



STRONGER TOGETHER

**CONGRESS**

Irish Congress of Trade Unions  
Northern Ireland Committee

Dr. Kevin Pelan  
Committee Clerk  
Social Development Committee  
Room 412,  
Parliament Buildings,  
Stormont,  
Belfast,  
BT4 3XX

5<sup>th</sup> October 2012

Dear Dr. Pelan

**Re: Parliamentary Passage of the Welfare Reform Bill**

I am writing to you on behalf of the Northern Ireland Committee Irish Congress of Trade Unions, NICICTU, concerning the timetable of the parliamentary passage of the Welfare Reform Bill.

Congress is the single umbrella organisation for trade unions in Ireland representing a wide range of interests of almost 850,000 working people, both in the Republic and in Northern Ireland. There are 36 affiliated unions in Northern Ireland representing over 215,000 members. Our affiliates regularly represent workers suffering discrimination and/or harassment, work with employers in raising awareness of equality issues in the workplace and in developing policies and practices to prevent discrimination occurring. NICICTU has a long history of campaigning for equal rights and fighting discrimination both in the workplace and in wider society.

Congress supports an equality and human rights-based approach to the provision of social security which demonstrates an understanding of and focus on the needs and choices of all in receipt of benefits.

We understand that the Welfare Reform Bill will be referred to the Committee for its consideration stage from 10<sup>th</sup> October until 27<sup>th</sup> November, where scrutiny will take place two and a half days a week. Standing Orders allow 30 days for a Committee to consider a Bill, however, extensions can be sought.

We are seeking confirmation from the Committee that the commitment given to Congress for full line by line scrutiny will be honoured.

We are seeking reassurance the committee will request an extension to 90 days to allow for a full debate to occur on the practical consequences of any proposals within the Bill and to discuss potential options to mitigate impacts. It is vital that a real appraisal of the effect of these proposals locally is achieved. The welfare reform changes are likely to last a generation and any attempt to hasten the timetable will prove counter-productive.

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Congress believes it is appropriate to tailor a Northern Ireland approach to issues presented by the Welfare Reform Bill. Given the wide range of reforms, the implementation of the changes will impact upon a significant percentage of the working age population in Northern Ireland. Different arrangements could be made and we argue that, in previous circumstances, different arrangements have been made that reflect the very different challenges that face society in Northern Ireland.

Furthermore, despite the legislation being passed in Great Britain, there remains a high level of uncertainty around the finer detail of Universal Credit. It is clear from the regulations that a number of important issues have yet to be decided, for example the level of the assumed minimum income floor which will be set of the self employed and the question of whether to pay monthly or fortnightly.

The challenge posed by these proposed reforms provides the NI Assembly with a unique opportunity to demonstrate the positive value of a devolved government and to impact on the formation of social security policy here for the next generation. We hope that this opportunity is seized and maximized and we look forward to working with the Committee on this important task.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

Pauline Buchanan  
Equality and Social Affairs Officer  
Irish Congress of Trade Unions