

THE WELFARE REFORM ACT (NORTHERN IRELAND) 2010

EXPLANATORY NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. These Explanatory Notes relate to the Welfare Reform Act (Northern Ireland) 2010 which received Royal Assent on 13 August 2010. They have been prepared by the Department for Social Development in order to assist the reader in understanding the Act. They do not form part of the Act and have not been endorsed by the Assembly.
2. The notes need to be read in conjunction with the Act. They do not, and are not meant to be, a comprehensive description of the Act. So, where a section, or part of a section, or Schedule does not seem to require an explanation or comment, none is given.

BACKGROUND AND POLICY OBJECTIVES

3. The Act makes provision for Northern Ireland corresponding to provision contained in the Welfare Reform Act 2009 (c.24). It is part of the ongoing process of welfare reform and modernisation of the benefit system.
4. The Act consists of three Parts:
Part 1 - Social security
Part 2 - Child maintenance
Part 3 - Miscellaneous and supplementary
5. The following paragraphs summarise those Parts, and are followed by detailed explanations of the individual sections and Schedules.

Part 1 - Social security

Abolition of income support

6. The aim of much of this Part of the Act is to move towards greater flexibility and personalisation of benefit conditionality and to reduce the number of working age benefits by abolishing income support. The Act contains provisions and confers regulation-making powers which will be used to increase support for benefit claimants and, where relevant, their partners with a view to improving their employment prospects or preparing them for work in the future. The provisions also set out the framework necessary for the future abolition of income support, and the movement of claimants off that benefit to jobseeker's allowance with differing degrees of conditionality, or to employment and support allowance.

Work for your benefit

7. The Welfare Reform Act 2009 contained provision for ‘Work for your benefit schemes’ to be piloted in Great Britain for long-term jobseekers who have received increasingly intensive support from Jobcentre Plus and specialist back-to-work providers.
8. Although provisions for the schemes are included in the Northern Ireland Act, it will not be necessary to introduce the scheme in Northern Ireland until after any Great Britain pilots have been completed and evaluated and a decision has been taken to proceed to national roll-out.

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.

Work-related activity for claimants of employment and support allowance

16. Provision is made to direct an employment and support allowance claimant to undertake a specific work-related activity in certain circumstances. This extends the provision in section 13 of the Welfare Reform Act (Northern Ireland) 2007 which requires employment and support allowance claimants (with the exception of those in the support group, who include those who are most severely effected by the results of their condition or disability and those who are terminally ill) to undertake a work-related activity of their choice.

Contribution-based jobseeker's allowance and contributory employment and support allowance

17. In addition to making provision concerning conditionality, this Part also amends the contribution conditions for both contributory jobseeker's allowance and employment and support allowance. This will mean 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. There is also provision to remove an adult dependency increase from maternity allowance and from carer's allowance. A further provision extends the mobility component of disability living allowance to certain people with severe visual impairments.

Community care grants

18. This Part of the Act also includes measures to reform the Social Fund. The discretionary Social Fund is a cash-limited system of one-off payments, mainly to people receiving pension credit, income support, income-related employment and support allowance or income-based jobseeker's allowance - although crisis loans are available to anyone, whether on benefit or not, who are without resources to meet their immediate, urgent needs.
19. Under the existing law, successful applicants for community care grants may be provided with cash to obtain goods or services that the award covers. At the discretion of the appropriate officer, a payment may be made to a third party to provide goods or services. The reforms enable the Department to require that, where the goods or services are covered by arrangements the Department has made with a supplier, the

award made must relate to specified goods or services and the payment would be made to the supplier.

20. Every year thousands of people make a social fund application because they are without funds but are awaiting the award or payment of benefit. This Part includes a provision which extends the existing provisions for making and recovering a payment of benefit on account. This will replace the need for people to apply for social fund crisis loans on the grounds that their health or safety is at risk.

Benefit fraud

21. Part 1 also includes amendments to the current provisions dealing with the consequences of benefit fraud. The amendments allow for the loss of benefit following one or more convictions, penalty or caution for benefit fraud.

Sanctions

22. Provision is made to apply a one or two week benefit sanction to jobseeker's allowance claimants who, without good cause, fail to attend mandatory appointments in connection with their claim. A sanction will also be introduced for jobseeker's allowance customers who commit acts of violence or threatening behaviour against staff in Jobs and Benefits Offices and Social Security Offices or contracted staff in the course of a claim for jobseeker's allowance. The sanction will only apply following a conviction or caution.

Miscellaneous provisions

23. This Part of the Act also contains several miscellaneous provisions. It includes provision for the sharing of social security information and functions, for example, to support contracting out arrangements. There is also provision for persons under pensionable age to take part in Work-Focused Interviews.

Part 2 - Child maintenance

24. This Part of the Act includes amendments to the current statutory provisions relating to information offences.

Part 3 - Miscellaneous and supplementary

25. This Part contains sections dealing with consequential amendments, repeals and revocations of other legislation, financial provisions, commencement of provisions of the Act, and the short title.

CONSULTATION

26. In July 2008 the consultation *No one written off: reforming welfare to reward responsibility* (Cm 7363) was published setting out proposals for welfare reform. At the end of the consultation period, and following the publication of an independent review of conditionality in the benefits system by Professor Paul Gregg *Realising potential: A vision for personalised conditionality and support*, the White Paper *Raising expectations and increasing support: reforming welfare for the future* (Cm 7506) was published.
27. In Northern Ireland 100 copies of the consultation paper were issued to a broad spectrum of interested groups, individuals and various political parties as well as the Social Development Committee. Nine replies were received and most were broadly supportive of the thrust of the proposals – the aim to reduce unemployment levels and reduce and eliminate child poverty, the simplification of the benefits system and greater parental responsibility for maintenance payments for those living apart. The comments were considered in developing the provisions of the Welfare Reform Act 2009 and the Welfare Reform Act (Northern Ireland) 2010.

OVERVIEW

28. The Act contains 37 sections and 4 Schedules.

Part 1- Social security

“Work for your benefit” schemes etc.

Revised system of working-age benefits

Abolition of income support

Work-related activity for claimants of employment and support allowance

Contributory jobseeker’s allowance and employment and support allowance

Disability living allowance

Abolition of adult dependency increases

Community care grants

Payments on account

Benefit sanctions for offenders

Pilot schemes

Miscellaneous

Part 2 - Child maintenance

Part 3 - Miscellaneous and supplementary

COMMENTARY ON SECTIONS

Part 1: Social security

Section 1: Schemes for assisting persons to obtain employment: ‘Work for your benefit’ schemes etc.

This section inserts two new Articles, Article 19A (schemes for assisting persons to obtain employment: ‘work for your benefit’ schemes etc.) and Article 19B (Article 19A: supplemental) into the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 (S.I. 1995/2705 (N.I. 15)).

Article 19A(1), which is inserted by subsection (2), enables the Department for Social Development to make provision in regulations for, or in connection with, imposing a requirement on jobseeker’s allowance claimants to participate in schemes that are designed to assist them to obtain employment.

In particular, these regulations may impose a requirement on claimants to undertake work or work-related activity as part of a ‘work for your benefit’ scheme.

Implementation in Northern Ireland will be subject to the outcome of the evaluation of pilots in Great Britain and the availability of resources.

If introduced in Northern Ireland, Article 19A(1) will provide for regulations to set out the circumstances in which jobseeker’s allowance claimants are required to participate in schemes under this Article. The intention is to use these powers to require a proportion of long-term unemployed claimants who reach the end of the Department for Employment and Learning’s Steps to Work programme without finding work to take part in a ‘work for your benefit’ scheme. It is envisaged that personal advisers will be able to require other jobseeker’s allowance claimants to take part in the scheme if the adviser considers that participation would benefit the individual concerned.

