Balsall and Berkswell Parish Council Merger

On Monday 5th October, an email was received by the Chair of Berkswell Parish Council and the Chair of the merger working group from the Clerk of Balsall Parish Council. The email stated an extraordinary meeting had been held 2nd October and Balsall Parish Council had voted to withdraw its support for the merger process. It also stated they had written to Andrew Kinsey, Solicitor to the Council and Monitoring Officer at Solihull MBC, to ask for the process to pause and the decision to be reassessed.

This email was unexpected as there had been no prior communication from Balsall Parish Council representatives on the merger working group to raise concerns and there had been no known break-down in relations between the parties.

Following a conversation with Andrew Kinsey, he confirmed the process cannot be paused and it can only be reconsidered by the SMBC Governance Committee with ratification required through the full council. For the Governance Committee to overturn a democratic process, the case will need to be robust.

A copy of the letter to Andrew Kinsey dated 5th October 2026 and a written record of the verbal report provided to Balsall Parish Council at their meeting of 2nd October was uploaded to their website on 17th October.

5th October Letter to Andrew Kinsey

Reasons provided by Balsall Parish Council for withdrawing from the process and Berkswell Parish Council's responses:

1. **Public Consultation and Community Support** – Berkswell Parish Council thanks SMBC for the professional democratic process undertaken during the community governance review which voted overwhelming in favour of the merger.
2. **Distinct Community Identities** – Berkswell Parish Council recognises the differing identities within both parishes and the existing experience of managing these. Balsall Parish represents residents from Balsall Common, Temple Balsall (including the conservation area), Fen End and the rural areas. Berkswell Parish represents residents from Balsall Common, Berkswell (including the conservation area) and the rural areas. Both Councils have successfully represented their residents, considering their differing origins and identities and a new council will continue to do so.
3. **Effective and Convenient Governance. Significant differences highlighted between the existing councils -** Berkswell Parish Council recognises there are some differences in the current operation of both councils. The Warwickshire Association of Local Councils (WALC) is acting as advisor on the merger process and has highlighted options for new governance structures which are different to both existing councils. Berkswell Parish Council looks forward to agreeing a new effective and convenient governance structure for the newly merged council.
4. **Financial Implications and Risks** – **Some residents may experience increases approaching 100%.** The letter is misleading; the top of page 5 refers to Band D council tax charges. The following paragraph states 'It is understood a 27/28 budget is likely to be in excess of £250,000 and that some residents may experience increases of 100%.' The cost of the parish council precept only forms a small part of the council tax charges and would never result in a 100% increase in council tax.

The existing precept of Berkswell is £37 and Balsall is £50.87. With Balsall being the bigger parish, it follows that combining the councils will result in an increase in the Berkswell precept.

The statement that some residents may experience increases in their parish precept approaching 100% is not based on fact.

An initial draft 2027/28 budget for the merged parish council has been produced by Cllr Peter Wreford (Balsall Parish Council) with input from Cllr Charlotte Shadbolt (Berkswell Parish Council). This demonstrates a small annual reduction in the parish precept for Balsall residents and an annual increase of c£11.50 for Berkswell residents (a 31% increase representing less than a £1 per month).

It should be noted that in succeeding years as development of new housing is delivered the precept calculation will change with the cost of services being spread across more residents in a combined Balsall and Berkswell parish.

The Practitioners Guide 2025, Governance and Accountability for Small Authorities in England recommends councils with a precept over £200,000 hold 3 months general reserves. Based on current year end forecasts and the draft budget, there will be a surplus general reserve of c £80,000. The new council will need to set its strategic priorities and allocate funds towards projects such as a new Neighbourhood Development Plan, but it will be in a healthy financial position and will consider this when setting future year's precepts.

Report on the Proposed Merger of Balsall Parish Council and Berkswell Parish Council

This is a written report created detailing the content of the verbal report given at the extraordinary meeting of Balsall Parish Council held 2nd October.

Additional concerns raised by Balsall Parish Council and responses from Berkswell Parish Council not dealt with above are:

Operation of the Joint Working Group

Discussions are often dominated by Berkswell

The working party has met on 7 occasions (including the staffing subgroup). There has been necessary and appropriate scrutiny of information provided, relevant questions asked, additional information sought and open debate. The setting up of a new council provides an opportunity to identify the best quality and most cost-effective processes which may differ from the processes currently operated by both councils. All decisions taken by the working group thus far, which will lead to recommendations for the parish councils to consider, have been unanimous.

Need for appropriately qualified and experienced staff.

Berkswell Parish Council agrees with this statement.

TUPE Process

Berkswell Parish Council has requested an independent HR advisor is appointed in order to ensure impartiality and independence in the interests of all parties, this recommendation to the councils is supported in writing by Andrew Kinsey, Solicitor to the Council and Monitoring Officer, Solihull MBC.

Quotes are currently being obtained. One provider, recommended by WALC provides a 10-hour package of support for £1350, which they anticipate will be sufficient. Should more hours be required, these can be purchased in 5-hour bundles at £675.

Benefits of the Councils Merging

The benefits of the councils merging remain:

- Balsall Common, Temple Balsall, Berkswell and the surrounding rural areas are intrinsically linked and share community services.
- Balsall Common will grow significantly over the next few years, one Parish Council will provide a strong united voice to advocate for the necessary infrastructure and for new developments to be sympathetic and in keeping with the existing settlements.
- The Community Infrastructure Levy funding from future developments will be more efficiently and effectively managed by one Council for the benefit of the whole community.
- A single Parish Council will be more efficient and ensure consistency of message for their residents.
- A merged Parish Council will mirror the new Solihull MBC Balsall and Berkswell Ward resulting in easier and more efficient partnership working with the SMBC Ward Councillors.

Conclusion

We are mindful of the time and expenditure already invested into this process by Solihull MBC in running the Community Governance Review and both parish councils in engaging WALC and the time invested into the joint working group. We would not wish to see this public money go to waste.

Berkswell Parish Council is surprised by the recent decision of Balsall Parish Council and does not believe there are any issues regarding the parish council merger raised which are insurmountable. It remains fully committed to the process and will continue to work to see the parish councils merge to form one body for the benefit of all our residents. We hope that Balsall Parish Council will review their decision and join us in achieving this goal.

Charlotte Shadbolt
Chair
Berkswell Parish Council