

Social Security Committee

16th Meeting, 2017 (Session 5), Thursday 14 September 2017

MECOPP workshops on Social Security Bill, 29 & 31 August 2017

1. On 29 August, Ben Macpherson attended a workshop on the Social Security Bill for Chinese carers arranged by MECOPP. The workshop was attended by 14 carers and MECOPP support workers. A second workshop was held for South Asian carers on 31 August. It was attended by a member of the Committee's clerking team.
2. The note below summarises the views that were expressed at the workshops:

Regulations

- There was general support amongst the group of South Asian carers for putting the rules in regulations as it was thought that this will make it easier to make changes to the system in the future. However, they felt that people should still be consulted before any changes are made.

Principles

- There was general support among both groups of carers for the principles.
- Both groups also agreed that in the current system, it can be extremely difficult for those who don't speak English to access information on benefits or speak to officials over the phone. They lack the computer skills to make use of online facilities and are often reliant on support workers and family members to help them.
- An additional principle regarding equity of access was therefore suggested i.e. equal access to information, advice, to be able to apply for benefits etc.
- It was also suggested that there should be specific help and support made available for non-English speaking communities.

Charter

- There was general agreement from both groups that the charter is a good idea.
- Participants at the Chinese carers workshop thought that the annual report should be honest, sufficiently detailed and publically available.
- They also suggested that as principles can be difficult to pin down it would be helpful to have a concrete set of standards underpinning each one.

- The group of South Asian carers suggested that an action plan should be produced in addition to the annual report, which outlines the steps that will be taken to deal with issues raised in the report.
- A suggestion was made at the first workshop that an expert panel (perhaps like the Scottish Government's experience panels) could be set up to assess whether the principles / charter are working in practice. Panels should be set up for different communities otherwise they could be difficult for people to access if English is not their first language.

Rules

- There was general support for the rules from both groups but the point was raised that effort will need to be made to make those in non-English speaking communities aware of them. They suggested that support organisations, such as MECOPP, could be used to do this.
- Attendees at the second workshop also felt that the rules should be kept simple and uncomplicated. They should also be available in different languages.

Benefits

- Funeral payments – both groups suggested that a quicker and more efficient decision making process is needed in the new system to make things easier for people during a difficult time. South Asian carers felt that it should also be responsive to different cultures and religious practices. For example, Islamic practices require the deceased to be buried as soon as possible after death so families need a quick decision regarding entitlement as they can't wait weeks to arrange the burial. They also felt that people need to be made aware that this kind of assistance exists as many don't know about it.
- Cold weather payment – a suggestion was made by the group of Chinese carers that the temperature at which the cold weather payment is triggered should be looked at, as elderly people are more susceptible to the cold and therefore have higher heating costs. It was also suggested that it could be offered to those with chronic illnesses or mobility issues.
- Winter fuel payment – the South Asian carers felt that a single annual payment is not enough to help meet fuel costs over the winter months. They also felt it should be extended to individuals with chronic health conditions, single parents and those on low incomes.
- PIP – the group of South Asian carers suggested that the forms need to be made shorter and less complicated. They felt that the questions should be simplified and be clearer in what they are asking.

- They also felt that, in general, more accessible literature is needed which provides information on benefit entitlement, how to apply etc. They suggested that it should be produced in different languages and be available in community locations such as GP surgeries, libraries etc.

Short-term Assistance

- At both workshops, most agreed that short-term assistance is a good idea and that it should not have to be paid back once a decision has been made. However, some attendees felt that if the individual is not entitled to the benefits they have applied for, or if their appeal fails, they should have to repay the money.
- The group of South Asian carers also felt that, if the short-term assistance payments are not required to be paid back, safeguards will be needed to stop potential abuse of the system i.e. by people who apply for benefits knowing they are not eligible, just to get the short-term assistance as they know they will not have to pay it back.
- Both groups felt that a quick, efficient and accurate decision making process is needed so there is less need for this kind of assistance in the first place.

Carers Allowance

- There was general agreement amongst both groups of attendees that they are happy that carers allowance is being increased. However, the group of South Asian carers felt that it is not enough and needs to be more in line with the cost of living.
- The South Asian carers also felt that there should be more flexibility in the number of hours you are allowed to work and still claim carers allowance
- Both groups suggested that financial help should be made available for the period immediately after someone's caring responsibility ends and their carers allowance stops.
- A participant at the Chinese carers group also raised the issue around carers allowance and state pension i.e. it stopping or changing when claimant reaches state pension age.