

Introduction

The British Association of Social Workers Northern Ireland (BASW NI) is part of BASW, the largest professional body for social workers in the UK. BASW has 21,000 members employed in frontline, management, academic and research positions in all care settings.

In NI there are over 6,000 registered social workers. This comprises staff working in Health and Social Care (HSC), in education and training, the criminal and youth justice sectors and the voluntary sector, as well as a growing number of independent practitioners.

Welfare reform—the impact on children and families

The welfare reform mitigation package has provided vital protection to thousands of households since 2016. *New Decade, New Approach* commits the NI Executive to extend the package beyond March this year. The Communities Minister's announcement to introduce legislation to extend mitigation of the Social Sector Size Criteria marks a vital first step in this process.

However, extending the existing welfare reform mitigations alone will not be enough to prevent a growth in poverty. The package must be strengthened to address the impacts associated with the roll out of Universal Credit, in particular, the two-child limit.

As a result of the two-child limit, if a family with three or more children claims Universal Credit, and any of the children were born following 6 April 2017, the family will be financially disadvantaged by £2,780 per year per child for their third child, and any additional children.

The Department of Communities' forthcoming Anti-poverty Strategy will be a vital mechanism for addressing the problem of poverty in our society. However, unless the root causes of poverty are tackled, attending to the impacts will potentially be costly and ineffective.

Limiting Universal Credit to the first two children in a family will result in 300,000 more children across the UK being in poverty by the time the benefit is fully rolled out in 2023-2024. BASW NI estimates 9,000 of these children will be in NI.

The impact of the two-child limit is likely to be felt most keenly in NI given the region has the largest average household size in the UK.

An increase in poverty will exacerbate the social problems which raise demand for social work services. For example, **children living in the most deprived areas in Northern Ireland are six times more likely to be placed on the Child Protection Register and are four times more likely to become looked after by social services than those in the least deprived areas.** Impacts will also be felt by the health service, education system and youth and criminal justice sectors.

Action required

The Minister for Communities should act on the recommendation made in September 2019 by the Westminster NI Affairs Committee and Work and Pensions Committee—to the UK Government in the absence of an NI Executive—to **halt implementation of the Universal Credit two-child limit in NI and reimburse any families affected.**

Welfare reform—the impact on social workers

The two-child limit has highlighted serious difficulties for the social work profession arising from section 5 of the Criminal Law Act (Northern Ireland) 1967.

There are several exceptions to the limit, including for children conceived as a result of a non-consensual sexual act—the ‘rape clause’. If a woman makes an application on this basis, her claim must be verified by an approved third party (a social worker, healthcare professional or specialist support worker from an approved organisation). Not only is this requirement unethical, it is degrading for the woman involved. It risks further traumatising the woman, stigmatising the child and increases the chance of the woman experiencing additional violence and further mental distress.

Legal advice obtained by BASW NI indicates that **a social worker in NI verifying a Universal Credit application made under the “rape clause” would be required, in accordance with section 5, to report the rape to the police, even if this contravenes the wishes of the service user.** A similar requirement to report does not exist in Great Britain.

Action required

In line with the recommendation made in September 2019 by the Westminster NI Affairs Committee and Work and Pensions Committee, **the Minister for Communities and the Minister for Justice should work in partnership to remove the legal risk to social workers posed by the Universal Credit two-child limit ‘rape clause’ exemption by amending section 5 of the Criminal Law Act (Northern Ireland) 1967.**