

An Open Letter to  
Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP  
Chancellor of the Exchequer  
House of Commons  
London  
SW1A 0AA

24 April 2020

Dear Rishi Sunak,

We write on behalf of the Austerity Action Group, a group of social workers and people with lived experience of using services, who share a commitment to social justice. We are supported by the Social Workers Union and the British Association of Social Workers to identify and address the ongoing impact of politically driven austerity policies on some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

A decade of austerity has been thrown into sharp relief by the sudden onset of the coronavirus pandemic. The harsh benefit regime of Universal Credit proved inadequate before the crisis and remains unfit for purpose in its current form. The growth in zero hours contracts and low wages in many sectors of the economy, including social care, has meant that many of those in work are not able to escape from poverty. This and many other failings were well documented by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights in the UK (2019). Likewise the Marmot review (2020) has shown the widening chasm in health equality between the richest and the poorest areas. Both are a shameful reflection on our country in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Meanwhile, systematic cuts to local authorities have reduced the services they can provide and slashed the support they can offer to local community groups. This has impacted most heavily on the poorest communities. We have heard from many people with disabilities, or with concerns about their mental wellbeing, that they feel increasingly marginalised from the rest of society. The lives of elderly people appear to have been regarded as of lower value than others during the current crisis.

The coronavirus crisis has given us all the opportunity to consider what we value in our society. There is greater public recognition that the NHS requires an adequately resourced social care sector, if it is to function effectively. Both are reliant on the valued work of significant proportions of staff from black and minority ethnic groups, who seem to have found themselves at elevated risk from the virus. It is also evident that, in the absence of a cure, established treatment or vaccination, it will only be through action by and within local communities that the virus will be overcome and a degree of normality resumed. Here local authorities have a vital role to play.

We welcome the fact that the government has been able to use its financial resources in new and different ways to support people during the current circumstances. Now is the

time to roll back pernicious austerity policies, once and for all, and invest in the future of our communities. This must be a country in which no one feels marginalised or excluded.

Therefore we call upon you to:

1. Work with your colleague, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, to establish a long overdue settlement for the proper funding of social care.
2. Conduct a rapid review of the tax and benefit system to ensure that it works fairly for all, addresses the issue of in-work poverty, reverses the growth of inequality and considers the introduction of a universal basic income.
3. Ensure that the systematic destruction of local authority services is reversed by a funding settlement that recognises their crucial role as promoters of public health and well being with unique links to local communities, and as a bulwark against current and future threats.

Yours sincerely,

Angi Naylor  
Jon Dudley

Austerity Action Group  
Birmingham