



Local Democracy and Boundary Commission for Wales: Review of the Community Arrangements of the City and County of Swansea Draft Proposal Report

Response from Rhossili Community Council

Context

Rhossili Community Council (<https://rhossilicc.org.uk/>) serves a rural agricultural and coastal community set within the Gower National Landscape (an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty). As such, it also incorporates Conservation Areas and Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). The population is small, yet the area welcomes many thousands of visitors as temporary residents and day-trippers throughout the year. Our permanent population is diverse in need and includes those who are clinically vulnerable as well as those who are geographically and/or digitally isolated. Isolation is compounded by limited bus service, poor network connectivity, and frequent extreme weather events e.g. flooding.

Preparing the response

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Commission's Report which has clearly required a considerable amount of detailed work. We did not respond to the initial invitation to comment last September as we were satisfied that the current arrangements were appropriate and work well in giving 'effective and convenient' local community boundary definition and representation at community council level. At the time, the invitation made was for comments where change was required.

We fully understand the Council Size Policy (of the City and County of Swansea) and have no objection to its content. That said, we were not expecting such a radical proposal for Gower South and Gower North and had no indication that this might be the direction of this review at the outset. We have been taken aback at the proposal as presented.

To inform our response, we have conducted a survey of Rhossili residents and the results of this are appended. We also hosted a public meeting with fellow members of the Gower Community Council Forum. The Forum brings together Gower Community Councils on a quarterly basis to share ideas, concerns and best practice and to promote a united voice for Gower residents and businesses, whilst protecting democracy at a local level.

Our Response

The views shared through the survey and the Gower Forum meeting show that the overwhelming majority of local residents are opposed to merger on a number of points which we outline below.

- i. We do not accept that the proposal for a 'super' community council for Gower South will achieve the aim of promoting more 'effective and convenient' local arrangements. On the contrary, it would create a community council with too large a geographical area to be manageable; with too few councillors to discharge the demands of the role effectively; and would be inconvenient in that it would make access to a larger and more remote community council – both in coverage of geographical area and in dislocation from four independent and self-sufficient communities - far more difficult for electors. The fact that the proposal recommends the retention of the four as community wards demonstrates that the Commission views the communities as separate as residential settlements and functioning communities.
- ii. Another consequence of the reduction in councillor numbers at local level (from 7 to 1 in the case of Rhossili) will be a severe reduction in capacity for innovation, development and progress in critical areas of local need, and a reduction in pooled expertise. Prompted by our response to the Covid-19 outbreak, and the construction of a community website (see ix below), we gained funding from the City and County of Swansea's Rural Development Partnership to develop the website further as a 'one-stop-shop' resource for community information and engagement (<https://www.rhossilihwb.wales/>). Although others contribute to content, one councillor takes primary responsibility for maintaining the site. This would not be possible with only one councillor for the Rhossili area but also, if the website were to be scaled up to cover the whole of the proposed Gower South Area (which would be possible), capacity to do so would be insufficient as the 8 councillors would already have a significantly increased workload.

Another example of how reduction in capacity can impact the reach and scope of any new merged community council is in fulfilling our statutory requirements in biodiversity planning ('Section 6'). This is of particular importance in an AONB with additional SSSIs and one which is a major international tourist destination. One councillor takes particular responsibility for our biodiversity planning and reporting and another meets regularly with Gower National Trust (whose headquarters are in Rhossili). Both have some

background in a relevant field and are passionate about the environment. Feedback from the One Voice Wales Local Places for Nature Officer to the publication of our Section 6 report this year (<https://rhossilicc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Biodiversity-Action-Plan-Review-05-2024.pdf>) was:

“The A6 report and revision is fantastic! I'd like to use that for a best practice example please. It just shows what a small Council can do for biodiversity!”

We question how eight councillors over a large and environmentally diverse geographical area would have capacity to maintain this level of work in such a critical area, as well as all the other duties they would have to cover.

