

Rt. Hon. Andy Burnham MP

Prime Minister
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Sent via email

Executive Leader

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Dear Prime Minister,

May I begin by congratulating you on your appointment as Prime Minister. I wish you every success in leading the country at a defining moment.

I also want to congratulate you on what you achieved as Mayor of Greater Manchester. Your leadership there demonstrated the enormous potential of genuine devolution: strong, visible and accountable local leadership, empowered to make decisions for its place and to get things done.

You have described the approach you developed in Greater Manchester as: "Place-first, not party-first; problem-solving, not point-scoring; long-term, not short-term." You have spoken about getting a whole place to face the same way and "pull in that same direction together". I could not agree more.

Indeed, that is precisely the approach we have taken in Harlow and I would challenge you to find another council anywhere in the country currently demonstrating "place-first, not party-first" more clearly or successfully.

We have frozen council tax for five consecutive years while more than doubling the council's budget compared with two years ago and delivering three consecutive budget surpluses. We are rebuilding our entire town centre, with cranes on the skyline and major schemes well under construction. We are delivering more council homes than at any point in a generation and investing record sums in modernising our existing housing. We are renewing neighbourhoods, restoring pride and much-loved community facilities and traditions, and investing heavily in community safety, with antisocial behaviour down significantly. We're restoring the immaculate standards of maintenance that was commonplace in decades gone by – the very vision you speak of. At the same time, major private investment is flowing back into Harlow, derelict sites are being brought back into use and confidence and pride in our town is being restored. Harlow is transforming like no other place in the country, both in bricks and mortar, but also in hope, belief and optimism.

That is place-first leadership in practice. It is not about political structures, institutional interests

or protecting an organisation for the sake of it. It is about asking, every single day, what is right for Harlow and then getting on and delivering it.

Your Greater Manchester Combined Authority itself described its success as coming from a “bottom-up form of governance where the power is shared” and a “whole place approach”. You have said that devolution is “changing things for the better from the bottom up”. Again, I agree.

It is precisely because I believe in that approach that I am asking you to stop the current programme of Local Government Reorganisation in Essex and focus wholly on a Mayoral Combined Authority for Greater Essex.

If devolution is fundamentally about empowering strong local leadership to do what is right for its place, the current programme of Local Government Reorganisation risks achieving precisely the opposite. Rather than empowering local leaders to deliver, it will consume them with structural reorganisation. Rather than strengthening leadership of place, it risks years of uncertainty and paralysis.

If the test is genuinely “place-first, not party-first”, then LGR must be judged by what it will actually do to places like Harlow – not by whether it completes a national programme of structural reform.

In our case, it would take an organisation currently delivering at extraordinary pace and require its leadership, people and resources to turn away from rebuilding their town and towards dismantling their council.

I cannot see how that puts place first.

You have set out an ambitious programme for national renewal. You have 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 council tax, social care, council funding, the planning system and end rough sleeping.

Those are ambitions I strongly support. They are also ambitions that Harlow Council is already delivering. It is because I believe so strongly in those ambitions that I am asking you to stop the current programme of Local Government Reorganisation in Essex.

When I wrote to your predecessor in June, our concern was that this programme was neither affordable nor deliverable within the proposed timetable. At that time, I warned that the financial implications were severe. Having now undertaken further detailed analysis, that concern has only deepened.

The reality is stark. Implementing Local Government Reorganisation on the basis and within the timetable set by Government would create an unmanageable pressure in direct revenue expenditure 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.

The Government's offer of just £1 million per new unitary authority bears no resemblance to the true cost of implementation. It would cover only a fraction of the unavoidable expenditure required simply to abolish existing councils and establish new authorities. It does nothing to address the far greater financial consequences: the loss of management capacity, the diversion of staff from delivering statutory services, the delay to major regeneration and housing programmes, the loss of commercial income and investment opportunities, and the increased borrowing and financing costs that inevitably follow. The opportunity cost alone runs to many millions of pounds.

