

Frances Ryan, January 2018

## **The Tories' obscene joke: shred the safety net, then toss people into it**

**Frances Ryan**

*From bedroom tax to universal credit, vulnerable people are being forced into crisis by May's policies. And she's gutted the system supposed to help them*

"If you make a mess, at least clean it up yourself" is a lesson most children learn – but it's one that Theresa May and her chaotic cabinet increasingly seem to struggle with. The year has started with local councils across the country having to put aside [emergency funding for the poorest residents](#) as they switch to the disastrous universal credit system.

From this month, Barking and Dagenham council has set aside £50,000 to help those struggling to pay their bills, while Tower Hamlets, another east London council, is budgeting £5m over the next three years. Grimly, Shropshire council has earmarked £20,000 to help food banks to "diversify the type of help they are able to give specifically to suit universal credit".

It's shameful that low-income families are being forced into crisis by the very system meant to help them – a chalice filled with such poison that even Conservative ministers are now [resigning from government rather than taking it on](#). Worse still, as the government plunders, it's cash-strapped local authorities that are being left to pick up the pieces – the same local authorities who are unable to afford [children's centres](#), [respite care](#), [libraries](#), or [environmental services and transport](#). But what's happening with universal credit is not unique. Council budgets are repeatedly being used to alleviate suffering being caused by government policies.

The bedroom tax may no longer make headlines but some of the poorest – [predominantly disabled](#) – social tenants are still having to find over a tenner each week simply because they have the so-called "spare room" through no fault of their own; and councils are having to "top up" their rent with discretionary housing payments (DHP) to stop evictions (while [having to deny these payments to many others](#)). Local authorities across Britain spent more than £80m on helping families affected by the bedroom tax in 2016, while another [£14m was spent on renters facing the benefit cap](#). Last year it was announced that some councils were running out of cash to help poor residents hit by these housing benefit cuts, with Dudley in the West Midlands having spent 84% of its DHP budget for 2016 after [only six months](#).

Worse still, this has a domino effect: short-sighted cuts to housing benefits, combined with the rise of private renting and precarious tenancies, are adding to the homelessness crisis that local councils are then also left to address. Local authorities spent more than [£1.1bn on homelessness in 2015-16](#) (some of this was recovered from the Department for Work and Pensions), with spending on temporary accommodation [rocketing by 39%](#) in real terms since 2010 – 11. This winter has seen harrowing reports of people [sleeping in cars, buses and tents](#),

Frances Ryan, January 2018

and even [dying in freezing cold](#). But years of cuts are leaving councils less able to provide a safety net: on average, local authority funding for services to help vulnerable people avoid homelessness was cut by [45% between 2009-10 and 2014-15](#).

Hardship funds, meanwhile, are increasingly a lifeline for families pushed into crisis by government policies; that's help to buy an oven for a young mum [drowning in private rent costs](#) because there's no social housing in her area, or a Parkinson's patient being given low-cost loans to buy food after being forced off disability benefits by a [flawed assessment](#).

But with their budgets gutted, nearly two-thirds of English councils have now closed their "welfare assistance schemes" or offer only a [threadbare service](#). It adds insult to injury that, at a time in which the Department for Work and Pensions has never been more needed to fulfil its duty, Esther McVey – a woman with such brass neck she [defended benefit sanctions](#), the [spread of food banks](#), and harsher disability benefit assessments – has been put [in charge of the system](#).

Austerity is turning into the ultimate raid on local government's finances – gut its funding and then force it to pay out more to fix the problems caused by other cuts. And it's only going to get worse: the local Government Association estimates that councils face a [£5.8bn funding gap by 2020](#), while [biting social security cuts](#), [rising poverty](#) and stagnating wages mean families are going to have an even greater need for help.

Yet this is about more than strained spreadsheets or internal politics – it's a sign of a government that's causing obscene hardship to its citizens and doing nothing to alleviate it. As councils and communities strain under the burden forced upon them, May's government is simply looking on.

*\*\* Poverty – Hardworking Britain*

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jan/11/tories-obscene-joke-shred-safety-net-bedroom-tax-universal-credit>

- Frances Ryan is a Guardian columnist