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Assembly

Committee for Social Development

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

Pensions Bill: NIPSA Briefing

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On a general point, the normal arrangement has been the application of parity for social security and, indeed, occupational pension schemes in Northern Ireland. NIPSA believes that, by and large, parity, warts and all, is the lesser of the evils, so to speak. We are concerned about attempts to break parity and the announcements in the autumn statement on provision for regional pay. We have had the nonsense from Tories, this week and previously, about looking at regional benefit rates in the UK. While we are not absolutely wedded to parity, we believe that it is the baseline for going forward.

There are two primary considerations on the Pensions Bill: the change in the age at which the state pension is paid, and the auto-enrolment dimension. I accept that there are a number of other important provisions in the Bill, but they are mainly technical and on the periphery of the bigger debate. Where we are now is the equalisation process to bring the age at which women can claim the pension up to 65. It is the usual position that, for government and employers, harmonisation is always the reduction of people to the lowest common denominator rather than bringing them up to the highest common denominator. We would much prefer men to be entitled to claim the state pension at 60 rather than women being penalised and only able to claim it when they reach 65.

We then have the change in the state pension age to 66 by November 2020. The previous Labour Government had proposed that that change would take place by 2026 and the pension age would be raised to 67 by 2036. We consider those changes draconian, both in their impact on people who anticipated their pension being paid when they were 65 or at age 66 by 2026. To bring that forward to November 2020 is unfair, because people plan their retirement provisions, and so on, well in advance, and their plans have been thrown into jeopardy. Likewise, bringing retirement at 67 forward to 2026 from 2036 is a retrograde step and one which is well beyond what happens in other European countries.

In essence, therefore, we believe that there is massive inconsistency in how the Tory-Liberal coalition Government is addressing the pensions issue. As you would expect from Tories, they engage in nothing but doublespeak. On one hand, they encourage people to plan and make provision for retirement, and then, by their actions, they do everything to undermine people being able to plan for their retirement. We have seen occupational pensions, particularly public sector pensions, being attacked by this Government. I am happy to leave copies of a NIPSA publication that relates specifically to public sector pensions.

We also believe that the changes will have the effect of driving workers out of pension schemes. That not only undermines sustainability of such schemes, it will also make people more dependent in their retirement solely on state benefit provision. That must surely be contrary to the alleged ethos of having people plan and make provision for retirement.

We believe that the current state provision is wholly inadequate. The basic pension for a single person is £102 a week — about £5,300 a year — or even the guaranteed rate of about £7,142 a year as a single person. For a couple, the figures are £8,354 or £10,900. That is a long way off the hype and nonsense that we heard this week of benefits ceilings of £26,000, and so on. I do not think that anybody should have to depend on such inadequate amounts in retirement. They are nothing but poverty payments. They reinforce the poverty trap and do nothing to enhance the economy.

We must also consider the current system of pension credits. Although our members try to do the best job that they can in administering pension credit, it, like most benefits, is a minefield. The benefits system is becoming more complex rather than simpler. That complexity puts people off claiming benefits. There is data to show the degree to which pension credit is under-claimed. That is mainly because pensioners find it highly complex and very difficult to work their way through the claim process. It is deemed that you are almost begging the government to pay you, rather than receiving what should be your entitlement. We commented on that in our submission to DSD and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) in August 2010. Our view is that the Pensions Bill has more to do with the coalition Government's austerity programme than with providing people with decent and proper pensions. Increasing the age at which people are entitled to claim pensions is purely another way of driving cuts in the welfare system.

We also believe that it is wholly inconsiderate. Increasing the state pension age and linking normal pension age in occupational pension schemes to the state pension age means that people will be

forced to stay in employment a lot longer than they would have otherwise, if they are lucky enough to be in employment at all. Nobody appears to be doing any macroeconomic assessment of what that will do to the labour market. For every person who stays in work for five, six or seven years longer, there is no opportunity in the labour market for those who are unemployed, who are in education or who are seeking to return to the labour market.