As well as undertaking full-time work or work-related activity it is also envisaged that participants in ‘work for your benefit’ schemes will be provided with relevant employment support.

Article 19A(2) makes it clear that the regulations may require claimants to undertake work or a work-related activity during a prescribed period with a view to improving their chances of finding employment. It is envisaged that claimants may participate in ‘work for your benefit’ schemes for up to six months.

Article 19A(3) defines ‘work-related activity’ as activity which would make it more likely that the participant will obtain or remain in work or be able to do so.

Article 19A(4) precludes regulations made under paragraph (1) from applying to jobseeker's allowance claimants who are not required to satisfy the jobseeking conditions. These are the conditions set out in Article 3A(5)(a) to (c) of the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 (see section 4(3) - namely that a person is available for work, has a current jobseeker's agreement, and is actively seeking employment). The Department envisages the precluded groups will include lone parents with younger children who are moved to jobseeker's allowance after the abolition of income support (see section 9).

Article 19A(5) provides examples of provisions that may be included in regulations made under Article 19A(1).

Article 19A(5)(d) enables regulations to provide that benefit payments may be withheld or reduced where a claimant has failed to comply with the regulations and he or she does not show good cause for the failure within the period specified in regulations. If good cause is shown, benefit will continue to be paid. It is intended that good cause for not participating in a 'work for your benefit' scheme will be consistent with the good cause provisions currently contained in regulations relating to jobseeker's allowance. An example of good cause would be dealing with a domestic emergency.

Paragraph (6) provides that a jobseeker's allowance is not payable for a period specified in regulations where a claimant has failed to comply with regulations made under Article 19A. This paragraph also provides that the period specified in the regulations in respect of which a jobseeker's allowance is not payable must be at least one week and not more than 26 weeks.

Article 19A(7) provides that the appropriate consequence if a member of a joint-claim couple fails to comply with regulations is that he or she be treated as subject to sanctions for the purpose of Article 22A. The period for which the full allowance is not payable must be at least one week and not more than 26 weeks.

Paragraphs (8) and (9) of Article 19A make provision for claimants to receive an income-based jobseeker's allowance even though provision made by the regulations may prevent it. This is to enable claimants who are subject to a sanction to receive hardship payments. Regulations may prescribe the rate and period of such payments and the circumstances in which they are payable. Paragraph (8) does not apply in the case of a joint-claim jobseeker's allowance. Provision for such payments is contained in Article 22B(4) of the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

New Article 19B, which is also inserted in the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 by subsection (2), contains provisions that are supplemental to Article 19A. These provisions relate to the practical operation of schemes prescribed under Article 19A and provide support for any contractual arrangements the Department for Employment and Learning may make regarding their delivery.

Paragraph (1) enables the Department for Employment and Learning to associate itself, financially or otherwise, with any scheme falling within Article 19A(1). For example, 'work for your benefit' schemes may involve contracting with non-Government organisations and providing funding for relevant work-related activity and employment support. The Department for Employment and Learning may also wish to make payments to persons participating in the schemes to cover certain expenses, such as the cost of public transport to the host organisation.

Paragraph (3) enables the Department for Employment and Learning, where necessary, to use existing powers in Article 4 of the Employment and Training (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 1988 (status of trainees etc.), to make an order dealing with the employment status of claimants participating in schemes under Article 19A and detailing how any income gained while on a scheme should be treated for the purpose of other relevant legislation (for example, legislation relating to tax or National Insurance contributions). This follows the same approach as in Article 57(7) of the Welfare Reform and Pensions (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 (N.I. 11).

Subsections (3) to (5) of section 1 make other amendments which are consequential on new Article 19A.

Subsection (3) inserts a new paragraph (4) in Article 36 of the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 (regulations and orders) to make it clear that regulations made under new Article 19A may make different provision for different areas and that they may make provision only in relation to an area or areas specified in the regulations.

Subsection (4) amends Schedule 3 to the Social Security (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 (N.I. 10) to provide that a decision relating to non-payment of benefit under Article 19A may be appealed.

Section 2: Work-related activity: income support claimants and partners of claimants

This section amends the Social Security Administration (Northern Ireland) Act 1992 (c.8) by inserting new sections 2D to 2H.

New section 2D allows the Department for Social Development to make regulations which may require a person in receipt of income support, and who is not the lone parent of a child under the age of 3 (subsection (1)), or the partner of a person receiving income support, income-based jobseeker's allowance or income-related employment and support allowance (subsections (2) and (3)) to undertake work-related activity, as part of their progression to work outlined in Professor Gregg's recommendations, as a condition of continuing to receive the full amount of benefit.

The regulations made under this section will make provision for –

- the circumstances in which a person is to be subject to any requirement to undertake such activity;
- notifying a person of such a requirement;
- prescribing the time and amount of work-related activity which a person is required to undertake;
- detailing the circumstances in which a person is, or is not, to be regarded as undertaking such activity;
- determining, in the case of a claimant in a polygamous marriage, which of the partners is required to undertake work-related activity;

- imposing a sanction where a person required to undertake work-related activity has failed, without good cause, to comply with the requirement. The regulations will prescribe which matters are, or are not, to be taken into account when determining good cause for such failure. Where a sanction is imposed, the regulations will make provision for benefit to be reduced, and prescribe the amount and period of the reduction;
- providing that lone parents entitled to income support can restrict the hours for which they will be required to undertake work-related activity;
- definitions for the purposes of this section and for *new sections 2E and 2F*. In particular ‘work-related activity’ is defined as activity which makes it more likely that the person will obtain or remain in work or be able to do so;
- information supplied under the regulations made under this section to be taken to be information relating to social security. This will enable the exchange of information with, for example, training providers.

New section 2E relates to persons in receipt of certain benefits and to the partners of such people who are required to attend work-focused interviews under the provisions of section 2A or section 2AA of the Social Security Administration (Northern Ireland) Act 1992. The benefits in question are income support, income-based jobseeker’s allowance or an income-related employment and support allowance.

The provision requires the Department or the Department for Employment and Learning, in circumstances to be specified in regulations, to provide such people with an action plan. Regulations made under this section will provide for the form, content and review and updating of action plans. Where a person is required under the provisions of section 2D to undertake work-related activity, the action plan will contain details of the activities which will allow that requirement to be met. The regulations will also allow a person provided with an action plan to ask for it be reconsidered, and set out the circumstances and time in which such a request may be made; the matters to be considered when deciding on reconsideration; notification of the reconsideration decision, and directions giving effect to the decision on reconsideration.

Subsection (6) provides that the well-being of the child should be taken into account when agreeing the activities that a parent will undertake as part of an action plan.

New section 2F allows the Department or the Department for Employment and Learning, in circumstances to be set out in regulations, to issue a direction to a person required to undertake work-related activity under section 2D. The direction will specify either –

- the *only* activity, in that case, which will be regarded as work-related activity, or
- activity which, in that person’s case, will *not* be treated as work-related activity.

The direction may not specify medical or surgical treatment as the only activity which is to be regarded as work-related activity.

The regulations will provide that any direction must be reasonable, taking into account an individual's circumstances, must be included in an action plan given under section 2E and may be varied or brought to an end by a subsequent direction made under section 2F(1). Where a direction is varied or ended by a subsequent direction, that change may have retrospective effect.

New section 2G will allow the Department and the Department for Employment and Learning to authorise staff of contracted out suppliers to carry out their functions in issuing action plans under new section 2E and issuing directions under new section 2F. In addition regulations may provide for those persons to carry out the functions of the Department in revising or superseding decisions made under those sections. However, they will not be able to make decisions about whether a person has failed to comply with a requirement to undertake work-related activity, whether that person had good cause for such a failure or whether benefit should be reduced as a result of that failure. Those decisions will remain with the Department.

