



Mrs T Strange, Clerk  
Melksham Without Parish Council

By Email

25 October 2015

Dear Teresa,

**Community Governance Review: Proposed Merger**

Please take this letter as CAWS's response to the Wiltshire County Council-led Community Governance Review, and in particular to the proposed merger of Melksham Without Parish Council (MWOPC) and Melksham Town Council (MTC).

As you know, CAWS (Community Action: Whitley and Shaw) was established to represent the interests of the people of Whitley and Shaw, and to provide a forum for community engagement. CAWS was established by local residents, and has had the support of MWOPC. CAWS objects to the proposed merger of MWOPC and MTC.

*Local Representation*

CAWS is a good example of localism in practice. It enables local residents to have power over matters which might previously have been outside of their reach. It allows local residents to have a stronger voice. It is in many respects a devolution of power to the community. MWOPC's involvement with CAWS, and with similar groups representing other villages within its catchment, illustrates MWOPC's strong commitment to localism.

MWOPC provides very effective representation of the interests of the villagers falling within its catchment, and provides an accessible and competent forum for the consideration of local concerns. Because MWOPC's focus is on the villages that surround Melksham, it is perfectly suited to representing the people that live in those villages. This is particularly so where the interests of the villages are not entirely the same as the interests of the town. Furthermore, having a separate council to represent the villages helps ensure that the distinctive identities of the villages are maintained.

Were MWOPC and MTC to merge, the voice of those living in the villages would be less strong.

Email: [shaw\\_and\\_whitley@aol.co.uk](mailto:shaw_and_whitley@aol.co.uk)



It follows that a merger of the two councils, particularly in circumstances where there may be a reduction in the overall number of councilors, will lead to a democratic deficit. In turn, all local residents (including those of the town) will receive less effective representation.

The Councils' approach in this exercise must be guided by the provisions of the Localism Act 2010. The Act codifies the national Government's policy of ever-greater decentralisation. As a matter of principle, the proposed merger runs contrary to that policy, and to the stated aim of the Act. Thus, as a matter of principle there is no good reason to merge MWOPC and MTC.

### *Financial considerations*

If there are no matters of principle with which to justify the merger, what then of matters of practice?

There is a dearth of published information setting out the practical benefits of a merger. There is, for instance, none shown on the relevant part of the Wiltshire County Council website ([here](#)). I assume that the chief justification for the proposed merger is financial, and I have in mind comments made by MTC member Cllr Hubbard, and quoted in the Melksham Independent News ([here](#)) that the proposed merger will reduce premises costs, and that "... the extra money can be spent on improving facilities in the town."

MTC is a significantly more expensive organization than MWOPC. This is demonstrated in the precepts charged by both councils. MTC charges a precept of £86.87 whereas MWOPC charges a precept of £41.63, i.e. less than half that charged by MTC.

A merger of the councils will inevitably lead to an increase in precept for those living in the MWOPC area; in addition to losing effective democratic representation, the residents will pay significantly more for their council-run services.

It is at least arguable that a merger could be justified if it would result in a significant saving in costs. Cllr Hubbard's statement refers to one saving, this being from premises costs. I note from MWOPC's published accounts for 2014/15 that its premises costs were £6,435.00. For the same year, MTC's total expenditure was £570,487.00 ([source](#)). The efficiency saving brought about by reduced premises costs would, therefore, be in the region of 1% of MTC's budget.

In any event, I note that Cllr Hubbard's comments only refer to there being financial benefits for the town.



*Summary*

CAWS considers that the proposed merger of the councils will not be in the best interest of the residents of Shaw and Whitley. The merger will weaken the effectiveness of local representation and in many respects runs contrary to the policy of localism.

Furthermore, any merger would increase the burden of taxation on local residents. It would at best result in an efficiency saving in the region of 1% of the MTC budget, and in any event, there would be no obvious financial benefit for village residents.

Yours sincerely,

Mark Ashkowski  
Secretary, Community Action: Whitley and Shaw