I have mentioned the parity position, but the life expectancy of someone in Northern Ireland is very different from that of the well-heeled Tory in the Shires of the south of England. Life expectancy in Northern Ireland is much lower than in those areas, and there is clear documented evidence as to why that is the case.

The other difference in Northern Ireland is that, in comparative terms, we still have a fairly healthy birth rate, and there have been some signs in recent years that the birth rate has been increasing. Statistics from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) show that only 16% of the current population is aged 65 and over. I think that explodes the Government myth that pensioners far outweigh people in work, and they claim that that is one basis for increasing the state pension age for payment of pension and the retirement age in public service schemes.

I have already mentioned that the short notice of the changes has a detrimental impact on people planning for retirement. When most people are in their teens or 20s, they do not think too much about retirement and pensions. They may begin to have some consideration for it in their 30s and 40s, but, when they hit the 50 barrier, suddenly it becomes one of the big issues and crises in life. However, if you are now reducing the time frame for that planning, it will be much more difficult for people to be able to deal with an orderly and dignified exit from work into retirement.

The Department also issued its equality impact assessment (EQIA), and, again, we commented on that. Our comments were brief, but it is clear that it is discriminatory. It clearly discriminates against women and against people who are in lower social classes, so to speak. Therefore, there are issues in relation to the equality impact assessment that need to be addressed.

One of the issues also relates to the move from the retail price index to the consumer price index. We think that that is likely to be discriminatory on a geographical basis and discriminatory against women, because, certainly in occupational pensions in the public service, there is a greater proportion of women employed than males. In our submission, we also touched on the equality impact assessment in respect of the mortality issue in Northern Ireland vis-à-vis the rest of the United Kingdom.

When it comes to looking at some of the other issues in the Bill, we have the whole issue of auto-enrolment. NIPSA fully supports auto-enrolment, but not in the way that it is presented, nor do we believe that National Employment Savings Trust (NEST) is an appropriate pension scheme. Proper defined benefit pension schemes should be provided for. Also, we are opposed to the re-enrolment process that is provided for within the auto-enrolment provision.

People should be auto-enrolled into the pension scheme, and, I would say, into trade unions, on their first day of employment. They should stay in the occupational pension scheme and not be allowed to leave it. That means having to address issues such as low pay, which are apparent across many parts of the both the public and private sectors.

To have to go through a process of providing auto-enrolment every three years is unnecessary, is a burden, creates high administrative costs for the pension schemes and provides people with opportunities to opt out. People may look at an opportunity to opt out on a short-term basis, particularly now if you are in employment and find that you are either facing a pay cut or a pay freeze. We have rampant inflation, and people are looking to see how they get through this week and this month rather than how they get through their retirement. People may then be superficially attracted to opting out of the pension scheme. That will not do anything for them in their retirement, nor will it do anything for the Government's supposed approach to getting people to plan for decency in retirement.

I will turn to other issues. There was the Green Paper entitled 'A state pension for the 21st century', which we provided comments on. The Government should move to a single rate for pensions and do

away with the pension credit approach. However, a decent rate has to be set, way above the £140 that was propositioned in the Green Paper.

We have seen some tax changes in how pensions are treated. The Government have got it wrong. Those changes tend to hit middle-income earners. The fat cats and the boards of directors around the UK continue to use their accountants to make sure that they benefit and get handsome pension provision. So, although on appearance the tax changes seem to be right, they are not really hitting those who should be hit and be contributing more to society.

There is also the European position. The European pensions paper was produced prior to the current crisis in Europe, and it remains to be seen whether that will be revisited. However, when you examine what is in that document and the provision of pensions in the UK, it is among the worst in Europe when it comes to the rate of pension and, to use a football analogy, is in the non-league area when it comes to the value of pensions. Those are comparisons with what are mostly considered to be developed economies. They certainly do not come anywhere near the recommendations that were contained in the Turner report on adequacy of income in retirement, which is a report that we broadly endorse.