Regulations made under new section 2G will further specify the extent to which a contractor and its staff may be authorised to carry out functions of the Department or the Department for Employment and Learning and the duration of the authorisation. The Department or the Department for Employment and Learning will be able to revoke the authorisation at any time, and will not be prevented from exercising any function itself. Any action or omission by the authorised person is to be treated as an action or omission of the Department or the Department for Employment and Learning, except where it relates to the exercise of the function, or where criminal proceedings are brought in respect of anything done by the authorised person.

New section 2H applies to any regulations made under sections 2A, 2AA or 2D of the Social Security Administration (Northern Ireland) Act 1992. This provides that circumstances are to be prescribed in regulations which will constitute good cause for failing to undertake mandatory activities. They must expressly state that availability of childcare and the claimant's physical or mental health or condition will always be considered.

Subsections (3) to (6) of section 2 make minor consequential amendments to the Social Security Administration (Northern Ireland) Act 1992 and the Welfare Reform and Pensions (Northern Ireland) Order 1999.

Section 3: Lone parents

Subsection 1 amends section 123 of the Social Security Contributions and Benefits (Northern Ireland) Act 1992 (c.7) to ensure that lone parents with a child under seven are a prescribed category of person entitled to income support.

Subsection 2 amends section 2A of the Social Security Administration (Northern Ireland) Act 1992 to ensure that lone parents on income support with a child under one will not be required to take part in a work-focused interview.

Subsections 3 to 5 amend sections 12, 13 and 24 of the Welfare Reform Act (Northern Ireland) 2007 (c.2), to ensure that lone parents on employment and support allowance with a child under one will not be required to take part in a work-focused interview and with a child under three will not be required to undertake work-related activity. A regulation-making

power provides that lone parents on employment and support allowance will be entitled to restrict the times when they are required to undertake work-related activity.

Section 4: Entitlement to jobseeker's allowance without seeking employment etc.

Subsections (1) to (3) amend the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 by inserting new Articles 3A and 3B to provide entitlement to jobseeker's allowance for different categories of claimant including groups who would currently claim income support.

New Article 3A makes provision for claimants who are not a member of a joint-claim couple. It re-states the existing basic conditions under which people who are not in remunerative work can qualify for contribution-based or income-based jobseeker's allowance if they satisfy jobseeking conditions (such as to be available for and actively seeking work.). It creates a new entitlement for people of a description provided in regulations, who are not required to meet the jobseeking conditions but meet the other basic conditions of entitlement, such as presence in Northern Ireland and satisfy an income test. It also ensures that lone parents with a child under seven are a prescribed category of person. This will enable income-based jobseeker's allowance to be extended to groups who currently qualify for income support.

New Article 3B ensures that the existing provision in Article 5A of the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 (the conditions for claims by joint-claim couples) can continue to operate in the light of the amendments made to the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order by the new Article 3A above. Where a person is a member of more than one couple, regulations will make provision for deciding which couple is included for the purposes of a joint-claim. This would apply, for example, to someone in a polygamous marriage.

Paragraph (4) introduces Schedule 1, which includes amendments to the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 to support these changes.

Section 5: Couples where at least one member capable of work

This section amends the law relating to certain claimants who are members of a couple.

Subsection (1) amends the Social Security Contributions and Benefits (Northern Ireland) Act 1992 by inserting new regulation-making powers into section 123(1) of that Act (conditions for income support) and by inserting new subsections (6A) and (6B) (employment and support allowance).

Subsection (2) amends paragraph 6 of Schedule 1 to the Welfare Reform Act (Northern Ireland) 2007 (conditions for income-related employment and support allowance).

The purpose of these provisions is to remove entitlement to income support and income-related employment and support allowance for couples where one member is capable of work. This will mean that the only route to income-related support for such couples will be through income-based jobseeker's allowance and the member of the couple who is work ready will be required to fulfil the jobseeking requirements in Article 3 of the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

Regulations will prescribe the circumstances in which a member of a couple will not be treated as being capable of work, for example, he or she has claimed or is receiving employment and support allowance or he or she is in receipt of carer's allowance.

Section 6: Statutory sick pay and employment and support allowance

This section amends section 20(1) of the Welfare Reform Act (Northern Ireland) 2007 which prevented eligibility for employment and support allowance by those entitled to statutory sick pay. That section is amended to include a regulation-making power to allow people who are receiving statutory sick pay to claim income-related employment and support allowance, instead of income support. Currently people may receive income support in addition to statutory sick pay. In order to abolish income support, alternative provision needs to be made for this group of people.

Section 7: Transitional provision relating to sections 4 to 6

This section makes provision for the transition of people who move from income support to employment and support allowance or jobseeker's allowance as a result of the provisions in sections 4 to 6. This includes stopping awards of income support or employment and support allowance, where it is appropriate. A transitional allowance can be paid for a time and an amount prescribed in regulations.

Section 8: Assembly procedure: regulations imposing work-related activity requirements on lone parents with children under 7

Section 8 provides that regulations made within five years of the passing of the Welfare Reform Act and which impose a requirement on a lone parent of a child under 7 to undertake work-related activity will be subject to the confirmatory procedure of the Assembly.

Section 9: Abolition of income support

This section provides for the abolition of income support and the repeal of its associated references if, as a result of changes made in this Act or otherwise, there are no longer any groups of people that require income support. There is scope in subsection (4) to provide any transitional protection necessary.

Subsection 7 provides that an order to end entitlement to income support will be subject to the confirmatory resolution procedure of the Assembly.

Section 10: Power to direct claimant to undertake specific work-related activity

This section allows the Department or the Department for Employment and Learning to specify a work-related activity which a claimant of employment and support allowance, in the work-related activity group, must undertake to meet the requirements of the claim. Work-related activity is activity aimed at helping the claimant obtain work, remain in work or to be more likely to obtain or remain in work. This will not apply to claimants whose condition limits them to the extent that they could not reasonably be required to undertake work-related activity as a condition of receiving their benefit.

Section 10 amends section 15 of the Welfare Reform Act (Northern Ireland) 2007 which provides a power for the Department or the Department for Employment and Learning to direct that a specific activity in the case of an individual is not to count as work-related activity under the requirements imposed by section 13 of that Act. This is intended to stop claimants seeking to satisfy the requirement to undertake work-related activity by undertaking activity considered inappropriate for their circumstances.

New subsection (1)(a) provides that in addition to the existing power under section 13 of the Welfare Reform Act (Northern Ireland) 2007, the Department or the Department for Employment and Learning can, in prescribed circumstances, direct that a specific activity is the only activity which can, in the person's case, be regarded as work-related activity. This is intended to enable the Department and the Department for Employment and Learning to require claimants to undertake a specific activity in certain circumstances.

New subsection (1A) provides that the direction may not specify medical or surgical treatment as the only activity which is to be regarded as work-related activity.

New subsection (2)(a) requires that any direction given to the claimant must be reasonable, having regard to the person's circumstances. New subsection (2)(b) requires that any direction given to the claimant under subsection (1) must be recorded in the claimant's action plan. Failure to undertake the specified activity without showing good cause for this within the allowed time would be sanctionable.

Section 11: Conditions for contributory jobseeker's allowance

This section amends the contribution conditions for jobseeker's allowance. It amends the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 so that the first contribution condition for jobseeker's allowance is met by the claimant having paid, or being treated as having paid, at least 26 weeks of Class 1 contributions on relevant earnings at the base year's lower earnings limit (£90 per week in 2008/09) in one of the two tax years prior to the claim. Class 1 national insurance contributions are those paid on earnings from employment. Relevant earnings are those upon which contributions have been paid and which count towards establishing entitlement.

Subsection (3) introduces a regulation-making power which will be used to set out the detail of the calculation to determine whether a person has paid contributions on enough earnings to be entitled to the contributory benefit. A further regulation-making power is introduced by subsection (5) to allow for prescribed categories of claimants to satisfy the first contribution condition by alternative criteria. This new provision in the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 for jobseeker's allowance will parallel the provision in the Welfare Reform Act (Northern Ireland) 2007 in respect of employment and support allowance.

