

Welcome to the first issue of the Advice NI newsletter on the Welfare Reform Bill. This newsletter will be compiled on a fortnightly basis to keep our members up to date with the progress of the Bill as it moves through the Assembly. Any comments or suggestions for content can be emailed to Jenny McCurry - jmccurry02@qub.ac.uk

Welfare Reform Bill: Progress so far

First reading: 01/10/2012
Second reading: 09/10/2012
Closing date for submissions of evidence: 19/10/2012
The Bill is currently being scrutinized by the Social Development Committee

Recent Assembly Activity on Welfare Reform

Friday 26th of October

Weekly Answers Booklet 26.10.12 (WA 636 onwards)

Includes answers concerning the current number of recipients of social security benefit and the frequency of payment (majority fortnightly at present); Financial implications of not implementing the Welfare Reform Bill; Report from NICCY on the impact of welfare reform on children; Youth Employment and Support Allowance; Administration of Universal Credit (staffing requirements and location of staff); Housing Benefit (Over-occupancy); Impact of implementation of Universal Credit on staffing levels at the Social Security Agency and Housing Benefit Offices.

<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Assembly-Business/Questions-For-Answer/Weekly-Answers-Booklet/>

Thursday 25th of October

Social Development Committee confirms additional meetings to scrutinize the Bill.

Dates can be found here:

<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/News-and-Media/Media-Operational-Notices/Social-Development-Committee-Confirm-Additional-Meetings-to-Scrutinise-Welfare-Reform-Bill1/>

The DSD Committee received briefings from NI Association of Mental Health, NICCY, WAVE and the NI Housing Executive. Minutes of proceedings will be made available on the Assembly website.

Tuesday 23rd of October

The Social Development Committee received briefings from Advice NI, Women's/Family Groups (Women's Resource and Development Agency, DemocraShe, Causeway Women's Aid, Gingerbread NI) and the Law Centre (NI).

Minutes are now available here:

<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Assembly-Business/Committees/Social-Development/Minutes-of-Evidence/>

Advice NI recommendations to the DSD Committee

1. Include a clause in the Welfare Reform Bill that ensures a statutory right to independent advice for those who are negatively affected by the Bill.
2. Include a clause to ensure effective scrutiny and monitoring of the service provider which is awarded the contract to assess claimants of Personal Independence Payment (PIP).
3. Include a clause to ensure effective monitoring of the impact of the implementation of welfare reform, both directly on people and indirectly on displaced expenditure.
4. Amendment to the child maintenance clause: When a family-based agreement cannot be reached, the parent who is blocking the agreement should be penalised.

Monday 22nd October

Nelson McCausland in welfare reform statement at Stormont

Nelson McCausland announced concessions on how welfare reform will be implemented in Northern Ireland. Split and more frequent payments will be made 'where necessary' and housing benefit will be paid to landlords rather than tenants. He said universal credit should launch in Northern Ireland in April 2014, six months later than in the rest of the UK.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-20026767>

Friday 19th of October

Weekly Answers Booklet 19.10.12 (WA 444 onwards)

Includes answers concerning the detail of differences between the Welfare Reform Bill and the Welfare Reform Act 2012; Financial consequences of delaying the approval of the Welfare Reform Bill by the Assembly; Costs of breaking parity; New criteria for awarding the Personal Independence Payment; Risk to social security agency jobs if there are delays in implementing welfare reform.

<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Assembly-Business/Questions-For-Answer/Weekly-Answers-Booklet/>

Wednesday 17th of October

Social Development Committee: Clause by clause consideration of the Welfare Reform Bill

These meetings between the Committee and Department precede formal clause-by-clause debate on and scrutiny of the Bill.

Minutes of Committee Meetings can be found here: <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Assembly-Business/Committees/Social-Development/Minutes-of-Evidence/>

This meeting examined clauses 76 – 94 on the Personal Independence Payment (PIP) and clauses 107 – 115 on matters of fraud and error.

- Lack of clarity highlighted on a number of issues: Concerns over Atos healthcare regarding work capability assessment and the danger of this being replicated with assessment for PIP; Dealing with people with terminal illness; How to ensure that healthcare professionals are qualified to assess complex needs i.e. multiple disabilities, mental illness.

- Confirmed that the contract for the provider to assess PIP claimants is to be signed within 4 to 6 weeks.

