

Rt. Hon. Steve Reed MP
Secretary of State
Ministry of Housing, Communities
and Local Government

Sent via email

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Thursday 18th June 2026

Dear Secretary of State,

Harlow Council has now reached a clear and considered view on the Government's current approach to Local Government Reorganisation (LGR): the programme should be paused and fundamentally reassessed in light of its deliverability, cost and impact on growth, regeneration and public service delivery.

Having carefully considered the requirements of the programme, the proposed timetable, the financial implications and the practical realities of implementation, Harlow Council has reached a clear conclusion: the Government's current approach to LGR is not deliverable within the timescale set, cannot be achieved within existing council budgets and would undermine, rather than advance, the Government's stated objectives.

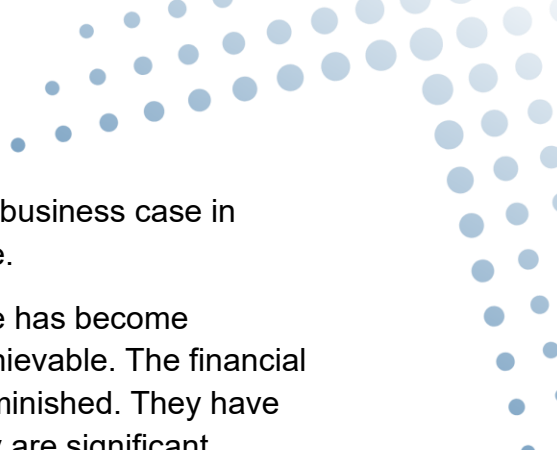
For those reasons, Harlow Council does not believe the current programme is capable of successful delivery and cannot responsibly commit the resources, leadership attention and organisational capacity required to implement it.

Accordingly, Harlow Council is opposed to the continuation of the programme in its current form and urges the Government to pause it immediately.

It is important to emphasise that this conclusion has not been reached lightly.

Harlow Council has approached this process constructively and in good faith. We recognise that the current system of local government is not perfect. There are legitimate questions about how public services can be delivered more effectively, how strategic decision-making can be strengthened and how local government can best meet the challenges of the future.

For that reason, Harlow Council engaged fully in discussions regarding LGR and supported the development of the five-unitary authority proposal for Greater Essex. We did so not because we believed it to be an ideal solution, but because, based upon the options available at the time, it appeared to represent the least worst option.



However, there is a profound difference between developing a business case in principle and delivering a reorganisation programme in practice.

As implementation has drawn closer, the scale of the challenge has become increasingly apparent. The timetable has not become more achievable. The financial risks have not reduced. The practical complexities have not diminished. They have become more evident with every stage of the process and they are significant.

Our principal concern is therefore one of deliverability.

We recognise that LGR is being pursued in different circumstances across the country and that there are authorities facing particular challenges which Government believes structural reform may help address.

In some places, reorganisation is being considered against a backdrop of acute financial challenge, governance concerns or structural difficulties. Government has understandably taken different decisions in those areas. Harlow's circumstances are fundamentally different.

Harlow is financially stable, politically stable, delivering significant regeneration, securing investment, building new homes and making substantial progress against the very objectives that Government has identified as national priorities.

Our concern is therefore not with the principle of reform, but with whether the Government's current approach can realistically be delivered in Harlow and Essex without compromising the outcomes residents expect and Government seeks to achieve.

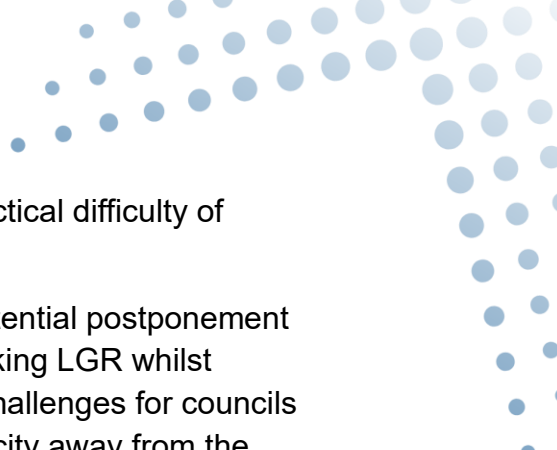
The practical reality is that the current approach to LGR would require significant leadership focus, organisational capacity and financial resource over a prolonged period. Those resources are not unlimited.

Every hour spent on reorganisation is an hour not spent on regeneration. Every pound spent on restructuring is a pound not invested in communities. Every leadership decision focused on institutional change is a decision not focused on delivering growth, homes, investment and better outcomes for residents.

