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Rachel Powell

By email: rachel.powell@wrda.net

Dear Rachel

Statement by the Women's Policy Group on the gendered impact of COVID-19

Thank you for your email correspondence of 26 March to Minister Hargey on the above issue. I have been asked to reply on her behalf.

These times are very worrying and challenging for us all and the issues you have raised are valid concerns. Firstly, I want to assure you that the Minister, the wider Executive, and the NI Civil Service is working hard to put in place measures to support everyone, especially the most vulnerable. We also recognise that while this pandemic affects everyone, its impact can be very different depending on a number of factors including gender.

You will appreciate that this is a rapidly evolving situation and as such I am not able to provide an answer to all of the issues raised in your briefing paper. However, as much as possible I have outlined at **Annex A** the work being taken forward by the Department for Communities (DfC) to address the issues you have raised. Some of the issues you raise are the responsibility of other Departments, for example, access to sexual and reproductive health services for women. Therefore, I have arranged for your briefing paper to be circulated across other Departments so the issues raised can be considered.

This is a rapidly evolving situation and we are working hard to improve the service we are providing. As such some of the information in this letter may have already changed by the time it reaches you.

I hope you find this response useful and that you and those close to you are doing well and staying safe in these worrying times.

Yours sincerely

JENNIFER CAMPBELL

Annex A

Department for Communities

1. Voluntary and Community Programmes

The COVID 19 Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Response Programme has been initiated to support and enable the Voluntary and Community Sector Response to COVID 19. The Programme is taking a cross sectoral partnership approach to responding to the needs of the most vulnerable in this crisis. A number of strands are being developed including:

- **COVID 19 Community Helpline**

The Department for Communities has worked closely with Advice NI to develop a dedicated Freephone 'COVID-19 Community Helpline' to provide advice, direction and connection into other support services. The Community Helpline is now running 7 days per week 9-5 and will move to 9-9 as both demand and capacity increases. The COVID-19 Community Helpline will be of immediate support to people who have been advised by their GP to shield for 12 weeks, along with other elderly and vulnerable people. Helpline staff have access to a directory of services including domestic violence support and will provide, where possible, a warm handoff to the appropriate service.

- **Access to Food Including Free School Meals**

DfC have put in place a Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Leadership Group, with support and input from local government and other stakeholders. This Group has a key role in providing collective leadership across government and grass roots community organisations to develop and implement urgent measures for protecting and supporting communities in need. In line with this group DfC has led on the introduction of a new weekly food delivery service and is investing £10m in the service. Over the next three months this will support 10,000 food boxes being delivered each week to the most vulnerable in society during the current lockdown. The box of mainly non-perishable goods will be delivered directly to the door of vulnerable people who have been notified to shield by their GPs and who do not have access to local support networks. These boxes will also be available to those who are not shielding, but are in critical need of food. The service is scalable up and down given the uncertainty associated with the duration, scale and geographic spread of the pandemic. A food supply and distribution infrastructure has been established. Food leads have been identified in each Council area and Councils have submitted their plans for delivering the food element within this emergency, linking to a regional supply hub.

No Department has the whole solution to food support for vulnerable people. The Department of Education has put in place a financial response to Free School Meals

in the context of school closures and the Department for Communities is working to bring together all interests and support that will be so important in delivering relevant and much needed food support to the range of vulnerable groups we know we need to get to.

- **Access to Medical Supplies**

The Community Development and Health Network is working with Community Pharmacies and volunteer groups to ensure the safe delivery of prescription medications to those who are unable to access their medication through another means.

- **Volunteering**

Volunteer Now has launched a new online campaign #HelpEachOther to support those who wish to volunteer for COVID-19 related opportunities and also for those organisations who require the support of volunteers to deliver their services to those who need it most. Volunteer Now has also developed specific advice and good practice guidance for informal and formal volunteering during COVID-19. Key messages focus on staying safe and protecting both volunteers and those they will be working with.

