

Social Development Committee
Dr. Kevin Pelan
Committee Clerk,
Room 412,
Parliament Buildings,
Ballymiscaw, Stormont,
Belfast BT4 3XX
committee.socialdevelopment@niassembly.gov.uk

October 2012

Dear Committee Clerk

RE: Evidence Welfare Reform

Thank you for your invitation to submit evidence to the Social Development Committee in relation to the Welfare Reform Bill.

Whilst the Community Relations Council (CRC) is not directly involved in the area of welfare advice/services, we do provide support via grant-aid to a range of organisations¹ that support Victims and Survivors of the troubles in this area of work² e.g. Welfare Advice workers and welfare advice sessions.

In response to concerns raised over welfare reform from our funded groups CRC facilitated a number of meetings with these groups and their members. The following issues were raised and are particularly significant to the current debate:

- Clients want to access an advice service that understands trauma relating to the conflict, and are concerned that this understanding/training will not be available in high street agencies;
- High profile cases aren't always comfortable accessing high street, statutory agencies therefore delaying benefit uptake;
- There are concerns about having to undergo a reassessments of physical disabilities;
- Lack of confidence and trust can make accessing welfare advice difficult for victims and survivors;
- Many clients are concerned over the 'pay monthly' proposals and the ability to budget over a monthly period.

¹ Groups funded via the CRC Strategic Support Fund & Development Grant Scheme who provide welfare advice include Corpus Christi Services, CALMS, Relatives for Justice, WAVE, ELY, UDR Coleraine, and SEFF.

² ESA assistance (appeals and questionnaires), DLA, Housing Benefits, JSA, Social Fund loans, Steps to Work, and Tax Credits.

In addition we would refer you to a recent report from WAVE (CRC funded group) '*The needs of Individuals and their families injured as a result of the Troubles in Northern Ireland*'³ which examined matters such as managing complex medical needs, economic and financial needs, families of the injured, post-traumatic stress, obstacles to work and ability to work since injury. These issues are specifically relevant to Part 4 of the Bill - Personal Independence Payment.

Finally a CRC commissioned report in 2006 *Who Cares for the Carers?*⁴ which also identified financial issues. The report found that the victim was often identified as the main breadwinner with this source of income now gone, and in other cases carers found themselves having to give up paid employment to provide care and support.

In conclusion, it is clear the legacy of the conflict continues to impact heavily on victims and survivors and their families. What has emerged very strongly during our engagement with the groups we fund and support are the genuine concerns about accessing financial support in the aftermath of the Welfare Reform Bill. These are important areas that need to be given serious consideration under the current welfare reform proposals.

We hope our comments assist the Committee in their deliberations. If you need clarification on any of the points raised please contact Gemma Attwood, Policy Officer at the following email gattwood@nicrc.org.uk Please also note that from 12 November 2012 CRC's Victims & Survivors Programme will transfer to the new Victims Service.

Yours sincerely

Pp Gemma Attwood

Jacqueline Irwin
Chief Executive

³The needs of Individuals and their families injured as a result of the Troubles in Northern Ireland', Executive Summary; <http://www.wavetraumacentre.org.uk/files/WAVE%20Executive%20Summary.pdf>; Full Report: <http://www.surrey.ac.uk/politics/files/cii/WAVE%20Final%20Report.pdf>

⁴ *Who Cares for the Carers?*; http://www.community-relations.org.uk/fs/doc/Who_Cares_for_the_Carers.pdf