

Borough of Rossendale: Electoral Review. Submission from [REDACTED]

I understand that a group advising Rossendale Borough Council has recommended the amalgamation of Shawforth and Facit ward with Bacup and Irwell ward. I am writing to object to this suggestion, and to argue for an alternative proposal put forward by Whitworth Town Council. I understand that the plan to amalgamate Shawforth with Bacup did not come from a resident or Councillor representing Shawforth and Facit ward or Whitworth and Healey ward but was a desk-based exercise which manipulated the numbers to try to make the proportion of councillors to electors fit a national 'average,' without reference to the historical, geographical and cultural ties which bind Shawforth to Whitworth, or to the wishes of the electors most affected. A purely numbers-based proposal for boundary change will underestimate the strength of these ties.

My objection to the proposal is based on the guidance published by the Boundaries Commission:

The Commission is interested in views on which communities should be part of the same ward. What facilities do people share, such as parks, leisure centres or schools and shopping areas? What issues do neighbouring communities face that they have in common, such as high numbers of visitors or heavy traffic? Have there been new housing or commercial developments that have changed the focus of communities? And are there roads, rivers, railways or other features that people believe form strong boundaries between neighbourhoods? We aim to ensure that the pattern of wards reflect community ties and identities and promotes effective local government.

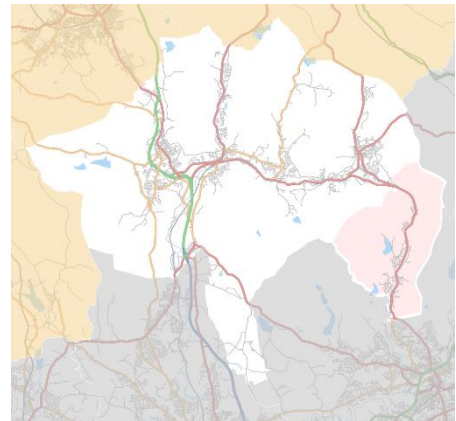
The Township of Whitworth is in a long thin valley. The clue is in the name - it is called the Whitworth valley, which includes Shawforth. The valley is surrounded by hills 1500 feet high, separating it from the valleys to the North, East and West. There is a watershed between Shawforth and Bacup, where the River Spodden rises and flows through Shawforth, Facit, Whitworth and Healey. Shawforth and Facit are confined in the bottom of the steep sided valley in a 'ribbon' development and they have historic and current ties along that ribbon into Whitworth and Healey, down the valley towards Rochdale rather than over the hill into Bacup. Shawforth, Millgate, Facit, Whitworth and Healey form a single Township, with a strong identity defined by geography, topography, history, and cultural and family links based on shared experience.

Put simply, residents of Shawforth and Facit have much more in common with Whitworth and Healey than they do with Bacup, Broadclough or Weir. As well as sharing a single watercourse they share a single trunk road, a single bus route, a single surface water drainage system, a single gas main, a single TV broadcast mast, a single Civic Hall, one cemetery and a single Brass Band. (The Whitworth Vale and Healy Brass band is not called the Whitworth Vale and Bacup Brass band for a good reason – Whitworth and Bacup are different towns.) A resident of Shawforth is much more likely to join the Remembrance Day parade in Whitworth than to travel to the Bacup parade, and the Whitworth Memorial Gardens are in Facit. The annual Whitworth Rushcart procession starts in Shawforth. The Whitworth Morris Men were founded in Shawforth. A resident of Shawforth is more likely to be buried in Whitworth cemetery than in Bacup cemetery, and more likely to be married or Christened in Whitworth church than in a Bacup church. The secondary school serving Shawforth is located in Whitworth. Whitworth was historically part of the Parish of Rochdale, and the modern civil parish of Whitworth extends into Shawforth but not into Bacup.

Whitworth and Shawforth form part of a single cohesive entity. An arranged marriage between Shawforth and Bacup, against the wishes of at least one of the parties, does not.

Representative democracy depends on councillors speaking for their constituents and representing their views, their needs and their concerns.

“As leaders of local places, councils and councillors have a hugely important role in promoting community cohesion. ...Critically, the knowledge of local councillors about their areas provides a firm foundation for understanding problems and offering clear leadership in addressing them.”
(LGA, 2019) ⁱ



Parish of Whitworth in Rossendale

In my view a councillor representing the Whitworth valley as a single entity is better able to represent people from Shawforth and Facit than a councillor representing Bacup. Community identity and cohesion is a valuable quality which can take several generations to develop but can be lost very quickly. The Township of Whitworth has clear boundaries, extending to the edge of Bacup in the North and to the edge of Rochdale in the South. It would be illogical to draw new local government electoral ward boundaries different from the existing Town Council boundaries.

The group which is advising the amalgamation of wards may argue that we should not be guided only by past practice, and that change is necessary. If applied rigidly this would be clearly at odds with the Boundary Commission's own guidance that cultural ties must be recognised and given due consideration. Although traditional and historic relationships are not always the best guide to planning for a changing world, the Boundary Commissioners should please consider the practical consequences of breaking these historical, cultural and geographic ties for the sake of satisfying the criteria of an abstract numerical model, based merely on the average number of electors in any given ward. The possible gain from new boundaries may be a closer approach to 'average' in that model, but with no real benefit for the people most affected. The certain loss would be the damage to the sense of identity and the cohesion of the community by the imposition of an artificial boundary with no basis in history, geography, culture or the preference of the people most affected. For example, it would be divisive for a Bacup councillor to take a view about Shawforth matters contrary to that of a Whitworth councillor. Community cohesion and proper representation is best served when a councillor speaks for one community, not for two or three or four different communities which have little in common.

The people of the Whitworth valley, speaking through their Town Council, have made it clear that they prefer to be represented by slightly fewer councillors in proportion to the number of electors than to have slightly more councillors, representing proportionally fewer electors but in different wards outside the valley. Good representation is not just a matter of numbers and national averages but requires knowledge and identification with the community represented.

24th November 2022

ⁱ https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/10.31%20Community%20cohesion%20guidance_04.2.pdf