

APPENDIX C

Email from Richard Owen 22nd September 2021

Title: Proposed New Community Hall, Ty Sign, Public Consultation Exercise

We have met and spoken on a number of occasions in the last couple of months; now that your consultation period has ended, and knowing that you and your colleagues will be preparing a report for Cabinet, I thought I would set out what Agape believe to be the case for the Council agreeing to grant a lease for the construction of a new Community Hall on Ty Sign.

I will copy this to Ward Members and to the members of the Council's Cabinet with a particular interest in the project, so that they are aware of the detailed situation, as well as seeing the summary that will appear in your report.

The basic question is what 'vision' that the Council has for the improvement of the well being of the community in Risca and specifically in Ty Sign. Up until March 2021 your 'strategy' (based on a Cabinet report in March 2019) was to see if the 60 year old Channel View Hall could at some point be replaced with a new hall. The pandemic exposed and worsened problems in the community, and led to the admirable work done by the RCVUK group. Now that the Channel View Hall is the 'hub' for RCVUK, the decision of your Cabinet Members to keep the building open looks like foresight, but it has left an opening for an additional 'state of the art' community hall, at no cost to the Council, that will build on what has already been achieved.

If Welsh Government announced a fund for Councils to improve community facilities in 'Community First' areas, we suspect that Caerphilly would be one of the first to apply. The offer has been made by Welsh Government, but it is through a funding stream that is only open to charities. Nonetheless it promotes CCBC's asset based approach, feeds into CCBC's wellbeing goals and provides an opportunity to improve the social capital of Ty Sign and Risca.

Our proposal for a new Community Hall is fully funded and (by the end of this month) should have all the consents needed, with a contractor in place, ready to start on site immediately after Christmas. There is no cost or risk involved to the Council. The facilities proposed complement those already available in the area, and there is clearly already a demand for the space proposed.

Our case rests on five facts:

- (1) That your consultation exercise has been fatally flawed by the actions of a few people spreading mis-information on Social Media. You will inevitably therefore have had more votes 'against' the proposal than you would otherwise have had, but it seems inherently wrong that five or six people, none of whom can be held accountable for their comments, can effectively make a decision on behalf of the entire community. Some of the areas of misinformation, i.e. the amount of open space, and the vehicle access to the site have been considered and agreed by your Planning Committee.
- (2) That the Channel View Community Centre has now changed its use to become the base for the Risca Covid Volunteer UK group (RCVUK). Ironically, several of the faults that the building had (and which led the Council to agree it was 'no longer fit for purpose' in March 2019) no longer apply in this new use; but its use as a 'hub' does leave a gap in provision of facilities for the Community as a whole.
- (3) That there is a demand for a new Community Hall, from groups that have not, or could not use the Channel View building or the TLC cafe. We have a list of fifteen groups and uses who could use the new hall and its garden; most of those confirmed in writing, nine months before the centre could be open for business, and without any serious marketing. The new hall will genuinely be available to the community as a whole; funding from the Big Lottery and Welsh Government would not be made available if that were not the case.

- (4) The new hall will be wholly funded by the third sector. There will be no financial risk to the Council in either the development or the operation of the hall; the only 'loss' will be the space occupied on the 'Spar Field' by the building and its car park, which amounts to some 5% of the total area. You will note that one of the proposed uses of the new development is to provide a community garden, which can only realistically happen if the area is fenced off, and properly managed. We have suggested to the Council's valuer that the car park (which is a planning requirement) might be open to those only using the field and not the hall.
- (5) The new hall has been designed to complement the facilities already available in the area, and there is no way that it is going to put any of the others out of business. The Council subsidises the operation of Channel View; the 'Centre at St Davids' is owned and subsidised by the Methodist and Anglican churches, and the Agape Community Church used to provide the majority of the Trustees of the TLC café, so we know exactly how that is financed. Since all of these venues are financially secure, there is actually little incentive for them to identify 'excess demand' that might benefit the community.

