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Dear Paul

Re: A Right to Food in Cumberland

Thank you for your letter on behalf of the Cumberland Shadow Authority regarding its motion passed on 29th July. I am pleased to advise Councillors that this Conservative Government already has a robust and comprehensive plan in place to tackle child poverty.

One child living in poverty is one too many. However, national statistics on the number and percentage of children in low-income households show that in 2020/21, there were 200,000 fewer children in absolute poverty before housing costs than in 2009/10.

Parental employment remains the best way to tackle child poverty and improve long-term outcomes for families and children. In 2019/20, children in households where all adults were in work were around six times less likely to be in absolute poverty (before housing costs) than children in a household where nobody works.

As you know, the number of job vacancies remains high locally and across the country. Yet, while local unemployment remains relatively low, according to figures from the House of Commons Library 1,185 people across this constituency alone are claiming unemployment benefits. Nationally, I understand that the unadjusted claimant count, which shows the number of people who have actually claimed Jobseeker's Allowance or are claiming Universal Credit and are required to seek work, is 1,580,500.

To help parents into work, the Plan for Jobs continues to provide wide-ranging support for all jobseekers through the Sector Based Work Academy Programmes (SWAP), Job Entry Targeted Support, and the Restart scheme. Through a staged rollout which began in April 2022, around 2.1 million low-paid benefit claimants will be eligible for extended support through Jobcentres to progress into higher-paid work.

The Plan for Jobs is in addition to the support already provided by increasing the National Living Wage to £9.50 per hour; giving nearly two million families an extra £1,000 a year (on average) through changes to the Universal Credit Taper Rate and work allowances, and the Universal Credit childcare offer which allows working parents to claim back up to 85 per cent of their registered childcare costs each month (up to a maximum cap). I also welcome the Government's action on energy bills. Under the Energy Price Guarantee (EPG), a typical household will pay no more than £2,500 per year until April 2023. The EPG will support millions of people through the difficult months ahead, meaning they will not have to face bills of £6,000 this winter.

Well-intentioned efforts to further increase benefits can have unforeseen negative consequences. To choose an industry that you will know well, it being in your remit from April, the care industry is already facing serious recruitment challenges, exacerbated by the misuse of the Universal Credit system (or, to put it more charitably, instances of individuals making use of that benefit in a way that was not intended). Universal Credit is based on the principle that work should always pay and



those who need support receive it, whilst also being fair to taxpayers. However, I am hearing considerable anecdotal evidence from the coal face that this is not always happening in practice.

As you know, Universal Credit was never intended to be used to supplement the income of part-time workers when full-time positions are available. Potentially, this situation affects the quality of care that companies across the sector are able to provide to my constituents, negatively affecting some of the most vulnerable in our communities.

I believe it is the job of Government to raise aspiration in children. This is one reason why I was so delighted when my Education (Careers Guidance in Schools) Act became law. This provides access to high quality independent careers guidance across the entirety of secondary education, helping our young people to make choices throughout their school journey. Simply increasing benefits helps foster a culture of state dependency and intergenerational worklessness. This is already a serious issue in Workington, of which I have considerable experience from my work in this sector under the previous Labour government. I am trying to address this on a number of fronts, one of those being by attracting investment in support of well-paid jobs, in particular around the Port of Workington.

This is why I have given my wholehearted support to Cumbria County Council's Expression of Interest for an Investment Zone at the Port of Workington and Oldside. Stimulating growth, and growing our employer base, on this site particularly, would be instrumental in dealing with some of our structural societal issues as it is surrounded by some of the most disadvantaged LSOAs in my constituency - yet within walking distance of those new jobs. As you will know, I spent much of my time growing up on Northside, while most of my life has been spent living in the wider St Michaels ward, so I am familiar with the challenges we face in these areas.

More generally, simply increasing benefit entitlement along the lines you suggest treats the symptoms of poverty. However, it does not address the cause, trapping families and their children in a cycle of poverty. Further increases along the lines you suggest are not sustainable, and nor are they necessarily in the interests of the children you say you wish to help. Setting targets based on relative income does not encourage policymakers to address the underlying causes of poverty. It led the previous Government to simply spend more and more money on income transfers to lift people just over the poverty threshold, without doing anything about why those people were in poverty in the first place. The relative income measures showed the number of children in relative poverty falling during the last recession because of falling median incomes, but of course, in reality, children were not better off at all.

