

Welfare Reform Bill

National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS) briefing: Committee for Social Development, Northern Ireland Assembly

Date: 19/10/12

About NDCS

NDCS is the national charity dedicated to creating a world without barriers for deaf children and young people. We represent the interests and campaign for the rights of all deaf children and young people from birth until they reach independence. NDCS believes that the family is the most important influence on a deaf child's development. We support the deaf child through the family as well as directly supporting deaf children and young people. NDCS estimates that there are approximately 1,400 deaf children and young people in Northern Ireland.

1.1/ Design of PIP for young people (16-24)

NDCS believes that there is a valid case for the design of PIP to be different for 16-24 year olds. We support the view of others including the Every Disabled Child Matters Campaign and Clic Sargent, that disabled young people aged 16-24 are a distinct group with specific and unique needs. This must be recognised in the benefits system if PIP is to successfully meet their needs.

1.2/ The assessment process and young people (16-24)

We are concerned about how the proposed PIP assessment process will work for this age group. Face -to -face assessments for benefit can be very stressful and are likely to harm the self esteem of many young deaf people. It is unrealistic to expect most deaf young people under 18 to present accurate information on the impact of their disability to an unfamiliar professional in a single face-to-face meeting. NDCS Family Officers report that they and parents regularly find inaccuracies in questionnaires which have been completed by young deaf people with a professional who either has limited knowledge of the young person themselves, or of deafness, or both. We know that 40%¹ of deaf young people will already experience mental health problems. Subjecting this vulnerable group to a stressful assessment process will exacerbate this.

1.3/ Recommendations for PIP

For PIP assessment to be easily accessible for deaf young people the assessment questions must be tailored to their needs, there is also a need for assessors' to be given deaf awareness training. If these conditions are not met deaf young people

¹ http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_4103995

could be faced with considerable additional stress at a key transitional time in their lives. There would also be serious question marks over the accuracy of any information attained through such assessments. Such requirements should be included in the regulations as a result of welfare reform.

NDCS would call for the NI Executive to ensure that assessment for PIP is adapted to reflect the additional support and costs disabled Northern Irish 16-25 year olds need during transition.

2.1/ Changes to disability additions

Currently, families with deaf children, who receive Disability Living Allowance (DLA) for the child, are entitled to a top up of their benefits. This 'addition' is currently worth £53.62 per week. Families with a child in receipt of the high rate care component of DLA also receive a 'top up addition' worth £21 per week.

Proposals under the Universal Credit will see lower benefit 'additions' halved. The majority of deaf children, who receive DLA (but not at the higher rate) will see their addition reduced to £26.75 per week. This could cost a vulnerable family with a profoundly deaf child nearly **£1, 400 per year**.

Deaf children do not generally qualify for higher rate of the care component of DLA. This is not because deafness is not a serious disability, but rather they often don't have significant night time care needs. Deaf children have significant care needs at other times and their families face many and varied related costs. Parents also sometimes have to give up work to care for their child, as highlighted by what parents have told us below.

What parents have told us-

A mother with two deaf children told NDCS that accessing sign language classes alone for her family incurred huge cost - £7,500. This was accompanied by over 30,000 miles worth of diesel in order to travel to these classes, as the family live in rural area – that would cost over £3,000 today*. But without this the parents would not be able to communicate with their sons, and their hearing daughter would not be able to communicate with her brothers.

Sarah, mother to Will, a profoundly deaf 12 year old says,

Over the years, by the far the biggest financial cost to us has been lost earnings. I had to pretty much give up work for three or four years when Will was very young because we had so many home visits and therapy and hospital appointments to attend – at least two or three a week (which also cost us in train fares, etc.) ...and he needed so much daily language and communication support at home... It was simply impossible to continue working and support him properly during those years. I still don't think we have recovered from the financial losses of that time, even now, ten years down the line.

* http://www.theaa.com/allaboutcars/advice/advice_rcosts_diesel_table.jsp

2.2/ Recommendations to disability additions

The National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS) believes that proposals in the Welfare Reform Bill will mean that vulnerable families with deaf children stand to lose £1400 a year, risking pushing them in to poverty.

NDCS therefore supported Baroness Meacher's amendment to Clause 10 of the Bill which was passed by the House of Lords. The amendment is detailed below.

Clause 10 (2)

Page 4, line 36, at end insert

"Such additional amount to be paid at a higher rate, a middle rate or a lower rate. The middle rate shall be no less than two-thirds of the higher rate as may be prescribed. The lower rate shall be no less than one third of the higher rate"

NDCS Northern Ireland would like the Welfare Reform Bill to ensure that the disability addition contained in the Universal credit sufficiently recognises the considerable care needs and costs attached to childhood deafness. An amendment similar to that tabled in the House of Lords by Baroness Meacher would go some way to doing that.

3/ Summary

NDCS Northern Ireland is concerned that the Welfare Reform Bill could disproportionately affect deaf children and young people. If the Bill as currently proposed is introduced deaf young people could ultimately receive a service not tailored to their needs. As the majority of deaf children are not in receipt of the higher rate of DLA, most deaf families will be losing around £1,400. NDCS Northern Ireland do not believe this reduced disability addition to the universal credit sufficiently recognises the additional costs incurred by childhood deafness.