Covering these points in more detail:

1. **The consultation exercise.** Immediately before your exercise started, a 'Change.org' petition was launched by a Katie Jones inviting people to vote against the development of the proposed hall, based on the string of lies; listed and rebutted in Attachment (1) to this e-mail. At the last count this petition had nearly 1000 signatures, and must have coloured the views of the residents of Ty Sign. We have asked 'Change.org' to take down the petition, but as yet have had no response. In any case, the damage has been done. Attachment (2) demonstrates the level of confusion that ensued; in August a local resident was warning others that your consultation document must be a fake (even though it had the Council logo on it), presumably because the information in it did not remotely match what she had already seen on social media. Those who have attempted to answer negative comments or clarify mis-information have themselves been subject to insults and abuse; the net effect is that those who might have been in favour of the project have been intimidated into silence. The design of the questionnaire itself may have caused you problems; it was not tied to an e-mail or house address, and at the end there was a button labelled 'Would you like to make another submission?' The Council will have no way of knowing how many duplicate submissions have been made by any one person. During the 'Fun on the Field event' organised by RCVUK, members of the community were being invited to complete the consultation on behalf of others. You attached to the petition document a plan showing the proposed site; this must have been prepared from a draft boundary for the lease, discussed in 2019, but which has not yet been agreed. It was based on an out of date plan, which does not show the current extent of the Skate Park, and it has extended the 2019 draft lease area, for example out into the area of mature trees to the north of the access road, and includes nearly half of the area of the existing skate park. Your plan red-lines an area of 3,800 sq m; but the new hall and its car park will actually occupy only 650 sq m; less than 1/5 of the area shown on your plan. The planning consent granted by yourselves very strictly limits the works we can do at the northern end of the site because of the need to retain existing mature trees, and that area will remain open to the public in exactly the way it is at the moment; but the impression given by your plan is that a large proportion of the 'Spar Field' will be taken out of public use. We have tried to correct the misinformation that has spread, by responding to social media posts and through the distribution of a 'Frequently asked questions' leaflet, both electronically and door to door. We agreed with you that a 'public meeting' would not help, but that a meeting with the very limited number of people making the most noise on Social Media might. Unfortunately, both your colleagues and GAVO refused to chair such a meeting, and the time needed to arrange such a meeting ran out. We were surprised that the papers attached to the consultation did not

include the Integrated Impact Assessment. It would have evidenced against the spread of mis-information and therefore assisted in a clearer consultation.

2. **The change of use of Channel View.** We covered this in some detail in an e-mail to you on the 16th August, and in our meeting that week. Nearly 30% of the floorspace of the Channel View building that was available to all community groups is now occupied solely by RCVUK. The main hall has been reduced in size; a second room, that was available for hire to small groups, has become a store (considerably smaller than the previous store), the kitchen area has been halved in size, the only access to the food bank storage area is through the main hall, and the car park has space for fewer cars than in March 2020. It makes a very good base for RCVUK, but is now considerably less useful as a Community Hall.
3. **Groups interested in using a new hall.** We have designed the new hall to complement, rather than directly compete with, the existing community facilities in the area. Channel View is now the base for RCVUK, with a relatively small hall; the 'TLC café' has a maximum capacity of 16 people and the 'Centre at St Davids' is occupied by a Meithrin every morning in term time in the week. The proposed new hall will have a hall that will seat up to 80 people at tables, with a commercial standard kitchen and a fenced garden available to community groups. We currently have fifteen groups who have expressed an interest in using the new hall; only two of those have previously used Channel View. Part of the 'mis-information' circulated was that we were seeking simply to build a church, but Agape will book space in the new hall in exactly the same way as any other group. We are very keen to involve the wider community in the day to day operation of the hall, and are working with GAVO and Pobl set up a 'Task Group' to achieve that. Attachment (3) to this e-mail lists the interest we have at this stage in the use of the hall and garden.
We have led this project because we believe in the local community, and believe that they deserve better facilities. You will be aware that local churches, including Agape have a track record of being involved in the well being of the community in Risca; chairing the group seeking to re-open public toilets, operating night shelters for the homeless, providing a Street Pastor team, helping people with debt problems, with their mental health, with food banks and so on.
4. **Funding.** None of the funding secured for the new hall will come from local 'rate-payers'. The only money coming from Caerphilly CBC is £5000 from the 'Welsh Churches Fund' which is administered by the Council. The project has been criticised as being 'a waste of public money', but money in the two main funding blocks, from the Welsh Government and the Big Lottery, will both be moved to other schemes, elsewhere in Wales, if not spent in Risca. None of the money secured can be transferred directly to any other local scheme, without the submission and approval of a new application, gaining planning consent if necessary and securing tenders. Our experience is that that is at least a two year process. We have been warned by Welsh Government that the 'Community Facilities Grant' will cease to exist on 31/3/22.
Both the development and the operation of the hall will be 'free' as far as Caerphilly CBC is concerned.
5. **Competition with other facilities.** We have demonstrated above that there is demand for the new Community Hall from groups who cannot, or will not use Channel View. Asking those who are involved in running those centres if there is un-met demand is a bit like asking turkeys if they are in favour of Christmas. The proposed hall is not designed to be competitive, but to be complimentary. In financial terms there is no danger that the new hall will 'put other centres out of business', as has been alleged. RCVUK are currently paying no rent, and have not since they moved into the building. The Council pay for all structural repairs to Channel View, plus the costs of insurance, have invested in the condition of the building, and pay most of the caretaker's costs. On top of that, the Management Committee have £85,000 in the bank. The 'Centre at St David's' has existed quite happily for years on the receipt generated by its use by a Meithrin, and the building is maintained by the Methodist and Anglican Churches. Members of the Agape

