

Rt. Hon. Louise Haigh MP
First Secretary of State
Cabinet Office

Sent via email

Executive Leader
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Dear First Secretary,

May I begin by congratulating you on your appointment as First Secretary of State, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office. I wish you every success in one of the most important roles in Government at a pivotal moment for our country.

Your Government has set out an ambitious programme of national renewal. The Prime Minister has spoken of delivering "good growth in every postcode" and "hope in every heart", supported by an agenda to accelerate economic growth, build a new generation of council homes, regenerate high streets and town centres, strengthen devolution, reform social care and local government funding, end rough sleeping, rewire the state and restore confidence in both local and national government.

Through the establishment of No.10 North, and more recently through the publication of *Rewiring the State* on 31 July 2026, the Government has rightly made clear that success will depend upon every part of the state working from a single plan, aligned behind the Prime Minister's defining missions and relentlessly focused on delivery rather than bureaucracy.

Those are ambitions I strongly support. They are also ambitions that Harlow Council is already delivering. Through our Building Harlow's Future programme, we are leading one of the most ambitious programmes of regeneration anywhere in the country. We are rebuilding our town centre, delivering more council homes than at any point in a generation, investing record sums in existing housing, attracting major private investment, renewing neighbourhoods and restoring confidence in our community. We stand ready to do even more to help deliver the Government's programme.

It is precisely because I believe so strongly in those ambitions that I am writing to you. In my view, Local Government Reorganisation has become the single greatest risk to the successful delivery of the Prime Minister's defining missions.

The Prime Minister has made clear that devolution and national renewal are among the defining purposes of this Government, and that he intends to deliver them through the programme on which the Government sought and secured its mandate at the 2024 General Election. That manifesto did not propose a programme of compulsory Local Government Reorganisation.

That means there remains both the opportunity and, I would respectfully suggest, the responsibility to ask whether Local Government Reorganisation continues to advance the Government's wider objectives or whether it now risks preventing local government from delivering the tangible change the Prime Minister wants the public to see and feel.

It is now abundantly clear that Local Government Reorganisation cannot be implemented within the timetable the Government has set, nor can councils realistically be expected to bear the financial cost of delivering it. The reality is stark. Implementing Local Government Reorganisation on the basis and within the timetable set by Government would create unmanageable direct revenue pressures before vesting day alone. Those costs are vastly greater than was ever envisaged in the original business case, which itself assumed significant Government funding that has simply not materialised.

In short, the Government is asking councils to finance their own abolition without providing anything like the resources necessary to do so. For Harlow, the consequence would be a profound and wholly unsustainable deterioration in our financial position, the closure of many local services and the suspension of our regeneration programme - quite literally the opposite of the agenda the Prime Minister is pursuing. Those concerns are evidenced in detail in our legal challenge, which demonstrates that the programme, as currently proposed, is simply not financially viable.

Yet even if those issues could somehow be overcome, they are no longer the central question. The more important question is whether this is the right moment to ask local government to undertake the largest structural reorganisation in a generation whilst simultaneously expecting it to deliver one of the most ambitious programmes of national renewal for decades.

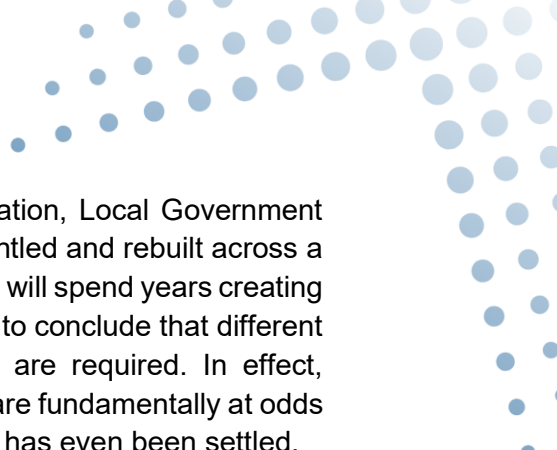
I do not believe those two objectives are compatible.

Indeed, I believe the greatest risk to the Prime Minister's programme is no longer a lack of ambition. It is asking the very organisations responsible for delivering that programme to dismantle and rebuild themselves at the same time.

