



Response to

SSAC consultation:

Passported Benefits under Universal Credit

September 2011

Introduction

UNISON is the leading trade union in Northern Ireland and the largest trade union in the UK with over 1.3 million members. Our membership includes public service workers in health and social care, the education and higher education services; workers in local government, youth justice; workers in private sector service suppliers; and workers in the community and voluntary sectors. 84% of our membership in NI are women.

UNISON believes that removing or restricting access to passported benefits will be disastrous for many vulnerable individuals and families who are already bearing the brunt of cuts to the welfare budget.

The concerted attack by the Coalition government on the welfare state and public services are hitting the poorest and most disadvantaged the hardest. The impact of these cuts is being felt nowhere more severe than in NI which remains the most unequal society in the UK.

The gap between rich and poor continues to widen. We have the lowest average wages in the UK and the highest proportion of our population classed as economically inactive. Our rates of disability and limiting long term illness continue to exceed all other regions. Lack of affordable childcare and lack of qualifications remain key barriers to prevent access to employment for women, and lone parents especially. Many of the jobs that are available are part-time and poor quality.

The consequence for NI is a profoundly unequal society where 21% live in persistent poverty – double the rate in GB. Inequality has had a particular impact on children from poor families who experience poorer health, educational and other key outcomes as well as increasing social and economic inequality and exclusion.

An interim report from the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister Committee's *Inquiry into child poverty in Northern Ireland* noted that 100,000 children were living in relative poverty in Northern Ireland and that 44,000 children were living in severe child poverty – a situation the Committee regarded as 'unacceptable in the 21st century'.

Key issues

- Universal credit entitlement should give access to all passported benefits.
- The crucial issues in designing the new system must be enhancing levels of entitlement; improving the experience of claimants; and maximising take up.
- With the introduction of Universal Credit, passported benefits should not be subjected to additional cuts and the current criteria for access to them should not be restricted or removed.
- Passported benefits such as free school meals are key to tackling educational, health and other socio-economic inequalities in society. Their definition should be inclusive to include any additional support which a claimant may currently receive which might be at risk as a result of the introduction of Universal Credit. The list should include supports such as access to free school meals, the Social Fund, housing costs, assistance with childcare costs, statutory and private sector fuel poverty schemes, and public transport subsidies.
- The consultation document ignores disability as a root cause of poverty and thus subsequent discussion on the reform of the benefits systems is fatally flawed.
- There is a real risk that the proposals will lead to a lack of clarity about when entitlements are withdrawn. The system must be accessible transparent and understandable. For example, people must understand that work incentives are being protected so they don't feel financial pressure to give up work. The vital thing from the claimant's perspective is that the system is accessible and information is available at the right time.
- Safeguards must be put in place to ensure access to passported benefits for people whose universal credit entitlement is yet to be decided or is under appeal.

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