Section 12: Conditions for contributory employment and support allowance

This section amends the contribution conditions for employment and support allowance. The section amends the Welfare Reform Act (Northern Ireland) 2007 so that the number of tax years in which a person can pay national insurance contributions and qualify for employment and support allowance is reduced from three years to two. This aligns the period for employment and support allowance with that for jobseeker's allowance.

The section further amends the Welfare Reform Act (Northern Ireland) 2007 to provide that the first contribution condition for employment and support allowance is met by the claimant having paid, or being treated as having paid at least 26 weeks of Class 1 or Class 2 contributions on relevant earnings at the base year's lower earnings limit (£90 per week in 2008/09) in one of the two tax years prior to the claim. Class 1 national insurance contributions are those paid on earnings from employment. Class 2 national insurance contributions are those paid on earnings from self-employment. Relevant earnings are those upon which contributions have been paid and which count towards establishing entitlement.

The section provides a regulation-making power which will be used to set out the detail of the calculation to determine whether a person has paid contributions on enough earnings to be entitled to the contributory benefit. The existing regulation-making power in the Welfare Reform Act (Northern Ireland) 2007 is amended to allow for further prescribed categories of claimants, for example partners of overseas service personnel, to satisfy the first contribution condition by alternative criteria.

Section 13: Mobility component

Section 13 amends the entitlement conditions to the higher rate mobility component of disability living allowance so as to allow entitlement to people with a prescribed severe visual impairment. The section amends section 73 of the Social Security Contributions and Benefits (Northern Ireland) Act 1992 to set out a new category of entitlement to the higher rate mobility component for people who are severely visually impaired as prescribed in regulations. Section 13 does not alter the existing entitlement to the higher rate mobility component of those who are blind and deaf (to the prescribed degree).

Section 14: Maternity allowance and carer's allowance

This section repeals sections 82 and 90 of the Social Security Contributions and Benefits (Northern Ireland) Act 1992 which make provision for Adult Dependency Increases (ADIs) to be paid with maternity allowance and carer's allowance respectively, in circumstances where the claimant has an adult dependant.

The section will abolish the payment of ADIs for all new claims to maternity allowance and carer's allowance at the same time as they cease to be available on new claims to state pensions in 2010.

ADIs in payment with carer's allowance at the time of change will be phased out between 2010 and 2020. This will be in line with the arrangements for phasing out the existing ADIs paid with the state pension. Phasing out will not apply to maternity allowance as this is a short-term benefit paid for 39 weeks. Payment of ADIs for existing maternity allowance claims will therefore cease when the maternity allowance entitlement ends.

Section 15: Community care grants relating to specified goods or services

Under the existing law, successful applicants for community care grants may be provided with cash to obtain the goods or services that the award covers. At the direction of the appropriate officer, a payment may be made to a third party to provide the goods or services. These amendments to the Social Security Contributions and Benefits (Northern Ireland) Act 1992 enable the Department to require that, where the goods or services are covered by arrangements the Department has made with a supplier, the award made must relate to

specified goods or services and the payment would be made to the supplier. It is expected that these arrangements will involve the supply of white goods and furniture at a discounted rate.

Section 16: Community care grants: reviews and information

Section 16(1) and (2) preclude an application for review being made where goods or services have been awarded. Clause 16(3) inserts a new section 116E into the Social Security Administration (Northern Ireland) Act 1992 which allows regulations to provide for the exchange of information between the Department and relevant suppliers and for the use or disclosure of such information, including provision for a criminal offence for unauthorised disclosure. There is power by regulations to make exceptions to this.

Section 17: Regulations relating to information: Assembly control

Section 17 provides that regulations about the unauthorised disclosure of information in relation to community care grants will be subject to the confirmatory procedure where the regulations create new offences or increase penalties.

Section 18: Payments on account

Section 18(2)(a) repeals section 5(1)(s) of the Social Security Administration (Northern Ireland) Act 1992, which enables regulations to be made providing for the making of a payment on account of benefit where it is impracticable for a claim to be made immediately, where it is impracticable for a claim to be determined immediately or where an award of benefit has been made, but it is impracticable to pay the whole immediately. Subsection (2)(c) of section 18 inserts a new subsection (1A) into section 5 of that Act. It provides a regulation-making power to allow a payment on account of housing benefit to be made where no claim has been made or a claim has been made (including where a claim has been determined and an award made) and, in either case, a person who is or would be covered by such a claim would be in need if no payment on account was made, and an award has been made but it is impracticable to pay the full amount of the benefit immediately.

The new subsection (1B) broadens the range of situations in which a payment on account may be made before an award has been made. It enables these payments to be made on a need basis rather than in situations where it is impracticable to make a claim, determine a claim or pay benefit. It provides the Department with improved flexibility to address short-term hardship.

The new subsection (1C) enables regulations to make provision about the manner in which payments on account of benefit are to be set against subsequent payments of benefit and to prescribe circumstances in which they are not to be set against subsequent payments and are not otherwise recoverable.

Subsections (3) and (4) of section 18 make consequential changes to references to section 5(1)(s) in other sections of the Social Security Administration (Northern Ireland) Act 1992.

Section 19: Loss of benefit provisions

Section 6 of the Social Security Fraud Act (Northern Ireland) 2001 (c.17) enables certain specified benefits to be withdrawn, or reduced payments to be made, for a period of 13 weeks (known as the disqualification period) where a person is convicted of benefit fraud on two

occasions, and the second offence was committed within five years of the date of conviction for the first. These loss of benefit provisions are commonly referred to as the ‘two strikes’ rule.

Where such an offence of benefit fraud comes to light, the offender may be prosecuted, agree to an administrative penalty as an alternative to prosecution under section 109A of the Social Security Administration (Northern Ireland) Act 1992, or agree to be given a caution.

Subsection (1) inserts new sections 5A, 5B and 5C into the Social Security Fraud Act (Northern Ireland) 2001. New section 5A defines, for the purposes of section 5B and section 6, ‘disqualifying benefit’ and ‘sanctionable benefit’.

New section 5B introduces the new benefit sanction to apply after the first conviction, or after any administrative penalty or caution known as the “one strike” rule. The combined effect of subsections (1), (4) and (5) is for benefit to be reduced or withdrawn for the disqualification period where the offender has –

- been convicted of one or more benefit offences in any proceedings;
- accepted an administrative penalty as an alternative to prosecution; or
- agreed to be given a caution

The disqualification period is defined in subsection (11) of new section 5B as a period of four weeks beginning at a prescribed time after conviction or the agreement of an administrative penalty or caution.

Subsection (2) of new section 5B sets out definitions of the terms used in new section 5B(1)(b).

Subsection (3) of new section 5B provides that a sanction under the new rules will not apply where a conviction would be the second conviction for the purposes of section 6 (‘two strikes’).

Subsections (6) to (10) of new section 5B provide that the amounts by which income support, jobseeker’s allowance, state pension credit, employment and support allowance or housing benefit are to be reduced will be prescribed in regulations. These amounts will be the same as those currently prescribed for the purposes of section 6.

Subsection (13) of new section 5B sets out definitions of the terms used within new sections 5B and 5C; in particular, ‘benefit offence’ is defined in such a way that the provisions will only apply to offences committed after new section 5B comes into operation.

Subsection (1) of new section 5C provides that in the event that a conviction is quashed all payments that would have been made but for the sanction are to be made as if no restriction had been imposed.

Subsection (2)(a) of new section 5C provides that where the person had agreed to pay an administrative penalty but has withdrawn that agreement, all payments that would have been made but for the sanction are to be made as if no restriction had been imposed.

Subsection (2)(b) of new section 5C provides that where, following an appeal or in accordance with regulations, it is decided that there was no overpayment or that it is not recoverable, all payments that would have been made but for the sanction are to be made as if no restriction had been imposed.

