

**P-06-1447 Stop Natural Resources Wales closing the visitor centre at Ynyslas National Nature Reserve - Correspondence from the Petitioner to the Committee, 30 June 2024**

Dear Petitions Committee

I am writing as a member of the grassroots group Save Our Centre - Ynyslas - Achubwch Ein Canolfan. We set the group up when we the centre staff told us they had been informed the centre was closing on December 31st 2023. NRW have subsequently denied making this decision, despite us having obtained a copy of the communication via an FOI request.

As a group of centre users, we are very concerned with the way in which NRW have treated the public and we have made a formal complaint which is now at 'level 2'.

We do not believe NRW are being honest with the public or with the Senedd. In the letter from the Minister, he says that he understands NRW are exploring commercial and local partnerships.

"NRW is considering a raft of possible options including provision of opportunities to local businesses, partnership working with social and community groups to investigate the feasibility of future management of these centres, etc."

However, we can confirm that NRW have made almost no attempt to engage with our group, Borth's County Councillor nor Community Council. They attended a public meeting in March 2024 and failed to answer most of the questions posed in advance. The transcript of the meeting makes it clear that they agreed to a follow up meeting, but they are now refusing set a date or even commit to that meeting.

Below is a recent communication one of our group has received from Elsie Grace, where she clearly states they will not consult with the public.

Dear Elizabeth

Thank you for getting in touch and sharing your concerns regarding Ynyslas and Natural Resources Wales's current strategy. I appreciate you taking the time to write to me and Sir David as all feedback is welcomed. Sir David has asked me to respond on his behalf, I have copied him into my reply to you.

I apologise that I was unable to attend the public meeting at Borth on the 1st of March as I was unwell. My colleagues who attended were able to share questions raised and whilst time has moved on there has been no change and no decision has been made.

The Visitor Centres' work is part of a larger exercise to review all our activities. We're assessing what we can and must continue to do, what to slow down, what to change, and what to stop, in order to live within our financial means. Once the NRW Board approves these proposals, we will communicate clearly with partners, stakeholders, and customers to explain the impact of changes on the services we can deliver. This will not be a public consultation, because it is for us to decide on our priorities and how we adapt to live within our financial means.

To clarify, it is the option to outsource that is being considered and not private-only options. The wider review will fundamentally influence our potential offer to market. We

won't hold another public meeting until staff have been informed of any outcome. We are currently looking at all the possible implications of such a change, but there is no decision at the moment.

If you have any more questions, please don't hesitate to get in touch.

Yours Sincerely

Elsie Grace

As Kim said in her response to you, Ynyslas is financially viable and NRW keep vacillating between whether it is a financial or another (undisclosed) reason. I would be very happy to have a meeting or phone conversation with the relevant elected representative to discuss my concerns, but they are mostly about NRW appearing to be unaccountable to anyone. We do not understand how this is acceptable.

I am attaching a copy of a letter I sent to all the Non-Executive Board Members and The Chair before the last Board Meeting. I have had NO response at all to this. It has a clear timeline of our concerns. I also attach the VC Futures Briefing Document from November 2023 where they laid out the following information to their staff:

Ynyslas - Key Messages:

- o The café and shop should not be opened in 2024, however the toilet facilities should remain open.

- o Ynyslas VC staff to transfer to Bwlch Nant yr Arian VC.

- o The VC should be offered to the community for use as a social enterprise or other community use. Commercial Team to progress discussions to ascertain interest.

- o Next steps would be to work with VC staff on site, Facilities, the Land and Place Management Teams. This to include how we should approach the operational practicalities of the proposed removal of carparking on the beach front.

NRW now claim the Futures Briefing Document was a miscommunication. I really hope someone at the Senedd takes this seriously.

Kind regards

Polly Ernest

## Save Our Centre – Ynyslas – Achubwch Ein Canolfan



FAO All Non-Executive NRW Board Members

Dr Rosie Plumber,  
Professor Steve Ormerod,  
Geraint Davies,  
Professor Calvin Jones,  
Mark McKenna,  
Dr Peter Fox,  
Kathleen Palmer,  
Helen Pittaway,  
Professor Rhys Jones,  
Lesley Jones,

Natural Resources Wales  
Rivers House  
St Mellons Business Park  
St Mellons  
Cardiff  
CF3 0EY

May 14th 2024

Dear NRW Board Member

I am writing to you as a founding member of Save our Centre – Ynyslas – Achubwch our Canolfan. This unincorporated action group was set up last year in response to news that Natural Resources Wales was proposing to close the Ynyslas Visitor Centre and restrict car parking on the beach. The group has over 600 members on Facebook, holds regular meetings and has garnered over 2,200 signatures on a Senedd Petition (<https://petitions.senedd.wales/petitions/245961>) and almost 5,000 on a [Change.org petition](https://www.change.org/p/prevent-the-closure-of-ynyslas-visitor-centre) (<https://www.change.org/p/prevent-the-closure-of-ynyslas-visitor-centre>) in an attempt to keep the Centre open, save staff jobs and ensure the public can continue to park at and access the site at Ynyslas. We were not sure if our messages were getting through to the Non-Executive Board Meetings and have therefore decided to write to you.

