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By email to jdickie@cpagscotland.org.uk on behalf
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Thank you for your letter of 13 May expressing your shared concerns for families on low incomes during the Coronavirus pandemic. We are dealing with the most difficult situation that many of us have faced in our lifetimes and these challenges will so often be felt most acutely by those with the least.

As part of our response, we have made significant funding available and working closely with business, the public sector, the third sector and communities.

Our total committed additional expenditure to date, including for the NHS, is worth around £3.8 billion and we have committed to spend every penny of the Barnett consequentials we have received on our response to COVID-19. This includes providing over £2.3 billion in support for businesses enabling them to keep people, including parents, employed. In addition we have targeted specific intervention for self-employed individuals experiencing hardship so we can ensure people are supported, regardless of their employment status.

For our communities, we committed £350 million of new funding to support those most at risk and ensure that public services, third sector and community organisations are able to step up and meet the needs of people across the country. From this we have allocated over £100 million of new funding to local authorities to date, with £50 million to meet local needs in a flexible funding package, and £30 million of initial investment targeted at food insecurity. This is over and above the £30 million committed to our national programme for shielded individuals, providing free food packages and support to those at greatest clinical risk from the virus – more than 250,000 boxes have now been delivered.

The £30 million allocated to local authorities from our Food Fund is helping them to lead and coordinate a local response to this crisis, drawing on the goodwill and skills of those in the community, volunteers and local partners alike. This investment is supporting over 168,000 children and young people to access Free School Meals across Scotland. We are the only part of the UK to have established a national helpline and have communicated the help available to those at risk and without support to each and every home in the country – we want to ensure that no one is left unable to access the essentials they need.

We have more than doubled our committed investment in the Scottish Welfare Fund, bringing the total available for 2020-21 to £80.5 million – helping to provide immediate cash support to those who require it.

We have also strengthened funding available to support third sector and community efforts, with £125 million of new investment committed. Our Third Sector Resilience Fund has awarded £17.9 million to 899 organisations since launching in March and has so far saved 12,000 jobs – protecting the services which many individuals rely on. Through our Wellbeing and Supporting Communities Funds, £70 million is being made available initially to ensure third sector organisations and community groups alike can provide tailored support for those in need – tackling isolation, supporting good mental health and ensuring access to healthy and nutritious food. Over £40 million of this funding has now been allocated to over 2,500 organisations across Scotland providing a vital lifeline to our communities. £10 million of our Food Fund is also committed to support national third sector partners and community efforts; ensuring a robust infrastructure for those who rely upon it. I am pleased that through these measures we have been able to support many children's charities including those providing emergency funds such as Aberlour, Barnardos and Action for Children alongside many other organisations focused on tackling poverty and inequality.

This collective investment is supporting our 'cash first' approach – put simply, we want families who are able to access food to have the freedom and choice to buy this for themselves where they are able. This also relieves pressure on other services which are working hard to ensure that no one in Scotland is left hungry. We know there is more to do to embed this response across Scotland, but we are encouraged by the efforts to date, building on cash first best practice.

We are also building on the existing strong foundations already established, such as our Scottish Welfare Fund, Council Tax Reduction Scheme and range of social security entitlements – which are more generous and have greater eligibility than many of the UK equivalents they replace. Our 2020-21 budget committed £3.4 billion for social security, including more than £70 million for Discretionary Housing Payments. Coming into the crisis child poverty levels were 20% lower in Scotland than the UK as a whole, and the new measures we have put in place are amongst the most comprehensive.

As we move out the current phase of lockdown, we are going to have to repair the damage and impact both socially and economically and get back to pursuing the priorities that we have set ourselves. There are lots of positive opportunities in that, but making sure that we take decisions in the right way and the right order with the right priority will be essential.

Within the powers and budget that we have, there are certain powers available to us but they are limited just as resources are finite, and we have to make judgments about those. Earlier this month, we announced a further boost to the support available to carers – many of whom are women and are facing additional financial pressures. Subject to the successful passage of our second Covid-19 Bill, around 83,000 eligible carers will get an extra £230.10 through a special one-off payment in June - backed by investment of £19.2 million.

We have also confirmed delivery of the Scottish Child Payment as a priority, to make this new payment available to low income families as soon as practicable in the current circumstances. Whilst we want to do more if possible, we must also recognise that introducing any further changes to our social security programme risks not only the delivery of current benefits, but also delays to this vital new payment. We are also mindful of the capacity that exists within the social security programme, Social Security Scotland, our local authorities and the Department for Work and Pensions to design and implement any changes. Weighing these considerations in full, and to ensure that we do not risk the successful delivery of the Scottish Child Payment – which will provide invaluable support in the longer term – I believe that the combined measures we have put in place strike the correct balance. However, we will continue to keep that under review.

We remain resolute in our commitment to eradicate child poverty – this crisis has further highlighted the damages that the inequalities in our society cause. We will continue to draw on the experience and knowledge of organisations across Scotland, and individuals who have experienced these challenges first hand, in mapping and navigating our way forward.



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