

08 April 2014

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Brandon Lewis MP  
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State  
Department for Communities and Local  
Government  
Eland House, Bressenden Place,  
London SW1E 5DU

Dear

**Re: Roundtable to discuss building a sustainable welfare assistance system beyond 2015**

I have already written to your department expressing my concern and disappointment at the withdrawal of funding for Local Welfare Assistance schemes from April 2015 (see exchange of letters attached). I welcome the confirmation that DWP will be conducting a review into the scheme this year, but I would like to propose a roundtable discussion in Surrey or London with Ministers and officers from DWP, DCLG and the LGA about how to build an effective and sustainable welfare assistance support service from 2015 onwards.

The previous DWP scheme operated as a 'cashbox' due to its ineffective targeting of support and did almost nothing to address the underlying causes of demand. Surrey County Council has avoided replicating the faults of the previous system by developing a scheme based on strong local partnerships and diverting applicants to other forms of support where possible. Applicants receive an initial assessment and a range of advice through the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) that seeks to address any underlying issues that may be causing the demand for support.

I recognise the Government's concerns about councils not yet using their full welfare assistance allocation, but I know that here in Surrey this is because we are making better use of the funding by adopting this early intervention approach. By seeking to tackle the root of the problem and signposting to other more appropriate forms of support, we have demonstrated that we can reduce demand on our own services and other agencies. This is possible because of close local partnership working and information sharing that produces better outcomes for residents and ensures real value for money.

However, I am deeply concerned that the sudden withdrawal of funding in 2015 will jeopardise this effective support network and deny partners the time to establish a sustainable alternative solution. If this support abruptly ends, it is inevitable many of these vulnerable people will go on to require much more intense and expensive support in the future from programmes such as Troubled Families. I welcome the Government's ongoing support for credit unions mentioned in the correspondence below. We share your belief that they will play a crucial role in helping people get back on their feet after emergencies, such as the recent extensive flooding in Surrey, and have ourselves invested substantially in helping to establish our local credit union, SurreySave. However, building the viability, awareness and accessibility of such services takes time. This is why ensuring there is not a sudden withdrawal of emergency assistance funding will give the council time to work with partners in order to adequately plan and design a long-term solution to take on the role of helping residents in short-term difficulties.

We would like to work with you and relevant partners to develop a framework for sustainable emergency assistance schemes in the future, that not only support vulnerable people, but do so at a reduced cost to the Exchequer. Therefore, I am offering to host and organise a roundtable with Ministers and officers from DWP and DCLG, the LGA and ourselves. I would also be happy in my role as CCN chairman to enlist the insight and support of wider County Councillors on a new proposition for the future.

I look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

David Hodge  
Leader of the Council