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 as well as the closure of many local services, the decimation of the hope we have harnessed and suspension of our regeneration programme. Those concerns are evidenced in detail in our legal challenge, which demonstrates that the programme, as currently proposed, is simply not financially viable.

Since then, however, the context has changed in an important respect.

The issue is no longer simply whether Local Government Reorganisation can be implemented in the timetable the Government has set out or whether councils can afford to do so. It is whether this is the right moment to ask councils to undertake the largest structural change in a generation while simultaneously expecting them to deliver one of the most ambitious programmes of national reform for decades.

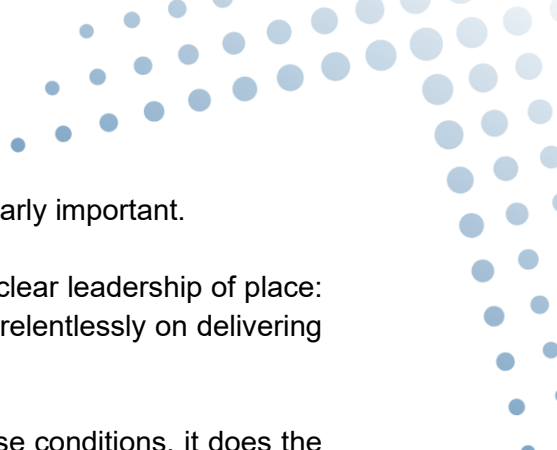
I do not believe those two objectives are compatible.

Local government does not possess unlimited capacity, organisational resilience or financial resources. The same officers, professional expertise and political leadership needed to deliver more homes, drive economic growth, strengthen partnerships and reform 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.

Indeed, it is the same money needed to drive those priorities that we are being asked to divert to reorganising councils.

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.

I fully understand why Government wishes to create stronger strategic authorities capable of supporting growth and working effectively alongside Mayoral Strategic Authorities. Those are legitimate ambitions. However, the question before you is not whether that vision has merit. It is whether pursuing it now will help or hinder the wider programme you have made your priority.



Your experience in Greater Manchester makes that question particularly important.

You demonstrated there that devolution can succeed when there is clear leadership of place: local leaders with the authority, accountability and capacity to focus relentlessly on delivering for their communities.

The danger of the current approach is that, rather than creating those conditions, it does the opposite – diverting leadership away from place and into years of organisational restructuring. In my view, Local Government Reorganisation is the single biggest risk to the delivery of those priorities.

The greatest obstacle to delivering your agenda is not a lack of commitment within local government. Across the country there are councils eager to build more homes, regenerate town centres, tackle homelessness and drive economic growth. The greatest risk is expecting those same organisations to devote the next three years to dismantling themselves.

That is why I believe the decision reached by your predecessor deserves to be looked at again. A decision by you to stop the current programme would allow Government to ask a straightforward question: how can councils best contribute to the national priorities you have set?

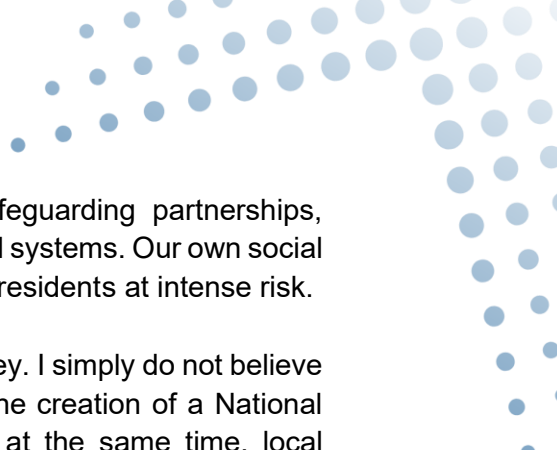
Furthermore, even if one accepts the principle of Local Government Reorganisation, the timetable is becoming increasingly difficult to reconcile with the scale of what is being proposed.

The Government's intention remains for elections to new authorities in May 2027, with the new councils assuming responsibility from 1 April 2028. Yet we are already well behind the timetable originally envisaged. Structural Change Orders have not yet been made and every month that passes compresses an already demanding programme further. This is further exacerbated by the fact Greater Essex is the most complex form of Local Government Reorganisation in decades, potentially ever.

