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Chair of Stormont All Party Group calls for urgent crisis funding for childcare sector

The Chair of the Northern Ireland Assembly's All Party Group on Early Education and Childcare is today (Monday 10 January) calling for urgent funding to address the crisis unfolding within the childcare sector as a result of Covid-19. Ahead of a meeting of the All Party Group this week, Chris Lyttle, MLA – also Chair of Stormont's Education Committee – has written to Ministers asking for the Northern Ireland Executive to reopen critical Covid-19 funding that was key in supporting the sector through the pandemic. Without this funding, many providers are at risk of permanent closure, with significant impact on parents, on the economy and society more broadly.

Mr Lyttle explains: "Childcare providers are telling us this is the most challenging time they have ever faced. Last year, 7 out of 10 providers were either just breaking even or were making a loss. This latest phase of the pandemic has had a further severe and detrimental impact. Stakeholders from across the childcare sector have reported growing numbers of closures and a sector in crisis. With more people again working from home, staff shortages, increased costs for PPE and cleaning materials and rising cases of Covid-19 across the community, many childcare providers are at breaking point. Without the reopening of vital crisis funding, it is inevitable more will be forced to close, while others may have no option but to increase fees to parents, who are also struggling.

The East Belfast MLA continues: "As well as the associated job losses across the sector, this will have the knock-on effect of making it more difficult for parents to find the childcare they need in order to work. This will put even more pressure on employers at a time when many are already facing a staffing crisis due to Covid-19 sickness and isolation. Over 40% of the workforce in Northern Ireland are parents with dependent children – including teachers, doctors, nurses, retail staff, those working in hospitality and blue light emergency services. If they are unable to access the childcare they need, that will have a major impact on every aspect of life, for everyone, whether parents or not.

He concludes: "Without urgent financial assistance from the Executive, our childcare sector is in a truly perilous position. Covid-19 pressures are creating immense financial difficulties for a sector that has stepped up and done an incredible job in supporting children and their families through these most challenging times, as well as facilitating workers, across all sectors, to continue in work, providing vital public services and contributing to the economy."

Representatives of the childcare sector have been meeting regularly with policy-makers from the Departments of Health and Education as part of a Childcare Reference Group throughout the Covid-19 pandemic and to date, almost £40 million in funding support has been allocated.

The All Party Group on Early Education and Childcare continues to provide a forum for those with an interest in early education and childcare, acting as a vehicle for driving policy and legislative development and promoting best practice. The Group has played a key role in articulating the need for a new Childcare Strategy, which must deliver strategic long-term investment to support parents and the childcare sector, and was a key commitment in 'New Decade, New Approach'. The Department of Education is currently working on a new Childcare Strategy, which is expected to be launched for public consultation later in 2022.

ENDS

Notes:

1. The office bearers of the All Party Group on Early Education and Childcare are:

Chair: Chris Lyttle, MLA

Vice Chair: Sinead McLaughlin, MLA

Secretary: Nicola Brogan, MLA

Treasurer: Claire Sugden, MLA

Further details on the All Party Group on Early Education and Childcare can be found here:

<http://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/mlas/apgdetails.aspx?&cid=1705>

2. The Department of Education has provided almost £40 million in funding to the childcare sector to alleviate pressures faced as a result of the pandemic. Most recently, a Childcare Temporary Closure Fund ran from 1 October to 31 December 2021 providing a financial contribution to providers as a result of the Covid-19 related closures. Further information can be found here: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/news/mcilveen-announces-further-measures-support-childcare-providers>