In conclusion, NIPSA rejects the increase in the state pension age. We are opposed to the 20 December public sector pension scheme heads of agreement; they do not do an awful lot. Public servants will continue to have to work longer, pay more and get much reduced pensions, if they live long enough to claim them. We are opposed to the inadequacy of pension provision in the state benefit system and the complex pension credit system that goes with that. We support a single adequate state pension, with occupation pensions being paid on top of that and no offsetting from occupational pensions. There is probably need to consider an additional safety net for special circumstances if the new state pension happens to fail certain individuals.

We encourage membership of occupational schemes via auto-enrolment, but not the rolling three-year revalidation of membership. We look to a more flexible approach to the state pension age and the normal pension age from occupational pension schemes, especially in order to provide improvements in labour market opportunities for those who find themselves out of employment and wish to be in employment. I am happy to conclude there. I have covered most of the ground on the Bill and on NIPSA's broad position on pensions, both occupational and state.

The Chairperson: OK, Bumper. Thank you very much for that very comprehensive run-through your submission.

Mr Copeland: How are you Bumper? Long time no see. Would it be fair to say that, generally, you are not in favour of this?

Mr Graham: I think that that would be —

Mr Copeland: The reason for asking you that goes back to something that was said this morning. The Committee was examining the departmental analysis of the EQIA. There was a general feeling that everyone was in favour of changes, but not the particular changes that had been proposed. It is interesting that the first person that we speak to this afternoon has confirmed not my fears but my understanding of what was being said.

We held a fuel poverty event not very long ago. It was interesting, because we were sitting round tables, speaking to people with ideas. Would you have thought of the possibility of a presumption in favour of pension credits being paid as something that would be useful if it could be done? In other words, instead of having to fill in complicated forms, the onus would shift and there would be a presumption in favour of payment with a requirement on the state to justify whether payment is made? Have you ever thought of that?

Mr Graham: Yes. There is something to be said about the concept of National Insurance contributions paying towards benefits and particularly towards pensions. Unfortunately, that whole Beveridge approach has been lost over time, and National Insurance contributions are now just another form of direct taxation. We need to ensure that employers and employees pay fair taxes and that people get their benefits as a consequence of that. The process should be simplified as far as is possible, and

the onus should not be put on people to make claims. As I said at the outset, there is a lot of research data on the under-claiming of pension credits because of complexity and —

Mr Copeland: Do you have numbers on that?

Mr Graham: I do not, but I have seen research papers from various pensioner organisations. Zoë Anderson may have some more information on that. There is a lot of UK-wide data floating around. I believe that the benefits system should be as simplified as possible. It should not be off-putting. People contribute throughout their working lives and, therefore, should have a right to receive decent benefits, whether they have been unemployed or are of pension age.

Mr Brady: Thank you very much for your presentation. It is interesting that you mention Beveridge, because the concept of Beveridge was to do with welfare and the well-being of the people for whom the welfare state was designed. It has moved over the years to a notion of perceived social security, as opposed to something that really should be put into practice.

I want to make a couple of points. You talked about the different strands in the Bill, including that of the state pension age. You put the nonsense about the cap on benefits into context very well — this perceived £26,000. I have been dealing with benefits for over 30 years and I have never met anyone who is getting £26,000, even though they might have been happy to get it and live a reasonably good life on it.

There is also the issue of the minimum income guarantee for pension credit. The £140 that has been mentioned, even by the Government's admission, is probably about £35 less than what was the minimum income guarantee, and that is going back a couple of years. There was a pilot scheme in Britain whereby people were paid automatically for three months, after which it was decided who was entitled and who was not. Automatic entitlement to benefits is operated in most European countries. Apparently, we were told that it could not be done here because of the postcodes, but we have postcodes, so it would seem relatively simple to do.

