

Macmillan Cancer Support response to DSD Committee Consultation on Welfare Bill



From: Heather Monteverde, Macmillan Cancer Support

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Key Points on the Bill:

Macmillan worked hard to reform the Bill as it went through Westminster. However, we are still concerned over two particular aspects for cancer patients:

- 1) We were pleased that the UK Government backed down on increasing the time people had to wait to receive PIP to 6 months – (although we are still concerned that 3 months can be a long time to wait before support would be available).
- 2) We were disappointed that the UK Government stuck to its' 12month time-limit on ESA before means testing – and would prefer this to be taken out of the Bill in Northern Ireland
- 2a) However, as the Bill was going through, we also worked with the UK Government over the last 3 years on the Harrington Review of ESA – and believe that if what the government say about the *proposed* new guidelines are true and implemented properly; then cancer patients should not be subjected to unnecessary face-to-face work assessments or deemed to be fit to work before they are properly ready – therefore greatly reducing the number of cancer patients effected by the impact of the 12month means test.

Work to be done:

Macmillan believes the UK Government have moved a long way since the beginning of this review process - and they have accepted that more cancer patients going through or just finished treatment, including those receiving radiotherapy and oral chemotherapy would be 'presumed' to be in the 'Support Group' of ESA than before.

We still await the *actual* UK Govt regulations and guidelines to how this is meant to work in practice - and when we have them we will want to work with DSD and the Health service in NI to ensure they are implemented properly on a day-to-day basis. The aim will be to ensure fewer cancer patients are asked to go for face-to-face assessments - and fewer cancer patients are placed in the 'Work related activity' ESA group.

Macmillan believes that Stormont Ministers and Members have shown real understanding and concern around the difficult issue of welfare reform and are well placed to make the best of a difficult situation for cancer patients (attached press release from DSD Minister Mr McCausland).

We urge MLAs:

- **To ensure the Social Security Agency and Health Service in Northern Ireland are ready to implement the new system for cancer patients.**
- **To work with Macmillan to train health & social care, & advice staff in Northern Ireland, including decision makers and ATOS staff.**
- **To ensure that cancer patients have access to Financial Information and Benefits Advice to help them navigate the new complicated welfare system at such a vulnerable time in their life**

Latest Northern Ireland Executive Position on ESA:

On 20 September 2012 – a press release from **DSD Minister Nelson McCausland** welcomed the UK Government rule change to support cancer patients:

“New proposals, published by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) in Great Britain, will mean that hundreds more people in Northern Ireland, and across the UK, who are awaiting, receiving, or recovering from any form of chemotherapy or radiotherapy for cancer will be placed in the Support Group for Employment and Support Allowance (ESA). Here they will get the financial support they need while unable to work.

Minister McCausland said: “This is a very welcome step and it is one that I have been calling for, for some time.

“I am pleased to see that our efforts have been well received, that the DWP has listened to our concerns, and that people suffering from cancer will now be properly supported by our benefit system.”

The simpler process will mean that all types of cancer treatment are seen as having the potential to be equally as debilitating, rather than the current rules which distinguish between different forms of treatment.

This means more people should qualify for the ESA Support Group, where before they may have been placed in the Work Related Activity Group (WRAG) and expected to make efforts to return to work.

Other changes being made to support cancer sufferers include:

- Removing the condition that treatment must be continuous for six months;
- Acceptance that it is the impact of the treatment, not the duration, which should be considered; and,
- The development of a new ‘light touch’ evidence gathering process which will see claimants with cancer being directed to a dedicated part of the ESA50 form, negating the requirement to complete the whole questionnaire.

Nelson McCausland added: “I have no doubt that people who can work should work, but similarly, I believe that those who are unable to work, or who are unable to carry out work-related activity because of their ill-health should not be forced to do so; nor should they be in fear of being forced to do so.

“These proposals will make a difficult time a little easier for those who are having treatment for cancer.”