**Assembly’s All-Party Group on Cancer**

**19th October 2021**

Good afternoon, everyone my name is Richard Spratt and it is my privilege to serve as the CEO of Cancer Focus Northern Ireland.

I am delighted to welcome you here today and introduce the Assembly’s All-Party Group on Cancer’s first face-to-face meeting in 20 months, so I’m doubly delighted to see you today. Whilst, it has been super to keep some continuity and momentum in virtually, there is nothing quite like meeting in person.

It’s encouraging to see such a strong representation from the voluntary sector and from our MLAs.

**The APGC and Cancer Focus’s role**

Advocacy for strong healthy public policy has been one of the four pillars of Cancer Focus’s charitable endeavour going back decades. To advance that we established the secretariat for the Assembly’s All-Party Group on Cancer here at Stormont in the assembly in 1999 and remain as passionate today, as we were back then, about ensuring issues relating to cancer remain front and centre of public policy.

Over the years we’ve engaged with our politicians and provided a platform for many experts, both local and from further afield (from right across the globe) and representing a range of issues across the cancer spectrum from research, prevention to early diagnosis, treatment, and patient support.

That engagement has led to many notable and pioneering successes including the first10-year Tobacco strategy, the ban on sunbeds for u18s and the campaign for equal access to cancer treatments for local patients, to name just a few examples.

More recently many of you will have also worked on the campaign for a new cancer strategy for Northern Ireland. We are delighted that, despite the setbacks of COVID-19, this has now been drafted and is out for a consultation and that the adoption of this new strategy in its final form will bring us into line with neighbouring jurisdictions across these islands.

**To our 3rd sector partners:**

I am proud to stand here today with colleagues from the 3rd sector knowing first hand the amazing work that all of these organisations undertake in difficult circumstances and especially over the last 18 months when they and the sector at large have very tangibly demonstrated unbelievable character, resilience, agility and creativity to navigate the ranges of the pandemic. The one thing which COVID has shone a light on, if it wasn’t already apparent, is the immense contribution made by all of us supporting and complimenting our health and social care colleagues in the diagnostic and treatment pathways through the various programmes and services which deliver so effectively and efficiently on a daily basis.

So it is super to have representation and support from colleagues today from:

Action Cancer

Bowel Cancer UK

Cancer Fund for Children

CRUK

Friends of the Cancer Centre

Macmillan

Marie Curie

OG Cancer NI

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Regarding your input into the Cancer Strategy, I know that all of you like us have worked hard helping to draft this through your work on the various subgroups offering your experience and insights from the ground.

Today is an opportunity for politicians to hear in more detail from you so that it can inform their own responses to the consultation as it closes tomorrow.

Crucially, today is a platform to encourage our MLA’s to provide the necessary resource along with a robust, time-lined implementation strategy for the years ahead.

**I would like to welcome our politicians here today – Thank you for taking time out of what I know are demanding schedules with many competing priorities.**

I encourage you to become involved in this consultation process and to use today as an opportunity to hear from your local voluntary sector. We have here today a range of organisations who are engaged on daily a basis with tens of thousands of local people. It’s your opportunity to hear their feedback on how we can improve the strategy and implement it for the collective benefit of all.

**The Cancer Focus perspective:**

Cancer Focus NI welcomes the co-production approach taken in the Strategy’s development, and we are delighted to see the focus on patient-centred care at its heart. By highlighting the enormous potential for cancer prevention, and in particular the necessity to tackle health inequality, the strategy is validating Cancer Focus NI’s long-term vision.

We welcome the inclusion of the need for appropriate and timely psychological support for people impacted by cancer. However, there should greater recognition of the role of counselling and psychotherapy within the Strategy, and of the contribution from the Third sector at large in this regard.

Like many other cancer charities, Cancer Focus NI welcomes the Strategy but understands that it can only be implemented effectively if it is fully resourced. Therefore, we are seeking a commitment from politicians to guarantee the long-term funding needed to deliver the Strategy’s recommendations.

**I want to thank you** all for being here today and encourage you to ask questions provide feedback and make the most of this platform.

We look forward to our engagements today and into the future.

We are confident that a properly resourced and implemented Cancer Strategy will address the needs of local people and can be central to rebuilding our health and social care system.

Thank you to everyone for your continued support of the Assembly’s All-Party Group on Cancer.