The change in pension age has disenfranchised a number of women in particular from their state pension for up to two years. What are your views on transitional protection for those people if the Bill's provisions are put into practice? Pensions are contributory benefits. People have paid money into a system that has failed to deliver for them at the age that they were entitled to get it. The same goes for pension credits. You mentioned the lack of uptake of those and the fact that almost £2 million is unclaimed every week. There has been no real effort by the Department or government to ensure that people get those credits.

It has been well documented that we have the meanest pension scheme in the developed world. As I said, there was transitional protection for people, but that seems to have been put to the side. I would like to hear your views on that.

It was interesting that you said that the pension age for men should be reduced to 60, rather than the pension age for women going up. They have been juggling around with that. The Minister would have preferred accelerated passage for the Bill on the premise that it would give people time to prepare for their future. Prepare with what? If you are in the public sector, you are not paid enough to prepare for anything. We are back to the scenario of the advantaged gaining and the disadvantaged losing. The people who can afford to save and plan for their futures are those who will live longer because of demographics. We were talking the other day about the fact that if you get on the bus in Donegall Square and travel to Finaghy Road South, you will gain eight years in life expectancy. That is amazing, and I do not think that Translink knows what it is involved in.

Mr F McCann: Mickey's moving to Finaghy next week.

Mr Brady: Yes.

Mr Graham: I am worried, Mickey. I used to live in Finaghy; you know too much about me.

Mr Brady: Maybe you should move back. There are all sorts of issues that do not seem to have been taken into account. We talk about the Tories and the Liberal Democrats, but Labour was as guilty. The only thing that Labour did differently was to set a longer time frame for the changes. However, that does take away the fact that it was a bad idea to begin with. I wanted to raise those points with you and get your views on them.

Mr Graham: The coalition Government made great play of their view that they had improved the transitional arrangements by shifting the date from April 2020 to November 2020. However, that was absolutely meaningless. I made the point earlier that, in our opinion, it does not provide people with the appropriate length of time that they need to plan for such dramatic changes. We consider the change to November 2020 to be almost valueless and a form of window dressing by the Government.

As to your points on benefit uptake and advice and information, we believe that far too little money is spent on benefit uptake initiatives by DSD. You could compare the amount it spends on benefit uptake to what it spends on benefit fraud. I am an anorak; I go on to the Northern Ireland Executive's website daily, and I look at all the press releases. I suspect that if you looked at the site over the course of a month, you will find 30 or 40 press releases about, for example, a woman in Magherafelt or a man in east Belfast being prosecuted for benefit fraud. I do not think I have seen one press release about the prosecution of an employer who is engaged in the black economy.

It is about time that DSD and HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) moved away from victimising individuals who are in dire economic straits, and started to tackle and prosecute those employers who are responsible for the black economy. I would spend more money on that and on benefit uptake initiatives. Increasing the amount of money in benefit uptake will put more money into the hands of individuals and into the spending power of what is commonly called the grey economy.

We heard this morning about the multiplier effect of Belfast City Council's capital spend initiative, and the same applies to money that is put into the hands of ordinary working people. They will go and spend that money in the corner shops and the supermarkets and will improve their own position and that of the economy. It is of great concern. We were not flying the flag for the previous Labour Government. We do not believe that they were that much different from the current shower. The situation is quite clear: the UK is one of the few countries in the developed economies where the poverty gap is widening, be it child poverty, pensioner poverty or fuel poverty. The UK is of the few economies in the world where that gap is widening instead of narrowing. The top 5% are getting richer and richer and the remaining 95% are paying for that 5%.

Mr Douglas: Thanks for your presentation, Bumper. You mentioned the whole notion of parity, which is an issue that has come up here a number of times. In fact, at one stage, we discussed whether we should break parity. However, we were advised by officials that that would cost billions. You also said, in respect of regional variations, that we should be treated the same as London. Is that what you meant?

Mr Graham: The London weighting allowance, for example, has been used to deal with pay in London. I therefore think that, in any system, you can build in provision for special categories or exemptions. The problem with poverty — sorry — parity; maybe it is both.

Mr Brady: Freudian slip.

