



All Party Parliamentary Group on M.E.

Chair: Dr Des Turner MP
Vice-Chairs: Andrew Stunell MP
Tony Wright MP
Secretary: Countess of Mar
Treasurer: David Amess MP

Welfare Reform Bill update 2009

Background

In July 2008 the Government produced a consultation paper *No one written off: reforming welfare to reward responsibility*, which outlined future welfare reform.

Following the consultation period a white paper, - *Raising expectations and increasing support*, was produced setting out the Government's proposals for the continuing reform of the welfare state.

Those proposals which require primary legislation to implement are contained within the Welfare Reform Bill.

Summary of the Welfare Reform Bill

The Bill consists of five Parts:

- Part 1 - Social security
- Part 2 - Disabled people: right to control provision of services
- Part 3 - Child maintenance
- Part 4 - Birth Registration
- Part 5 - Miscellaneous and supplementary

Aspects of the Bill of particular interest to people with M.E. included:

Part 1 - Social security

Abolition of income support - The Bill sets out the framework necessary for the future abolition of income support, and the movement of claimants of that benefit to jobseeker's allowance with differing degrees of conditionality, or to employment and support allowance.

Work for your benefit schemes - Mandatory schemes Piloted for long-term jobseekers and some jobseekers who are likely to benefit from the scheme at an earlier stage. The scheme aims to give jobseekers the opportunity to develop their work skills through undertaking full time work-experience.

Employment and support allowance (ESA) claimants - Provision is made in the Bill to direct and to undertake a specific work-related activity in certain circumstances. This

extends the provision in section 13 of the Welfare Reform Act 2007 which requires ESA claimants (with the exception of those in the support group) to undertake a work-related activity of their choice.

Contribution conditions for contributory jobseeker's allowance and employment and support allowance - These have been amended so that in order to qualify, new claimants will normally need to have paid national insurance contributions for at least 26 weeks in one of the last two tax years prior to the claim.

Part 2 - Disabled people: right to control provision of services

Part 2 confers regulation-making powers that can be used to give adult disabled people greater choice and control over the way in which relevant services (defined in clause 29) are provided by relevant authorities (defined in clause 30). The Government intends that regulations should initially make pilot schemes having temporary effect, so Part 2 includes provisions allowing this. It also introduces a statutory requirement to consult over specified draft regulations.

Part 5 - Miscellaneous and supplementary

This Part contains clauses dealing with consequential amendments, repeals and revocations of other legislation, financial provisions, the extent of the Bill, commencement of provisions of the Bill, and the short title.

As the new procedures have been introduced, people with M.E. have reported considerable problems with the application process for Employment Support Allowance, including:

- Administrative delays in excess of guideline time scales
- Misinformation given by staff on the Department for Work & Pensions claim line.
- Documentation is unclear, too lengthy, and the questions are not relevant to people with M.E. The assessment process does not take into account the practical/physical difficulties that many people with M.E. face.
- Disregard of information provided by GPs
- Many people with M.E. are placed in the Work Related Activity Group where they are expected to take part in work focused interviews and are given support to help them prepare for suitable work, rather than the support group. Entry to the support group would protect people from ongoing interviews and this would allow people with M.E. to concentrate on their health rather than having to use up valuable energy attending interviews.