Community Church used to be Trustees for the 'TLC' so we are aware of the financial status of that centre. There again, the rent is subsidised by the Council.

We suspect that a majority of those who have 'voted' in your consultation will say that they are against a lease being granted. A large number of them will, unfortunately, have been misled by the campaign on social media. It's very easy to click a box on a questionnaire without checking what the facts actually are, or having the vision to see what might actually be achieved. We simply ask that you set against those 'votes' the fact that part of the funding package for our proposed hall is over £100,000 offered by individuals who are interested enough in the future of the community to put their own money on the table. This opportunity to build a new Community Hall, if lost, is unlikely to come again.

Yours sincerely

Richard Owen
Trustee; Agape Community Church, Ty Sign

Attachment 1: Petition started by Ms Katie Jones on 'Change.org

PETITION

The planning permission given to Agape Church to build their new Ty Sign Church Hall on the Spar Field depends on Caerphilly Council allowing them to have a lease agreement for that space.

Whether they get the lease or not is going to public consultation.

We believe that the lease should NOT be granted because this is a valuable piece of green space in this area. Generations of children have played on this field which is next to the skate park, ball court and play park.

We do not want to lose this green space and certainly do not want vulnerable people suffering from substance misuse to be invited to our children's park areas, which is their intended use of the building.

The facilities they claim to provide once the church is built are already in place elsewhere, and more groups and charities are supporting the community than ever before.

Agape have closed over the pandemic while other local groups have come together to provide essential support in our area.

We also believe that the applications submitted for both planning and funding were highly misleading and in fact the details were in some areas blatantly incorrect.

RESPONSE

It is not, and never has been a 'Church Hall'. The funding that has been secured is only available for a hall that is open to the entire community.

The petition gives the impression that all of the Spar Field is to be used; actually only 5% of the area will be used for the hall and the car park; and the latter may be available to all users of the field.

