

The Rt. Hon. Angela Rayner MP
Secretary of State
Ministry of Housing, Communities
and Local Government

Sent via email

Executive Leader
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Dear Secretary of State,

May I begin by congratulating you on your appointment as Secretary of State. I wish you every success in one of the most important roles in Government at a defining moment for local government and the communities we serve.

Your Government has set out an ambitious programme for 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 council tax, social care, council funding, the planning system and end rough sleeping. More recently, on 24 July, when asked to identify your top three priorities as Secretary of State, you highlighted the council house building revolution, devolution and ending rough sleeping.

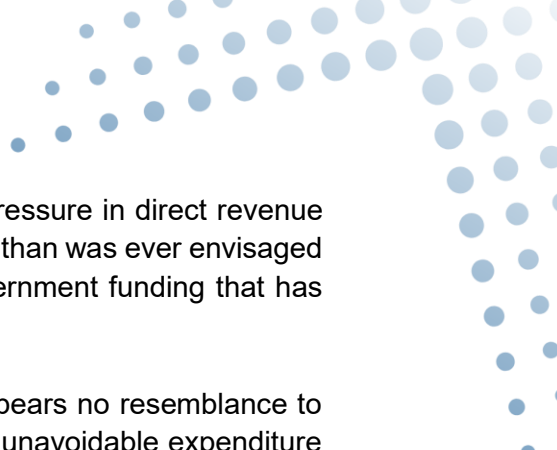
Those are ambitions I strongly support. They are also ambitions that Harlow Council is already delivering.

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. The people of Harlow have backed that programme decisively, and we are determined to continue playing our part in delivering the wider ambitions of your Government.

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 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.

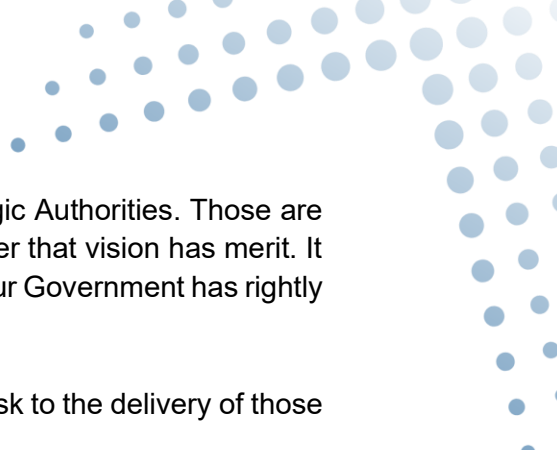
I do not believe those two objectives are compatible.

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 your Government has rightly made its priority.

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 the Prime Minister has 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 your Government is 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 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 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 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 your Government is 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.

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.

A decision by you to stop the programme 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 your Government the greatest chance of success.

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 Government's programme.

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 that your Government has rightly made its defining mission.

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. 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 your Government was elected 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.

Yours sincerely,



Councillor Dan Swords

Executive Leader of Harlow Council