

Thank you to the All Island Social Security Network for arranging this fantastic event and for allowing us all this platform today.

My name is Samantha Gallagher and I am the Assistant Manager and Welfare Rights Specialist at Community Advice Fermanagh. Within this role, I am Head of Advice and Head of Social Policy working collaboratively with our membership leaders, such as Advice NI and Law Centre NI in holding the government of Northern Ireland to account.

Community Advice Fermanagh provides free, impartial, independent and confidential front line advice to the people of County Fermanagh.

There is a common misconception that it is only those not working who claim social security but since COVID and the cost of living crisis thereafter, the profile of our service user has changed . Now the bulk of people who we assist are (1) of working age (2) who are in work and who are struggling financially to get by or who are struggling to navigate the excessively complex system of Universal Credit. You will see from the screen here the numbers we dealt with in May and the significantly high numbers of working age people.

I am here today to give you an insight into the experiences of universal credit recipients in Northern Ireland and how often the system fails to protect their rights.

To give some context because It still amazes me that people on the island of Ireland often do not know exactly where Fermanagh is! So, for those of you who don't know Fermanagh is located in Northern Ireland but based on the western fringe, largely bordering ROI and with a particularly rural landscape.

As such you will find the worker profile and the profile of a social security claimant slightly different.

So, In terms of the worker profile, There are only really 3-4 large employers in Fermanagh,. The average wage is one of the lowest in the United Kingdom. It is currently 12% lower than the NI average. There is also a lot of seasonal work, cross border work, part time work and zero hour contracts.

Because of this, there is a reliance on social security as a top up to wages and it is very much a means of keeping people out of poverty.

So, first of all I wanted to highlight the difficulties faced by rural workers

We can evidence through case study and I will go through a few of these today to give you all a real flavour of social security in practice

Universal Credit has within its core a Claimant Commitment that must be signed in order to claim the benefit. The commitment has work related requirements and depending on your circumstances you will be required to look for work and it may not always make sense. We have an example of a single farmer, living alone. Despite him working 40 hours on average per week, he has been told because he does not earn enough, he is required to look for more work.

This claimant commitment has become an issue for families as well. We have a couple and they have two children. Without considering if their income was actually over the Administrative Earnings Threshold, which is what they should have done first, they told Mum that she would have to look for work despite already working part time. She tried to explain that working part time was all she could manage due to living rurally and having two children. She advises us her work coach told her verbatim and in this tone “there is such a thing as child care you know”. But the nearest child care provider is 24 miles away. The issue here is this ladies reasons for working part time are not acceptable under UC regulations, despite them being a regular rural issue. UC itself does not understand or accommodate a rural way of life.

There are many more aspects of UC that are problematic for rural working people. Other issues we have seen on the ground include:

- (a) **The digital nature of the benefit.** Fermanagh has many areas with no broadband at all.

We also see many people, older people in particular, getting family members to help them. I always give this important example, we had a client, a lady in her mid fifties, relying on her daughter to manage her UC claim. UC were aware that she could not even log in to her account without her daughter. Her daughter took ill, was unable to action something required by UC. They shut down her claim. It took a complaint from us to resolve the matter. It has since then been our policy never to encourage family assistance with a digital claim and press for telephone claims where appropriate.

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(c)- The real time and monthly nature of the benefit is also causing issues. Most workers in Fermanagh are paid weekly so if a claimant has 5 weekly wage payments in one UC assessment period, their UC will be reduced the following month. There is a real lack of understanding amongst claimants on this and this is something we are continuously needing to explain. UC staff are also not providing explanations on this in a manner which claimants can understand. UC staff need to be mindful of this otherwise, there is a real risk, with UC being digital, that the person at the end of the screen is forgotten about.

One of the biggest trends we are seeing on the ground presently is serious issues for the self employed in trying to navigate UC. Those significantly affected include farmers, mechanics, builders, tradesmen. All work seasonally, contribute significantly to our economy, our housing and our food industry but are not receiving the support under UC that they used to receive under Tax Credits.

There is still a lot to understand and interpret when it comes to navigating UC as a self employed person. The requirement to report income and expenditure monthly, what is income and what is expenditure? Monthly reporting instead of yearly just does not work for Farmers as their earnings fluctuate eg they receive single farm payment in September which means high income but then have no income October to February. But because the SFP was so high it adds surplus earnings to UC and we had a number of farmers receive no universal credit as well as no income from September through to March because of this.

For your average person on the street, there is a lot of jargon to understand and it has become overwhelming for many.

I gave a speech at Stormont last year advising that there were going to be issues with self employment under UC and instead of getting upstream the Department waited for it to happen. I can now confirm that after months of negotiations and working through live examples with the Department we have managed to secure some operational protections including a longer Gateway appointments as well as additional telephone and face to face support with uploading account information.

It is worth pointing out however that despite this additional support, the very nature of the UC AP makes it very difficult. It is the AP, from our research, which has caused most apathy in choosing not to move to UC. We are seeing large numbers choosing not to move or not surviving past the first 3 APS. We are already seeing an increase in foodbank referrals since Move to UC started. This really needs to be explored from a rural poverty perspective and so, we have asked the Department for numbers on this and we await a response.

