

## **COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO THE WELFARE REFORM BILL**

### **SUBMISSION FROM ACTION ON HEARING LOSS, AUGUST 2012**

Action on Hearing Loss is the charity working to create a world where deafness or hearing loss do not limit or determine opportunity and where people value their hearing. We work to ensure that people who are deaf, deafened or hard of hearing have the same rights and opportunities to lead a full and enriching life. We strive to break down stigma and create acceptance of deafness and hearing loss. We aim to promote hearing health, prevent hearing loss and cure deafness.

Action on Hearing Loss welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to this Inquiry and would be happy to provide oral evidence to the Committee.

#### **UNIVERSAL CREDIT**

##### Application methods

The online channel, while cheaper and easier for many people, is not always the most appropriate. Many older and/or disabled people do not use the internet and do not have the skills or confidence to use it in a setting such as a job centre or advice office. Likewise, use of the telephone is not always appropriate for someone who has a hearing loss. For many deaf people, English is not their first language and they will require face-to-face support with form filling, with the help of an interpreter. The Department will therefore have to ensure that information is available in a hard copy format, that claimants are not contacted by telephone where they are unable to use one and that they have provision made for the supply of communication support professionals for appointments.

##### Conditionality

While many deaf and hard of hearing people do work and many more want to work, it is vital that the Department makes full provision for support in order that people can access employment. This would include educating employers, promoting Access to Work and ensuring that communication support is provided for all appointments and interviews. Sanctions should not be enforced if the claimant has been unable to access any form of work or work-based conditionality due to this support not being made available to them.

#### **PERSONAL INDEPENDENCE PAYMENT**

As with Universal Credit, we have concerns about the application process and about the need for communication support. For example, the amount of time a claimant is given to return their form is unlikely to be suitable to meet the needs of claimants with a hearing loss – it can take weeks to get an appointment at an advice centre and if communication support is required for this appointment, it can take even longer to secure a time which is suitable to the claimant, the advice centre and the communication support professional.

It is also vital that the Department is prepared for numerous communication support requests for people attending assessments and the fact that scarcity of this support in Northern Ireland may mean that appointments need to be rescheduled. Under no circumstances should the claimant be penalised if they are unable to attend an appointment due to lack of communication support.