Subsection (3) of new section 5C provides for subsection (4) to apply where the person had agreed to pay an administrative penalty, but following an appeal or in accordance with regulations the amount of the overpayment is revised.

Subsection (4) provides that where there is a new penalty or caution relating to the same offence, the new disqualification period is to be reduced by the length of the old disqualification period and that in any other case the necessary adjustments are to be made to reverse the effects of the sanction.

Subsection (4)(b) of new section 5C provides that if a new agreement to pay an administrative penalty is not made then all payments that would have been made but for the sanction are to be made as if no restriction had been imposed and the Department can proceed to prosecute the offence.

Subsection (5)(b) of new section 5C provides for convictions that result in absolute or conditional discharges and to a conviction in Great Britain, including convictions that result in absolute discharges, conditional discharges, or probation orders made by a court in Scotland and absolute discharges made by a court of summary jurisdiction in Scotland, to count as convictions for the purposes of the new sanction.

Subsection (2) of section 19 introduces Schedule 3 which contains further amendments to the Social Security Fraud Act (Northern Ireland) 2001 and related amendments to other legislation.

Section 20: Jobseeker's allowance: sanctions for violent conduct etc. in connection with claim

This section inserts two new Articles into the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, Article 22C (sanctions for violent conduct etc. in connection with claim) and Article 22D (Article 22C supplementary).

Paragraph (1) of new Article 22C makes provision for a benefit sanction of one week to be applied to jobseeker's allowance claimants who are successfully convicted of or, cautioned for violent or threatening behaviour towards staff of Social Security Offices or Jobs and Benefits Offices or contracted out staff. In addition, for the sanction to apply it is necessary that –

- the violent conduct was towards staff of Social Security Offices or Jobs and Benefits Offices or contracted out staff;
- the offence took place on the Social Security Office or Jobs and Benefits Office premises while the offender was there for the purpose of a jobseeker's allowance claim;
- the offender is a person or a member of a joint-claim couple who satisfies the conditions of receiving jobseeker's allowance.

Paragraph (2) provides for:-

- (a) benefit not to be payable for a period of one week in the case where the jobseeker's allowance claim is not a joint-claim even if the conditions of entitlement are satisfied; and
- (b) the period of any other sanction also to be extended by five weeks on the first occasion that the other sanction applies to the claimant.

The reference to another sanction is to any other sanction arising as a result of the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 and during which jobseeker's allowance is not to be payable. It explains that the sanctions period which is to be extended by five weeks is the period of that other sanction arising out of the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

Under paragraph (4) in the case of a joint-claim jobseeker's allowance, the offender will be treated in the same way as in paragraph (2), namely that a sanction of one week will be applied. If another sanction is imposed the sanction period will be increased by five weeks.

Paragraph (5) explains in relation to a joint-claim jobseeker's allowance that the reference to another sanction is to any other sanction arising as a result of the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 and during which jobseeker's allowance is not to be payable. It also explains that the sanctions period which is to be extended by five weeks is the period of that other sanction arising out of the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

Paragraph (6) provides for regulations to set out that after a certain period the sanctions in paragraphs (2) and (4) will not apply to the claimant of jobseeker's allowance or that in certain circumstances the sanction will not apply to the claimant.

Paragraph (7) makes provision for hardship payments to be made during the sanction period. This does not apply in the case of a sanction of a joint-claim jobseeker's allowance as in paragraph (4). Corresponding provision is made for them by Article 22B(4).

Paragraph (8) provides that regulations may be made for hardship payments in paragraph (7) to be paid as follows:-

- only if the information required from the claimant has been provided;
- payable at a prescribed rate;
- payable only for part of the week.

Paragraph (9) provides that where a conviction is subsequently overturned the amount of sanctioned benefit would be repaid as if the person had never been convicted of the offence in the first place.

New Article 22D sets out in paragraph (1) the offences involving violence or harassment in respect of which the sanction will be applied. These are-

- (a) common assault, battery or affray;
- (b) an offence under section 16, 18, 20, 42 or 47 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861;

- (c) an offence under Article 9 or 10 of the Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order 1987;
- (d) an offence under Article 4 or 6 of the Protection from Harassment (Northern Ireland) Order 1997;
- (e) an ancillary offence in relation to an offence within any of sub-paragraphs (a) to (d).

In paragraph 1(e) “ancillary offence”, in relation to an offence means any of the following –

- (a) aiding, abetting, counselling or procuring the commission of the offence;
- (b) attempting or conspiring to commit the offence.

Paragraph (4) explains the meaning of ‘cautioned’.

Paragraph (5) provides for regulations to be made for requiring prescribed persons (such as the police or the prosecuting agencies) to notify the Department of any offences set out in new Article 22D in respect of which a sanction may be applied, as in new Article 22C.

Paragraph (6) provides for amendments to be made by regulation to paragraphs (1) or (2) by removing or adding offences.

Subsection (3) of section 20 amends Article 37(1)(c) of the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 so that the regulation making power found in paragraph (6) of new Article 22D will be subject to the confirmatory resolution procedure.

Subsection (4) makes a consequential amendment to paragraph 3(d) of Schedule 3 to the Social Security (Northern Ireland) Order 1998. This will give those whose benefit is sanctioned a right of appeal about the payability of their benefit.

Section 21: Repeal of sections 53 to 57 of the Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Act (Northern Ireland) 2000

Section 22: Period for which pilot schemes have effect etc.

This section amends Article 31 of the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 and section 19(1) of the Welfare Reform Act (Northern Ireland) 2007 which allow for the piloting of regulations made under specified enactments relating to working-age benefits. Piloting regulations can have effect only in specified areas and in relation to specified classes of persons. Persons can be selected for participation in schemes on a sampling basis. At the moment, piloting regulations can only have effect for a maximum of 12 months under Article 31 of the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 and a maximum of 24 months under section 19(1) of the Welfare Reform Act (Northern Ireland) 2007. Subsections (1)(a) and (2) extend and align both these time limits to 36 months. Subsection (1)(b) amends Article 31 of the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 to mirror the language used in section 19 of the Welfare Reform Act (Northern Ireland) 2007 so as to create consistency and to ensure that regulations which are aimed at making it more likely that persons will obtain or remain in work or be able to do so, can be piloted.

Section 23: Exemption from jobseeking conditions for victims of domestic violence

Section 23 inserts a new provision in Schedule 1 to the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, which relates to those who have been victims of, or threatened with, domestic violence. The Department will be required to exercise regulation-making powers to provide that victims of domestic violence will, for a period of 13 weeks, be able to start or continue a claim to jobseeker's allowance without: being available for employment; having entered into a jobseeker's agreement; or actively seeking employment. Regulations made by virtue of the new provision will be subject to the confirmatory procedure.

Section 24: Good cause for failure to comply with regulations etc.

Section 24 provides that where regulation-making powers in the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 and the Welfare Reform Act (Northern Ireland) 2007 enables circumstances to be prescribed that constitute good cause for failing to undertake mandatory activities (and just cause for leaving employment in the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order) the regulations must expressly state that availability of childcare and the claimant's physical or mental health or condition will always be considered.

Section 25: Jobseekers' agreements and action plans: well-being of children

Section 25 introduces a requirement in Article 11 of the Jobseeker's (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 and section 14 of the Welfare Reform Act (Northern Ireland) 2007, that the well-being of the child should be taken into account when agreeing the activities that a parent will undertake as part of an action plan or jobseeker's agreement in order to help the parent move closer to or into work.

Section 26: Contracting out functions under Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995

This section provides a general provision to allow the contracting out of certain functions of the Department or the Department for Employment and Learning under the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

Subsection (2) of section 26 inserts new Article 22E before Article 23 of the 1995 Order. This provides for particular functions of the Department and the functions of the officers of the Department for Employment and Learning to be carried out by authorised persons.