- iii. The draft proposals are not backed by any detailed case to demonstrate how the proposed Gower South super-council would be more efficient and convenient. How is efficiency and convenience under your proposal to be defined and measured?
- iv. The number of councillors proposed (8) would be insufficient to effectively discharge the duties of a community council including being a statutory consultee for the City and County of Swansea for example on planning applications. A council size of 8 would be too small to be able to form sub-committees around specialist areas of activity e.g. planning (including site visits), finance and resources, and community planning and engagement. Therefore, council meetings under the proposal you make would have lengthy agendas by necessity, which would inevitably mean that sufficient time and concentration could not be given to all reports and issues. Rhossili Community Council meets monthly for two hours, and managing a full agenda is always a challenge within the allocated time. Special projects (such as our D-Day 80 commemoration, see below) require additional meetings.
- v. To follow the above point the proposed council would likely be a less responsive statutory consultee when called upon.
- vi. The representation of specific wards for example Rhossili with only 1 councillor, would give too little voice and influence.
- vii. All community councillors are unremunerated. The roles as the arrangements stand can be time-consuming with formal meetings, community events and projects, and community engagement. The workload would be spread across a much smaller group of councillors and the role would be onerous. For those in full-time work, and those with young and dependent families, the workload and time demands might be off-putting. At a time when there is a big emphasis on achieving greater diversity in

democratic representation, the proposal would seem to be counter-intuitive and reinforce democratic representation largely by older people with more time on their hands (whilst still wanting time to pursue other interests).

- viii. Many people who have served, or currently serve as community councillors, both become active in wider local volunteering and find serving the community to be good for their well-being. Such a drastic reduction in councillor numbers would reduce the opportunity to grow local volunteering.
- ix. Each of the four current community councils have the capacity to respond to emergency events and support local community resilience. To do this they draw on their combined expertise and skills, and local knowledge and contacts. A more remote super-council, with less capacity, would be unlikely to have the same agility.

Perhaps the best example of this is the response to the outbreak of Covid-19 in 2020. Rhossili Community Council was able to mobilise a community support group and within a rapid timeframe we had set up a volunteer database, register of vulnerable residents, a dedicated website to provide information and resources relevant to the pandemic and established communication lines for every resident. These activities were underpinned by appropriate policy development where necessary. To boost well-being at Christmas of that year (and the next), we organised a community-wide 'Living Advent Calendar' which was extremely popular.

- x. The review seems to be over-influenced by councillor numbers and the councillor-elect ratio. A community council has a much wider role than community representation as part of local democracy. They organise community events and activities, bring together communities through social events and activities, oversee or inspire local projects of community benefit, and promote volunteering. An excellent recent example of this was D-Day 80 commemoration led by Rhossili Community Council (<https://rhossilicc.org.uk/d-day-80-a-day-to-remember/>). Whilst we followed the national programme of events, we also collaborated with our Village Hall, Gower National Trust, local Church, primary school and community choir to provide events across the day, e.g. an exhibition of memorabilia, an afternoon tea and an evening concert. This was open to the whole community and the venues were 'buzzing' throughout the day. These types of events make a reality of community cohesion.

Our local Community Councils also ensure community resilience in times of need. We have given the example of Covid 19 but severe weather incidents

including flooding and the very high winds to which we are often subject, also require agility in co-ordinating self-help and support. All of this is done for free at a personal level, with the councils operating on small budgets with insignificant precepts. As said above, a super-council would be less in touch with the communities it serves and less agile, with vulnerable people being at greater risk of being overlooked or isolated.

- xi. We know that the community councils as things stand have low councillor-elect ratios with Rhossili, for example, being as low as 1:30. This makes no allowance for the many thousands of annual visitors and temporary residents. Furthermore, as we are demonstrating in this response, the value of having an active and localised community council is much greater than democratic representation alone.
- xii. Another argument often made for reform is that too many community councils struggle to fill their quota of councillor positions through election or co-option. First, we would raise the possibility that a more centralised and remote super council might seem to be of less relevance and interest to potential applicants. Secondly, over the years, Rhossili Community Council has shown to be sustainable. In May 2022, 3 long-serving councillors stood down and 3 new councillors took their place. One of our 7 community councillors stood down in May this year, again after many years of service. We are very confident that this vacancy will be filled when we meet later this month to consider the applications we have received. We will be thus back to our full quota within two months.
- xiii. Gower South is an extremely popular tourism destination and Rhossili is also popular as a venue for film crews and charity races, bringing the problems of congestion at peak-times during the summer and at bank holidays. This creates additional community tensions, and casework for the community council to help manage with local partners. Some issues we have to monitor and deal with on an ongoing basis include littering, refuse collection from holiday homes, severe congestion, car parking and antisocial behaviour. For this we need to liaise with Gower National Trust, holiday letting services and/or holiday home owners and the local police.

