

# [Ilston Community Council](#)

Working in the community

## **Local Democracy and Boundary Commission for Wales: Review of Community Arrangements for Swansea Council: Gower**

This is the response of Ilston Community Council to the Commission's proposals for consultation in respect of all community councils in Swansea made in May 2024, with a response deadline of 10<sup>th</sup> July 2024. It is proposed that all seven of the current community councils across Gower are to be abolished and merged into two "super" councils representing North and South Gower, with the exception of our council, in respect of which it is proposed that it will be merged into Pennard Community Council.

**In view of the extraordinary scale and constitutional nature of the proposals and lack of prior indication of them, we seek an extension of time to make further submissions once we have had a chance to engage properly with our community in a meeting/s once the holiday season is over. We are planning meetings in September hence we therefore ask for further time until 30<sup>th</sup> October 2024 to make further submissions.**

**Ilston Community Council is strongly opposed to all these proposals, which amount to a fundamental local government restructure for Gower.** Consideration has been given to the possibility, in the event of abolition, of seeking a merger instead with the new South Gower Community Council. However, the Council would be equally opposed to such a proposal. Our reasons, in either event, are as follows:

### **1. Undermining of local democracy and community engagement**

- 1.1 The proposed reduction in council members is drastic and unprecedented.** For Ilston, the reduction would be from the current number of 11 councillors to two (as part of Pennard), representing the whole of Penmaen, Nicholaston, Ilston, Parkmill, Lunnon and surrounding area. This would be an area of AONB taking in Three Cliffs, Parc le Breos, and Fairwood/Pengwern Commons. This encompasses huge tourist/leisure/sporting attractions, National Trust coastline and large areas of ancient woodland and common land. In turn, Pennard Council itself would have half the number of councillors that it presently has.
- 1.2 Inevitably, there will be a hugely reduced ability to raise agenda items particular to our community, a major loss of voice and much reduced chance to transact local business.** Ilston Council meetings presently take a minimum of two hours to get through, with a lengthy and lively agenda managed by a very effective, experienced chairperson. We have nine very active council members, six of whom joined in the last three years. We have a youthful dynamic. There would be no chance of providing that level of representation and transaction of council business as part of either the proposed Pennard or South Gower Councils. We refer to our last two annual reports showing the level of work undertaken.
- 1.3 Huge deterrent to becoming a council member.** Ilston has been able to attract a large number of new members in recent years because we have sought to become more inclusive and representative by encouraging busy people to volunteer to "do their bit". People are understandably shy of coming forward to volunteer in very old, established, rural communities. This would never have happened if responsibility for the whole community currently represented was to be shared by only two persons. Contrary to perceptions or expectations, the vast majority of us are of working age. There is no need for us have competitive elections and certainly no desire for it locally.

Those with caring responsibilities and/or young families will be deterred from joining under these proposals.

**1.4 Inability to effect change.** Meetings will become more bureaucratic and unwieldy under these proposals. The role of chairperson will become much more onerous and less rewarding. The volume of emails to keep track of will vastly increase across a much bigger area. It is likely that more sub committees representing different wards will be necessary, leading to less transparency and community cohesion.

**1.5 Change of ethos of community councils, undermining spirit of volunteering. Lack of understanding of what councils do.** It appears that the Commission has not sought to understand or appreciate how community councils, certainly in rural areas like ours, operate, which is, in large part, by encouraging and rewarding a spirit of local engagement, volunteering and participation. We do not wish to be treated as mere voting constituencies or even as “elected bodies”. Our role is much wider than that, including the organisation and encouragement of community events and looking out for vulnerable members of our isolated community. Voting is virtually non-existent at community council level. Indeed, the idea of competitive elections is off-putting. This calls into question the rationale for these proposals which appears to be entirely based on the numbers of electors. There has been no sudden reduction in the number of electors or residents on Gower since that last Boundary Commission review.

**1.6 Loss of knowledge, experience.** The encouragement of volunteering and co-option of members onto the Council helps us to attract people from a wide variety of backgrounds, knowledge and skills. People will not be inclined to join their council if they feel they will be burdened with too much, too soon and very likely with a much less rewarding experience.