Paragraph (3) provides for regulations to enable the relevant functions to be contracted out and paragraphs (5) and (6) provide for those regulations to include the extent to which the contracting out arrangements are to apply.

Some types of decisions, for example failure to comply with requirements, good cause for failure, and any reductions in jobseeker's allowance are excluded and cannot be contracted out. Under these provisions any authorisation to a contractor may specify the duration for which the authorisation applies. The section also makes provision for the revocation of an authorisation and deals with the limits of any liabilities arising out of functions carried out by an authorised person.

Subsection (3) substitutes references to ‘employment officers’ with ‘officer of the Department’ in other parts of the 1995 Order so that it is aligned with the new terminology. Subsections (4) and (5) include further consequential changes.

Section 27: Attendance in connection with jobseeker’s allowance: sanctions

This section amends Article 10 of the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. Article 10 allows regulations to be made providing for entitlement to jobseeker’s allowance to cease for between one and five days if the claimant fails to attend a mandatory interview and subsequently makes contact with the Social Security Office or Jobs and Benefits Office within a prescribed period of the date of the mandatory interview without showing good cause for the failure to attend. Regulations set out that the prescribed period is five working days.

This new provision will mean that in the above circumstances, entitlement to jobseeker’s allowance will continue but will not be payable for a fixed period of at least one week and not more than two weeks.

In addition, regulations will provide that if a person fails to attend a mandatory interview for the second or subsequent time, a fixed sanction of two weeks will be applied whilst keeping the claim open.

If the person makes contact with the Social Security Office or Jobs and Benefits Office within the prescribed period of five working days and shows good cause in both circumstances, a sanction would not be imposed.

Example: If a person fails to attend a mandatory interview on Monday and attends the Social Security Office or Jobs and Benefits Office on Wednesday of the same week but fails to demonstrate good cause for failing to attend, a sanction of the loss of a week’s jobseekers allowance would be imposed but the claim will remain open. If he/she fails to attend a mandatory interview for a second time in respect of the same claim and cannot show good cause, he/she would lose two weeks jobseeker’s allowance but his or her claim would remain open.

The usual appeal rules apply for both cases.

This section also amends Article 10 of the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 to allow regulations to provide that if the claimant fails to make contact with the Social Security Office or Jobs and Benefits Office within the prescribed period of five working days from the failure to attend, his or her claim would be closed.

Example: If a person fails to attend a mandatory interview on Tuesday and makes contact with the Social Security Office or Jobs and Benefits Office on Wednesday of the following week, his or her claim will be closed.

Section 28: Social security information and employment or training information

Subsections 1 and 2 insert new subsections into sections 2A and 2AA of the Social Security Administration (Northern Ireland) Act 1992 and relate to the use of Article 69 of the Welfare Reform and Pensions (Northern Ireland) Order 1999. The definition of social security information is also broadened to include information not just related to work-focused

interviews, but information shared for the purposes of any provision made by or under the Act, including in regulations.

Subsection (3) adds a new paragraph to Schedule 1 to the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 and expands the scope of data-sharing powers under that Order to enable information sharing which is relevant for any provision in or made under the Order. It does this by providing that such information should be taken to be social security information. This is linked to the Welfare Reform and Pensions (Northern Ireland) Order 1999, in which Article 69 deals with data-sharing for social security purposes, between Northern Ireland Departments, people carrying out functions on their behalf, or designated by a Northern Ireland Department, and statutory bodies.

Subsection (4) amends Article 69 of the Welfare Reform and Pensions (Northern Ireland) Order 1999, to reflect this change. The amendments would also allow the Department to make regulations concerning the sharing and use of employment and training information. For example, regulations could permit a person providing a training course for a jobseeker's allowance claimant pursuant to arrangements made by the Department for Employment and Learning to provide information to the Social Security Office or Jobs and Benefits Office about the claimant's record of attendance and levels of attainment.

Section 29: Persons under pensionable age to take part in work-focused interviews etc.

Subsection (2) amends Section 2A of the Social Security Administration (Northern Ireland) Act 1992 to allow regulations to be made requiring a person who is under 60 years of age who is claiming any one of a number of specified benefits to take part in a work-focused interview, as a condition of continuing to receive the full amount of that benefit.

Subsection (3) amends section 2AA of the Social Security Administration (Northern Ireland) Act 1992 and extends the requirement so that where the claimant has a partner, and both are under 60 years of age, they are both required to attend work-focused interviews.

The process of equalising state pension age at 65 (as provided by the Pension (Northern Ireland) Order 1995) for both men and women began from 6 April 2010. The state pension age for women will gradually be increased over a 10 year period until it reaches 65.

To reflect these changes, the age at which a person will be required to take part in a work-focused interview will also increase.

Section 29 removes the references in sections 2A and 2AA to a person being under 60 years of age, and replaces them with references to a person who has not attained pensionable age. Subsections (2)(c) and (3)(b) provide a definition of when a man born before 6 April 1955 will be treated as having attained pensionable age.

Section 30: Minor amendments

Subsections (1) and (2) of section 30 will ensure that the preserved right to a child dependency increase under sections 80 and 81 of the Social Security Contributions and Benefits (Northern Ireland) Act 1992 can continue for a child over 16 who meets the relevant conditions.

Sections 80 and 81 of the Social Security (Contributions and Benefits) (Northern Ireland) Act 1992 provided that incapacity benefit, severe disablement benefit, state pension, carer's allowance, widow's benefit and bereavement benefit could be increased where a person was receiving child benefit in respect of a child, defined as a person under the age of 16, or a person under the age of 19 who was still in full time education.

When child tax credits were introduced in 2003, child dependency increases ceased and section 80 was repealed; however it was preserved for those cases where the increase was already in payment, until such time as the child reached the age of 16, or 19 where he or she remained in full-time education.

The definition of a child was amended to a person who has not attained the age of 16 from 10th April 2006 when the Child Benefit Act 2005 came into force. A new definition of 'qualifying young person' applies to a person over 16 years of age who meets certain conditions set out in the Child Benefit (General) Regulations 2006 (SI 2006 No. 223).

No amendments were made to change the definitions for the purposes of preserved child dependency increases, with the consequence that these may only be paid in respect of a child who has not reached the age of 16.

Subsection (3) of section 30 amends section 146(2) of the Social Security Contributions and Benefits (Northern Ireland) Act 1992 (interpretation of Part 10: Christmas bonus) to amend a provision of the Welfare Reform Act (Northern Ireland) 2007. This resulted in entitlement to a Christmas bonus to all claimants of employment and support allowance, including income-related employment and support allowance. This did not achieve the policy intention of taking forward the existing distinction between contributory incapacity benefit and income-related income support.

Part 2: Child maintenance

Section 31: Payments of child support maintenance

Article 29 of the Child Support (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 provides a general power to make regulations as to the payment of child support maintenance. These regulations allow the Department to specify the intervals at which payments are to be made, having regard to the circumstances and preferences indicated by the non-resident parent. Many non-resident parents prefer to pay calendar monthly, in line with when they receive earnings. Precisely matching payments to weekly liabilities may not be straightforward and may be unclear to parents.

Section 31 amends Article 29 of the Child Support (Northern Ireland) Order 1991, extending the provisions which may be made by regulations in relation to payments of child support maintenance. Subsection (2) allows for regulations making provision for determining the total amount of maintenance payments due in a reference period (a period of 52 weeks or, in some circumstances, a different period - see subsection (3)), and requiring payments to be made, by reference to that amount and that period, at prescribed intervals.

This will enable the notification of the maintenance calculation issued to each parent to show an annual rather than weekly amount. Where the payment interval is to be monthly, the schedule of payments due will show 12 equal monthly amounts. It will therefore be much easier for each parent to see what payments are due to be made, on what date, and how they

relate to the maintenance liability. This will also facilitate the making of payments by regular direct debit because the amounts will be the same each month. Annual amounts will be adjusted if a relevant change in circumstances occurs during the year, requiring a new maintenance liability to be calculated.