The closer implementation has come, the clearer it has become that attempting to deliver the Government's current approach to LGR alongside the scale of transformation already underway in Harlow would create substantial delivery risks.

For Harlow Council, the question is no longer whether reorganisation can be designed in principle. The question is whether it can be delivered in practice without damaging the programmes that are already succeeding.

We do not believe it can.



Indeed, your own Government has already recognised the practical difficulty of delivering LGR alongside local elections.

In your Minister's letter of 18 December 2025 regarding the potential postponement of local elections, the Government acknowledged that undertaking LGR whilst simultaneously conducting elections would create significant challenges for councils and risk diverting leadership attention and organisational capacity away from the successful delivery of reorganisation.

That assessment was correct, as I set out to you in January.

Ultimately, local elections proceeded. The people of Harlow therefore exercised their democratic right to determine the future direction of their town and elected a new Council with a clear mandate.

However, the fundamental point made by Government at the time remains unchanged.

If LGR was considered sufficiently complex and demanding that elections risked undermining its successful delivery, then it is difficult to see how the programme can now be regarded as realistically deliverable in the circumstances that Government itself identified.

The facts have not changed. The elections took place, new democratic mandates have been secured, councils are implementing those mandates, residents have set clear expectations about local priorities and authorities are now expected simultaneously to continue delivering services, pursue economic growth, implement ambitious regeneration programmes and undertake Local Government Reorganisation.

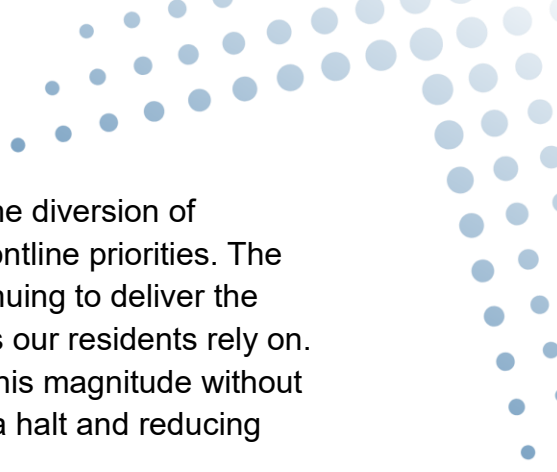
The Government's original assessment was correct.

Attempting to do all of these things at the same time creates significant delivery risk.

For Harlow, where we are undertaking a once-in-a-generation programme of regeneration and where residents have delivered an overwhelming mandate to continue that work, those risks are particularly acute.

The practical reality is that the conditions the Government itself identified as making LGR difficult now exist in full. That is precisely why Harlow Council no longer believes the current programme is capable of successful delivery.

The financial implications are equally concerning. Whilst detailed analysis is nearing completion, it is already unavoidable that implementing LGR in the manner and within the timescale proposed by Government would cost Harlow Council many millions of pounds in revenue expenditure - substantially more than was ever anticipated in the original business case.



Those costs would have to be met upfront and would require the diversion of significant financial and organisational resources away from frontline priorities. The scale of expenditure involved is simply incompatible with continuing to deliver the regeneration, housing, growth and in fact, the frontline services our residents rely on. In practical terms, it is not feasible to fund a reorganisation of this magnitude without bringing a substantial amount of the council's existing work to a halt and reducing service provision significantly.

At a time when local authorities should be focusing every pound of expenditure on delivering change for the people they serve, the Government's current approach to LGR would require substantial expenditure before any benefits could conceivably be realised. In the most optimistic scenarios, many years would pass before any financial benefit is realised. The costs associated with transition, restructuring, programme management, systems integration, legal processes, staffing changes and organisational redesign would be considerable.

Those costs are increasing whilst the projected benefits remain speculative.

Every pound spent on restructuring is a pound that cannot be spent on regeneration, housing delivery, public services, infrastructure or improving the quality of life of residents.

For Harlow residents, the proposition is particularly difficult to justify. The council is effectively being asked to divert millions of pounds away from regeneration, housing, public services and investment in order to fund its own abolition.