Local government does not possess unlimited capacity, organisational resilience or financial resources. The very same officers, professional expertise and political leadership needed to deliver more homes, drive economic growth, strengthen partnerships, implement devolution and reform public services are also those that would be consumed by designing new organisations, integrating workforces, restructuring services and managing the abolition of existing councils. There is no second leadership team waiting in reserve.

Nor is it simply leadership that is diverted. It is the same money needed to deliver the Prime Minister's priorities that councils are now being asked to spend on reorganising themselves. Every hour spent on structural reorganisation is an hour not spent delivering homes. Every pound spent on transition is a pound unavailable for investment in communities. Every major organisational decision inevitably displaces attention from improving outcomes for residents. That is not an argument against reform. It is simply the practical reality of delivering it.

Nowhere is that contradiction clearer than in social care. At precisely the time your Government



is pursuing the most fundamental reform of social care in a generation, Local Government Reorganisation would require those very same services to be dismantled and rebuilt across a number of entirely new organisations. There is a real risk that councils will spend years creating entirely new structures only for Baroness Casey's recommendations to conclude that different structures, different accountabilities and different delivery models are required. In effect, Government risks asking local authorities to build organisations that are fundamentally at odds with the direction of travel for social care reform before that direction has even been settled.

The central argument of *Rewiring the State* is that Government should remove barriers to delivery, align institutions behind common objectives and ensure that every part of the public sector is working from one plan rather than competing ones. That is precisely why I believe this issue falls squarely within your responsibilities as First Secretary of State.

Local Government Reorganisation is no longer simply a matter for one department. It has become a cross-government delivery issue because it now risks frustrating almost every domestic priority the Prime Minister has set. Rather than strengthening delivery, it diverts the leadership, expertise and financial resources needed to achieve it. It is for that reason that, alongside my correspondence with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, I am writing to ask you to take that wider, cross-government view and discuss this directly with both the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister.

The consequences are already becoming apparent. Across the country, and particularly in Essex, an increasing number of councils have commenced or joined legal proceedings challenging the decisions underpinning Local Government Reorganisation because they believe there are fundamental flaws in the process by which those decisions were reached.

Litigation was not our preferred course. Court proceedings consume public money, time and political attention that would be far better devoted to serving residents. We have taken this step because we believe there are serious legal issues that require determination if the current programme continues. My hope, however, is that the litigation ultimately proves unnecessary.

I know that position is shared by the many councils that have either directly commenced Judicial Reviews or are acting as interested parties to Judicial Reviews.

Over recent years we have transformed both our council and our town. We have modernised how the organisation operates, restored financial stability, strengthened accountability and built a culture relentlessly focused on delivery. Today, cranes dominate our skyline. New homes are being built. Private investment is flowing into the town. Neighbourhoods are being renewed. Community safety is improving. Pride is being restored. Long-standing challenges that once seemed permanent are being addressed because the council has been able to focus its energy on delivering change rather than managing structural uncertainty.

Those achievements are not aspirations for the future. They are being delivered now. They are also closely aligned with the outcomes your Government wants to see replicated across the country. If Government wishes to see what sustained investment, local leadership and long-term regeneration can achieve, Harlow provides a compelling example. That progress has taken years to build, bringing together residents, businesses, investors and public sector

partners around a shared vision for the future of our town. It would be truly disastrous if that progress were now interrupted by requiring those same people and organisations to divert their attention towards the complex task of abolishing one council and creating another.

Ultimately, Government faces a simple choice. It can ask councils to devote the coming years to building homes, driving economic growth, strengthening devolution, improving public services and delivering the programme of national renewal that the Prime Minister has set out.

Or it can ask those same councils to devote those years to dismantling themselves and spending their leadership, financial resources and organisational capacity on structural reorganisation.

I do not believe they can successfully do both.

I therefore respectfully ask you to use your position as First Secretary of State to make the case within Government that the current programme of Local Government Reorganisation in Essex should be stopped.

Doing so would not require the Government to depart from the programme on which it was elected. Rather, it would remove one of the greatest barriers to delivering it, allowing councils like Harlow to devote their leadership, expertise and resources to the Prime Minister's defining missions of growth, devolution and national renewal.

I would be delighted to welcome you to Harlow so that you can see first-hand the transformation already underway and the contribution councils can make when they are given the stability and capacity to focus relentlessly on delivery.

With every good wish,



Councillor Dan Swords

Executive Leader of Harlow Council