I would also remind you of the unprecedented level of support this Government has provided first through Covid-19, and now to help vulnerable families manage a global rise in the cost of living – much of which has been directed through your predecessor councils. The Government will continue to ensure that the policies in place help those who need it most. Covid and Putin's war in Ukraine have caused immense challenges for our country, with energy prices rising and families facing significant cost of living pressures. The £20 uplift, as it was when in operation, was a temporary response to the Covid-19 pandemic as part of the package of measures, worth up to £400 billion, to create, protect and support jobs in the UK which was withdrawn along with the rest of the measures.

Recipients of means-tested benefits such as Universal Credit and Child Tax Credit will be eligible to receive a £650 cost of living payment, provided they meet the qualifying day criteria. The first instalment was paid in July. A second payment is due in the autumn, with the qualifying day announced before the end of October. There are further payments for pensioners and those on



disability benefits. As announced at the 2022 Spring Statement, the National Insurance threshold has now risen from £9,568 to £12,570, representing a £330 tax cut for 30 million workers. A total tax cut of £6bn that delivers on the commitment in the 2019 manifesto. Additionally, households will get £400 of support with their energy bills through an expansion of the Energy Bills Support Scheme, as well as £1.5 billion of support being made available through the Household Support Fund distributed by councils. In addition to the council tax rebate announced in the Spring Statement, the support is worth up to £1,500.

To support low-income families further, the Government has increased the value of Healthy Start Food Vouchers to £4.25, helping eligible low-income households buy basic foods like milk, fruit and vitamins. There is also investment of over £200m a year to continue the Holiday Activities and Food programme, which is already providing enriching activities and healthy meals to children in all English Local Authorities. The Holiday Activity and Food programme benefitted over 600,000 children last summer, including many here in Cumbria. I'm also delighted to report to the council that I worked with a philanthropist and Cumbria Community Foundation to extend that programme to many who didn't qualify through benefits, and to destigmatise the programme.

Free School Meals: Hungry children don't learn, which is why I continue my work on improving access to reasonably priced breakfast clubs. Universal infant free school meals are provided to all of those in Reception and KS1 through a government grant, which was £5m in Cumbria in 2021/22, but by definition are also provided to families that could afford to pay. This puts further strain on public expenditure, leaving less for those in need.

Many children from disadvantaged backgrounds are entitled to receive free school meals throughout their full-time education, while those entitled to Free School Meals at any point in the previous 6 years attract an additional annual Pupil Premium, worth £17.4m this year in Cumbria, for measures to deal with the additional challenges those from disadvantaged backgrounds face in reaching their full potential.

Access to reasonably priced school meals is important. Cumbria County Council is a key provider of school meals through their subsidiary companies, which you will inherit. I implore you to use your position for good in this area.

Childcare Costs: The level of support for childcare costs within the Universal Credit system has been increased from 70 per cent to 85 per cent. This support is available to lone parents who are in paid work regardless of the number of hours they work. This helps ensure families with children are not disadvantaged when seeking work or looking to progress in their career, perhaps by taking on more hours. This is part of a wider package of increased childcare provision. This includes an extra 15 hours of free childcare available to working parents of 3- and 4-year-olds since September 2017, and the introduction of Tax-Free Childcare for working parents of children aged up to 12 and disabled children aged up to 17.

As a new administration with considerable budget and powers, the Cumberland Authority has an important role to play in tackling child poverty. Members have a duty to work to respond to these issues at a local level. I think it is fair to expect councillors to have an intimate knowledge of the issues and challenges facing this area – and to take responsibility for working to mitigate them, just as I am doing in my role.

I am more than happy to work with you to that end.



Moving to issues that you will have direct control over from April, I'm sure you'll agree that anything you do should not find my constituents compromising their current financial position or service levels.

I believe at some point all of your constituent councils have billed themselves as 'real living wage' employers and would be interested to know your council's position on this. I understand that you have not yet chosen to harmonise salaries on vesting day, which leaves many of my constituents working for you that have dedicated their lives to serving our borough councils, at a distinct disadvantage to those who move from the county council. One such example is in refuse collection, where there are significant differences in terms and conditions across the three borough areas and no plan, as I understand it, to harmonise pay on vesting day. A former Allerdale Chief Executive once told me if we were to see industrial action in the council it would be from 'the bin men' – can the council promise my constituents that they won't see bin collection disrupted by decisions taken by councillors, or indeed decisions not taken?

My constituents are all in Allerdale, and benefit from the lowest council tax rates in Cumbria thanks to decisions taken by various Conservative administrations. My constituents also benefit from weekly bin collections, protected against the wishes of officers by an administration I served in, while other areas have had their service reduced to fortnightly. I therefore seek your assurances that they will see no increase in their council tax in April, and that you will instead be passing on your savings in the form of a reduction – the only 'levelling down' I wish to see – while you 'level up' the other areas to match our bin collection service.

Yours sincerely

Mark Jenkinson MP