

Women's Policy Group NI

COVID-19 FEMINIST RECOVERY PLAN

Childcare

**All-Party Working Group on Early
Education and Childcare**

November 2020

All-Party Working Group on Early Education and Childcare

Key Briefing

Childcare is a key part of our economic infrastructure and is a necessary prerequisite for people being able to return to work, particularly women.

It will not be possible to transition to a stage where the lockdown is fully lifted without the issue of childcare being treated as a priority by the Executive.

Despite this, the issue of access to childcare was completely absent from the NI Executive Roadmap to recovery.

Accessible and affordable childcare is also fundamental to facilitating women's full and equal participation in both the economy and society in general. Without it, their access to paid work, education and training is restricted.

The lack of an adequate childcare provision in Northern Ireland, as we move further out of lockdown, means that women will continue to face barriers to accessing work, education and training, and more women will have to work outside the home, or struggle with unemployment.

Women are more likely to be forced to care for children, either in addition to their work, or instead of paid work. This increases their risk of poverty and is also likely to have health impacts for both parents and children.

The Women's Policy Group supports the Childcare for All Campaign and believes that a universal, free and high-quality childcare provision, which meets the diverse needs of children, is essential for economic recovery in Northern Ireland. Further, it believes that childcare should be treated as a public good, rather than a private family matter.

Sources of Childcare

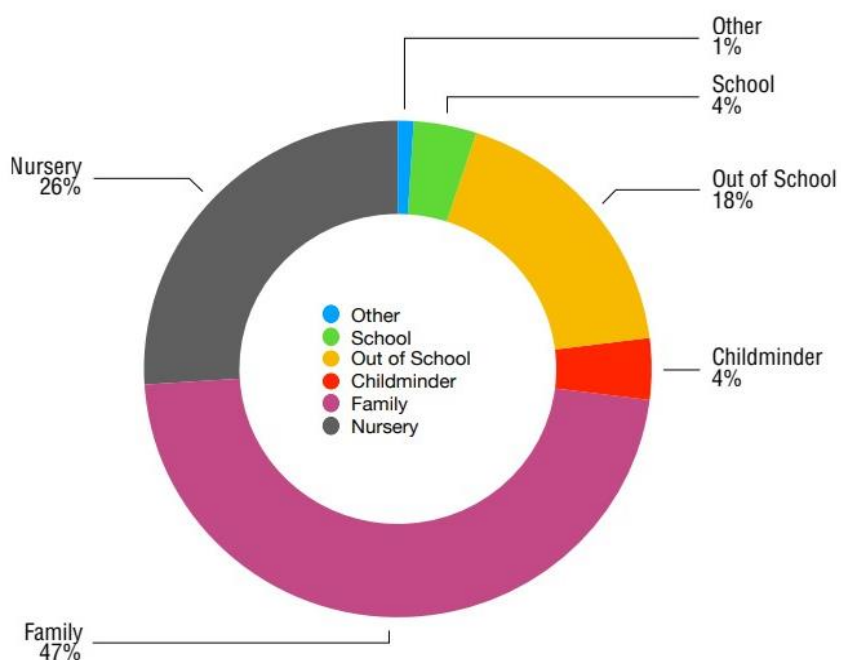
Research from the Nevin Economic Research Institute found that 40% of families in Northern Ireland (around 350,000 workers) have dependent children.

As you can see from the chart below, the Family Resources Survey conducted between 2015-2016 shows that 47% of these families rely on support from other family members for childcare, to enable them to access the workforce.

This means that without informal childcare provision from family members, almost half of all parents in Northern Ireland would be unable to access the workforce.

Clearly, greater understanding of the diverse needs of families, intergenerational relationships and childcare support within families is needed to ensure barriers to work, education and training are removed.

The childcare model in Northern Ireland has one of the lowest levels of public provision in the UK. In contrast, 75% of childcare in Scotland is council-run and funded by government.



- * 40% of families (approx. 350,000 workers) in NI have dependent children (Nevin Economic Research Institute)
- * 47% of these families rely on support from other family members for childcare

Source: Family Resources Survey, 2015-2016
(found in ICTU Report 'Childcare in NI,' 2019:

Accessibility and Affordability

The rising costs of childcare are of deep concern, particularly in the context of Covid-19 and the economic consequences we are already seeing as a result of it.

Research from the Northern Ireland Childcare Survey in 2019 shows that the average cost of a full-time childcare place is £166 per week or £8,632 per year. This is an increase of 11% since 2010 when the first NI Childcare Survey was conducted.

In the next three months, 51% of parents of under-11s say they will struggle to make ends meet; this rises to 56% for single parents (the majority of which are women).