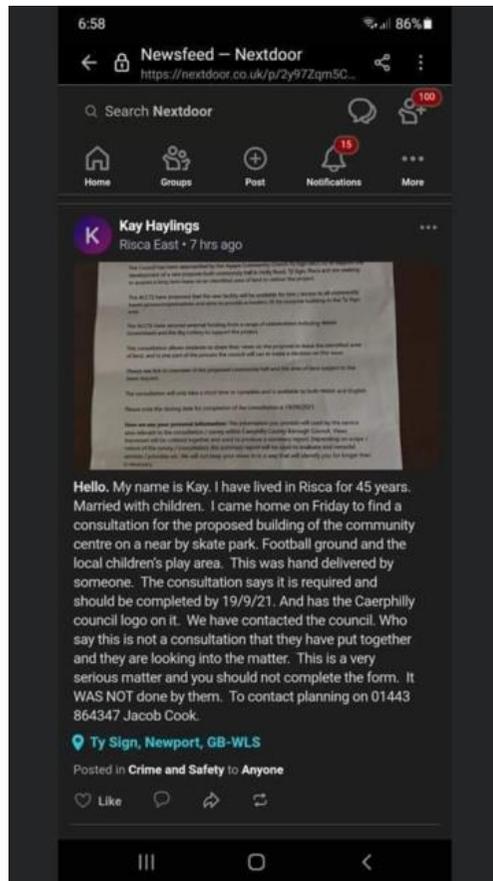
This is not and never has been an intended use of the building. The church, with help from the national charity 'Christians against poverty' have run a course called 'Fresh Start' designed to help people with 'life controlling issues', such as smoking, eating disorders, gambling; but not drug taking. The courses have been run for the past 7 years in the TLC shop without local comment.

The facilities we propose will complement other existing facilities.

The Agape Community Church continued operating throughout the pandemic, meeting via 'Zoom', helping people with debt, running activities for children and toddlers and those suffering from mental health problems and delivering food parcels.

No evidence provided; both planning and funding applications are available for scrutiny

Attachment 2



Attachment 3: Possible users of ‘Ty Mawr Community Hall’

September 2021

User	Use	Could they use Channel View?	Did they use Channel View before March 2020?	Confirmation of interest in writing?
Community garden	Facility for all ages of the community to garden together. Fenced to provide security (for both plants and users); link to ‘green prescribing’, mental health work and work with both OAP’s and children.	No. The open space immediately adjacent to Channel View is extremely limited and contaminated with asbestos; space close to TLC café and the ‘Centre at St Davids’ is steeply sloping and inaccessible to the disabled.	No	Yes
After School club	Commercial operation to provide additional capacity for parents, supplementing individual childminders.	No. Not close enough to the Ty Sign primary school to be useful.	No	No
‘Ty Sign Tots’	Mothers and Toddlers group. Up to 30 adults (parents and carers) and 30-40 children aged 0-4	Yes, but the group was running out of space in the CV hall and car park in March 2020, and interest has grown since.	Yes	Yes
Risca Community Comprehensive School	Outreach facility for both pupils and families.	No interest expressed in using Channel View.	No	Yes
Age Cymru	Could be a wellbeing hub for all ages. Opportunity to provide digital inclusion sessions, lunch club with activities, advocacy support, volunteer training events etc	Would need a kitchen capable of serving a meal to 70-80 people, plus an ancillary ‘interview’ space.	No	Yes

Dog Training	Original pet dog Co: Dog training.	Need both hall and adjacent enclosed garden space.	No	Yes
Youth work	No yet defined: could be a regular booking or flexible. No doubt of level of need.	Proximity of skate park, 'MUGA' and open space makes new hall more attractive.	No	Yes
Mental Health charity: 'Gofal'	They work closely with residents of HollyRoad flats. Up to March 2020 used CCBC Housing office.	No. Needs interview space separate from CCBC Housing office but close to flats.	No	Awaiting confirmation

Innovation Centre for Enterprise in Wales	Training for entrepreneurs	No. Nearest existing facility is at Llanhilleth.	No	Yes
Welsh Language Education	We understand that Menter Caerffili are seeking suitable accommodation in Riscato extend its provision for Children.	No interest expressed in Channel View.	No	Awaiting confirmation
Pobl	Meetings with social housing tenants	No	No	Yes
Community Education	'Welsh for Adults' adult community education course.	No interest expressed in Channel View.	No	Awaiting confirmation
Christians against Poverty	Base for debt counselling and financial advice service	Have used TLC café in the past, but have outgrown space; Channel View not practical because there is now no interview space.	No	Yes
Agape Community Church	Community Church: Sunday mornings and occasionally in mid week: 30-40 people on Sundays	Yes; but it's no longer as convenient because the hall is smaller and there is no separate room (used for 'Sunday School').	Yes	Yes
Private parties		The booking Secretary for Channel View has said on social media (21/9/21) that the hall is	Yes	Yes

		booked up for parties until Christmas.		
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