- **Wellbeing In Isolation**

Working with Inspire Wellbeing we are developing a 3 tiered strategy focusing on the short, medium and long term plan to help people build wellbeing strategies into their daily lives. In the short term our focus will be on the immediate issues relating to anxiety, feelings of loss of control, loneliness, isolation and the 5 Steps to Wellbeing. In the medium term the focus will be on adding tailored content for specific issues such as parenting, bereavement, carers, and addictions. In the longer term we will focus on recreating a trauma informed community response to the end of the Corona Virus and a return to 'normality', a time when trauma and adverse experiences can manifest themselves.

2. Domestic Violence Services

The Department for Communities jointly funds the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Helpline delivered by NEXUS NI. The Department is aware that NEXUS NI has a contingency plan in place to address the expected increase in calls to the Helpline including additional staff, staff training and IT to enable remote working.

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) administers the Supporting People Programme on behalf of DfC. The programme supports a number of vulnerable groups including women fleeing domestic violence. The programme provides both accommodation based services such as refuges as well as floating support services in the community. DfC is working with NIHE to prioritise vulnerable people who are

supported through this programme with financial and other support. NIHE have also provided a letter to Supporting People service providers on key worker status of front line workers.

3. Access to Support Services and Safe Shelter

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive operates a Sanctuary Scheme as one accommodation option for households at risk of domestic violence which can where suitable and appropriate, offer households the choice of remaining in their homes. Currently this is only available to Housing Executive tenants.

As set out above the Supporting People programme administered by NIHE provides accommodation for a range of vulnerable groups including those experiencing homelessness and fleeing domestic abuse.

4. Urgent Support Arrangements for Vulnerable and Low Income Households

- **Ban on Evictions**

DfC have asked landlords to work with their tenants to plan ahead for the next few months. This could include establishing affordable repayment plans, taking into consideration tenants' individual circumstances, at the end of any mortgage holiday period. We are currently exploring a range of measures, including introducing a Bill in the Assembly which will extend the notice to quit period that landlords must give tenants to 12 weeks before proceeding with evictions. We also note that the County Courts are dealing with only urgent cases from 30 March onwards, and this is expected to further limit the number of cases of eviction proceeding during this period.

DfC has an agreement in place with all social housing landlords (Housing Executive and Housing Associations) that any social housing tenant facing difficulties paying rent during COVID-19 will not be evicted.

The Department will work with Housing Associations and the Housing Executive to help them keep tenants in their homes and to ensure that the welfare system can provide help to their tenants as quickly as possible.

The package of measures recently announced by the Chancellor, alongside changes to Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates and increases in periods of Discretionary Housing Payments, provide some assurance to both landlords and tenants at this time. We are presently exploring the group(s) of people who remain adversely affected by COVID-19, the scale of the issue and the mechanisms available to the Department to support these groups.

- **Discretionary Support**

Discretionary Support has been amended to include a specific grant for short-term living expenses where the claimant or any member of their immediate family is

infected by COVID-19 or is advised to self-isolate. Claims for this grant can be made by completing an application form on nidirect rather than the usual teleclaim process. The grant may be payable to people in employment provided they have an income below £18,137.

- **Suspension of Face to Face Assessments**

DfC have suspended face to face appointments across the Jobs and Benefits network and this includes medical assessments for Personal Independence Payment (PIP) and Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) to ensure continuity of awards.

- **Universal Credit (UC)**

New claims to Universal Credit can still be made on-line. All follow-up activities that would ordinarily have been undertaken in the office, will be managed on-line or over the phone. If someone is unable to make a claim online, or needs help with their claim, they can telephone the Universal Credit Helpline on 0800 012 1331.

People will not need to attend any Work Capability assessments during the COVID-19 outbreak and for three months from 30 March, work search and work availability requirements will be removed for new and existing claims to Universal Credit.

Operational easements have been implemented to ensure access to financial assistance is readily available.

The Department also provides the UC Contingency Fund, which can assist with living expenses for new UC claimants while waiting on their initial benefit payment. This is a non-repayable grant that can be paid up to mid-way through the second UC assessment period.

The rate at which the living expenses awards is calculated has also been increased during the current crisis.

5. Financial Support for Childcare

Financial support for those parents requiring childcare will continue as business as normal. Childcare payments will continue to be made throughout. Claimants can upload their costs as normal and these will be picked up by staff working cases.

