

Councillor Adrian Abbs
Wash Common Ward, West Berkshire Council
6 Lower Farm Court
Hambridge Lane
RG14 5TH
Adrian.abbs1@westberks.gov.uk | 07768 998370

23 July 2026

The Rt Hon Andy Burnham MP
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London SW1A 2AA

Copied to:

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

Matthew Pennycook MP, Minister of State for Housing and Planning

Lee Dillon MP (Newbury)

Olivia Bailey MP (Reading West and Mid Berkshire)

Olly Glover MP (Didcot and Wantage)

Freddie van Mierlo MP (Henley and Thame)

Layla Moran MP (Oxford West and Abingdon)

Charlie Maynard MP (Witney)

Dear Prime Minister,

Local plan-making in the Ridgeway Council area: a request for a short transitional adjustment

I am an elected member of West Berkshire Council for Wash Common Ward and sit on the Council's District Planning and Western Area Planning Committees. I also serve on Greenham Parish Council. I write in my personal capacity as an elected member, and not on behalf of West Berkshire Council. I write about a problem created by the interaction of two of your government's own reforms — local government reorganisation and the new plan-making system — in the three authorities that will form Ridgeway Council on 1 April 2028.

My request is a single one: that the 31 October 2026 Gateway 1 deadline be held in abeyance for West Berkshire, South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse, and that the transitional regulations your department promised on 6 July be brought forward and used to enable one Ridgeway-wide local plan in place of three legacy plans. **This is not a request for fewer homes.** It is a request to assess the need once, for the right geography, at the right time — and to stop three councils spending several million pounds preparing plans for areas that will shortly cease to exist.

The position as it stands

On 16 July the Secretary of State confirmed that West Berkshire will merge with most of South Oxfordshire and most of Vale of White Horse to form Ridgeway Council. The structural changes order is expected this autumn, elections to the shadow authority in May 2027, and vesting day on 1 April 2028.

All three councils appear on your department's published list of authorities required to give notice of intention to commence plan-making by 30 June 2026 and to publish a Gateway 1 self-assessment by 31 October 2026 — because the housing requirement in each plan as submitted for examination met less than 80 per cent of local housing need under the December 2024 standard method.

West Berkshire duly published its notice on 25 June and expects to start the 30-month clock on 30 October 2026. Adoption therefore falls due around April 2029 — a year after the authority preparing the plan has ceased to exist.

South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse are in a stranger position still. They remain in examination on their Joint Local Plan 2041, with hearings held this month and further hearings scheduled for the autumn, while simultaneously being required to begin a second plan running to 2045, with first consultation in September. Their own cabinet members describe this as twin-tracking, and note that around forty councils nationally now face the same difficulty.

Why this cannot be the right answer

Two of the three plan areas are about to be dissolved. Parts of both South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse transfer to the new Greater Oxford Council. Those councils are therefore required to start plans in September 2026 for territory that will be divided between two unitary authorities eighteen months later. Your department's guidance of 6 July recognises the difficulty precisely — it lists, among the matters still to be resolved, the complications that arise where an emerging plan does not sit neatly within a single new unitary area — while also confirming that an authority cannot begin preparing a plan on the basis of the new unitary area until that authority is operational. The councils are told to start, told the boundaries are wrong, and told they may not use the right ones.

The cost is avoidable. Three plans mean three evidence bases: land availability assessments, sustainability appraisal, habitats regulations assessment, transport modelling, viability testing, employment land studies, landscape and water evidence. Three Gateway processes, three examinations, three sets of consultants and inspectors. One recent local plan examination cost a single authority more than £3.5 million. The three councils can give your officials exact figures from their own budgets; on any reasonable estimate the difference between three parallel processes and one runs to several million pounds, drawn from the very budgets meant to fund reorganisation.

The present arrangement produces less plan-led development, not more. From 1 July 2026, authorities whose adopted housing requirement sits at or below 80 per cent of local housing need must add a 20 per cent buffer to their five-year land supply. West Berkshire adopted its Local Plan Review only in June 2025, providing for 9,270 homes at 515 a year against a standard method figure of roughly 1,070. The district will therefore spend the entire transition carrying an enlarged buffer with no realistic prospect of an adopted, compliant plan before 2029 — which means sites decided at appeal rather than chosen through a plan. Consolidation puts an up-to-date plan in place across the whole Ridgeway area sooner, not later.

It cuts across the strategic direction of travel. In February your department published its proposed spatial development strategy areas, placing West Berkshire alongside Oxfordshire, Swindon and the rest of Berkshire in a single Thames Valley strategic planning area; council leaders across that geography welcomed it. The rollout guidance already disapplies the legacy transitional trigger where an operative spatial development strategy sets the housing requirement. The principle is therefore conceded: where strategic planning determines the number, forcing legacy-boundary plans through in the interim serves no useful purpose.

What I am asking for

1. Hold the 31 October 2026 Gateway 1 deadline in abeyance for West Berkshire, South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse, by direction or regulation, pending the transitional arrangements your department has already confirmed it is preparing.
2. Lay the transitional regulations alongside the Ridgeway structural changes order this autumn, and use them to enable a single Ridgeway-wide plan — begun by the three councils through the joint committee being formed this autumn, carried forward by the shadow authority from May 2027, and adopted by the council that will actually implement it. Set the Gateway 1 date and the 30-month timetable accordingly.
3. Assess the housing requirement once, for the Ridgeway area, against the revised National Planning Policy Framework when it is published this summer — and apply the 80 per cent test to that area as a whole rather than three times over to boundaries that are about to disappear. It is the legacy figures, measured against the December 2024 standard method, that have placed all three councils on the 30 June list. Reassessed once, for the new area, on the new numbers and over a plan period running into the 2040s, the position can be brought within the threshold and a single plan reset on a coherent timeframe.

What this would deliver

- Not fewer homes. The same need, assessed properly once, with sites chosen across the whole area rather than three times over at three boundaries — an approach more likely to find deliverable capacity, not less.
- Plan coverage for 430,000 people sooner than the present path allows, instead of three plans stranded mid-process on vesting day.
- Several million pounds returned to frontline services at a time when every council in the group is under financial pressure.
- No change whatever to the reorganisation timetable. Elections in May 2027 and vesting on 1 April 2028 are unaffected.

The window is narrow, and it is now. The revised Framework is due this summer; the structural changes order is expected in the autumn; the transitional regulations have not yet been laid; and the Gateway 1 deadline falls on 31 October. A decision taken in the next few weeks costs nothing and saves a great deal. A decision taken after October will find three councils already committed to three plans, and the money already spent.

This is, I think, precisely what the 6 July guidance says your department is trying to achieve. The only question is timing, and Ridgeway is the case that makes the point. I would be glad to meet officials, or to supply any further detail that would help.

I am copying this letter to the six Members of Parliament whose constituencies fall within the three districts concerned. The difficulty I describe is not a party-political one, and I hope it can be considered on its merits.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Adrian Abbs', with a long horizontal line extending to the left.

Councillor Adrian Abbs
Wash Common Ward, West Berkshire Council
Greenham Parish Council