A significant issue this year has been the welfare of ponies grazing on the cliffs, with deaths of some being linked to visitors approaching too closely and uncontrolled dogs causing panic. This has been the cause of considerable distress to residents; we have been involved in discussions with them, the Gower National Trust, the Gower Commoners Association and the



grazier involved. Needless to say, this has been very time-consuming for the council as a whole and for the individual councillors involved in one-to-one conversations.

- xiv. It is sometimes argued that 'bigger is necessarily better' and that there are economies of scale to be had from reorganisations and amalgamations. There is ample contrary evidence of this presumption in the coherence of governance and the performance of bigger reformed public bodies. If the four were to be amalgamated, the new council might require a full-time clerk and a part-time finance officer due to the scale of activity and the need to compensate for fewer councillors being able to do less with an increased workload. Other than having a single website, and a single venue hire for meetings, then there are no discernible financial savings to be had from the proposal.

Conclusion

The results from our survey underpin the points raised above. Whilst a minority recognise the potential benefits of greater collaboration and sharing of resources, the majority (83%) expressed scepticism over the proposed merger and raised concerns about the potential for the unique needs of the community to be sidelined, and potential negative impact on community spirit, volunteer engagement and local democracy.

We propose that the current arrangements are continued for the future for all of the above arguments. Democratically elected community councils provide leadership at the closest level, by people who are locally known and who are directly accountable to their communities. There will be less effective and less convenient local representation under the proposal made, a loss in community representation and activity and a reduction in capacity for innovation and improvement. These communities are remote and rely heavily on community self-support with a community council at their centre. The four community councils are all active and impactful in their respective community areas.

Submitted by Cllr Maggie Kirk on behalf of Rhossili Community Council.
C/O Foxgloves
Pitton
Rhossili
Swansea
SA3 1PH
Email: Clerk@rhossilicc.org.uk

APPENDIX: Rhossili Community Survey 2024

Executive Summary

A survey was conducted by Rhossili Community Council in July 2024 with permanent residents of the Rhossili Ward. The purpose of this exercise was to understand and therefore more accurately represent the views of the community on the merger proposed by the Local Democracy and Boundary Commission for Wales.

We took a number of different approaches to recruiting respondents to ensure all residents had the opportunity to participate, either via a link to the online survey or completing a paper copy. Four questions were posed along with an opportunity for comments by free text.

In total 84 responses were received: 83% of respondents did not support the proposed merger, 7% were supportive of the merger, and 10% were unsure.

Several themes emerged from the comments received:

1. Scepticism about the benefits of the merger.
2. Concern about potential for side-lining the unique needs of the Rhossili community.
3. Potential for greater collaboration and resource sharing.
4. Potential negative impact on community spirit and volunteer engagement.
5. Potential for negative impact on democracy at local level.

Survey Results

The results are in two parts:

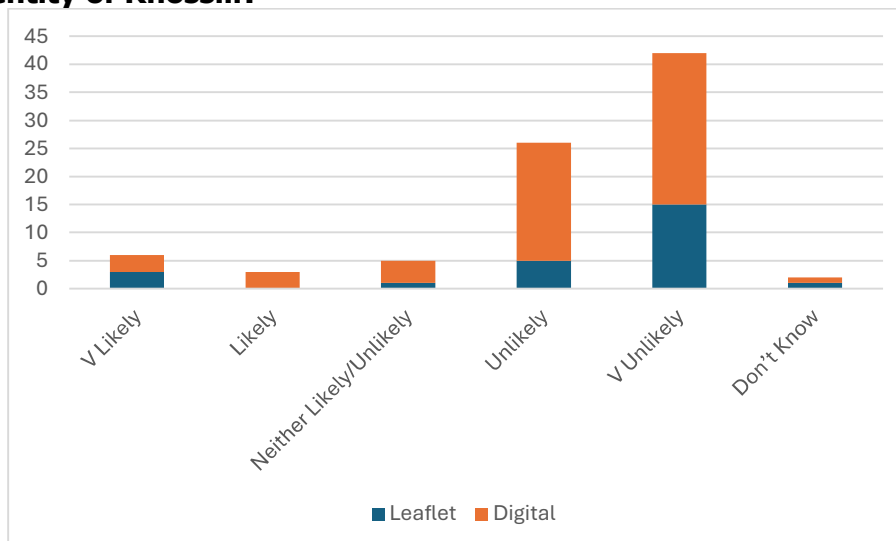
A. Responses to the 4 questions are summarised below as bar charts. Some free-text responses are shown as examples where they illustrate the thoughts behind responses to individual questions.