Childcare costs are paid upfront on a monthly basis by the claimant who then returns that receipt to UC and the childcare element for that assessment period is then paid (at the end of month). Both the work condition and the childcare costs condition must be satisfied in order to have their childcare costs reimbursed in their UC.

If a child can't attend the nursery because of self-isolation then this would be treated in the same way as a child currently being ill for any other reason and their childcare will be paid. This will ensure the childcare place is available once the parents are ready to resume work.

If parents are not currently receiving childcare because of coronavirus and their childcare provider is asking for an advance payment to retain a place, costs will be reimbursed if the parents pay and report the costs and childcare recommences in either the current assessment period or the next two.

6. Expanding Economic Support Measures to Cover All Workers Affected by COVID-19

- **Universal Credit (UC) and Basic Element in Working Tax Credit**

As part of the Government's strategy of supporting people affected by Covid-19, from 6 April the standard allowance in Universal Credit and the basic element in Working Tax Credit was increased for one year. Both will increase by £20 per week on top of planned annual uprating. This will apply to all new and existing Universal Credit claimants and to existing Working Tax Credit claimants.

The minimum income floor in Universal Credit has been suspended for the duration of the outbreak – meaning every self-employed person can now access, in full, Universal Credit. It ensures that the self-employed are supported by the benefit system so that they can follow the Regional Agency for Public Health and Social Well-being guidance on social distancing and self-isolation.

- **Local Housing Allowance Rates**

From April, Local Housing Allowance rates will be increased to the 30th percentile of market rents. This will apply to all private renters in receipt of UC and to existing Housing Benefit claimants.

- **Carers**

Changes have also been made to ensure that carers can continue to be paid benefit when they have temporarily ceased to care for a severely disabled person due to either of them self-isolating or being infected with coronavirus. These changes to the current rules regarding entitlement are designed to cover a break in care due to the coronavirus so that carers can continue to receive their carer's allowance.

In addition, measures are also being taken operationally by DfC to ensure that during the period of COVID-19, that emotional support can also count towards the carer's allowance care threshold of 35 hours a week.

- **Housing Benefit**

Increasing the Housing Benefit additional earnings disregard from £17.10 to £37.10 per week.

- **Universal Credit (UC) and Job Seekers Allowance (JSA)**

In UC and new style Job seekers allowance (JSA), for the next 3 months, work search and work availability requirement will be removed for new and existing claims. Sanctions for these requirements will also be removed.

For both new style and old style JSA it will be ensured that Coronavirus and/or isolation are excluded for the purposes of a period of sickness.

- **Statutory Sick Pay**

Statutory Sick Pay will be paid for anyone who is sick or self-isolating because of coronavirus (COVID-19) and can be paid from the first day as and from 13 March. These changes will provide certainty to individuals that they will be entitled to Statutory Sick Pay from the very first day that they are off work, if they are unwell or isolating, in line with the latest Government advice.

- **Job Retention Scheme**

The Chancellor recently announced a multi-billion COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Job Retention Scheme to help workers, of any employer, to keep their jobs. The scheme, which covers employees here, means that the Government will pay up to 80% of the worker's monthly wages, up to a limit of £2,500. This will be backdated to 1st March and will be initially open for 3 months, it will be extended if necessary. Recipients, depending on their income, may also be eligible for UC.

- **Self-employed and Freelancers**

The Treasury announced a similar scheme which will assist self-employed and freelancers (including gig economy workers and those on zero-hours contracts) and this will apply here as well. This provides self-employed people earning under £50k per annum, with a grant of 80% of their average profit for 3 months up to a max of £2,500. It will however, be subject to tax and national insurance contributions, and will not be disregarded for benefit purposes. The income support scheme, which will be implemented by HMRC, will cover the three months to May. Grants will be paid in a single lump sum instalment covering all 3 months, and will start to be paid at the beginning of June. In the interim, the self-employed will be eligible for UC and for Discretionary Support.

Details on the Chancellor's recently announced 'Support for self-employed through the Self-employment Income Support Scheme' can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-to-employers-and-businesses-about-covid-19/covid-19-support-for-businesses#support-for-self-employed-through-the-self-employment-income-support-scheme>