Section 32: Child support maintenance: offences relating to information

Section 32 amends Article 16A of the Child Support (Northern Ireland) Order 1991, which deals with offences relating to the provision of information.

Article 16A(3A) of the Child Support (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 currently provides that a person commits an offence if he or she fails to notify the Department of a change of address. Section 32(2) substitutes a new paragraph (3A), which extends this offence to a failure to report other changes of circumstances. These other changes of circumstances will be specified in regulations made under the provisions of Article 16(1) of the Child Support (Northern Ireland) Order 1991.

Article 16A(2) of the Child Support (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 currently provides that it is an offence for a person to knowingly make a false statement or representation or knowingly provide, or cause or allow to be provided, a document or other information which is false. Section 32(3) adds a new paragraph (6) into Article 16A of the 1991 Order, setting the time limit for bringing such a case to 12 months from the date the false information was provided. Currently, Article 19(1)(a) of the Magistrates' Courts (Northern Ireland) Order 1981 limits the time in which a prosecution can be brought to 6 months. The amendment brings the time limits broadly in line with those for benefit fraud, and increases the likelihood of successful prosecutions under Article 16A(2) of the Child Support (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 due to the increased time in which the offence can be discovered and investigated by the prosecutor.

Part 3: Miscellaneous and supplementary

Section 33: Consequential amendments of orders and regulations

This section enables the Department to amend or revoke by way of regulations any statutory rules made under other enactments before this Act received Royal Assent, where such amendments and revocations are necessary as a consequence of a provision of this Act. Regulations made under this power may include transitional provisions and savings, and provisions conferring discretion on any person. Regulations made under this power are subject to negative resolution procedure.

Section 34: Repeals

This section gives effect to the repeals and revocations in Schedule 4. It lists provisions in Part 2 of Schedule 4 that will have effect on 6 April 2010. It protects the operation of Article 3 of the Tax Credits Act 2002 (Commencement No. 3 and Transitional Provisions and Savings) Order 2003 - (savings in relation to the abolition of child dependency increases).

Section 35: Interpretation

This section sets out definitions for the purposes of the Act.

Section 36: Commencement

Section 36 provides that sections 1, 2, 3, 8, 14, 19 and Schedule 3, 20, 22, 23, 24, 27, 28, 29, 30, 32(3), 33, 34(2) and (3) and Part 2 of Schedule 4, so far as relating to the repeals and revocations, mentioned in section 34(2) and sections 35, 36 and 37, come into operation on Royal Assent (that is on 13 August 2010).

The remaining provisions will be brought into operation by means of commencement orders made by the Department. The orders may appoint different days for different areas and purposes and make necessary transitory, transitional or savings provisions.

SCHEDULES

Schedule 1 - Amendments connected to section 4

Part 1

Paragraph 2 amends Article 10 of the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 so that only those persons on jobseeker's allowance who are required to meet the jobseeking conditions, rather than those who have moved from income support, will be required to attend an interview with an employment officer and provide information and evidence of their circumstances, availability for employment and the extent to which they are actively seeking work.

Paragraph 3 of Schedule 1 inserts new Articles 13A, 13B and 13C into the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

13A: Persons not required to meet the jobseeking conditions

This Article provides for regulations to be made which would require people who are not required to meet the jobseeking conditions, and who are not a member of a joint-claim couple, to undertake work-focused interviews. This provision will not apply to lone parents with a child aged under the age of one. The purpose of the interview is to consider a person's existing and future employment and training prospects or needs.

13B: Provision which may be made by regulations under Article 13A

This Article details some of the things which can be specified in regulations made under new Article 13A. This includes provision to sanction people who fail to comply and do not take part in a work-focused interview without having good cause. Matters to be considered as relevant in determining whether a person has shown good cause are to be prescribed in regulations. Where a person does not meet an interview requirement that is made as a condition of becoming entitled to benefit, the appropriate sanction will be to treat that person as not having made a claim. Where compliance with an interview requirement applies as a condition of entitlement to benefit continuing, the appropriate sanction will be to reduce the benefits paid to that person by an amount specified in regulations.

Paragraph (4) allows for the requirement to undertake a work-focused interview to be waived if it is not considered appropriate for the claimant. Under paragraph (6), benefit can still be awarded in this situation.

The meaning of ‘relevant benefit’ in paragraph (7) currently applies to income support, housing benefit, widows and bereavement benefits, carer’s allowance, severe disablement allowance and incapacity benefit.

13C: Action plans in connection with work-focused interviews

This provision requires a person, in prescribed circumstances, to be provided with an action plan. In preparing this the well-being of any child which may be affected by it is to be taken into consideration.

Paragraph 4 of Schedule 1 inserts new Articles 20A and 20B into the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

20A: Requirements imposed on claimants by officers of the Departments etc.

This makes provision for jobseeker’s directions to require the claimant to take part in any activity, particularly some form of activity related to finding employment, becoming more employable or remaining in employment, such as improving skills, which an employment officer considers relevant. This direction can be included in an action plan.

If the person is notified of a place on a training scheme, he or she can be required to apply for such a place and if offered it the person can be required to accept and attend. A person required to meet the jobseeking conditions can be required to apply for a place on an employment programme, or for a vacant job. This can also apply to those who are not required to meet the jobseeking conditions if they so agree.

Paragraph (8) of new Article 20A makes provision to allow for the requirement for those not required to meet the jobseeking conditions to undertake a direction to be suspended in particular circumstances.

Claimants who fail to comply with these requirements will incur a sanction.

20B: Work-related activity: Article 3A(4) claimants

This is a regulation-making power which allows for regulations to require those on jobseeker’s allowance who do not have to meet the jobseeking conditions to undertake work-related activity as a condition of continuing to receive their full amount of benefit. Lone Parents with a child under the age of 3 will not be required to undertake work-related Activity. Work-related activity will be detailed in an action plan, and will be reasonable and have due consideration to a person’s circumstances. The requirement to undertake such activity can be suspended in specific circumstances, which will also be prescribed in regulations.

Paragraph (4) provides that lone parents (subject to meeting any prescribed conditions) can restrict the hours they are required to undertake work-related activity. This will enable lone parents to restrict the activities they will undertake to their child’s hours of schooling and formal childcare.

Paragraph (5) provides that in circumstances prescribed in regulations, only a specific activity specified in the direction is to be regarded as a work-related activity. The provision also allows for specified activities to be deemed not to be work-related activity.

Provision is made in paragraph (6) that a person cannot be required to undertake medical or surgical treatment to meet their work-related activity requirement.

Claimants who fail to comply will incur a sanction.

Paragraph 5 of Schedule 1 inserts new Articles 20C and 20D before Article 21 of the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

20C: Definitions for purposes of Articles 21 and 22A

Article 20C to the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 defines the circumstances in which claimants may be sanctioned for failing to satisfy conditionality requirements. Paragraph (2) provides that a claimant is in breach of a jobseeker's direction if he or she has without good cause, refused or failed to carry out a direction.

Paragraph (3) explains when a claimant will have failed to cooperate with a requirement to attend a training scheme and paragraph (4) explains when a claimant will be in breach of an employment programme requirement.

Paragraph (5) deals with those who have failed to fulfil an employment requirement, and paragraph (6) explains when a claimant will have failed to comply with a work-related activity requirement.

The circumstances in which people who are required to satisfy jobseeking conditions may be sanctioned are the same as they are now. People who are not required to satisfy jobseeking conditions will only be liable to sanctions if they are in breach of a jobseeker's direction, a training scheme requirement, or a work-related activity requirement.

