Frank Field MP
Chair, Work & Pensions Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

7th January 2019

Dear Mr Field,

We write in relation to the Secretary of State Amber Rudd evidence session to the Committee on Wednesday 19th December 2018.

By way of background in Northern Ireland the issue of welfare reform almost brought the NI Assembly to the brink in 2015 due to concerns about its impact on vulnerable people. A consensus was reached in 2015 with the Fresh Start Agreement to mitigate some of the harshest impacts of welfare reform. Professor Eileen Evasion was tasked with identifying the mitigations, which she developed with the Welfare Reform Mitigations Working Group. The Group’s recommendations were adopted in full by the NI Assembly and most have been implemented. Please find a copy of the Report enclosed.

At the Committee session, we noted in particular the reference to the impact of Universal Credit on women, including steps that could be taken to protect women. There was some discussion about access to the Universal Credit money and plans to ensure that the main payment is made to the primary carer. There was considerable discussion about Scotland wanting to introduce split payments. Ruth George highlighted the position in Northern Ireland, that agreement was secured by the NI Assembly for:

- Split payments;
- Fortnightly payments;
- Direct payment of housing costs to landlords;

The Secretary of State confirmed that these arrangements are “done by hand”; the Permanent Secretary confirmed that they are done “manually”.


We have followed up this issue with the Department for Communities in NI and can confirm that in fact the arrangements in NI are as follows:

**Split Payments** – This would require UC Agent intervention on every application, however, to date, there have been no applications in Northern Ireland for split payments.

**Fortnightly (twice monthly) Payments** – Twice monthly payments do not require UC Agent intervention or manual workarounds as the UC computer system ‘recognises’ Northern Ireland postcodes and automatically defaults to twice-monthly payments.

**Direct Payment of Housing Costs to Landlords** –

- In relation to the Social Housing Sector – Once the claim has been processed payment is automated and does not require any further UC Agent intervention;

- In relation to Private Landlords – Work is on-going to automate this process but currently all payments to private landlords are processed manually.

We hope you find this information helpful and indeed would welcome the opportunity to provide an update to the Committee on social security developments in NI including the real concerns relating to the current mitigation package which is due to expire in March 2020.

Yours sincerely,

[Signature]

Professor Eileen Eavon, CBE

Kevin Higgins
Advice NI

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