

Written Ministerial Statement

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Social Development

Welfare Reforms – Incapacity Benefit Reassessment

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The Minister for Social Development

(Mr Attwood): Assembly colleagues will be aware of my unease over the the range, nature and pace of Welfare Reform initiatives put forward by the Coalition Government. Given Northern Ireland's unique political and social history and our current economic situation, I have met with Department for Work and Pensions Ministers on a number of occasions and strongly expressed my concern that time, flexibility, proper phasing and acknowledgement of our conditions is vital in the implementation of such changes in order to protect the most vulnerable in our society here.

The most immediate of these Welfare Reforms is Incapacity Benefit Reassessment and the Department for Work and Pensions has been trialling their processes in Aberdeen and Burnley since October 2010. I note that Minister Grayling has indicated in a written statement to the House of Commons today that as the London Government sees it the trials have proved successful and that the Department for Work and Pensions will build on the success of the trials and begin building up to full reassessment volumes from May 2011. However, the Minister, at the same time intends to extend the trial to all of Britain, limit the number reassessed up to April 2011 and "ramp up" the numbers thereafter.

In my meeting with Lord Freud, I made it clear that, giving the character of conditions in Northern Ireland I would be phasing in reassessment. This already meant that fewer customers are being reassessed in the early

stages to allow the delivery model to be fully tested in Northern Ireland and adjustments made accordingly. I have also tasked my officials with building in additional support mechanisms and safeguards, particularly for those customers who may lose their previous benefit entitlement, to ensure, as far as possible, all receive their welfare entitlements. In noting the announcement in London, it appears that their approach now parallels the one I had already adopted and argued for.

I remain committed to protecting the interests of the most vulnerable people here and this tailored approach to implementation reflects my concerns about its potential impact on customers in Northern Ireland. It does not undo, in my view, the fundamental error in much of the London approach, but a phased approach nonetheless helps.

I will continue to press Coalition Ministers that Northern Ireland requires flexibility in the design and delivery of the proposed Welfare Reform agenda.