



Subject:	Planning for the impact of Welfare Changes in Belfast
Date:	23 September 2016
Reporting Officer:	Suzanne Wylie, Chief Executive
Contact Officer:	Sharon McNicholl, Strategic Policy and Resources manager

Is this report restricted?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Is the decision eligible for Call-in?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>

1.0	Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues
1.1	Purpose of Report: To highlight to Members the work currently under way by the Department for Communities, Belfast City Council and other organisations to prepare for the changes to the Welfare system in Northern Ireland.
1.2	Summary of main issues: The most significant changes to the Welfare system in Northern Ireland in seventy years commenced in May 2016 in a process that will continue over the coming months including the introduction of Universal Credit in 2017.
1.3	Given the high levels of benefit uptake in Belfast (almost 29% of our working age population are in receipt of some form of benefit ¹) these changes are likely to have a significant effect in the city. Council officers have been engaging with the Department for Communities to consider mitigating these plans including enhancing the delivery of our advice services; the

¹ Source: Department for Communities, 2015

1.4	<p>city wide tribunal services; and examining the implications on the concessionary rates for Council services that are currently available to those in receipt of 'passported' benefits.</p> <p>The role of Members is likely to prove particularly important over the coming months in terms of signposting residents to information and advice and in helping to identify unforeseen emerging problems during the roll-out of welfare reform changes.</p>
2.0	<p>Recommendations</p>
2.1	<p>The Committee is asked to;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Note the contents of the attached leaflet 'Elected Representatives Guide to Welfare Changes' prepared by NILGA and the initiatives that are currently under way across the Council.
3.0	<p>Main report</p>
3.1	<p><u>Key Issues</u></p> <p>The Welfare Reform Act is introducing a range of changes to the benefits system in Northern Ireland. This process has already begun with a number of changes being introduced this year. Over the coming months many current benefits are going to be abolished and replaced by a new benefits system. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Since May there has been a cap on the total amount of benefit a person can receive. This may have a particular impact on those people receiving Housing Benefit and could mean they will get less money towards rent. - From 2017 Universal Credit will gradually replace most other means-tested benefits such as income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, income-related Employment and Support Allowance, tax credits and Housing Benefit. - Personal Independence Payment (PIP) will gradually replace Disability Living Allowance (DLA) for people of working age with daily care needs or difficulty getting about. <p>3.2 In addressing the challenges, the NI Executive has allocated £501 million over the next four years to 'top-up' the UK welfare arrangements with a review planned for 2018-19.</p> <p>The recent 'Evason' report produced by the Welfare Reform Mitigations working group</p>

3.3	<p>recommended several strands of mitigation that the Executive should seek to adopt to help protect the most vulnerable people in Northern Ireland.</p>
3.4	<p>The Department for Communities is putting in place measures in support of these recommendations. Local councils have an important role to play in supporting the implementation of the mitigation measures. Council officers have been engaging with DfC officials on a number of strands including additional support being put in place for advice services within the city.</p>
3.5	<p>On 13 September, a cross party deputation of elected Members met with the Minister for Communities, Paul Givan MLA to commend the early roll-out of the mitigation measures including the following key programmes identified by the Department.</p> <p><i>(i) 'Welfare Reform Readiness programme'</i> – This programme will provide additional in-year funding of approximately £600,000 to provide support to front line advice organisations currently funded through local councils' Community Support Advice grant. The programme will ensure that advice organisations are prepared to assist customers through the implementation of Welfare Reform.</p> <p><i>(ii) The Welfare Reform Training programme</i> has funding of approximately £210,000 to enable front line advice organisations to complete immediate training requirements related to Welfare Reform. Provision is being made for training to be targeted at a number of groupings including elected Members. Funding for both programmes will be distributed through the existing Council's Community Support Programme mechanism.</p>
3.6	<p>Regional Independent Advice – it is understood that DfC intend to procure and establish a centralised independent advice contact centre for Northern Ireland.</p>
3.7	<p>Concessions for services: Currently, those in receipt of welfare benefit such as Housing Benefit or Income Support may qualify, or have a 'passport', for discounts on certain charges or fees for services provided by Council or benefits in kind. Officials from the Department for Communities have written to all councils asking for details of such passported concessions which include, for example, leisure centre fees, dog licences etc. Officers from the Council's Finance and Resources Department are currently preparing a list for the Department of such services and are also engaging with GLL on fees associated with leisure provision. A further report will be brought back to Committee in due course outlining the findings of this audit.</p> <p>Belfast Agenda: Members will be aware of the emphasis that the emerging agenda places</p>

<p>3.8</p> <p>3.9</p> <p>3.10</p> <p>3.11</p>	<p>on the concept of ‘inclusive growth’ – and the commitment by the Council to ensuring that individuals and communities are in a position to benefit from future economic growth. Those in receipt of benefits often represent those least likely to benefit from such growth. Through our planned employability and skills strategy and labour initiatives, the council will seek to put in place a coherent inclusive growth programme designed to support pathways to employment.</p> <p>Going forward officers will continue to engage with the Department to determine opportunities for maximising mitigations. The role of Members and front line officers are likely to prove particularly important in this regard in terms of signposting to information and advice. And in helping to identify unforeseen emerging problems during the roll-out of changes.</p> <p><u>Financial & Resource Implications</u></p> <p>Members note the proposed additional in-year allocation to the existing Community Support programme for advice services planned by the Department of Communities (DfC). The percentage allocation to Belfast is still to be confirmed by DfC.</p> <p><u>Equality & Good Relations Implications</u></p> <p>Equality and good relations implications, in relation to this policy, are still under consideration. Further updates will be sent to the Equality and Diversity Officer in due course.</p>
<p>4.0</p>	<p>Appendices – Documents Attached</p>
<p>4.1</p>	<p>Appendix 1 - ‘Elected Representatives Guide to Welfare Changes’ NILGA leaflet</p>