



The Rt Hon Hilary Benn MP  
Secretary of State for Northern Ireland  
**By email**

Michelle O'Neill MLA  
First Minister

Emma Little-Pengelly MLA  
Deputy First Minister  
**By email**

26 March 2026

Dear Secretary of State, First Minister and Deputy First Minister

**Re:- Urgent Intervention Required on Local Growth Fund Decisions and the Future of Supported Employability Services**

We are writing collectively as organisations from across Northern Ireland's voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector to express our profound and urgent concern about the imminent impact of Local Growth Fund decisions on vital community-based services across Northern Ireland.

Within days, the current funding profile will begin to take effect. The consequences are no longer hypothetical - they are immediate, measurable, and deeply damaging.

Across our sector, we now face:-

- The immediate withdrawal of frontline services
- The removal of support for thousands of people in need
- Hundreds of staff redundancies
- The loss of trusted, community-based infrastructure and expertise built over many years.

For many organisations, including those delivering critical employability, inclusion, and skills support, this is not simply a reduction in funding - it represents a breaking point.

The reduction in revenue funding from £25 million to £9.2 million under Local Growth marks a fundamental shift that cannot be absorbed. Organisations are being placed in an impossible position: demand for support is rising, yet the means to deliver it are being removed.

At the same time, the overwhelming prioritisation of capital over revenue funding exposes a deeper flaw in the current approach. Capital investment cannot replace the staff, relationships and day-to-day services that enable people to move towards work, stability, and independence.

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You cannot build opportunity without funding the people and services who deliver it.

We have repeatedly warned of the thousands of people each year and the hundreds of staff who stand to be impacted by this decision.

Behind every number, is a person:-

- Individuals who will lose trusted support and pathways to opportunity, often mid-journey
- Highly skilled and experienced staff now facing redundancy after years of dedicated service
- Communities who will see vital services disappear, with no replacements or suitable alternatives in place.

Those hardest hit will be those already facing the greatest barriers and with the least access to alternative supports, those furthest from the labour market. This includes individuals with learning difficulties, people with long-term health conditions, young people disengaged from education, those experiencing mental health challenges, women who have faced persistent barriers to employment, and people with convictions seeking a second chance. The knock-on effects will extend across families and communities in every constituency in Northern Ireland.

This is the real impact. This is the real cost.

This situation has not arisen overnight. The sector has consistently raised concerns throughout the transitions from European Social Fund (ESF) to UK Shared Prosperity Funds (UKSPF) and now to the Local Growth Fund. At each stage, instability has increased. We have now reached a point where the consequences will be unavoidable unless urgent action is taken.

We are clear: this outcome is avoidable.

We therefore call, at this critical stage, for immediate intervention from both the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Executive.

- Westminster must recognise that the current funding model does not reflect the scale of need and must urgently revisit the funding profile - particularly the disproportionate reduction in revenue.
- The Northern Ireland Executive must act with urgency and leadership to ensure these vital services are not lost. The consequences of inaction will be felt in every community across Northern Ireland and across our already stretched public services.

If a solution to the current funding model cannot be agreed before the 1 April, an alternative funding resource must be secured to prevent the collapse of essential services, whilst a more long-term funding model and approach is agreed.

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This is not simply a funding issue, it is a test of political responsibility.

If these decisions proceed unchecked, services will be lost, the jobs underpinning them will go, and the people who rely on their support will be left without it. This would be a direct and foreseeable outcome.

As a united sector, representing thousands of staff and tens of thousands of individuals across Northern Ireland, we will not allow this to pass without challenge.

The needs of those we support will not simply disappear on 1 April. We cannot and will not quietly allow essential services to fall away, nor allow those we advocate for to be robbed of the right to future opportunities and support.

We will continue to advocate, to speak out and to hold decision-makers to account for the consequences of these choices.

But there is still time to act and on behalf of those we support we urge you to do so. We remind you of the commitments made in both the UK Civil Society Covenant and the Northern Ireland Partnership Agreement to work collaboratively with our sector in the best interests of the people we collectively serve. As we have repeatedly stated, commitments to codesign a new programme for 2027 and beyond will be meaningless if services are allowed to collapse now. Without immediate intervention, there will be no foundation left on which to build. Once lost, this infrastructure cannot simply be re-established or rebuilt.

We urge both the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Executive to act now to prevent irreversible damage to services, organisations and the people who depend on them. If this is not addressed, the loss of services and jobs will not be an unforeseen consequence - it will be a conscious political decision and a profound failure of leadership.

The next few days matter.

At this critical point, we ask for your leadership, your intervention, and your assurance that these vital services will not be allowed to simply fall away as a result of a short-sighted funding decision that will have irreversible long-term consequences across our communities.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Celine McStravick'.

Celine McStravick  
Chief Executive, NICVA

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**And on behalf of Northern Ireland Voluntary and Community Sector**

**Representatives:-**

Susan Irvine Russam, MBE, CEO, GEMS Northern Ireland Limited  
Edyth Dunlop, NI Union of Supported Employment  
Fiona Greene, CEO, Niacro  
Dr Martin McMullan, CEO, Youth Action Northern Ireland  
Lorraine Black, Head of Services, Access Employment Limited  
Elaine Armstrong, CEO, The Cedar Foundation  
Diane Hill, CEO, Include Youth  
Robert Shilliday, Country Director, RNIB Northern Ireland  
Grainne Close, Director, Mencap  
Lynn Carvill, CEO, WOMEN's TEC  
Janet Schofield, CEO, CAN  
Anne McVicker, Director, Women's Resource & Development Agency (WRDA)  
Louise Coyle, Director, NI Rural Women's Network  
Karen Sweeney, Director, Women's Support Network (WSN)  
Valerie McConville, Chief Executive, CO3  
Colin Jess, Chief Executive, Social Enterprise NI  
Liam Devine, CEO, Clanrye Group  
Donal McKinney, CEO, USDT  
Paula Jennings, Chief Officer, Stepping Stones, NI  
Charles Lamberton, Strategy Manager, TRIAX Success NW  
Georgina Grieve, Chief Executive, The Workspace Group  
Natalie Corbett, CEO, NI Youth Forum  
Mark Dougan, Director, The King's Trust NI  
Sharon Didrichsen, Managing Director, Specialisterne Northern Ireland  
Andrea Brown, Chief Executive, Disability Action  
Cara Cash-Marley, CEO, Orchardville  
Chris Alexander, CEO, Triangle  
Stephen Dallas, CEO, Bytes  
Leslie Ann Scott, CEO, Extern  
Jacinta Linder, CEO, Bolster Community  
Elaine Leonard, CEO, The Appleby Trust  
Alex Leslie, Director, AdaptNI CIC  
Danny McQuillan, CEO, Start360  
Gary McKay, Executive Director, Impact Training (NI) Ltd  
David Babington, CEO, AMH  
Aisling Doherty, Project Manager, AMH

**cc:-**

John O'Dowd MLA, Minister of Finance  
Gordon Lyons MLA, Minister for Communities  
Dr Caoimhe Archibald MLA, Minister for the Economy  
Mike Nesbitt MLA, Minister for Health  
Naomi Long, Minister of Justice  
Julie Harrison, Permanent Secretary, NIO  
Matthew Patrick, Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland