

*These notes refer to the Welfare Reform Act (Northern Ireland)
2010 (c.13) which received Royal Assent on 13 August 2010*

Welfare Reform Act (Northern Ireland) 2010

EXPLANATORY NOTES

BACKGROUND AND POLICY OBJECTIVES

Part 1 - Social security

Supporting parents with younger children into employment-‘Progression to work’

9. Since 30 April 2001 all lone parents in Northern Ireland, on income support have been required to participate in Work-Focused Interviews (WFI) as part of their claim. The lone parent WFI regime has been expanded over time and since April 2008 has required all lone parents to undergo regular interviews, generally every six months.
10. The aim is to encourage more lone parents to take up sustainable work and ensure that all lone parents are aware of the help and support available to them. Since October 2005 lone parents have been required to agree a mandatory action plan with their Personal Adviser as a condition of completing their initial WFI, helping lone parents and their advisers concentrate on their longer-term goals and set the steps they can take or are taking to prepare for work.
11. Lone parents who wish to take up the offer of greater support to move towards employment can volunteer for the Department for Employment and Learning’s Steps to Work programme. This programme aims to help and encourage lone parents to improve their job readiness and employment opportunities and gain independence through working. This is achieved through providing access to various elements of assistance and provision made available through a Personal Adviser.
12. Obligations to look for work have already started to increase for lone parents with older children. From 2 December 2008 lone parents with a youngest child over twelve will have their entitlement to income support removed if their entitlement was based solely on the grounds of being a lone parent. By 25 October 2010 this will extend to lone parents with a youngest child aged seven and over. Those who are able to work can claim jobseeker’s allowance instead, and those with a disability or health condition may claim employment and support allowance.

13. Partners of jobseeker's allowance claimants with children are required to take part in a compulsory WFI every six months, whilst partners of benefit claimants in receipt of income support, incapacity benefit or employment and support allowance are required to attend one WFI six months into their partner's claim. As is the case with lone parents, a partner who wishes to volunteer for extra support following a WFI is able to take up the Steps to Work programme. To support more partners into employment, there are powers in this Act which may be applied to require more activity from partners in return for benefits. The support will be in line with the long-term vision for personalised conditionality proposed by Professor Paul Gregg in his independent report *Realising potential: A vision for personalised conditionality and support*.
14. The powers in the Act will give effect to Professor Gregg's recommendation that in the long-term parents with younger children should generally be part of a 'Progression to Work' group, for whom an immediate return to work is not appropriate, but is a genuine possibility with time, encouragement and support.
15. The intention is to establish a personalised conditionality regime which is tailored to the individual's circumstances, so that preparation for work becomes a natural progression rather than a sudden step up. The Act includes provision that will ensure lone parents and partners of benefit recipients in the Progression to Work group are required to undertake action planning and work-related activities. These actions and activities are broadly defined to ensure they are appropriate to the needs and circumstances of each individual. In instances where work-related activity is identified which will improve their employment prospects, individuals may be directed to carry this out.