

MPs have £5.7m taxpayer-funded 'hardship fund' despite emergency support for poor being axed

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Out of order: MPs can avoid foodbanks

Pampered MPs are sitting on a taxpayer-backed war chest of nearly £6million that can be used if they fall on hard times.

The Treasury pays thousands of pounds a year into the "hardship fund", which gives financial help to former members and their families down on their luck.

But while MPs have this to fall back on, some of the most hard-pressed families in Britain have lost similar support because of the Government's cuts.

The Department for Work and Pensions this month axed the discretionary social fund, which provided emergency support to people living in poverty.

The £800million pot has been wound up and responsibility handed to councils for loans and grants to those in need.

The Government admits the money given to councils is "not ring-fenced" and could go "on other things". Documents reveal the House of Commons Members' Fund has assets of £5.7million and spent £160,000 last year to help 58 ex-MPs.

Accounts show the fund got £148,000 from the taxpayer last year and £15,479 from members, who pay an annual subscription of £24 each.

The fund spent nearly £22,000 on salaries for administration, £14,476 on actuarial fees, £12,800 on auditors, and Capita was paid £6,000 to act as "custodian" for the assets.

The pot, set up in 1939, is overseen by a board of trustees headed by former Tory Cabinet minister Peter Lilley.

The Members' Fund can claim up to £215,000 a year in support from the Treasury.

Since 2007, it has received more than £1million of taxpayers' money.

Attempts by MPs to make the fund no longer reliant on the Treasury have been blocked by ministers, who refuse to grant parliamentary time for such a debate.

Former Labour MP Joe Ashton recently argued the fund was essential and said many former MPs descended into alcoholism and poverty.

There are more than 1,000 former MPs, some in their 90s.

But MPs may find it difficult to get sympathy. They went off this week on a two-week break.

Parliament will sit for only about 150 days this year, compared to 190 days in school for teachers.

Matthew Sinclair, of the TaxPayers' Alliance, said: "Helping those who fall on tough times is a worthy aim, but it is bizarre that ex-MPs have exclusive access to a taxpayer-funded hardship fund."

Our MPs certainly know how to make themselves unpopular.

We reveal today that, having spent the last legislative session axing benefits for the disabled and vulnerable,

they are sitting on their own hardship fund of almost £6million.

Most of this money has come from the taxpayer, with the Treasury paying more than £1million into it over the past six years.

Nobody doubts there will be former politicians who need support when they fall on hard times.

What many will find galling, not to say hypocritical, is that MPs are feathering their own nest while withdrawing exactly the same help for the rest of us.

On April 1 the Government axed the discretionary social fund which offered emergency grants and loans to those most in need.

And unlike MPs, people who relied on this money did not have the luxury of a decent pension or subsidised bars and restaurants.