B. Free-text responses were categorised under broad themes and illustrative examples are given under each theme.

A. Responses to individual questions:

APPENDIX: Rhossili Community Survey 2024

1. With one Rhossili representative, how likely do you think it is that the new South Gower Community Council will reflect the local identity of Rhossili?

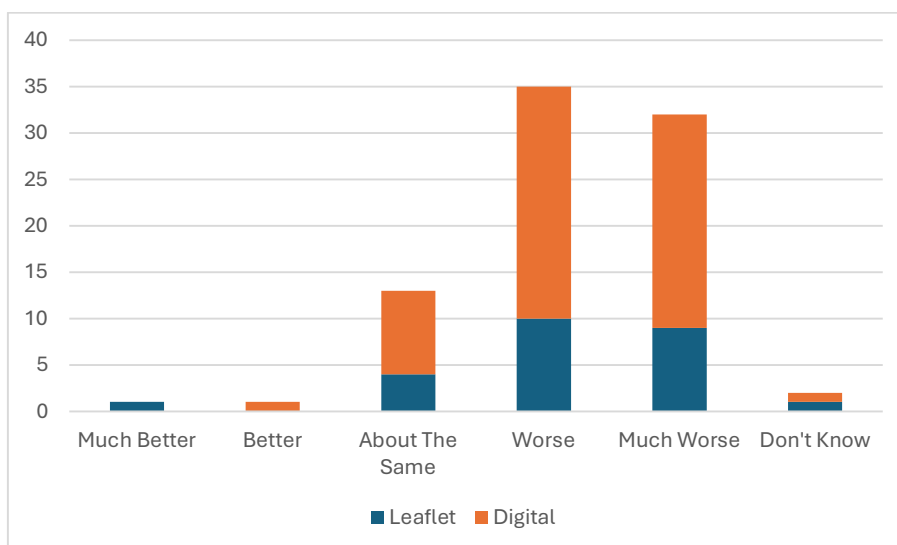


"The proposed changes cannot possibly give residents in these areas better representation and service. Each of these villages has its own identity and needs."

"A streamlining of the four community councils will lead to reduced representation, community involvement, identity and spirit."

"I believe that this will result in Rhossili losing its identity. We are the 'last' place that people think of now. We often hear people say that it's 'too far' to come."

2. How much do you think the proposed merger will affect you being able to have your say on local issues?



APPENDIX: Rhossili Community Survey 2024

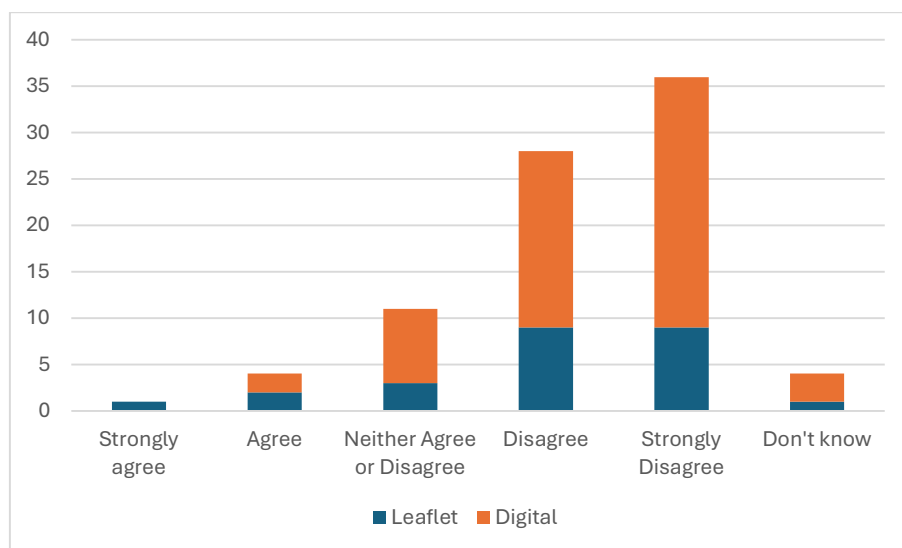
"In order to 'have your say' on local issues, there would need to be an infrastructure created for effective and fair feedback within the Rhossili Ward, but we have no knowledge of any such potential methodology. Bear in mind that sustainable communities thrive when residents participate in decision making."