20D: Article 20C: supplemental

Paragraph (2) of this Article states that those who are subject to a jobseeker's direction under Article 18 of the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 are not regarded as having breached a direction under the requirements in Articles 20A and 20B of that Order. Article 18 allows the Department to provide jobseeker's allowance to 16 to 17 year olds on grounds of hardship, and Article 18(3)(b) allows that payment to be revoked if the person is seen to have failed to avail himself or herself of a place on a training scheme, or has lost that place, without demonstrating good cause for doing so, under Article 19(3)(b) or (c) of the 1995 Order.

Regulations can prescribe circumstances in which a person can be considered not to have left employment voluntarily.

Regulations must provide that those claiming the form of jobseeker's allowance where they do not have to satisfy the jobseeking conditions are not sanctioned for leaving employment after taking a job and may provide that they are not sanctioned for not completing a training scheme.

Paragraphs (7) and (8) of new Article 20C are regulation-making powers which will prescribe what can be considered good cause for failing to carry out a jobseeker's direction. The amount of payment for the employment cannot be considered good cause through regulations made under these powers.

Paragraph 6 of Schedule 1 substitutes new provisions for Articles 21 and 22 of the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

21: Certain circumstances in which a jobseeker's allowance is not payable

New Article 21 of the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 describes circumstances in which jobseeker's allowance can be disallowed for a 'relevant period' because the claimant has failed to satisfy the requirements under Articles 20A and 20B of that Order even though the claimant may meet the other conditions for entitlement to the benefit. This applies to claims which are not part of a joint-claim.

Paragraphs (2) and (3) list the circumstances in which jobseeker's allowance can be disallowed under this Article with respect to claimants who are required to meet the jobseeking conditions and to those claimants who are not so required.

Paragraphs (4) and (5) provide a power that will enable regulations to be made to determine the 'relevant period' over which the sanction is to apply. That period must be at least one week and not more than 26 weeks.

Paragraph (6) provides for regulations to prescribe circumstances which must be taken into account and those which must not be taken into account in determining the sanction period.

22: Exemptions from Article 21

New Article 22 provides for regulations to be made to prescribe possible exemptions from new Article 21.

Paragraph 7 of Schedule 1 replaces Articles 22A and 22B of the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 with new provisions.

22A: Certain circumstances in which a joint-claim jobseeker's allowance is not payable

New Article 22A prescribes conditions in which a member of a joint-claim couple may be sanctioned for a breach of a requirement under Article 20A of the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

If both members of the couple are sanctioned, no allowance is paid. If one member is sanctioned the amount paid is reduced by the method prescribed in paragraph (6). Other provisions are similar to those that apply under new Article 21 of the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

22B: Exemptions from Article 22A

New Article 22B of the 1995 Order makes exemptions from new Article 22A, in the same manner that new Article 22 makes exemptions from new Article 21.

Paragraphs 8 to 15 (Other amendments) of Schedule 1 amend the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 so that the new provisions are properly cross-referenced throughout that Order and deal with some consequential matters.

Paragraph 16 of Schedule 1 amends Article 16 of the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order to provide that except in prescribed circumstances a single person who is involved in a trade dispute will not qualify for jobseeker's allowance. The exceptions to the general rule are to be prescribed in regulations.

Paragraphs 17 and 18 of Schedule 1 amend Articles 17 and 17A of the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 to provide that in trade dispute cases involving couples a claim may be accepted from either member of the couple subject to the other conditions in those provisions applying. The claimant can only receive a reduced amount of benefit while either member of a couple is involved in the trade dispute.

Paragraph 19 of Schedule 1 inserts new Article 17B into the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. The provisions will specify that when the person involved in a trade dispute returns to work, the person (or the person's partner) may be able to receive the full normal rate of jobseeker's allowance that would apply to his or her circumstances for the first 15 days following the person's return to work. The normal rules which prevent jobseeker's allowance being paid when a person is in remunerative work are suspended for the 15 day period to ensure that the claimant cannot be excluded under those provisions. Any benefit awarded under this rule will be recoverable from the claimant or, where the claim is from a couple, the other member of the couple. These provisions are similar to those which currently apply in respect of income support.

Paragraphs 20 to 22 of Schedule 1 make further minor amendments to the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 to take account of the new provision.

Paragraph 23(2) of Schedule 1 inserts provision into the 1995 Order to allow regulations to be made to ensure that in some circumstances a person who has limited capability for work can claim jobseeker's allowance. There are some people who do not have to meet the jobseeking conditions who will have a choice over which benefit to claim. For example, a disabled lone parent who has a child under seven years of age could claim either employment and support allowance, and be subject to full employment and support allowance conditionality, or he or she could claim jobseeker's allowance without the jobseeking conditions. The regulations will give these groups a choice as to which benefit they would prefer to claim.

Paragraph 23(3) of Schedule 1 is intended to amend an existing provision in Schedule 1 of the Jobseekers (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, which allows people to continue to receive jobseeker's allowance temporarily without being available for work, having entered into a jobseeker's agreement, or actively seeking employment. The amendment reflects the fact that in the future these conditions are going to be referred to as the jobseeking conditions.

Paragraph 23(5)(b) of Schedule 1 provides for regulations to prescribe circumstances in which a person who is in relevant education and who is not required to meet the jobseeking conditions may claim jobseeker's allowance. There are similar provisions relating to income support for this group of persons.

Paragraph 23(6) of Schedule 1 provides for regulations to prescribe circumstances in which people who are not required to meet the jobseeking conditions will be required to be under the qualifying age for state pension credit in order to qualify for jobseeker's allowance. These rules are similar to those that apply in relation to income support.

Part 2

Part 2 makes consequential amendments to other Acts and Orders, including the Social Security Administration (Northern Ireland) Act 1992, the Social Security (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 and the Welfare Reform Act (Northern Ireland) 2007.

Schedule 2 - Abolition of income support: consequential amendments

Schedule 2 makes consequential amendments that are required for the abolition of income support. It amends references to income support in a number of Acts and Orders and where appropriate, inserts a new reference to jobseeker's allowance instead.

Schedule 3 - Loss of benefit provisions: further amendments

Part 1 of Schedule 3 makes further amendments to sections 6 to 10 and 12 of the Social Security Fraud Act (Northern Ireland) 2001. These are related to the amendments made by section 18.

Part 2 of Schedule 3 makes consequential amendments to other statutory provisions.

Paragraph 7 amends the Social Security Administration (Northern Ireland) Act 1992. Paragraph 8 amends the Social Security (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 to ensure that there is a right of appeal against the decision under the new section 5B of the Social Security Fraud Act (Northern Ireland) 2001 that a benefit is to be reduced or withdrawn.

Schedule 4 – Repeals

This Schedule provides for repeals consequential on the provisions in the Act.

HANSARD REPORTS

The following table sets out the dates of the Hansard reports for each stage of the Act's passage through the Assembly.

| STAGE | DATE |
|--|----------------|
| Introduction of the Act to the Committee for Social Development | 1 April 2010 |
| Introduction to the Assembly | 12 April 2010 |
| Second Stage debate | 20 April 2010 |
| Committee Stage – evidence from Advice NI | 11 May 2010 |
| Committee Stage - evidence from Citizens Advice Bureau, Law Centre (NI) and Gingerbread NI. | 13 May 2010 |
| Committee Stage- evidence from Age NI Consideration of sections 1 to 17 | 20 May 2010 |
| Committee Stage – Submission from Law Centre (NI) which included suggested amendments to the Welfare Reform Bill. Consideration of sections 18 to 37 and Schedules 1 to 4 | 25 May 2010 |
| Committee's report on the Act - Report number 61/09/10R | 3 June 2010 |
| Consideration Stage in the Assembly | 14 June 2010 |
| Further Consideration Stage | 22 June 2010 |
| Final Stage | 30 June 2010 |
| Royal Assent | 13 August 2010 |

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