I am very concerned with the way in which a publicly funded organisation is treating the public, and appears to be totally unaccountable or truthful. When we first heard that the staff had been advised the Centre was closing, we immediately contacted our elected representatives, who were, at the time, in the dark about it. Once our Senedd Member, MP and County Councillor made representations, they were informed that there had never been a proposal to close the Centre at the end of 2023 and that this was a 'miscommunication'.

## Save Our Centre – Ynyslas – Achubwch Ein Canolfan



Our initial idea was to try to speak to the executive to understand how the decision had been made and why. I felt strongly that Ynyslas Visitor Centre had been lumped in with larger, more commercially viable operations in being moved to the Commercial Department and should probably be transferred back to Operations. It is nearly impossible to commercialise the operation at Ynyslas further because there are few opportunities other than car parking. The beach is not a swimming beach due to dangerous currents, so despite space, it would not be possible to promote a surfing or wakeboarding business there. In addition, there is lots of unexploded ordinance and rare flora and fauna. The Centre is an excellent interactive education hub that informs visitors from a diverse catchment area about the importance of the dunes.

However, rather than meeting with us, the officers on NRW have actively avoided us. This includes cancelling a pre-arranged meeting with members of SoC Ynyslas AeC, with virtually no notice. That meeting with Elsie Grace was scheduled via Elin Jones's (Senedd Member) office, and I rescheduled my work diary to attend. The meeting has never been reconvened. Until I wrote to the Chair's Office I was unable to get any contact with the relevant people. Even now, Elsie Grace has responded to my queries but has not provided satisfactory answers.

Here is a rough timeline of what has happened:

- Staff were told in writing in December that the Visitor Centre was closing. (Official briefing document attached)
- When the public got on board to try and save the Centre, we were then told (via our political representatives) that there had been a communication error and that there had never been a plan to close the Centre.
- We were advised that a decision would be made about the Centre's future by the end of the 2023 financial year.
- A decision has not been made.
- It was initially intimated that the Centre was closing due to it losing money.
- A senior person within NRW described it as 'A room with a coffee machine'.
- As a public group, we had a meeting arranged (via Elin Jones Senedd Member) on February 14th with Elsie Grace at Ynyslas Visitor Centre. I rearranged my work schedule to attend. The meeting was cancelled at the last minute.
- A large public meeting was convened for March 1st at Borth Community Hall. We submitted questions in advance. At the last minute, it was announced that Elsie Grace could not attend the meeting, but Sarah Jennings could. Sarah Jennings had not seen any of the questions and could barely answer the ones posed. The acoustics in the hall were



terrible, and the sound system was inadequate. She had no visual aids or real explanations. Around 150 people attended and received no concrete answers. Sarah Jennings claimed that up to 3,000 cars were parked at the site on busy days, which is an impossible number. Last Saturday was super busy, and there were 250 cars.

- NRW advised that despite a recruitment ban, they were bringing on temporary staff via an Agency to keep the Centre open until September
- After the meeting, group members started to get responses that contradicted what had been said in the meeting. NRW was now claiming it was not considering closing the Centre on financial grounds but on environmental ones.
- All the communications sent contradict each other.
- Our Senedd member (Elin Jones) has sent us a message to say NRW are in conversation with Borth Community Council
- When we asked Borth Community Council about this, they said they could not get any response or feedback from NRW – despite promises of a follow-up meeting in April.
- The country councillor has also been unable to get any commitment to a future meeting.
- Yesterday, I sent a Freedom of Information request asking for the Ynyslas -Centre Futures Staff Briefing Note issued on November 29th and received it by return email. (enclosed)

As you can see, the Ynyslas -Centre Futures Staff Briefing Note lays out a clear proposal to close Ynyslas, which is in complete contradiction to everything we have been told. See example of a question response sent after the Borth Public Meeting at which Sarah Jennings repeatedly told the public that there was no proposal to close the Centre at the end of last year. (I can send a transcript of the meeting if required).

Was there a proposal to close Ynyslas VC on the 31<sup>st</sup> December 2023? If so who decided not to pursue this plan and why?

- There was no proposal put forward to close the VC on this date. There was a miscommunication that resulted in a belief that a decision had been made to close the VC by the end of the year. This mistake was rectified and the review of Ynyslas is ongoing.

I wonder if this is behaviour that you would expect of a publicly funded organisation, one of which you are a non-executive director. Having been a non-executive director of an Arts Council-funded organisation in the past, I know I would want answers to questions and proper accountability if I were in your shoes.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter, and I look forward to hearing from you and getting feedback. I have submitted questions to the Board Meeting about this matter and raised an official (level 2) complaint.

**Save Our Centre – Ynyslas – Achubwch Ein Canolfan**



Yours sincerely

Polly Ernest

On behalf of Save our Centre – Ynyslas – Achubwch ein Canolfan

Cc Sir David Henshaw – Chair, NRW  
Clare Pillman – CEO, NRW  
Vaughn Gething – First Minister, Senedd  
Irranca-Davies - Cabinet Secretary for Climate Change and Rural Affairs,  
Senedd