



Subject:	Cross Party Deputation Meeting with Tracy Meharg, Permanent Secretary, Department for Communities
Date:	22 February 2019
Reporting Officer:	Nigel Grimshaw, Strategic Director City and Neighbourhood Services Department
Contact Officer:	Ryan Black, Neighbourhood Services Manager

Restricted Reports	
Is this report restricted?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
If Yes, when will the report become unrestricted?	
After Committee Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
After Council Decision	<input type="checkbox"/>
Some time in the future	<input type="checkbox"/>
Never	<input type="checkbox"/>

Call-in	
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	The purpose of this report is to provide members with an update of the cross-party deputation meeting with Tracy Meharg, Permanent Secretary, Department for Communities, as a result of the notices of motions.
1.2	The Council's deputation met with Ms. Meharg and senior members of her team on Wednesday 6 February to discuss issues relating to the Personal Independence Payments (PIP) and Welfare Reform.
1.3	Following discussions Ms. Meharg offered to;

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Produce a summary information sheet outlining the key statistics relating to PIP and Universal Credit for Council • Facilitate a walk-through of the PIP assessment process for members by CAPITA.
2.0	Recommendations
2.1	<p>The Committee is asked to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Note the contents of this report and agree to accept DfC's invitation for CAPITA to provide Members with 'a walk-through' workshop of the Personal Independence Payment assessment process.
3.0	Main report
3.1	<p><u>Key Issues</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Members will recall that at Council's meeting in July 2018 a Notice of Motion was proposed by Cllr. McReynolds in relation to Personal Independence Payments, seeking a response to the issues raised from the Minister for Work and Pensions; • Council received a response from the Minister suggesting that all concerns should be directed to the Department for Communities (DfC) which has responsibility for benefits in Northern Ireland; • A further Notice was proposed by Cllr Collins at November's Council on Welfare Reform that agreed the Permanent Secretary and senior officials within the Department for Communities be invited to meet at the earliest opportunity with an All-Party delegation from the Council to discuss issues associated with Welfare Reform; • Ms. Meharg took up position as the Permanent Secretary for DfC in December 2018; • The council deputation met with Ms. Meharg and team on Wednesday 6 February 2019.
3.2	<p>In Attendance:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Council deputation included: Alderman Sonya Copeland, Alderman Frank McCoubrey, Councillor Charlene O'Hara and Councillor Peter McReynolds. The deputation was accompanied by Mr. Ryan Black, Neighbourhood Services Manager and Brian Kelly, Community Services Manager. - DfC represented: Ms Tracy Meharg, Permanent Secretary, Anne McCleary and Mickey Kelly.
3.3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summary of Issues Raised and Responses <ol style="list-style-type: none"> i. Welfare Reform Mitigation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Measures put in place to mitigate the impact of welfare reform will end on the 31 March 2020. This date is enshrined in Law thus will require an Act to progress any further measures beyond this date.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A review of the current Welfare Reform Mitigations will be conducted in the Spring, with recommendations of best practice being put forward for consideration.
3.4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ii. Claiming Universal Credit <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - DfC Officials outlined a range of ‘Access Channels’ through which people can claim Universal Credit. They include: Digital zones in Benefits Offices, IT access in Libraries, paper base, telephone and outreach services such as home visits. Claimants can be provided with additional support to help meet identified needs including; disability, literacy/numeracy or language.
3.5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> iii. Support for Advice Services <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Permanent Secretary stressed the need for advice services and the Department’s ongoing commitment to funding the sector via the Community Support Programme. - Ms. Meharg also mentioned that the DfC’s initiative ‘Make the Call’, a service which aims to provide claimants with information on all their benefit entitlements has achieved £37 million in benefit maximization.
3.6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> iv. Walter Rader Report, PIP Independent Review of the Assessment Process <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The report makes 14 recommendations in relation to the PIP assessment process of which 10 have been accepted by DfC.
3.7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> v. Protecting People Moving From Legacy Benefits <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Welfare Reform mitigations are aligned with the implementation of the new benefit system. The Department of Work & Pensions have delayed the implementation of the new system and are currently conducting a pilot with 10,000 people to ascertain the impact of implementing the system. - Once the pilot is concluded and report published DfC will be in a better position to identify the package of measures which could be introduced to support people moving to the new systems.
3.8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> vi. Rent Arrears <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ms. Meharg advised that she met with the NIHE to discuss this matter. One of the key issues identified is the lack of communication about and understanding of

<p>3.9</p>	<p>the process; with some housing benefits claimants receiving the benefit to pay their rent and others where the benefit is paid directly to the housing provider. There is some confusion about the process which will be rectified but requires further consideration.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actions <p>Following discussions Ms. Meharg offered to;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Produce a summary information sheet outlining the key statistics relating to PIP and Universal Credit for Council - Facilitate a walk-through of the PIP assessment process for members. This will be conducted by CAPITA.
<p>3.10</p>	<p><u>Financial & Resource Implications</u> There are no financial nor resources implications associated with this report</p>
<p>3.11</p>	<p><u>Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment</u> There are none associated with this report.</p>
<p>4.0</p>	<p>Appendices – Documents Attached</p>
	<p>None</p>