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PRESS RELEASE

Childcare and its role in the return to work after lockdown

“I can think of few things of such fundamental importance to families, the economy and society as the availability of good quality, affordable childcare” says Chief Commissioner of the Equality Commission, Geraldine McGahey.

The Commission is adding its voice to calls to support the childcare sector and act on childcare provision.

Ms McGahey said: “More than ever, families across Northern Ireland need access to affordable, good quality, flexible childcare to enable those who can and wish to return to work.”

The Commission has for many years been calling for action on childcare here, where childcare costs are amongst the highest in the UK.

The lack of childcare provision impacts women disproportionately and lone parents are likely to be particularly affected. Good childcare provision is key to increasing women’s economic independence and in promoting equality between men and women.

“In the current circumstances, childcare provision needs to be more flexible than ever before. It needs to take account not only of the working patterns of parents or carers, which may be more flexible, shift-based or part-time than previously, but also of the potential of a part-time school timetable where children may only be in school for part of each week or in alternate weeks.

“In Northern Ireland, grandparents are often very involved with helping to care for their grandchildren and the shielding/distancing requirements may limit their ability to do this. This may increase demand for formal childcare places and providers may need to be supported to do this. Alongside this, employers will also need to be flexible and supportive as working parents seek to balance employment, schooling and childcare requirements.

“Childcare is a key priority in New Decade, New Approach. Whilst short term measures to support childcare providers introduced during the current Covid 19 pandemic, including additional funding to provide additional childcare places for children of key workers and vulnerable children are to be welcomed, the need to act

on childcare provision in the longer term is urgent. It is important that we get childcare right and that parents and childcare providers are involved in the policy decisions made.

Ms McGahey concluded: "The time to act on childcare is now. The Commission is calling on Government to support families and employers as everyone seeks to get back to work."