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The impact of welfare reform on disabled people

The introduction of welfare reform has imposed real hardship on many disabled people across the UK. The cap on household benefits, changes being introduced by the new Personal Independence Payment, and the closure of the Independent Living Fund have driven many to increased dependency on relatives and into debt and put some under unbearable stress as they struggle to maintain a minimum level of income.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities establishes rights for disabled people – among them rights to independent living, to work and employment and to social protection. In October 2016, the United Nations Committee which deals with that Convention issued an inquiry report which states clearly that the enjoyment of these rights by disabled people has been disproportionately affected by the welfare reforms and that their impact amounted to ‘grave or systematic violations of [their] rights.’

The Committee’s enquiry revealed that the assessments of disabled people’s suitability for work focused too much on a functional evaluation of their skills and abilities and put aside their personal circumstances and needs. The UN Committee made recommendations in their concluding observations on the UK’s first State Party Report in August 2017, but there has been no move to implement them. Indeed, the UK Government response indicated that they would not be taking any action on the relevant findings of the inquiry report or the concluding observations. That is very troubling for everyone concerned by the disadvantage and hardship which the welfare changes are causing to an already vulnerable and hard-pressed section of our community.

Early indications are that the roll-out of the changes in Northern Ireland may have a very considerable impact. The process of reassessing people receiving Disability Living Allowance (DLA) was commenced here in June 2017 and it is reported that 36% of claimants had been disallowed, that is a higher rate of disallowance than that in Great Britain, which is 27%. In Northern Ireland arrangements had been made by the Executive to

mitigate the financial impact on anyone who, following assessment, had lost out as a result of the transfer from Disability Living Allowance to PIP. That mitigation measure applies to each individual for just one year from the date of their assessment.

As the welfare changes are now being rolled out across Northern Ireland, many disabled people are facing a deadline at which they will either lose their entitlement altogether or have it greatly decreased.

The Equality Commission made submissions about all these issues to the UN Committee and, in its report, the Committee made a specific recommendation for Northern Ireland, that the Government should extend the period of operation for the support packages to mitigate the negative impacts of welfare reform. The Commission urges the Government to publish full details of how they intend to mitigate the impacts which would affect disabled people in Northern Ireland after the expiry of the time-limited programme.

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