**1.7 Narrow membership.** It follows from the above that a smaller number of Council members will be more likely to remain in office for longer as others are less likely to want to come forward. In a rural community like ours, those involved in farming, horticulture and tourism, our core businesses and the sources of local employment, are extremely time pressed and work unsocial hours. Equally, those unable or unwilling to participate in meetings online or travel across Gower will be deterred from joining.

**1.8 There is only one Swansea Council member representing Gower out of 70 council members.** Already, the voice of Gower at Swansea Council level is completely subsumed into a body representing the second largest conurbation in Wales, with vastly different interests and dealing with a large number of pressing social needs. There is concern that the proposed “super” councils for Gower, representing a drastic reduction in the number of members, will be expected to fulfil the kind of role undertaken in the past by Gower Rural District Council but without the relevant powers, funding or resources.

## **2. Reduced efficiency**

**2.1 Workloads and minute taking will increase substantially,** making it likely that full time clerks and possibly finance support will be required.

**2.2 Increased workload with fewer members.** Already we have and encourage a diversity of work areas covering planning, tourism, biodiversity, commons land highway safety planning. We now have statutory obligations in respect of biodiversity and training. We fail to see how these demands can be met under the proposed arrangements.

**2.3 Tourist numbers.** The Commission's proposals do not take account that for a large part of the year, the population of Gower expands vastly with the number of holiday makers, tourists, day trippers and sporting and leisure participants who come to visit and stay on Gower every year. Taking into account the number of self-catering units alone, which are in much demand, the numbers using facilities and resources in staying on Gower can increase by many thousands on a weekly basis. Our own evidence demonstrates that the number of cars going through Parkmill each day can reach 2,000.

**2.4 Precepts/assets.** No account appears to have been taken in these proposals of their potential effect on Council precepts and how assets owned by councils at present will be owned and managed with vastly different council boundaries.

- 3. Ilston would be totally subsumed into a separate much large semi-suburban community.** This is despite the fact that the proposed wards under the new arrangements are the same as the existing council boundaries confirms the existence of well-functioning and sustainable communities.
- 4. Swansea Council lack of resources and funding.** Local authorities across the UK continue to face a funding crisis, albeit it is noted that there is to be an increase in the number of MS's in the Senedd in 2026 by over 60 per cent. We find that a range of tasks and responsibilities that arguably Swansea Council members should ordinarily attend to in chasing up Council departments and raising local issues often need to be dealt with by community council members in the absence of a county councillor. By way of example, a major study of serious and ongoing road traffic problems and congestion in Parkmill undertaken by Ilston Council members (regarding an issue affecting a large number of Gower residents, businesses and visitors), took over a year to get even acknowledged by Swansea Council. A response was not provided. Unfortunately, a complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman has now had to be made as a result.
- 5. These proposals should form part of a wider review of arrangements in respect of local authority representation across Wales.**
- 6. Increased cost, reduced value for money. There is no evidence that the Commission's proposals will save money.** Importantly, the costs of running community councils like Ilston is minimal, with members not claiming the extremely limited allowances available. Our main overhead is the cost of a part time clerk for a limited number of hours per month. The proposals made would require more officer and professional time and costs. Likely there would be a need for a full-time clerk and finance support.
- 7. These proposals are not led or even informed by local views or interests.** It should be for community council members, and Swansea councillors to lead on major restructure such as this. We consider that it is not appropriate for changes of this scale to be led by an unelected body.
- 8. These proposals are not evidence based.** Crucially, the Commission's report does not refer to any evidence in support of its contention that the proposals will make for "effective and convenient local government."
- 9. We already share resources, knowledge and expertise across different community councils through the existing Gower Community Council Forum.** This Forum should be encouraged and can provide all the benefits and efficiencies that the Commission are hoping for with these proposals without all the problems identified above.
- 10. Emergency responding.** This Council provided an essential service to the community during the COVID crisis in coordinating and making food deliveries. More recently this year, coordinated supplies of sandbags to vulnerable members of the community, to deal with

sudden flooding. In the early stages of the COVID crisis, all community councils were asked by Swansea Council Social Services Department to warn that users of care services may have to make alternative arrangements, as home care was likely to be stopped under certain circumstances. The community councils were the only agencies with appropriate communication networks.

Ilston Community Council 10<sup>th</sup> July 2024