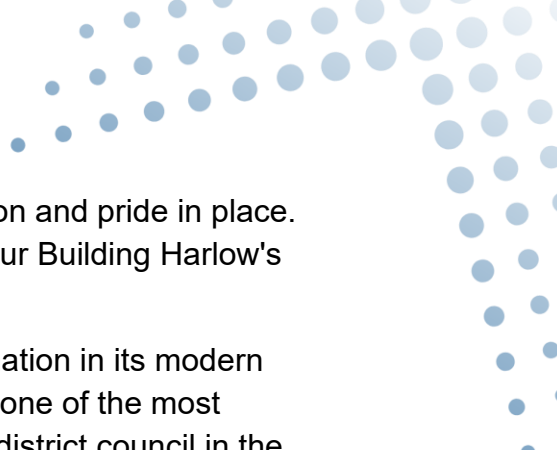
Residents will rightly ask why scarce public resources should be used to dismantle a council that is delivering for them rather than continuing to invest in the future of the town. At a time when Government is rightly demanding that every pound of public money delivers maximum value, that is a question which deserves careful consideration.

The consequence is that the Government's current approach risks producing precisely the opposite outcome from that intended. Rather than accelerating growth, it would slow it. Rather than strengthening places, it would weaken momentum. Rather than improving outcomes for residents, it would place successful delivery programmes at risk.

This is particularly true in Harlow.

The Government has rightly placed economic growth at the centre of its agenda. Harlow is already delivering economic growth.

The Government has prioritised housing delivery. Harlow is already delivering housing.



The Government has emphasised value for money, regeneration and pride in place. Harlow is already delivering each of those objectives through our Building Harlow's Future programme.

Our town is currently undergoing the most significant transformation in its modern history. Through Building Harlow's Future, Harlow is delivering one of the most ambitious regeneration programmes being undertaken by any district council in the United Kingdom. New homes are being built. Major regeneration projects are underway. Infrastructure is being improved. Investment is being secured. Jobs are being created. Confidence in our future is growing.

This is not future potential. It is happening now.

The success achieved in Harlow over recent years has not happened by accident. It has been driven by a council whose sole purpose is championing Harlow. Every decision, every investment and every priority has been shaped by what is right for our town, our residents and our future.

That singular focus has been central to the progress that has been made and would inevitably be diluted within a significantly larger authority serving multiple communities, places and competing priorities.

The fundamental contradiction at the heart of the current programme is therefore impossible to ignore.

The Government is asking councils that are actively delivering its objectives to divert their attention away from those objectives in order to undertake a lengthy, costly and resource-intensive process of institutional restructuring.

The success of the Government's economic growth mission depends upon places capable of delivering housing, infrastructure, regeneration and investment now.

Harlow is one of those places.

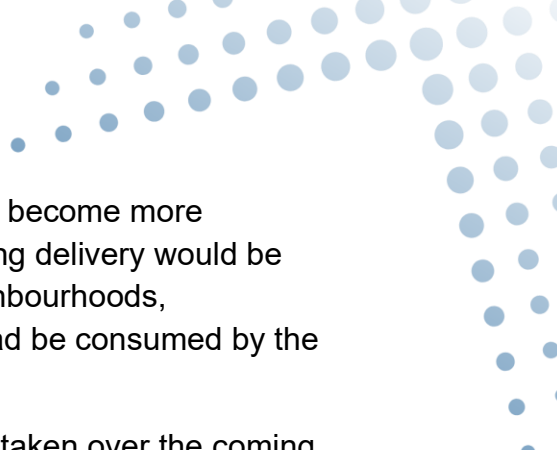
The risk posed by the Government's current approach is therefore not simply that it fails to accelerate growth.

The risk is that it interrupts growth that is already being delivered.

What the current approach can do is slow delivery, consume resources, create uncertainty and place at risk the momentum that has been built over many years.

The consequences of proceeding should not be understated.

For Harlow, the current approach to LGR would inevitably require leadership attention, capacity and financial resources to be diverted away from the delivery of Building Harlow's Future and towards organisational restructuring.



Regeneration projects would slow. Investment decisions would become more uncertain. Partnerships would be disrupted. The pace of housing delivery would be affected. Resources that should be focused on improving neighbourhoods, supporting residents and driving economic growth would instead be consumed by the mechanics of institutional change.

The rebirth of our New Town is at a pivotal moment. Decisions taken over the coming years will determine whether Harlow fully realises its potential as one of the country's leading regeneration and growth stories.

We cannot responsibly place that opportunity in jeopardy.

There is also a clear democratic consideration which should not be overlooked.

The Government chose to proceed with local elections in Essex. In doing so, it rightly gave residents the opportunity to express a view about the future direction of their communities at precisely the moment LGR was being proposed.

The people of Harlow responded with extraordinary clarity.

At the May elections, Conservative councillors were elected in every ward across the town, resulting in one of the most decisive electoral mandates seen in local government anywhere in the country.

The scale of that result was not simply a political outcome. It was a democratic endorsement of a programme.

