

Statement to Assembly Covid-19 Ad Hoc Committee
Thursday 9th April 2020

Deirdre Hargey MLA, Minister for Communities

To begin this afternoon, I would like to formally recognise the many difficulties and challenges which people and communities, particularly the most vulnerable, are facing at this time. As Minister for the Department for Communities, I am committed to doing everything in my power to support the most vulnerable in our society.

Today I welcome the opportunity to update the Assembly on the important work which I have undertaken to help support and protect people in need during this public health crisis. In recent weeks, intensive work has taken place across the Department for Communities, in partnership with our multiple partner organisations, to ensure that those most in need are protected and receive the necessary help and support they require.

One of my key priorities has been to ensure continued delivery of benefits to those in need and to introduce necessary changes to the system to provide additional support and flexibilities in these extraordinary times. To date, work has been completed to change the necessary legislation, regulations and operational processes to provide easier and faster access to Universal Credit, Personal Independence Payment, Jobseekers Allowance, Employment Support Allowance and Discretionary Support.

We have seen unprecedented demand in terms of new claims for Universal Credit with 45,000 cases received in the last three weeks, a tenfold increase. As a result, we have reconfigured a lot of our services to make the payment of benefit to these people our first and foremost priority. Since 16th March the average number of claims received each week has been 16,650. This can be compared to a weekly average of 1,950 new claims before this crisis. Significant operational adjustments have been put in place which put a priority on payments and supporting the most vulnerable.

In the last 3 weeks we have made over 35,000 regular payments of UC with 99% of those paid on time. Our average speed to answering calls this week is under 3 minutes. We are answering nearly 95% of calls offered to us. Yes, there will be exceptions, but please recognise the context our staff are delivering against.

All of this has been delivered with a much reduced workforce due to the circumstances we are operating under. This has resulted in available staff being redirected to priority areas, including dealing with new claims for Universal Credit and Discretionary Support and maintaining important telephony services.

I would wish to take this opportunity to pay tribute to staff right across the Department who have provided an exceptional public service under the most severe pressures. Their determination and hard work has helped ensure that important services continue to be delivered at this exceptionally difficult time.

These important changes to our business operations have presented significant challenges for managers and staff. We have worked closely with trade unions to ensure that we comply with social distancing guidelines across our office network and have increased cleaning regimes to protect our staff.

Many staff are now working rota systems to ensure that these guidelines are strictly adhered to and I would commend them for their dedication in working long hours and over weekends to ensure that vital public services are delivered.

Members will be aware that the Universal Credit standard allowance has increased for everyone by £86.67 a month. In addition, everyone making a new claim to Universal Credit can now apply for a non-repayable Universal Credit Contingency Fund grant, available through Discretionary Support. This is publicised through NIDirect - the main citizen facing information portal as well as the Department's social media channels and through the network of advice and community groups.

In terms of Discretionary Support, a number of steps have been taken to improve our ability to respond to increased demand. We have amended the Regulations to widen the grant eligibility criteria to provide a grant for short term living expenses to assist claimants specifically affected by COVID-19. An on-line application form for the new

living expenses grant is now available and staff have been redeployed to this area to ensure that we can manage the increase in applications.

We have also suspended face to face appointments across the Jobs and Benefits network and this includes medical assessments for PIP and ESA to ensure continuity of awards. Access to telephony channels will continue to be available for anyone claiming UC, PIP, ESA, JSA and Discretionary Support. However, given the significant staff absences experienced across all benefit operational areas and the potential long delays in answering calls, new on-line application forms for ESA, JSA and Discretionary Support (Covid-19 living expenses) are now available on NIDirect. The forms can be downloaded, completed and emailed directly to the relevant benefit area for processing.

Due to the Covid-19 crisis, some households in social homes may face difficulties with paying the rent which are beyond their control. I can assure these households that their home is secure and they will not be evicted. Both the Housing Executive and all of our Housing Associations have given a commitment to treat all rent issues with sensitivity. They will support tenants through this difficult period. 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 fast as possible.

The package of measures recently announced by the UK Chancellor, alongside changes to Local Housing Allowance rates and increases in periods of Discretionary Housing Payments, provide some assurance to both landlords and tenants at this time. I have also announced that the proposed Housing Executive rent increase will be put on hold until October 2020. People are worried about their jobs and the impacts of this crisis on their families and I do not want them to face additional pressures about whether they can pay their rent. My officials and I are also exploring the groups 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.

I am particularly focused on how we can protect the homeless during this period. The Housing Executive has taken a number of emergency measures, including the

sourcing of additional temporary accommodation for those who are homeless or threatened with homelessness. I am thankful that we have no-one currently sleeping on the streets of Belfast and I would commend those who have worked with us in the Public Health Agency, the Department for Health, PSNI, the Probation Board and local homeless providers to ensure the protection of this most vulnerable of groups.

