

8 October 2012

Mr Alex Maskey MLA  
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Dear Minister

**RE: Welfare Reform Act & Victims/Survivors of the NI Troubles**

I very much welcomed your contribution at the NICVA Conference on Welfare Reform earlier this year, and Sinn Fein's continued concern about the effects of Welfare Reform. As the Welfare Advice Worker for WAVE Trauma Centre, a cross community charity which helps and supports victims/survivors of the 'NI Troubles,' I am particularly concerned about the impact of the Welfare Reform Act on many of our members. To date I have seen for myself the stress and anxiety caused among our membership due to Incapacity Benefit Migration to ESA. I am aware that the Welfare Reform Bill is coming before the NI Assembly soon so I felt compelled to write to you and raise some issues on behalf of members of WAVE.

Many of those injured in the NI conflict lost limbs and sustained serious injuries as a result of bomb explosions or random shootings. Many sustained not only physical injury, but also psychological trauma, depression and anxiety as a result of the violent loss of loved ones or physical injury. Most of our clients claim disability and/or means tested benefits. Unfortunately due to sustained anti-claimant media campaigns many people and some politicians are not aware just how severe Welfare Reform will be on those who have serious ill health and disability. This is because every aspect of welfare support is changing within a relatively short period of time during one of the worst recessions in recent decades.

Statements such as "**those who really need the help will continue to get support,**" will and already has proved untrue for many and even GP's know that this is the case (see below). This is why the issue of welfare reform is so important. A policy of "**Work Pays**" and "**getting people back to work**" will only be a reality if (1) people really are fit for work, (2) if there is work and a need of labour particularly in areas of high deprivation, and (3) if potential employees are attractive to employers. In regard to the first point, thousands of individuals are disallowed benefit under the new ESA

system causing stress and anxiety to genuinely sick and disabled people and as many as 40% are reported to be winning their case on appeal. The cost to the taxpayer of the tribunal system alone is £50m in the UK, around a half of the £100m a year being spent on reassessment. On the second point, new findings released on 8<sup>th</sup> May 2012 by the Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR) show that unemployment is set to continue rising in Northern Ireland:

*“The regions expected to be worst affected by rising unemployment are those most dependent upon the public sector for employment and so are most exposed to government cutbacks. These include Northern Ireland, Wales, the North East of England and Scotland.....With almost three in ten workers employed by the public sector in Northern Ireland, the increase in unemployment is expected to be particularly pronounced. The unemployment rate is projected to rise from 8.8% in 2012 to 10.7% by 2016, weighing down heavily on consumer spending growth in the country.*”

This prediction brings us to the third point. A saturated labor market means that employers can pick and choose their workers. Those recently made redundant with up to date skills and good health will be far more attractive than those with long term disabilities or fluctuating health problems, who have been out of the labor force for many years. Most of those injured in the conflict are now in their 50's and early 60's and statistically this age group has little or no academic qualifications. They will also be competing for jobs with many young lone parents who will also have to search for work due to welfare reform and unemployed graduates. Who from the above list will be least attractive to potential employers? How will the long term sick in their 50's and 60's make “work pay” while their benefits are removed? This is exactly why the government's Welfare Reform Act is problematic – they place everyone on an equal playing field when the reality is they are not “equal.”

A prime example of this is contained in the current more stringent test for Employment Support Allowance introduced last year. A registered blind person will not automatically pass the test for ESA – yet do they have equal chances of getting a job compared with able bodied workers? It is therefore of no surprise that in March 2012, the BMA reported that GP's at their Annual Scottish Conference unanimously voted to end the Work Capacity Assessment, calling for *“a more vigorous and safe system that does not cause avoidable harm to some of the weakest and most vulnerable in society.”* At the British Medical Association's Local Medical Committee Conference 2012 held in Liverpool, **GPs voted unanimously for the work capability assessment to end ‘with immediate effect.’** Dr Dean Marshall,

Chairman of the British Medical Association's Scottish General Practitioners Committee, said, *“Evidence appears to suggest that people with serious health conditions are sometimes being declared fit for work.”*

Another serious concern of welfare reform is the assumption that because someone has an aid, white stick; wheelchair, prosthesis etc. to do things they should be treated like everyone else, and this policy is reflected in the new criteria for PIP and ESA. But this is a distortion of what disability policy in our society should be about. The disabled and long-term sick should be supported for their efforts to be independent not penalized as they struggle on a day to day basis to do things able bodied people take for granted.

I have outlined many important points regarding the Welfare Reform Act in the attached document, and as the policy may affect thousands of your constituents I trust that you will consider them. Although we welcome encouragement to those who can work to do so, in reality the actual details of welfare reform could have devastating effects on many disabled people and those who are chronically sick across our province. It is all the more hard hitting as it will affect not only one benefit but practically all benefits over a short period of time including housing costs. This means claimants will feel the financial impact not just once or twice but many times over.

We feel that politicians at the NI Assembly have a moral duty to ensure that those who bore the brunt of suffering over 40 years of violence in Northern Ireland are taken care of and we need to ensure that they are not forgotten nor their burden made more acute by poverty and the stress of frequent medical examinations and stress and uncertainty about their benefits. Northern Ireland has been applauded across the world for the peace process and on-going progress in our political situation. It is imperative that we also demonstrate our care and real support for those who have paid the highest price for our new society. We need to take a realistic view of the lives of disabled and chronically sick individuals, the very people who did not benefit from the years of prosperity since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. Northern Ireland Politicians must have the courage and creative thinking to ensure that those who do need help and assistance due to their disabilities will receive it.

We welcome your assurances that the Welfare Reform Bill will receive full scrutiny from the NI Assembly.

Yours sincerely

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