That matters because the task is not simply one of changing governance structures. It involves creating entirely new organisations capable of safely delivering billions of pounds of public services from their first day of existence.

Across Essex, existing councils would need to disaggregate and reconfigure major services, appoint new statutory officers and senior leadership teams, establish governance arrangements, integrate workforces, harmonise policies and systems, set budgets, manage assets and liabilities, and ensure legal and regulatory compliance throughout the transition. Nowhere is that challenge greater than in social care.

At precisely the time you are rightly 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 within little more than eighteen months. The practical consequences are immense. Dozens of new Directors of Children's Services, Directors of Adult Social Services and Directors of Public Health would



need to be recruited, alongside the creation of entirely new safeguarding partnerships, commissioning arrangements, governance structures and operational systems. Our own social care authority has made clear they believe this will place vulnerable residents at intense risk.

It is for precisely that reason that I have also written to Baroness Casey. I simply do not believe it is possible, wise or realistic for her Commission to recommend the creation of a National Care Service and fundamental reform of adult social care while, at the same time, local government is expected to redesign the very organisations responsible for delivering those services.

There is a real risk that councils across the country will spend years creating entirely new structures through Local Government Reorganisation, 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 two programmes compete for the same leadership, the same expertise, the same workforce and the same financial resources. More fundamentally, they may be pursuing incompatible organisational models. It cannot be sensible to require councils to undertake the largest restructuring of local government in decades while simultaneously considering reforms that could fundamentally reshape how those same services are organised and delivered.

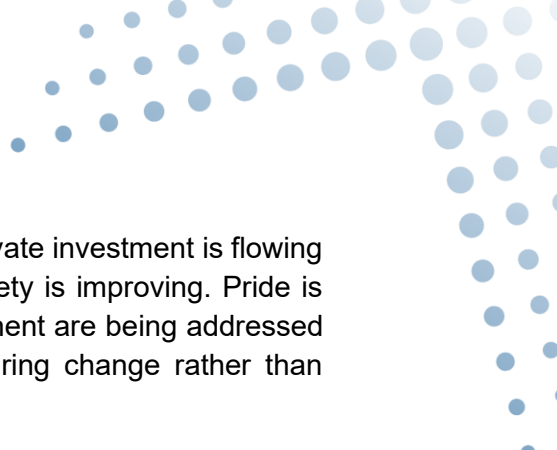
These are not simply organisational changes. They concern some of the most vulnerable children and adults in our country. They require continuity of leadership, stability of partnerships and unwavering operational focus. Introducing wholesale structural reorganisation at the very moment Government is considering the future architecture of social care creates an unnecessary and wholly avoidable risk to the quality, safety and resilience of care.

The consequence is that the first decade of the new authorities would inevitably be dominated by organisational transition rather than strategic leadership. Their immediate priority would not be accelerating growth, building homes or reforming services. It would be ensuring safe, lawful and financially sustainable operations.

That is the fundamental contradiction with genuine devolution. Devolution should be about giving places the power and capacity to lead. The current approach risks consuming that capacity in the machinery of reorganisation.

That is why I believe there is still a short but important window to stop the current programme before councils are committed to an increasingly irreversible course.

For Harlow, the answer is clear. 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. That has created the confidence to undertake the largest programme of regeneration of any district council in the country.



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 you want 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 for my town if that progress were now abruptly interrupted by requiring those same people and organisations to divert their attention towards the complex task of abolishing one council and creating another.

The case for stopping Local Government Reorganisation is therefore not rooted in resistance to change. It is rooted in a desire to protect delivery at precisely the moment you are asking local government to achieve more than ever before.

I should also address the legal position openly.

