

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department for Communities

CHANGING THE SPECIAL RULES FOR TERMINAL ILLNESS (SRTI)

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Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): As many of you will know the special rules for terminal illness provide an automatic entitlement to certain social security benefits, and crucially, fast-tracked financial support where a person has received a diagnosis of a terminal illness, and death is reasonably expected within six months.

Members will all be familiar with the campaign by Marie Curie, Motor Neurone Disease Association and others over recent years to change the six months criterion in the special rules for terminal illness. As seen in previous debates in this Assembly, all Executive parties are united on this issue to change the status quo.

On the 6 October 2020 this Assembly agreed to a motion that called for the removal of the six months criterion in terminal illness provision. You will recall at the time that Minister Ní Chuilín made a clear commitment to bring about change to better address the needs of terminally ill people here.

No-one could fail to be moved by the testimony of people who find themselves facing a terminal illness diagnosis. My priority is to reform the current rules to improve the support we provide to terminally ill people.

Today I want to tell you that, as an immediate step, I will extend the current six months criterion to twelve months and will bring forward legislation within this current Assembly mandate to do this.

I have secured Executive agreement to my planned approach to amend social security legislation to widen the eligibility definition in the special rules for terminal illness.

The changes I will make will apply to all of the five social security benefits to which the special rules apply.

This is an important step forward that will mean more people who find themselves in the devastating position of being terminally ill will benefit from fast-tracked access to financial support through social security benefits. They will not have to go through assessments and will get automatic access to benefits earlier.

Changing the provisions around the special rules will require amendment to both primary and secondary legislation. I know that Assembly colleagues across all parties have expressed concern about the current legislative provision and I hope that you will all work with me so we can deliver change as quickly as possible.

I can reassure you that through the legislative process my Departmental officials will continue to actively and positively engage with key stakeholders, advocacy groups and the clinical community.

I will keep these provisions under review and consider further options for reform in the future. This will include monitoring international best practice, reviewing the definition of special rules and looking at a clinically led model in the time ahead.

I am committed to making real change to the status quo in order to put in place a system that lessens the stress and anxiety for people during the most difficult times.