

The Rt. Hon. Sir Stephen Timms
Chair of Work and Pensions Select Committee
House of Commons,
London
SW1A 0AA

Waltham Forest Town Hall
Forest Road
London E17 4JF

Date: 11 January 2024

Dear Sir Stephen,

RE: Household Support Fund – the crisis isn't over

I am writing to you in your capacity as Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee about the implications of the Household Support Fund not being extended beyond March 2024

I am extremely concerned that the Chancellor has so far failed to note any intention to extend the Household Support Fund in his Autumn Statement on 22 November, and that since this date, the Government have refused to commit to extending.

The Household Support Fund has been an absolutely essential lifeline for Waltham Forest's most vulnerable residents throughout the cost-of-living crisis. These are people who face poverty and homelessness on a daily basis. We are absolutely committed to doing everything we can to help our most vulnerable residents.

This year we have used £4.2 million to support our vulnerable groups, including:

- Providing **free school breakfasts for 2,135 children**
- Supporting **over 11,000 families with free school meal vouchers in the school holidays.**
- Administering **over 5000 direct targeted payments** to vulnerable households.

I cannot emphasise enough that the crisis is not over. In fact, it is getting worse.

Food inflation remains stubbornly high, and the accumulative impact of the fall out of the pandemic and rising prices for years has exacerbated the situation for the most vulnerable. For example:

- Half our residents say they are very concerned about the cost of living which is up a third from last year. This is impacting social renters and those from ethnic minorities the most.
- The demand for food banks has increased over the last year - we expect it will continue to rise.
- The number of residents seeking cost of living support from Citizens Advice Waltham Forest rose by 579 between 2020-2023.
- In 2023, we saw a 50% rise in homelessness presentations from the previous year. 1405 households in Waltham Forest were either homeless or at risk of homelessness between April 2022-May 2023 alone.

We have used money from the fund to support community living spaces. The Hornbeam Centre in Walthamstow looks after residents who are vulnerable, low income and have complex needs and gives them access to cooking and eating food, community, and support with their issues. One resident, Tony, who has been attending for years told us he can't eat at home, a situation complicated by his epilepsy. If he didn't have the space he wouldn't be

able to cook and he would be 'doing nothing' outside. He said everyone is finding it hard to get by and we need more spaces like this.

Waltham Forest Council's finances

Waltham Forest Council is facing very stark real-term funding cuts. Since 2010, we have had to find £120m in savings after a huge reduction in funding provided by central government. This is despite the increased demand and pressure on our services which we have seen in recent years: Since 2019, we have become responsible for 1000 more people in adult social care and have provided 1,200 more local children with Education and Healthcare Plans. However, in the recent funding settlement, the Government did not respond to our calls that we need a 9% increase to continue to deliver our most vital services.

Please understand that if this fund is withdrawn for 2024/25, and an equivalent cost of living support fund is not put in place, we will not be able to replace this. **These services will simply not continue.** This will leave not just our residents, but the most vulnerable in our society, up and down the country, destitute.

John Cryer MP and [I wrote to the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on 11 December](#) to urge the Government **to provide the Household Support Fund until the cost-of-living crisis is over, as well as providing councils with early notice of the value of Household Support Fund to be provided in 2024/25.**

We note that the Work and Pensions Committee supports the maintenance of the fund. In your [recent inquiry report on cost of living support payments](#), you implored the government to 'maintain the Household Support Fund as it is an important safety net for those ineligible for these payments and other means tested benefits' and in the recent scrutiny session with the Liaison Committee you suggested 'there is a very strong case for extending it, so that very important safety net remains in place into the new financial year'.

I thank you for the work you have done on this important issue to date. I urge you to continue to use your scrutiny role in the Work and Pensions Committee and the Liaison Committee to maintain the pressure on the Government.

We will continue to stand up for our residents and do what we can, but we need the financial tools from central government to be able to do this. We would be more than happy to provide you with a written or verbal briefing to aid your work in this.

We must work together to secure the fund that people so desperately need.

Yours sincerely,



Cllr Grace Williams
Leader of Waltham Forest Council