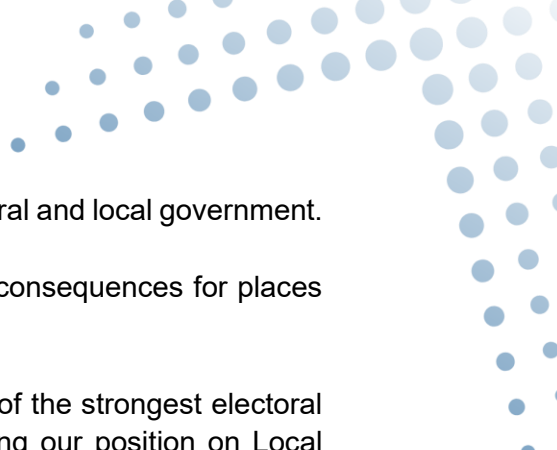
Following detailed legal advice, Harlow Council has joined the judicial review commenced by Essex County Council because we believe there were significant flaws in the process by which the previous Secretary of State reached his decision. Several other authorities across Essex have reached the same conclusion.

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.

Is it better for the Government and councils to spend coming years fighting ferociously through the courts or to focus on delivering your plan for national renewal? Is it better for the Government to force local areas, against their will and in spite of the disastrous impact on delivering outcomes, or to work together to deliver your plan for national renewal? I know which answer is in the interest of my town, as you would've seen in your time as Mayor.

My hope, therefore, 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.

A decision by you to stop the programme and focus solely on devolution would create an opportunity to resolve these issues through constructive engagement rather than continued



legal proceedings. I believe that would be in the interests of both central and local government.

Finally, I hope you will also reflect on the democratic and practical consequences for places like Harlow.

Earlier this year, the people of Harlow gave this administration one of the strongest electoral mandates seen anywhere in local government. They did so knowing our position on Local Government Reorganisation and because they wanted us to continue rebuilding our town. They voted for regeneration, investment, new homes and neighbourhood renewal - not for years of structural transition.

That confidence extends beyond the ballot box. Investors, developers, housing associations, businesses and public sector partners have committed to Harlow because they have confidence in the council's stability, leadership and ability to deliver. Those relationships have taken years to establish. They should not now be placed at risk by creating unnecessary uncertainty at the very moment they are beginning to deliver results.

This letter is not an argument against reform.

It is an argument for sequencing reform in a way that gives you the greatest chance of success. It is also an argument for moving at pace to implement devolution across the country.

Your record in Greater Manchester demonstrates why strong local leadership matters. Devolution should mean trusting places and their leaders to take responsibility, make decisions and deliver. It should not mean imposing a process which absorbs their leadership, resources and capacity in years of restructuring.

Your ambitions for housebuilding, devolution, economic growth and public service reform deserve the full attention of local government. They deserve councils whose leadership is focused on delivery rather than institutional redesign, whose resources are invested in communities rather than transition, and whose energy is directed towards improving people's lives rather than abolishing existing organisations.

Harlow stands ready to play its part.

Indeed, I would be delighted to welcome you to our town so that you can see first-hand the transformation already underway. I believe Harlow demonstrates what can be achieved when local government is given the stability and capacity to focus relentlessly on delivery, and I would welcome the opportunity to discuss how councils like ours can make an even greater contribution to your programme for the country.

Ultimately, however, the decision rests with you.

You 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 you want to lead.

Or you can ask those same councils to devote those years to abolishing themselves and spending all of its resource, both financial and human, on bureaucracy.

I do not believe they can successfully do both.

You have said that the future should be “built from the bottom up, not the top down”. Harlow is doing exactly that. We have a clear mandate from our residents, strong leadership of our place and a programme that is demonstrably delivering.

Your record in Greater Manchester showed what can happen when local leadership is empowered to focus on its place. The current LGR programme risks doing the opposite: creating paralysis at precisely the moment we need pace, leadership and delivery.

I therefore respectfully ask you to stop the current programme of Local Government Reorganisation in Essex, and allow councils to concentrate on delivering the outcomes you want to achieve.

The greatest contribution Harlow Council can make over the next three years is not to spend them restructuring itself. It is to spend them delivering your agenda.

If we truly believe in “place-first, not party-first”, then I implore you to put Harlow first and let us continue delivering for our town.

With every good wish,



Councillor Dan Swords

Executive Leader of Harlow Council