Almost half (48%) of parents of young children say they are worried about how they will pay their rent or mortgage,

57% of women working outside the home say that they cannot afford to stay at home; compared to 34% of men.

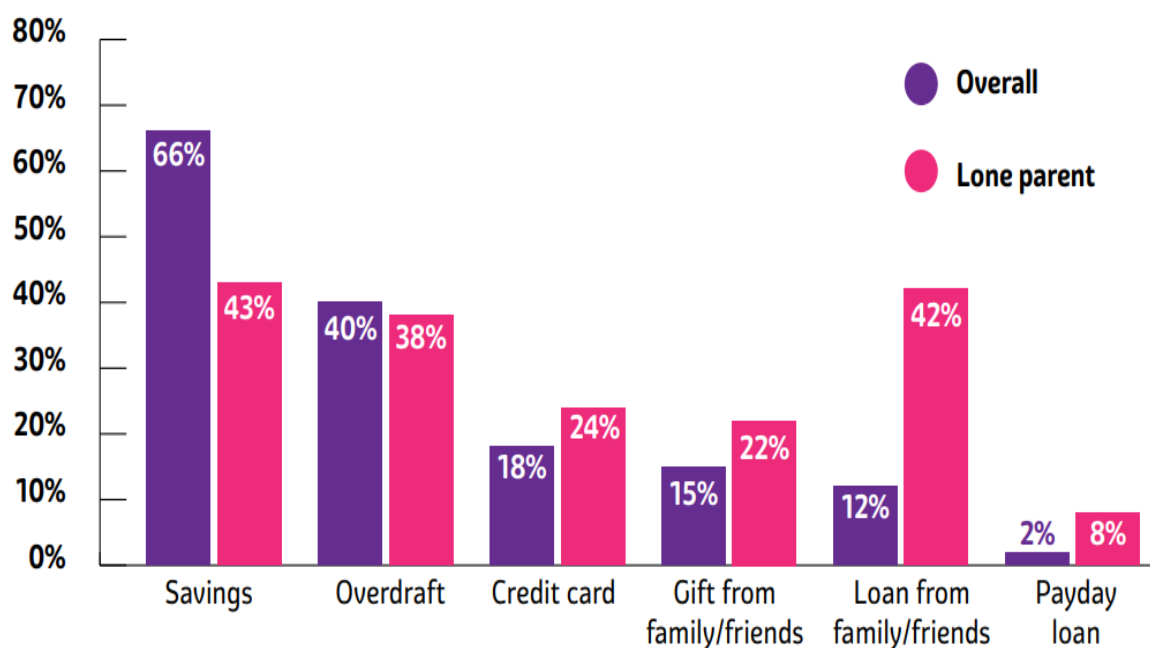
50% of families report spending more than 20% of their overall household income on childcare (Research from UK Women's Budget Group and Employers for Childcare NI Survey)

Lone Parents

Lone parents are disproportionately impacted by the rising costs of childcare and lack of accessible public provision, the majority of whom are women.

Research from the Northern Ireland Childcare Survey shows that 63% of lone parent households report spending more than 20% of their overall household income on childcare, and that 1 in 10 lone parent households spend more than 50% of their overall income on childcare.

It also shows that 51% of lone parent households resorted to means other than their income to pay for their childcare needs, including savings, an overdraft, loans and credit cards. A breakdown of the ways lone parents pay for childcare (other than through income) can be seen in the graph on this slide



Source: *Employers for Childcare Northern Ireland Childcare Survey 2019, p.21*

- * Lone parents are more than 20% more likely to resort to using savings to pay for childcare;
- * 30% more likely to ask for a loan from family and friends; and
- * More than 63% of lone parents have had to cut back or go without another expense to pay their childcare bill.

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Why is this a Gender Equality Issue?

Accessible and affordable childcare provision is crucial if we are to achieve gender equality in Northern Ireland. Therefore, the gendered nature of this issue cannot be ignored.

Without this provision, women do not have equal access to the workplace, they are more likely to end up in poverty, and pre-existing inequalities are likely to become exacerbated, particularly for BME and disabled women.

Women's employment is more likely than men's to be affected as a result of need for childcare. For example, 56.2% of mothers said they had to make a change to their employment due to childcare, compared to 22.4% of fathers.

We have also seen since the crisis began, that mothers have been 1.5 times more likely than dads to have lost their job or been furloughed.