The Department's Make the Call Helpline has reprioritised its available resources in light of the decision to step back from home visits and attending community events in order to protect vulnerable people and minimise the spread of Covid-19. All additional resources have been redeployed to the telephony team to increase its capacity to assist those who need to access benefit advice and other supports and services. I know that this vital service has been a lifeline to many vulnerable people during this crisis and we will ensure that the necessary resources remain in place to continue this service.

My Department has also worked closely with Advice NI to support the establishment of a Freephone Covid-19 Community Helpline. This service is available 9.00-5.00 seven days a week to ensure that the most vulnerable and those at risk of Covid-19 have access to practical support services and emotional support at this most difficult time. The Department also provides funding to Advice NI for the Independent Welfare Changes helpline which is also another important source of information for the public.

Whilst the main focus of the Department has been on responding to the ongoing crisis situation, I have continued to progress important work in relation to welfare mitigations. A draft Bill to allow for the extension of mitigation payments for the bedroom tax has been shared with the Executive. Once approval to proceed has been granted then the Department will ensure that it is formally presented to the Assembly as quickly as possible.

The legislation to extend the remaining welfare mitigation schemes will be laid shortly after the Bill. However, the Department has now implemented contingency arrangements with mitigation payments made under the sole Authority of the Budget Act from 1 April 2020. This approach has been agreed with the Department of Finance

and was announced by the Minister of Finance during his opening statement to the Assembly on the Budget Bill on 25 February 2020.

The use of the Budget Act will allow the Department to make payments to people who would otherwise be entitled to a Welfare Supplementary Payment. This approach is an exceptional measure that is necessary to protect people and ensure that payments continue to be made. This approach will continue for a short period until the relevant legislation to extend the mitigation schemes is approved by the Assembly.

At this point I would wish to place on record my sincere thanks to our range of voluntary and community sector partners who continue to deliver important services to local communities. I 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.

This partnership approach has been demonstrated this week with the introduction of a new weekly food distribution service. My Department is investing £10m in this service over the next three months which will see 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.

Whilst my Department is leading on the initiative, it has only been made possible through collaborative working with Health Trusts, local councils, the Voluntary and Community sector and the private sector. This vital service will ensure that those most in need in our society who do not have a support network of family and friends to help them through this emergency will have access to basic food supplies. It will also allow those at risk of social isolation to see a friendly face and know that we as a society

have not forgotten about them. There is a tremendous amount of goodwill and generosity in action across our society, which is very welcome at this challenging time.

The Department has taken the lead in responding to the challenges that community and voluntary organisations face in introducing a range of flexibilities in terms and conditions around grant funding, including upfront payment and reduced bureaucracy. In addition, we have introduced a COVID-19 Community Support Fund, releasing £1.5m initially, through local government's existing Community Support Programme. This funding will enable our local Councils to directly support grass roots organisations in tackling poverty and helping those in greatest need. We have also released £200k to the Community Foundation's Small Grants Programme to further tackle the crisis at a local level.

I was also pleased to work with the Education Minister to announce a new scheme to introduce direct payments to families whose children would normally benefit from a free school meal. Payments are being issued by the Education Authority and will also cover the Easter holiday period. This is an important initiative to ensure that families do not experience additional hardship as a result of the decision to close our schools.

One of the positive aspects to arise from this crisis has been the willingness of people to reach out to help others and to volunteer their services across a range of areas. I was pleased to work with Volunteer Now in launching a public campaign **#helpeachother** to direct new volunteers to its online registration and volunteer matching platform. Since its launch the campaign has already had over 2,000 people registering to express support. Existing volunteers across health trusts, sporting bodies and other large organisations are also being coordinated to respond to immediate needs.

I am conscious that other sectors are facing significant challenges at this time. I recently announced a new £1m Covid-19 Creative Support Fund which will be a mechanism to support individual artists and institutions in finding innovative ways to combat social isolations and address wellbeing challenges. The Arts Sector has such an important role to play in keeping spirits high and promoting creativity in these difficult times.

I have also asked my officials to work with Sport NI and the Sports Forum to consider immediate practical steps which can be taken to support sporting organisations. To date this has involved early release of 2020/21 grant awards and we are also seeking to have a programme in place to provide emergency financial relief to grassroots sporting organisations.

We are all involved in a fast-moving and most challenging situation which demands a highly flexible and responsive approach across Government and with our partners in the voluntary, community and private sectors. I will continue to work closely with Executive colleagues, with the Committee for Communities and with this Assembly to ensure that we do all in our power to limit the damage of this deadly health crisis and to protect the most vulnerable across our communities.

I know that I will have your full support for the measures we have introduced so far and I am happy to engage further with Members to explore how we can all work together to protect everyone within this society.