Tuesday 16th of October

Social Development Committee Meeting

Consideration of Clauses 30 – 120 (excepting 76 – 94 and 107 – 115)

Consideration of Universal Credit; Working-Age Benefits, Employment and Support Allowance; Industrial Injuries; Benefit; Housing Benefit and State Pension Credit

Wednesday 10th of October 2012

Social Development Committee Meeting

Consideration of clauses 1 – 30 (Universal Credit)

Thursday 4th of October 2012

DSD briefing on Welfare Reform to the Committee for Social Development

Upcoming Business Diary

Monday 29th of October: Briefings by Church Groups and by ICTU, PCS AND NIPS.

Tuesday 30th of October: Briefings by NI Welfare Reform group, Equality Commission and Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission.

Wednesday 31st of October: Briefings by CIH/NIFHA/HRS and Council for the Homeless; Citizens Advice; Action Mental Health, Disability Action and Mencap.

6th, 7th and 8th of November: Welfare Reform Bill – Consideration of Stakeholder Comments, Proposed Amendments and Departmental Responses.

13th, 14th, 15th and 20th November: Formal clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Bill

Media Coverage

Monday 28th of October

Five million paid less than Living Wage, say KPMG

The report claims that 1 in 5 workers in the UK are paid less than required for a basic standard of living. The Living Wage is £8.30 per hour in London and £7.20 per hour in the rest of the UK. It is voluntary, unlike the National Minimum Wage. Northern Ireland has the largest proportion of people earning below the Living Wage, standing at 24% of workers.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-20104177>

Child benefit cuts: One million letters being sent

Households where at least one person earns £50,000 or more will have their child benefit reduced or stopped. This is expected to produce anomalies in the case of two earner families where each parent earns up to £49,000 and will not be affected, whereas families with one parent earning over £50,000 will be.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-20119514>

Thursday 25th of October

Benefit cuts 'very worrying'

'6 out of 10 poor children live with a working parent' - Chief Executive of Child Poverty Action Group speaks on the Today Programme about concerns over plans to cap child benefit.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_9763000/9763398.stm

Child related benefits may be 'capped' at two children

Iain Duncan Smith outlines proposals raising concern among child poverty campaigners. The plans would not come into effect until after the

next general election, scheduled for 2015. Of 7.8 million families currently receiving child benefit, 1.2 million have more than 2 children. The BBC calculates that the cap would save an estimated £200m, little compared to the £18 million already cut from the welfare budget and the additional £10bn in savings which is currently being sought.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-20077758>

Wednesday 23rd of October

Unanswered questions on welfare reform

BBC NI Political Editor Mark Devenport discusses the politics behind the concessions announced by Minister McCausland earlier this week.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-20038871>

Thursday 18th of October

Minster's Domestic Abuse warning about welfare reforms

A Welsh government minister has raised concerns about welfare reform making it harder for victims of domestic abuse to leave their partners.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-politics-19994916>

Wednesday 17th of October

Holes in the Safety Net: The Impact of Universal Credit on Disabled People and their Families

An inquiry led by Baroness Tanni-Grey Thompson, and backed by the Children's Society, Citizens Advice and Disability Rights UK, finds that up to half a million disabled people and their families stand to lose out under the new universal credit system.

Read the full report at:
www.childrenssociety.org.uk

Useful Briefings and Research Reports

- 04/10/12 - Northern Ireland Assembly Research Service, *A guide to the Welfare Reform Bill*
http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Documents/RaISe/Publications/2012/social_dev/14412.pdf
- 03/10/12 – Advice NI Welfare Reform Briefing Paper
http://www.adviceni.net/publications/index.cfm/pckey/6/pub_key/176
- 27/09/12 - Northern Ireland Assembly Research Service, *Work and Pensions Committee Inquiry: The Implementation of Universal Credit*
http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Documents/RaISe/Publications/2012/social_dev/15412.pdf
- Written evidence submitted by the Northern Ireland Welfare Reform Group, *Progress towards the implementation of Universal Credit*
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmworpen/writev/576/m72.htm>
- 24/05/11 – Northern Ireland Assembly Research Service, *Parity and Social Security in Northern Ireland*
<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Documents/RaISe/Publications/2011/Social-Development/9911.pdf>
- October 2010 – Oxfam, *A Gender Perspective on 21st Century Welfare Reform*
<http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/a-gender-perspective-on-21st-century-welfare-reform-118087>