"Each community will have specific characteristics and requirements which may have to compete for priority should a merger happen. This could weaken each community's specific voice when presenting a case to the Council. Also could lead to a sense of disenfranchisement for those dedicated to serving their specific community."

"Centralisation inevitably means local issues must compete for funding, so achievements for the village would rely on having the loudest voice in the bigger council. We would most likely lose out."

"As a former Rhossili Community Councillor, I feel that if you were to merge the four communities into one council, then to make it there should be equal representation from each area, i.e. two representatives from each current council."

3. The commission says: "this proposal provides for more effective and convenient local government as the new community areas provide for a more sustainable community". To what extent do you agree with this statement?



"We would be able to combine resources and be able to afford more professional support. As a larger body we should also have more voice and influence. Six councillor positions would not be sufficient. Rhossili will be inadequately represented with only one councillor."

APPENDIX: Rhossili Community Survey 2024

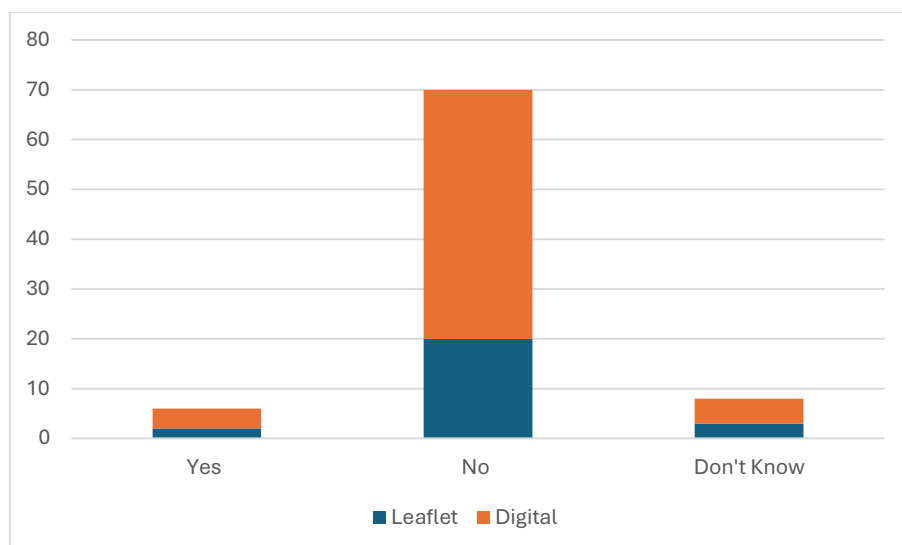
"Rhossili would be a minor party in the proposed reorganisation which leads to concerns about our local priorities being sidelined. It is not clear how the claims referred to in question 3 are justified

"Communities only become unsustainable when they are cut and their voices diminished, keeping Rhossili sustainable means keeping its voice to be heard, one councillor can't debate issues to put forward on their own to achieve the best for their community, and one councillor can be bullied into submission at higher levels, there is safety in numbers!!"

"We have all seen that when you have a reduced representation in a centralised body that you lose the autonomy which you would have in your own area. How can anyone possibly consider that one voice out of 8 representing 25% of the area can possibly be effective."

"I don't believe that 'convenience' is relevant when speaking about the voice of the people."

4. Overall are you in favour of the proposal to merge the 4 community areas?



B. Free-text responses

Excerpts taken from the survey response comments based on the identified themes:

1. Scepticism about the benefits of the merger

"This sounds like merely a cost-cutting exercise to me and unlikely to benefit any of the local communities."