A recent Trades Union Congress (TUC) Report found that *"women with caring responsibilities and those returning from maternity leave are at higher risk of being unfairly targeted for redundancy and dismissal due to difficulties with their childcare."*

The gender pay gap largely exists due to a disproportionate number of women being involved in part-time employment, as a result of having childcare responsibility. For example, 59% of women were found to be in full-time paid work, compared to 87% of men.

Childcare Workers

There are major concerns relating to attitudes towards childcare work, and care work more generally.

The underinvestment and gender segregation in the sector shows that care work is both an underpaid and undervalued profession, despite how critical this work is to the functioning of our economy.

If childcare is to become a valued service, then the workers who provide that service also require to be valued. Significant action needs to be taken in order to bring workers into the childcare sector, maintain staff morale and reduce turnover, and reward workers' skills and experience.

Almost half of all childcare workers earn below the real living wage (48%). This is a significantly higher figure than the proportion of all workers who earn below the real living wage (30%).

The median annual gross pay for childcare workers is almost half of that compared to the average of all workers (£11,028 compared to £21,254).

NI Executive commitments in the New Decade, New Approach Agreement include commitments to reduce carbon emissions, to work to transition to a zero-carbon society, and support clean and inclusive growth as part of a Green New Deal.

Childcare, and care more generally, is an already existing sustainable, green industry, with low levels of pollution and carbon emissions. This sector should be adequately funded, as part of a Green New Deal, and should be regarded as a key sustainable industry, in which workers are valued and paid a liveable wage.

Why invest in Childcare?

The Women's Policy Group endorses the UK Women's Budget Group and Women's Environmental Network paper for the WBG Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy, '*Towards a Feminist Green New Deal for the UK*' which discusses how investing in childcare, and care more generally, is a worthwhile investment for the NI economy.

UK Women's Budget Group research shows that a 2% GDP investment into care, particularly childcare, creates double the amount of jobs for women, and almost as many for men - than the same investment in construction.

If the Northern Ireland Assembly, and the Department of Education, introduce free universal childcare, statistics from the WBG submission to HM Treasury indicate that a full return would be made on this investment through additional tax revenue generated by the additional jobs created.

In addition to this, when relating the investment in social infrastructure to the environment, WBG and WEN reference Eurostat data which suggests that: *"The care industry is 30% less polluting (in terms of greenhouse gas emissions) than the construction industry and, the education industry is 62% less polluting than the construction industry"*.

- 1 Increased job opportunities
- 2 Full investment return
- 3 Sustainable industry
- 4 Increased participation of women in workforce

Key Recommendations:

- * Invest adequately, based on an informed assessment of realistic needs, to deliver a high-quality childcare infrastructure that is affordable for all to access, and providers to deliver.
- * As highlighted in the recent report on 'Creating a Caring Economy' by the UK Women's Budget Group, we must restructure the economy so that care is placed at its centre. This means moving to an economic structure that prioritises people's wellbeing and the wellbeing of the environment above economic growth.
- * Work extensively with the women's sector and childcare sector in the development of a childcare strategy and childcare provision for Northern Ireland.
- * Fully implement CEDAW recommendations, noting the particular reference to Northern Ireland, calling on the Government to introduce a costed Childcare Strategy that is underpinned by legislation, which meets the needs of children, parents, childcare providers and benefits local economy.
- * Ensure all parents and childcare providers can easily access the financial help they are entitled to.
- * The childcare sector suffers from deep gender segregation. This needs to be addressed through the creation of sectoral agreements; providing a mechanism to introduce a skills and wage infrastructure so as to improve job quality, and bring more men into the profession.
- * Promote family friendly policies and practices across all sectors to reduce barriers to women accessing and progressing in the workforce.
- * The focus of any childcare strategy must be placed on creating greater diversity within the sector to support the needs of BME families and children with disabilities.
- * Actively work to remove stereotypes of childcare work as a "woman's job"
- * Ensure that any provision in place is one that supports the needs of women, families, children, providers and wider society.

Conclusion

Although the lack of accessible and affordable childcare disproportionately impacts parents, and women parents more specifically, the cost of not providing accessible and affordable childcare has an impact on the whole economy.

As a recent Trades Union Congress (TUC) report¹ outlines, failing to provide such childcare runs the risk of *'reversing decades of progress women have made in the labour market, and increasing the gender pay gap - as well as having a damaging impact on our national economic productivity.'*

Northern Ireland still does not have a workable childcare strategy, despite commitments in the New Decade, New Approach agreement.

If Northern Ireland is to move towards a greener, more sustainable economy, childcare and care more generally, must be prioritised as a key sustainable industry in any Green New Deal.

Further information can be found in the full Feminist Recovery Plan, which can be accessed [here](#).

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