Assembly motion on the cessation of support services for carers
Coalition of Carers Organisations Northern Ireland

INTRODUCTION
1. The Coalition of Carers Organisations NI supports the motion scheduled for debate in the NI Assembly on Tuesday 7 July:

This Assembly recognises the significant impact of COVID-19 on children and adults with a disability, the exceptional contribution of family carers further to the cessation of many statutory and non-statutory services and calls on the Minister of Health to produce a detailed plan for the resumption of services.

2. It is estimated that up to 310,000 people in Northern Ireland may be providing unpaid care to a family member or loved one, including 98,000 people who have become carers since the COVID-19 outbreak began.\(^1\)

3. Before the outbreak of COVID-19, unpaid carers already experienced difficulties in accessing enough practical support and short breaks/respite to look after their own health and wellbeing. These challenges have been further compounded by the pandemic, with many coping with additional caring responsibilities and limited or no external support.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON UNPAID CARERS
4. Unpaid carers across Northern Ireland are providing support every day to loved ones affected by poor health, chronic illnesses and other physical and mental health conditions. Many do this round-the-clock, while others have to juggle their caring role with other responsibilities such as work and family. It can be physically, mentally and emotionally exhausting, and research has consistently shown the negative impact on carers’ health and wellbeing.

5. Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, one in five local carers did not have access to support for their caring role,\(^2\) and this situation has only been exacerbated by the pandemic. Survey data shows that 78% of carers in Northern Ireland are providing more care now than before the outbreak began, with each carer providing, on average, an additional 10 hours of care per week.\(^3\)

6. Crucially, 45% said they are providing more care because their local care and support services had been reduced or closed. Social distancing and other lockdown measures have resulted in the removal or reduction of key supports such as domiciliary care, day opportunities, short breaks and appropriate care packages following a discharge from hospital. This has meant an extra burden on carers to provide emotional, personal and therapeutic care and support, and the impact this is having on them is palpable:

- More than two-thirds (64%) say they feel overwhelmed and are worried that they will ‘burn out’.
- 70% are worried about the negative impact on their physical and mental health.

7. Carers are among the groups most vulnerable to experiencing loneliness, with 74% of local carers saying they felt lonely or socially isolated as a result of their caring role prior to COVID-19.\(^1\)

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\(^1\) Carers UK. Carers Week 2020 research report: The rise in the number of unpaid carers during the Coronavirus outbreak.
\(^3\) Carers UK (2020). Caring behind closed doors: Forgotten families in the Coronavirus outbreak.
For many carers, the outbreak will be an even more lonely and isolating experience, as they are cut off from wider social support networks and relevant services.

Access to regular respite is critical to allowing carers to take a break from their caring role, recharge their batteries and look after their own health and wellbeing. Prior to the COVID outbreak, less than 10% of carers said they felt able to take sufficient breaks, and the reduction or closure of local care and support services, reduction in home visits by paid carer workers and the impact of social distancing measures is likely to have made this even worse.

THE TIME AHEAD

It must be recognised that, while COVID-19 has served to intensify the burden on local carers, pressures on the services which support them long pre-date the outbreak. For instance, the widely acknowledged financial pressure facing adult social care has often meant a reduction in the services available to patients and the carers who support them. A significant increase in funding levels will be needed to allow Health and Social Care Trusts to rebuild after the crisis, as well as bringing forward plans for the long-term reform of adult social care.

The Coalition of Carers Organisations Northern Ireland supports the Assembly motion and further recommends that the Executive:

- Co-produces an action plan with carers to restore essential services and support carers to transition back to some sort of normality as lockdown eases and while COVID-19 remains present.
- Ensure key work continues in exploring the long-term needs of carers and strategic planning to meet those needs in partnership with carers.
- Identify carers as a priority group requiring emotional support services and develop an agreed pathway for them to access interventions such as psychological talking therapies.
- Work in partnership with third sector organisations providing advocacy and other key support services to carers.

For more information please contact:

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Established in 2016, the Coalition of Carers Organisations is an alliance of community and voluntary organisations collaborating to advance the rights of unpaid carers in Northern Ireland.

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5 Carers UK (2019). Carers at breaking point.