"The arguments for the proposed merger seem very weak and in terms of cost seem mainly to be aimed at reducing the number of audits carried out. This is a very poor reason to weaken local representation."

APPENDIX: Rhossili Community Survey 2024

"Assertions are made in the proposal but no evidence is offered to underpin these. Since when has centralisation boosted democracy at local level?"

2. Concern about potential for side-lining the unique needs of the Rhossili community

"The proposed changes cannot possibly give residents in these areas' better representation and service. Each of these villages has its own identity and needs."

"The issues affecting the 4 areas are potentially quite different. Rhossili will lose its voice and local views diluted. The proposed change is not in the interests of the inhabitants of Rhossili."

"Different villages in Gower have different problems. At present local councillors are easily accessible to the community they represent and are well aware of the problems each village has."

"Having our own community council is essential for our 'community'. It provides accountability and community cohesion. The proposals are just costs savings dressed up as efficiencies."

"The Rhossili CC have a record of delivery and achievement - notably the recent D Day celebrations and establishment of the Rhossili Hwb - are consultative and representative of the community. No additional powers are being granted to community councils which might offset the reduction in local representation, and I therefore fundamentally disagree with this proposal from the Commission."

3. Potential for greater collaboration and resource sharing

"Greater collaboration between the villages will create better services for local people and hopefully be more outward looking, working on common issues rather than differences."

"We would be able to combine resources and be able to afford more professional support. As a larger body we should also have more voice and influence."

"There are a lot of common issues within the 4 proposed Wards of the Community of Gower South. It is here that the benefits of shared resources and services could come into play."

"I could see possible benefits from merging Rhossili and Port Eynon Community Councils as they have similar issues."

4. Potential negative impact on community spirit and volunteer engagement

"All of these groups comprise many local volunteers whose well-being is improved by their being able to give their time and skills to their local communities, in the knowledge that they are helping their communities become

APPENDIX: Rhossili Community Survey 2024

more inclusive and sustainable. These volunteers are the life and backbone of their communities."

"Inevitably the same level of work will not get done."

"A very sad day if this goes ahead."

"The proposed merger will take away from the community feeling and being able to be included in important discussions, decisions and meetings."

"The CC in Rhossili supports the social side of the village hall & this is much needed in a rural community like Rhossili. It helps tackle loneliness & isolation in the community especially in the winter months."

5. Potential for negative impact on democracy at local level

"I strongly feel that 1 is not sufficient. There is no support for absence or illness at the crudest level."

"Rhossili has individual problems re tourism, traffic, difficulties involved in single access. To have only one representative, we can be easily outvoted when our unique problems are discussed. I believe we will lose out badly!"

"This leads one to think that one Rhossili Councillor could not possibly represent all other all of the Ward AND be involved with voting or giving feedback on other Wards. They would be inundated with work. They would have no cover AND they would have total responsibility."

"The proposed merger will give councillors an enormous task, especially the one councillor in Rhossili – who would take on this role?"

"I fail to see how Rhossili Community's interests can be fairly represented by one person (and what a workload for them!)."

APPENDIX: Rhossili Community Survey 2024

Additional information:

Survey method

Questions were based on the Democracy and Boundary Commission Cymru consultation document and were circulated both digitally via 2 village What's App groups, the Rhossili Community Council email database, and a door-to-door leaflet drop, which was followed up by face-to-face discussion. This mixed survey method ensured that those residents who prefer non-digital communication, or who might be less engaged with the community, were consulted.

Four questions were posed along with an opportunity for comments by free text:

1. With one Rhossili representative, how likely do you think it is that the new South Gower Community Council will reflect the local identity of Rhossili?
2. How much do you think the proposed merger will affect you being able to have your say on local issues?
3. The commission says: "this proposal provides for more effective and convenient local government as the new community areas provides for a more sustainable community". To what extent do you agree with this statement?
4. Overall are you in favour of the proposal to merge the 4 community areas?

Approximately 1/3 of residences in Rhossili are second homes or holiday lets; only residences which are occupied permanently were surveyed. A total of 84 responses were obtained (59 online; 25 leaflets).