



The Rt Hon Robert Jenrick
Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government

Dear Secretary of State

18 May 2020

RE: Open Letter to Town and Parish Councils

The Kent Association of Local Councils (KALC) represents 312, just over 97%, of Parish, Town and Community Councils and Parish Meetings (Local Councils) representing an electorate of over 700,000 across suburban, rural and urban Kent.

We welcome your recognition of the important work that Local Councils are doing to support their communities and vulnerable people. We have attached a table of examples of what Local Councils are doing to support their local communities in Kent.

Within your letter you make reference to a recent cash injection of £1.6bn into the local government sector “including a larger share for lower tier councils” and that if local councils “have questions regarding funding I would encourage you to speak with your principal council”. Many principal authorities are already under significant financial strain due to the impact on the services that they provide, and the grant being provided from Government does not address their own budgetary shortfall, let alone that of Local Councils.

We can see no mention of Local Councils in the original announcement of the additional £1.6bn funding and understand that there was no reference to Local Councils when the funding was allocated. We would be grateful if you could clarify why “a larger share” was allocated for the lower tier, but the return makes no reference to this part of local government. We would also welcome clarification on the guidance given by your Department to principal authorities on what the grant funding is for.

We have seen many of our Local Councils be the lead organisations in galvanising community support and volunteering, with many taking a very direct approach to co-ordinating the volunteering effort, while others have played a facilitative role providing resource and advice to local community groups. Many have also been working closely with their Principal Authorities through their District Community Hubs and Kent Together. There has been a cost associated with this type of operation, from printing leaflets to purchasing PPE, organising dedicated phone lines to funding food parcels. All have done what they feel has been right for their communities and supporting vulnerable people in their area. I have enclosed a table of examples of what Local Councils in Kent are doing to support their local community. The table is not exhaustive and many more are undertaking activities and providing services to support their community through this unprecedented period.

Lockdown has impacted greatly on many of those Local Council activities. For instance, parks remain open whilst social distancing rules apply, and cemeteries continue to be special places for the communities. But lockdown has meant that play areas and sports facilities have closed; events in parks have been cancelled; community centres, village halls and town halls have closed and bookings cancelled; and decline in town centre footfall has meant that carparking income for those Local Councils with carparks has dramatically reduced. Local Councils remain very pessimistic about any quick return in income streams, as the necessary

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restrictions to maintain social distancing will mean that much of the activity that Local Councils provide are not likely to return any time soon.

We are aware of the dramatic effect that these losses of income are having on individual Local Councils across our county. Our National Association of Local Councils recently undertook a financial impact survey across the sector, which shows:

- Significant losses of income for some of the larger local councils serving larger populations, with over 100 local councils estimating a short-term first quarter of the year loss of between £25,000 and £500,000
- Two thirds of local councils' report loss of income for the first quarter of the year of up to £5,000
- Three quarters of local councils estimate total additional costs as a direct result of the pandemic for the first quarter of the year of up to £5,000

We would respectfully ask that Government considers the following financial package of support to our sector:

- introduce a dedicated Coronavirus Interruption Fund managed by NALC
- extend eligibility to the Job Retention Scheme, Small Business Grant Fund, Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Grant Fund, and business rates relief, as well as to existing funding schemes for towns and parks
- payment holiday on loans from the Public Works Loans Board
- fast-track current legislation to exempt public toilets from business rates, backdated to 1 March 2020
- a further multi-year deal on council tax referendum principles to the end of this parliamentary term.
- introduce a Town Recovery Fund that all tiers of Local Government can access to bring life back into our towns.

Our sector needs your support. All other tiers of local government have received financial support, as have Business Improvement Districts, not to mention funding for the business community in the way of grants and exemptions on business rates.

We would be happy to discuss this further with you or your officials. We have copied this letter to Kent MPs and our national association (NALC).

Yours sincerely

Sarah Barker (electronic signature)

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