



Association of Green Councillors

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Councillors**

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17 April 2020

Rt Hon. Robert Jenrick MP

Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government

By email

Dear Mr Jenrick,

We are all Green Party councillors, serving on 120 councils at district, borough, county and unitary authority level.

We are writing to urge you to announce immediately:

- that funding to cover the work we are doing in the Coronavirus crisis will be made available now;
- and that a new longer-term settlement for local authority funding and devolution will follow.

Councils and devolved administrations across England and Wales urgently need this clarity and reassurance.

We are also calling for more flexibility for local authorities to decide how these funds will be spent. Local authorities are best-placed to see where the real need is and how it can be most effectively tackled. Government needs to support them to do this work, without being overly-prescriptive.

It is clear now, several weeks into lockdown measures, with the peak of illness not yet reached, that the initial £1.6 billion in additional funding for local authorities is nowhere near sufficient for the community response needed to tackle the consequences of this crisis.



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Government announcements have indicated that the unrestricted emergency funding is intended to cover increased demand on: social care, support for rough sleepers, increased homelessness, domestic violence, emergency food support, and many other urgent needs. It is simply not enough.

Other funding for hardship, related to council tax payment, is ring-fenced and subject to conditions. We are unable to use this to help those who are not covered by existing council tax relief schemes with the supporting income from other sources including Government, and because it affects other preceptors.

Councils are nevertheless stepping up and helping the most vulnerable in every way we can. We are filling in gaps in Government programmes and doing this essential work because it is necessary. One example from Lewes District, where we are in co-operative administration, illustrates the scale of our efforts. In that authority alone, the provision of food packs for those who are not covered by the medically shielded programme has alone cost £1 per head of population in the first three weeks.

Councils are being supported by colossal volunteer and Voluntary and Community Sector efforts in all our local areas. But our communities cannot survive on charity and good wishes for much longer. As responsible local authority councillors, we need to be able to provide and support this work knowing that we are not putting our own councils' viability in jeopardy.

Local authorities are required by law to set balanced budgets and we are reliant for general funding on council tax, business rates and commercial income. All these sources (as well as other more ring-fenced income streams such as from parking and council home rents) have been dramatically reduced during this crisis. A number of councils have also reduced or paused rents to business tenants to help preserve the viability of small and local businesses. These actions, while vital, also reduce our income.

Reserves can only make up the difference to keep these crisis services going for so long. There is very little leeway in other essential services to divert resources to scale up the crisis response. Local authority funding has been squeezed too far already in recent years for that to be possible.

It is clear from discussions between councils that the deficits we face are large and growing. Even if lockdown were only to last for three months, estimates range from a third to a half of spending power being lost this year. And this will be much worse if the crisis continues.

We know you appreciate that councils falling over financially is not in the public interest, and that our ability to step up and support people at this crucial time, in a national crisis, is dependent on financial security and stability.

We are not simply asking for more temporary or conditional grants. We need general funding and, although immediate relief and reassurance is imperative, we also need a new longer-term, mutually respectful relationship between democratically elected local authorities and central Government.



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We urge you to act now. The additional funding that has been promised for local authority services so far in this crisis is significantly less than for other frontline services - less than a quarter of the additional funding allocated to the NHS and less than half of that provided for railways.¹

Yet those of us working in and running councils are on the frontline of the crisis and it is often council services, including social care, that keeps people out of hospital.

Unless local authorities receive sufficient funding to allow them to intervene and support residents in a timely manner, this will only cause added strain on other services, including the NHS.

With very best wishes,

Sian Berry and Jonathan Bartley

Green Party Councillors, and Co-leaders, Green Party of England and Wales

Paul Woodhead

Green Party Councillor and Chair, Association of Green Councillors

Zoe Nicholson

Green Party Councillor and Leader, Lewes District Council

(and 347 other Green Party councillors)

¹ Of the more than £14bn fund provided by Government for the coronavirus response, £6.5bn is going to the NHS, and £3.5bn to rail services, with only £1.6bn going to local authorities.
(<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/13/uk-triples-coronavirus-response-fund-for-nhs-and-public-services>)