Mr Graham: Parity is giving us poverty. If we break from parity, the size of the block will be reduced de facto. If we want to spend an extra £100 million on something, which is based on Barnett or social security application, the London Government would say, "Fine. Go ahead. Do whatever you want". However, the cost envelope would stay the same, and we would then get into a situation where we would be robbing Peter to pay Paul. I think that the bigger issue is about the equitable distribution of money across the UK by revisiting the Barnett formula, if need be, and certainly by going out and getting the £120 billion in tax that has been evaded and avoided. If we had that £120 billion, we would not be looking at austerity programmes. We would be looking at generating employment, improving the value of social security benefits, closing the poverty gap and enhancing our public services.

Mr Douglas: You mentioned auto-enrolment. Have you any views on how that will impact the likes of small business. I am not talking about big business. I am talking more about one or two-person businesses.

Mr Graham: There is a problem with the way in which government supports big business but fails to support small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). I think that there is a need to critically look at the intervention strategies of government in respect of assisting small employers. I think that it would be more beneficial to do that than to concentrate, as we appear to, on big business. You have to make the system as simple as possible for small employers to administer. There may be ways of doing that: for example, by setting up organisations or using civil servants or public servants to go in and help them to deal with those types of issues. We certainly do need to be cognisant of that. We also need to be clear that we cannot just say, "If you have fewer than 10 or 20 employees, you are getting a free run." If we did that, we would be doing the workers in those organisations a disservice and allowing the employers to be treated more beneficially than other employers.

Mr Douglas: Finally, you mentioned discrimination against women. I read somewhere recently that welfare reform will have more of an impact on women than on men. So, in a sense, it is a double whammy.

Mr Graham: A women's group in Britain tried to take a judicial review. Unfortunately, the austerity measures taken by the coalition Government meant that the judicial review was lost. However, it is anecdotal. When you look at the composition of the public service workforce in Northern Ireland, there are more women than men. When you look at longevity, women live longer than men, and even the operation will not help you on that one. Therefore, that means that if women are living longer and living on the current rate of pensions, they are in pensioner poverty for a longer period. It is clear that there is at least indirect, if not direct, discrimination against women.

Mr F McCann: Some of my questions have already been asked.

The Chairperson: See if you can get through it without asking the same question twice.

Mr F McCann: Thank you for the presentation. There was not a lot in it that I would disagree with. First, with regard to your point about low pay and people being charged with fraud, it is a fact of life that most of the people who are caught doing the double are women in very low-paid jobs. Some of them earn only £40 or £50 a week. Many of them work in hospitals and in the public sector. There is a trawl every now and again and the records are cleared out, and that is how they build the thing up. If they looked at error in the Department as much as they looked at fraud, there might be some movement forward.

We voted against the Bill when it was before the Assembly the other day. We believe that it is unfair and unjust. As Mickey said, if there was a transitional period between 60 and 65, that might help. However, over and above that, if people do not want to work at 66, 67 or 68, then provision should be made because they have paid into the system for many years.

One of the other things that we have argued in Committee is that if you need to breach parity to test the waters, so be it. Some people say that parity is sacrosanct, but it is just an agreement between people. There is nothing written in stone. Therefore, I was interested to hear you say that you believe in parity. How would that fit in with this Bill? In the Assembly the other day, we were told that we were taking the easy way out and that it would cost hundreds of millions.

Mr Graham: I am not so sure that I would sign up to saying that I believe in parity. It needs to be put into context. As I said already, if you do not have parity, you will still get the same amount of money in the block or in social security expenditure. If you do anything over and above that, you have to find the wherewithal to make up that difference. The only way that that can be done currently is to shift the focus on expenditure, but that is robbing Peter to pay Paul. The wider economic issue has to be addressed.

However, parity should not always be seen to be a one-edged sword. There is no reason why it cannot be a double-edge sword at times. There is probably a need for greater working together between the

Welsh, the Scottish and the Northern Ireland Assemblies against the Westminster Government. At the end of the day, the Westminster Government are currently controlled by a bunch of millionaires who have no time for ordinary working people, and certainly no time for the trade union movement.

