Henllys Community Council (HCC) Response to the Communities Review

1. Introduction

HCC responded to the first stage of the review suggesting the area of HCC was increased following the road (roads were suggested by Torfaen County Borough Council as an easy and recognisable boundary) from Ashleigh Court, including Henllys Church in Wales primary school and to include all the houses that backed onto the Henllys Local Nature Reserve.

This suggestion was ignored by TCBC. No reason was provided to HCC as to why this proposal was ignored.

1. First Stage of the Review Outcomes

After the first stage of the review TCBC recommendations for HCC were:

1. to extend its boundaries and take over the whole community council ward of Two Locks, thus removing Two Locks from Cwmbran Community Council.
2. For Henllys Community Council to merge with Cwmbran Community Council as a whole.

These options were presented to the community council without any evidence or analysis to support of them.

HCC have concerns about both TCBC recommendations. These concerns focus on:

1. The loss of history of the Henllys community’s identity and historical significance.
2. The possible loss of finance available to the Henllys community for the maintenance of Dorallt park, the grants offered to local community groups such as Henllys LNR, the events funded by HCC such as the youth club, afternoon tea, and the fete.
3. HCC Final Response

We have gathered evidence from speaking to residents. We have publicised the review on the HCC website, FaceBook page and on Henllys Life and encouraged residents to complete the survey.

We have also used statistical evidence provided by the Welsh government to query (in our opinion) the skewed recommendations made by TCBC. (see commentary on the review process below).

No one that we have spoken to, or who has responded to the posts on the Henllys Community Council or Henllys Life Facebook page has reacted positively to either of the recommendations made by the Task and Finish group. The overwhelming response is to stay as we are.

It is the unanimous view of the seven Henllys Community Councillors that HCC should remain as it is and HCC is disappointed that TCBC has not been prepared to enter into a discussion about HCC’s proposals to enlarge its boundaries.

1. Commentary on the review process

The following comments are included for consideration with both TCBC and the Task and Finish Group.

1. Statistics

The suggestion within TCBC’s terms of reference document is that the main reason for Henllys to be considered for reorganisation is that HCC is deemed to be too small. One of the recommendations is that HCC is merged with Cwmbran Community Council.

HCC consulted the Welsh government website and collected the following statistics from data published for 2022-23. Out of the 729 councils listed with data we were able to compare both Cwmbran Community Council and Henllys Community Council:

CCC has the 2nd largest population - this begs the question what is the benefit to Henllys residents of being merged with CCC?

The median council population is 617. Henllys has a population of 1149, which is the 213 highest population. This means that Henllys is well within the top half of council population size.

Looking at Band D average tax comparisons Henllys is ranked 433rd in the list compared to CCC which is ranked 195 places higher at 238th in the list. This means Henllys residents will be worse off financially if the recommended merger with CCC went ahead.

As far as precept is concerned HCC has the 268th compared to CCC who has the 12th highest precept in Wales.

1. Narrative Feedback

Several groups hold regular events in Henllys village hall. Some members of these groups (older residents) reported to Henllys councillors that they felt the review ignored them completely because they didn’t have access to the internet and no other written information was provided for residents such as flyers or via public meetings.

Henllys Community Council also feel that the review was conducted with minimal engagement from either, TCBC officers, or members of the Task and Finish group.

1. Best Practice

Henllys Community Council are disappointed that the Torfaen County Borough Council communities review did not appear to follow the best practice guide of the Local Democracy and Boundary Commission for Wales (April 2018), when conducting their communities review.

TCBC’s terms of reference document refers to “the Council will ensure that various seminars are held during or prior to, the consultation periods to allow stakeholders to be provided with any additional information they may need to better understand the processes involved in the review”. There is no evidence to suggest any public meetings took place.

The terms of reference also included blank pages that were supposed to be the responses from the community councils. This valuable information was withheld from all stakeholders.

It is standard practice in government departments that run consultations to publish all responses. This means that recommendations were made to residents and community councils without providing them with the analysis or evidence that the recommendations were based on. In our opinion this is not an open or transparent government process.

The best practice guide advises wider and closer engagement with local communities when carrying out a community’s review. The use of a roadshow mentioned by the guide has been used by other principal councils to enable discussions about the proposals thereby creating a greater engagement with communities. HCC feel that not having a roadshow diminished the quality of the review.

A notice was placed on the TCBC website to launch the consultation. No other form of active engagement appears to have been offered to residents, particularly those who do not have access to the internet.

It has become common practice for principal councils to develop, consult on and then publish their council size policy. There is no evidence to suggest that TCBC followed this guidance.

1. IT Issues

The online survey provided by TCBC was also not fit for purpose. During the first few weeks there were technical issues that were reported to them by the Clerk of HCC.

Firstly, anyone could have responded to the survey whether they lived in Torfaen or not as there was no address validation. Second, if residents provided comments about their views which ever tick box, they had chosen then became blank. Both errors could distort the outcome and volume of responses.

1. Democratic Process

HCC feel that TCBC have missed significant opportunities during this review to have a closer dialogue with residents and the community councils. Any such dialogue would have established a greater understanding of what each community’s priorities were, and helped residents understand more about the democratic process within Wales.

The very fact that responses remain unpublished gives cause for concern. A consultation process should be open and informative to enable dialogue for all interested parties.

The membership of the Task and Finish Group (again not published for residents’ information) meant that HCC had to ask for this information, gives rise for concern on democratic grounds.

The group does not reflect the percentage of political parties that the 44 councillors of TCBC are made up of. There was also no information provided to stakeholders about the selection criteria for this group.

In responding to the findings of the initial consultation HCC have referred to the following documents:

Local Government Democracy (Wales) Act 2013 – Explanatory Notes

Local Democracy and Boundary Commission for Wales – Guidance for Principal Councils on the Review of Communities.

Torfaen County Borough Council (TCBC) – Review of Communities – Terms of Reference

Statistics were collected from:

<https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Local-Government/Finance/Council-Tax/Levels/community-council-precepts-by-community-council>

Henllys Community Council

Councillor Valerie Waters, Councillor Brenda Everett, Councillor Jonathan Lewis,

Councillor Lawrence Smith-Higgins, Councillor Ron Burnett,

Councillor Colette Thomas, and Councillor Steve Webb

Clerk Adrian Issacs 26th February 2024