
Written Ministerial Statements

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Social Development

Proposals for Reform of Disability Living Allowance

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The Minister for Social Development

(Mr Attwood): You will recall that on 23 November 2010 I made a statement to the Assembly about the welfare reforms being proposed by the Westminster Government. At that time, the specific proposals for Disability Living Allowance were not available.

I wish to advise Members that a consultation document has since been presented by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on Disability Living Allowance reform (6 December 2010). The document sets out the Westminster Government's argument that Disability Living Allowance is, as they see it, not fit for purpose and goes on to propose a new benefit, Personal Independence Payment, to contribute to the extra costs of overcoming the barriers faced by people with a disability to leading full and active lives. The London government considers that the Personal Independence Payment will be underpinned by a new objective assessment which it is claimed will help identify those who face the greatest need in a more consistent and transparent manner.

The consultation document asks for views to inform the policy for reforming Disability Living Allowance and introducing a new objective assessment.

Members will be aware that we have the highest percentage of Disability Living Allowance claimants per head of population compared to England, Scotland and Wales. I am very concerned at how these proposals could impact not only on individuals but on wider communities here.

My concern has recently been confirmed in recent days by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, when their research, commissioned by the Law Centre, and the Economic and Social Research Council, concluded that people with low incomes in Northern Ireland will be disproportionately affected by the welfare and tax reforms proposed in the June 2010 Budget, due to the higher reliance on DLA and higher number of families with children.

To ensure that people here have the opportunity to make their views known on the proposals, I have issued the consultation document in Northern Ireland with a covering letter setting out my concerns. I urge everyone with an interest in this very important issue and MLAs to take this opportunity to make their views known.

A copy of the consultation document is available at www.dsdni.gov.uk/consultations.htm. Hard copies will be available from the Library.

The response of politicians, the people and community of Northern Ireland is crucial in this consultation. I believe in reform, in simplifying the benefit system but I oppose benefit cuts masquerading as reform, and I am gravely concerned that the welfare profile in Northern Ireland and the particular circumstances are not acknowledged or fully understood by parts of the London administration. DLA is a central and necessary element in welfare practice in Northern Ireland. I would urge all to respond.