In the meantime, we can look at our own statistics from Community Advice Fermanagh. If we take a snapshot of one of our rural outreach clinics to give you an idea of this apathy:

- I attended an outreach clinic in Kinawley. A very rural village on the Fermanagh Cavan Border and a significant farming community. In one day I carried out 27 Benefit Entitlement Checks.
- Out of those 27 families I seen, 25 of them were seeking advice on Move to UC.
- Out of those 25 families moving to UC, 23 of them were self employed mainly in farming.
- Out of those 25 families moving to UC, 8 of them did not have the digital skills needed to set up and maintain the claim

Lets tease this out more, so out of the 25 families who have to move to UC lets look at who has moved to UC and had a TPP added to their claim. All of them!! All of them!! I think there can be no denying that UC is indeed an austerity benefit.

Lets look further again, so out of the 25 families who have to move to UC lets also look at who has:

- Chosen not to proceed with Move to UC: 6 families out of 25 choose not to bother with the move
- and let us look at who has managed to stay on UC after 3 Aps? 4 families. Only 4 families managed to stay on UC past the first 3 APS. That is 19 families who have not managed to stay on this benefit.

They cited a variety of reasons, some had surplus earnings due to selling livestock or receiving Single Farm Payment, others simply found the system unbearable to work or too overwhelming, others said they were not supported enough and so gave up and others cited the monthly reporting as too much work in addition to their farming commitments.

This to be is very concerning. That is a 76% failure to transition to UC. The knock on impact that this will have is also further reaching than one might realise. Can these families realistically survive without this additional financial support? These families may previously have received free school meals- that means they now have to pay for that themselves, can they afford to do it? Will that rural school see a reduction in free school meal uptake which of course has a knock on impact on the funding they receive in terms of being able to show rural deprivation for example.

There is also a lot of incorrect advice being provided about UC for self employed people and this is incorrect advise by DFC staff. We have had examples of female staff giggling and saying they do not know much about farming so they are not asking appropriate questions about expenditure, we have staff misunderstanding the AET, and evidence of incorrect Transitional Protection Payments resulting in benefit overpayments.

We have even seen errors in advice being provided by Accountants. I have an example here on the screen from the leading partner in one of Fermanagh's biggest Accountancy Firms specialising in farming accounts. The errors I have highlighted and they include:

1. UC will “want to see those figures within 14 days of the end of each month involved” that is not correct. UC want income and expenditure on the last day of your Assessment Period. An assessment period may or may not and usually does not mirror a calendar month. This needs to be clearer
2. He advises them that they would certainly become ineligible after the first year. We carried out benefit checks for this family and they actually will have some entitlement even if MIF is applied albeit lower than Tax Credits.
3. They enclose pages from a book based on English Law
4. They also refer to the Advice Sector. So, it appears that the Advice Sector have now become the replacement for Accountants and to mop up mistakes made by Government Departments.

Lastly and given the nature of today being an All Island Based Event, I also wanted to highlight to you the difficulties faced by cross-border workers trying to use the Universal Credit System.

I have on the screen a picture of Pettigo Village which rests in County Donegal but just over these black pillars is Tullyhommon Co.Fermanagh. The border is fluid to the people who live and work along it.

The border region has always had its difficulties in trying to navigate two social security systems and there are very few experts on social security both sides of the Border because it is so complex.

An example of this is a young family in their late twenties living in Roslea Co. Fermanagh. Mum and Dad both lived and worked in Roslea. There is no child care in Roslea and so their nearest option was a creche just the other side of the border in Monaghan. They applied for help with child care costs under UC and were told that, because the provider was not in the jurisdiction, UC could not pay for it. They had got into financial difficulties trying to cover the cost and could not afford the essentials when they initially contacted our service. We checked the legislation on this, and this is not correct. You can use an outside jurisdiction provider. We spoke with Employers For Childcare and together we appealed this decision.

We then had another example of incorrect interpretation. So, in this scenario, we have a couple with children who live in NI. One parent works in North and the other in the South. The parent working in South has a live claim to Working Family Payment in Ireland. Working Family Payment is not considered income for UC purposes. However, we had evidence that UC were taking WFP pound for pound off people's UC claim and this was an isolated incident. Centre For Cross Border Studies contacted us to seek help in looking in to this and I was able to establish that this was incorrect practice and it was agreed that new guidance would go out to UC staff.

But this should not be happening, UC staff who operate claims for a border County should have received this specific training and we should not have to fix these mistakes and look out for these errors.

It goes back to the complexity I mentioned earlier, Advice Sector receive funding per head of population, given the complexities dealt with from both a rural and border perspective I would question if this practice is a fair allocation of funds.

Mistakes should not be made in terms of social security service delivery or entitlements. It is very clear from the mistakes I have outlined today and the operation of UC itself that our governments do not put enough policy emphasis on rural living despite Ireland the island being very rural in nature. UC fails rural communities by its very design.

We have one in four living in poverty in Fermanagh which is very much a reflection of a rural community along the border. The Border Area throws up complexities within our systems that cannot and should not be downplayed. The complexities are compounded by years of economic and political neglect, underinvestment in jobs and infrastructure. The status quo cannot be maintained and there is also a wider significant policy issue. It is naïve to think a benefit like universal credit, with such a strong emphasis on work can operate in isolation without looking at child care strategies, disability and employment rights, the housing crisis, rural needs, the state of our roads, anti poverty strategies, and the state of our healthcare system.

Social Security should allow for equal access for all and people should always have enough income through work and/or social security to be able to get the essentials.