

Send by email

Rt. Hon Rishi Sunak MP  
Chancellor of the Exchequer  
1 Horse Guards Road  
London  
SW1A 2HQ

18<sup>th</sup> March 2020

Dear Chancellor,

I was very pleased to hear yesterday your commitment to additional measures to mitigate the economic impact of the Covid-19 crisis on families. It is vital that we do not underestimate the impact of the current crisis on families and the welfare of children. I urge you to be as bold and ambitious in helping families as you have been in helping business.

We need to acknowledge that the system we have in place to recognise and support families lacks the agility and flexibility for these unique circumstances. In particular, I am concerned about the pressure on the Universal Credit (UC) system to respond to an unprecedented number of new claims, both from first-time benefit claimants and legacy claimants whose change in circumstances mandate a switch to UC. Given the history of UC roll-out, I am sceptical about the system's ability to cope with this spike in demand, and I am worried about the impact on families already facing unprecedented flux and strain.

Financial stresses are not the only problem facing families at the moment, but they will amplify other issues, unless mitigated. While children face a relatively lower risk from Covid-19 itself, vulnerable children face a cocktail of secondary risks as families become destabilised at the same time as other support structures such as schools, clinics, health visitors and children's services may have to cut back on the support they can offer.

Government cannot mitigate all these risks, but it can ensure that the financial strain families are under is relieved. As an immediate and short-term measure the Government could consider an increase in child benefit. This, I believe, would be the easiest way of getting support to families quickly, and would complement the very welcome decision of the Government to provide vouchers to children eligible for free school meals. An increase of around £20 per child may be needed, and should last for at least three months to cover what is likely to be a particularly turbulent time in accessing other more targeted forms of support. I hope such a measure could be implemented in the next week. I also believe that automatic upfront payments will be needed for all claimants moving on to UC as they are likely to be facing circumstances that there is no way they could have envisaged and then face five weeks (in cases where there are no complications) before they receive funding.

I also believe a broader package of support will be needed for those families who are already vulnerable and particularly susceptible to both financial risk and reductions in other forms of support. I would urge you and your cabinet colleagues to give special consideration to two groups of children:

**Group 1: Children for whom school provides a vital safety net**

The impact of schools closing is likely to be particularly severe for the 1.275m children eligible for Free School Meals and the 700,000 children who receive some kind of social services intervention each year (children placed on a 'Child in Need' plan, 'Child Protection Plan' or taken into care). There is a significant overlap between these two groups. While I am very pleased that the Government have announced that schools will

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remain open for those children *currently* with a social worker, about 400,000 children, there will be a large group of children on the edge of services for whom school provides vital structural and support.

These are children living in families which are likely already to be unstable and at risk of descending into chaos. It is very welcome that Government are continuing provision for the most vulnerable children, but there remain a wider pool of at risk children for whom school is equally important and for whom we need to minimise the pressure on these families.

These families on the edge of services face school closures, increased financial instability and a likely reduction in other forms of day-to-day support to families (such as health visitors, Troubled Families and youth services). As well as the practical support these services provide, their closure means that those children on the edge of services – but not currently with a social work – become invisible to professionals just as the circumstances around them deteriorate. This will happen at the same time as social services are facing issues of staff shortages and a crisis in adult social care.

### **Group 2: Children in families on the edge of homelessness**

Children who are homeless or at risk of becoming so are also highly vulnerable in the context of Covid-19.

My research has found that there is a baseline of around 375,000 children living in families which are at financial risk of becoming homeless, due to being behind on their rent or mortgage payments. The financial shock posed by Covid-19 will increase the size of this group significantly. Furthermore, it can easily tip many of these families into actual homelessness, leading to a spike in demand for temporary accommodation across the country.

There are currently over 125,000 children in England living in temporary accommodation. Research by my Office has found that this accommodation is frequently poor quality and simply too small, and that this can have extremely negative impacts on children's health and wellbeing – for example, having little space to play and nowhere quiet to do homework. With children off school and stuck at their accommodation for a prolonged period, the impact on these children will be immense, putting them further behind academically and damaging their wellbeing and mental health.

Certain types of accommodation will pose particular risks in the current context. Nearly 2,000 families with children are living in B&Bs, which typically have shared kitchen and bathroom facilities. Aside from the strain of living in this accommodation, the communal facilities will reduce families' limited ability to self-isolate, making it more difficult for them to avoid contracting Covid-19, and more difficult to avoid spreading it to others.

Furthermore, we estimate that there are around 90,000 children living in families who are sofa-surfing – staying with extended family or friends as they have nowhere else to go. With more and more people leaving work and spending time at home, it is a risk that some of these families will be asked to move on – particularly if anyone contracts the disease and should be self-isolating.

My office have undertaken extensive research into both these broad groups of children. I am very happy to share all this work with Government and my analysts and other researchers are available to work with Government identifying the children and families most at risk as the situation changes.

The Government cannot eliminate all these risks, but it can:

- Make more financial support available to families, as outlined above. In the medium-term, I believe local authorities and job centres will need to be given funding to increase the staff available to

support families in accessing benefits. No child should go hungry because of the current situation and it is the job of Government to make sure this does not happen.

- Provide temporary funding to food banks to ensure that the last lifeline for families is available when needed.
- Ensure funding is available is for community-level resources. It is hugely important that schools will remain open for vulnerable children, but some will want to support a wider group of children than those they have been mandated too. Schools know their populations and will know where they have wider need which needs meeting, we need to support them in meeting this. Similarly, local authorities will need to think about how to support younger children and those on the edge of services. They may also need additional funding.
- Provide funding for local authorities to find alternative, self-contained accommodation for families currently living in B&Bs. No child should be facing months in a BnB with nowhere to go. I do not believe councils could not find flats or houses for these families if funding was available, even if local authorities have to hire AirBnBs or equivalents.
- Suspend evictions for all families with children who are renting– including those where rent payments cannot be made and no-fault evictions. The Government committed to banning no-fault evictions a year ago, now would be an ideal moment to implement this policy.

I am copying this letter to the Secretaries of State for the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Education and the Department for Housing and Local Government as well as the relevant Select Committee Chairs.

Best wishes,



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Children's Commissioner for England

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