

**Correspondence address:
Local Government Association Liberal Democrat Group
18 Smith Square
London
SW1P 3HZ**

7th August 2020

Dear Secretary of State

We are writing to raise our serious concerns with you about the Recovery and Devolution White Paper due to be published in September and national government's approach to reorganisation at critical time.

As you know, local councils have been on the front line during the Covid-19 pandemic and played a crucial and critical role in keeping our communities safe and protecting the NHS. Our efforts are ongoing, and will continue, in relation to public health, economic recovery and supporting the people in our communities most badly affected by the impending economic recession for some years to come.

Council officers and members have gone above and beyond on behalf of our residents and local businesses since March and are committed to maintaining and developing that support despite the financial challenges we all face.

The complex problems we and our communities will face in the coming years are unprecedented. Therefore, it seems extraordinary that national government have decided this would be a good time to instigate a mass programme of local government restructuring.

Reorganisation is an extremely resource-intensive and unwelcome distraction at a time when we should be completely focused on responding to the recovery needs of our communities.

Any reorganisation of councils should be driven by what is best for local communities and places. Our partnership work throughout the Covid pandemic has shown how well councils and local partners are working together within existing structures, therefore we can see no sense at all in spending money on a top-down reorganisation that will take members and officers away from our crucial recovery work.

The imposition of Mayoral Combined Authorities risks an additional layer of bureaucracy that makes local government more remote from citizens. Existing councils are deeply rooted in their communities and can always respond to the residents needs effectively and efficiently. Liberal Democrat Councillors, both Leaders and those in senior positions in their authority, are opposed to any reorganisation that would result in a reduction in accountability and decision-making being moved further away local people, especially at this time of renewed appreciation and understanding of this importance of community.

We ask that you divert the funds away from your programme of local government reorganisation towards our excellent existing local councils to ensure that we can continue crucial recovery work in our communities.

We also ask that any future reorganisation for local governance structures be at the request of local communities, not imposed on them from above. We are not in principle opposed to unitary councils or reorganisation, but it should only ever be locally driven, designed to empower communities and respond to local needs. Now is not the time to be disbanding our high performing councils and creating new ones.

Reorganisation may benefit some places, but not all, and not now. Continuing with mass reorganisation at this time risks scarce resources being diverted away from the covid recovery and other vital public services. The choice for us as council leaders will be 'what do we stop doing on recovery in order to resource reorganisation? That is not a choice we wish to make.

Yours sincerely,

Councillor Emily Smith, Leader, Vale of White Horse District Council
Councillor Bridget Smith, Leader, South Cambridgeshire District Council
Councillor Dine Romero, Leader, Bath and North East Somerset Council
Councillor Keith House, Leader, Eastleigh Borough Council
Councillor James Walsh, Leader Arun District Council
Councillor Sarah Nelmes, Leader, Three Rivers District Council
Councillor Gordon Hook, Leader, Teignbridge District Council
Councillor Virginia Taylor, Leader, Eden District Council
Councillor Lucille Thompson, Leader, Winchester District Council
Councillor Howard Sykes, Group Leader, LGA Liberal Democrat Group
Councillor Stephen Robinson, Leader, Chelmsford Borough Council
Councillor Caroline Reeves, Leader, Guildford Borough Council
Mayor Peter Taylor, Elected Mayor of Watford
Councillor John Boyce, Leader, Oadby and Wigston Borough Council
Councillor David Worden, Leader, North Devon Council
Councillor James MacCleary, Leader, Lewes District Council
Councillor David Tutt, Leader, Eastbourne Borough Council
Councillor Ruth Dombey, Leader, London Borough of Sutton
Councillor Steve Darling, Leader of Torbay Council
Councillor Sue Cooper, Leader of South Oxfordshire District Council
Councillor Stephen Cooksey, Leader of Mole Valley District Council
Councillor Chris White, Leader, St Albans District Council
Councillor Giles Archibald, Leader of South Lakeland District Council
Councillor Sarah Butikofer, Leader of North Norfolk District Council
Councillor Susan Prochak, Deputy Leader, Rother District Council
Councillor Eileen Wragg, Deputy Leader, East Devon District Council
Councillor Fran Oborski, Deputy Leader, Wyre Forest District Council
Councillor Paul Clark, Deputy Leader, North Hertfordshire District Council
Councillor David Whipp, Deputy Leader, Pendle Borough Council
Councillor Ben Martin, Cabinet Member for Housing, Swale Borough Council