You mentioned increasing the age of retirement from 65, 66, to 67. In a few years, no doubt, we will be up to the 70 mark. What is that doing to the health of the workforce? Many of the people working in the Ambulance Service, in patient transport, etc, often have to carry people either in chairs or on stretchers up and down many floors. Do you want somebody who is 68 or 69 carrying a 20 stone 40-year-old? A teacher who spoke at our demonstration on the day of the strike in November said, "How am I going to mark somebody's homework if I am 68 or 69 and perhaps suffering from the onset of dementia or something like that?" There are important issues about the age of retirement and the ability of people to do their job. That, again, has not been taken into account in any of the Government's considerations. The Government is treating the age of retirement purely as an economic austerity measure.

Mr F McCann: I have spoken to quite a few women approaching the age of 60 and men reaching 65 who, given the choice, would have worked on but could not because of the legislation at the time. Something must be worked into the Bill to give the people that choice. There are many categories of people who want to work on. We argued the other day that people's mental and general health conditions also had to be considered in that process, particularly across many working class areas in the North.

Mr Graham: You are right. It is difficult to make a concrete statement with lots of evidence. However, given a more flexible approach, for every person who wants to go at 60 someone else will want to stay in work until they are 70. I suspect that the equation will be fairly balanced in the round. That is why I concluded by saying that we look to having a more flexible approach.

Mr Durkan: Thank you, Bumper. This is like bingo. I have been ticking off things as you said them and I nearly have house. *[Laughter.]*

You have studied the debate in the Assembly, Bumper, so you know that we voted against the Bill. In my speech, I referred to the need for us to explore a coalition of the regions, which you mentioned. I think that the Executive should explore that to embarrass the coalition Government or at least make them see other ways of generating money, such as introducing a Robin Hood tax. Sarkozy is looking at that possibility. What are your views on that?

Mr Graham: NIPSA has always strongly supported and was among the first to sign up to the concept of a Robin Hood tax. Again, although that would be useful, there are quicker ways of dealing with the issue, including, as I said earlier, clawing back the £120 billion lost in tax evasion and avoidance. We should deal with that, and the Robin Hood tax would help to ensure additional income for the Exchequer to provide better social welfare protection.

Mr Durkan: I was going to raise the tax evasion issue but I did not want to be accused of repetition. Fra mentioned the hundreds of millions of pounds that we were told that opposing the Bill would cost us. I think that there was cross-party acceptance — even among those that voted against it the other day — that the retirement age will change. However, our concerns focused on the timing of that and the acceleration of the transition. The Minister quoted a figure of £700 million. Have you done any costings on pensions outside of the Department's figures?

Mr Graham: We have not done any work specifically on the welfare side of things. We have done some work, which I referred to, in the public service pension document. You have to look at the beneficial impacts of early retirement that is linked to decent and adequate income. People with decent and adequate incomes will be less of a drain on social services and the health service. They will also be less of a drain on the complex administrative processes involved in paying social security benefits. You have to take a much wider view than the very narrow view taken by the Treasury, DFP and DSD.

Mr Durkan: I agree, and I made all those points the other day. I was just hoping that you would tell me that that figure is fairytale stuff.

Mr Graham: Zoë Anderson, who spends more time on the issue of benefits, might mention that in the next session.

Mr Brady: Bumper, you made the point that, if this Bill goes through, there is nothing to stop them putting the age up to 80 if they feel like it. I will just make a point about Mark and his house. He is under 35, so he would only qualify for single-room rent. Sorry; that has knocked you out. It really is possible that the age will just keep going up. You made the point that, of 24 cabinet Ministers, 21 are millionaires, so they are not really bothered about the price of oil, the price of food, travelling to Finaghy on a bus or anything else.

The Chairperson: OK; point made. We have no other questions. Bumper, thank you for your presentation and for responding to all the questions.