Residents voted for the continued delivery of Building Harlow's Future. They voted for the regeneration of their town centre. They voted for new homes, new infrastructure, economic growth and investment. They voted for the continued renewal of Harlow as a thriving New Town for the twenty-first century.

They also voted knowing that Harlow Council had made clear its opposition to the abolition of the council through Local Government Reorganisation.

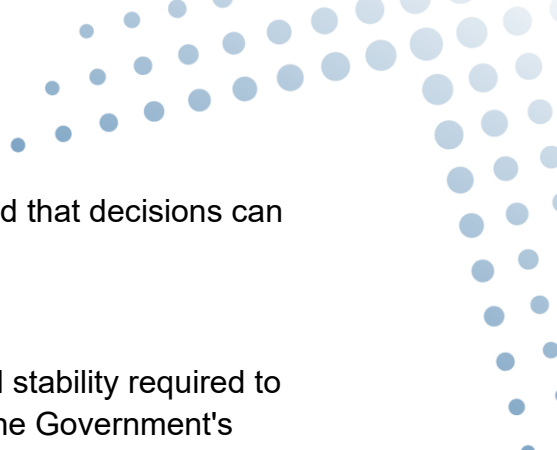
At a time when many councils face fragmented political leadership and competing priorities, Harlow Council has been given a clear, united and unequivocal instruction by the electorate.

Residents have not asked us to spend the coming years designing new governance structures, integrating organisations or overseeing the dissolution of their council.

They have instructed us to continue rebuilding their town.

That mandate matters not simply because it reflects democratic accountability, but because it enables delivery.

Successful regeneration requires political certainty, organisational focus and long-term commitment. Investors, developers, businesses and public sector partners need



confidence that agreed priorities will continue to be pursued and that decisions can be taken consistently and at pace.

The result in Harlow has provided precisely that certainty.

The council now has both the democratic authority and political stability required to accelerate delivery at a critical moment in our town's history. The Government's current approach to LGR would undermine that certainty at the very moment it is needed most, replacing clarity with uncertainty and delivery with disruption.

We also support the Government's ambition for devolution.

The creation of strategic authorities with clear powers, responsibilities and democratic accountability has the potential to strengthen economic growth, improve coordination across wider functional economic areas and bring decision-making closer to the communities affected by it.

Government recognised the importance of taking time to get devolution right and worked with councils and local leaders to develop arrangements capable of commanding confidence and delivering results.

We believe the same principle should now be applied to Local Government Reorganisation.

A reform of this scale should proceed only where it is demonstrably deliverable, financially sustainable and capable of improving outcomes for residents. Where there are serious questions about those tests, Government should be willing to pause, reassess and ensure that the chosen approach genuinely serves the interests of the communities affected.

The Government's objectives are clear. It wants stronger economic growth. It wants more homes built. It wants greater pride in place. It wants efficient public services and better value for taxpayers. It wants local government focused relentlessly on delivery.

Harlow Council is already delivering those objectives.

We are delivering them today, not as a future aspiration, but as a matter of practical reality.

The question facing Government is therefore not whether Harlow needs a new structure.

The question is whether Government wishes to interrupt a programme that is already delivering its own priorities.

We supported the development of the five-unitary proposal because, at the time, it appeared to represent the least worst option available.

However, leadership requires the willingness to reassess a position when the evidence changes.

The closer implementation has come, the clearer it has become that the programme is not deliverable within the proposed timescale, cannot be justified against its cost and would place at risk the very outcomes it is intended to achieve.

The people of Harlow have now delivered an overwhelming mandate for regeneration, growth and renewal.

We cannot responsibly disregard that mandate, nor can we responsibly divert the council's resources away from delivering it.

To proceed would mean slowing regeneration, creating uncertainty for investors and partners, diverting resources from residents and placing at risk a once-in-a-generation opportunity to transform our town.

We are not prepared to do that.

Harlow Council's responsibility is to the residents who elected us and to the future of the town we serve.

Accordingly, Harlow Council cannot support the current LGR process and does not believe that the programme can be delivered successfully in its present form.

We therefore ask the Government to pause the current programme and undertake a fundamental reassessment of deliverability in light of the electoral mandates now secured, the costs involved, the differing circumstances facing councils across the country and the impact the current approach risks having on growth, regeneration and service delivery.

The greatest contribution Harlow Council can make to the Government's agenda is not to reorganise itself.

It is to continue delivering it.

To that end, I would greatly appreciate swift engagement with you and your Ministerial Team.

With every good wish,



Councillor Dan Swords
Leader of Harlow Council