

**Women's  
Policy Group NI**

**COVID-19  
FEMINIST  
RECOVERY  
PLAN  
WEBINAR SERIES**



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**Looking at Childcare,  
COVID-19 and Women  
- One Year On**

In collaboration with the  
Childcare for All Campaign  
for #WD2021

Thursday 4th March 2021 10am-11am



EVENTBRITE LINK:  
<http://bit.ly/3aRd18u>



## **WPG COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan Webinar Series - Childcare, COVID-19 and Women: One Year On**

The seventh in our series of Feminist Recovery Plan Webinars focused on childcare in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic; which has been one of the most significant issues faced by women, and parents more generally, over the past year. Even before the pandemic, the childcare sector was facing a sustainability crisis, but COVID-19 has exacerbated pre-existing issues in regards to funding, protections for childcare workers, accessible and affordable provision for parents, and high-quality provision which meets the diverse needs of families. This lack of this provision continues to hinder women's access to employment, training, and education; keeping them in low-paid, part time work, and perpetuating the gender pay gap. This Webinar was held in collaboration with Employers for Childcare as part of the 2021 International Women's Day campaign, and showcased a number of speakers who shone a light on the situation regarding childcare in NI.

We first heard from the Women's Sector Lobbyist, Rachel Powell, who gave an overview of the WPG NI COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan. The Plan recognises childcare as a key part of our economic infrastructure and a crucial obstacle to advancing gender equality in Northern Ireland. Women are more likely to be primary providers of childcare, more likely to be in low-paid, precarious and part-time work, more likely to be lone parents, and more likely to make changes to their work hours due to childcare responsibilities. According to Carers NI, unpaid carers, the majority of which are women, save the NI economy £4.6 billion a year. This highlights how crucial care work is to our economy; yet it continues to be a sector which is drastically underfunded and undervalued. Despite it being one year on from the beginning of the pandemic, the NI Executive has still not included childcare in its economic pathways to recovery, which has had a detrimental effect on childcare providers, children, families and women.

Next, we received a presentation from Alexandra Chapman, a Research, Policy and Information Officer at Employers for Childcare, who highlighted some key findings from the 2020 NI Childcare Survey. Employers for Childcare conducted two surveys in 2020, one between February and March and one between September and October, showing the impact of the pandemic on childcare in NI. Between the two surveys, 5000 responses were received. The data from these surveys showed that the average cost of a full-time childcare place in 2020 was: £169 per week, £34 per day, and £5 per hour. It also showed that one third of parents reported childcare as their largest monthly outgoing, and almost one third of childcare providers reported a decrease in earnings. From these statistics, it is clear that the current childcare system is not working for families or for childcare providers, and that the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing issues with the system.

Alexandra also highlighted the fact that, during the pandemic, 61% of mothers had to balance work alongside childcare responsibilities, 20% had to use unpaid leave or annual leave to manage childcare, and 31% had to work outside their normal working hours to manage childcare. Alexandra stressed that, going forward, we need to use this evidence to ensure that women's unpaid care work is recognised and valued, and that barriers which impede women's full and equal participation in society must be removed. Furthermore, it is vital that women are included in decision making within all departments and within consultation processes, and childcare providers must be included in the drafting of any Childcare Strategy for Northern Ireland.

Our third speaker was Julie Kinnear who is the Deputy Manager of Childcare at Windsor Women's Centre. Julie shone a light on the experiences of childcare providers over the course of last year during the COVID-19 pandemic, and highlighted some of the key areas where additional funding and support for the childcare sector is required. Windsor Women's Centre has continued to provide childcare services for families throughout the pandemic, adapting and adhering to continuously updated government regulations and restrictions. As noted in the WPG NI COVID-19 Feminist Recovery Plan, 47% of families with dependent children in Northern Ireland rely on childcare support from other family members, such as grandparents. However, due to lockdown measures and shielding practices being in force, many of these families could no longer access this support, and had to turn to providers such as Windsor Women's Centre to access childcare.

The strength and resilience of the staff at Windsor Women's Centre was clear through listening to Julie's presentation. Almost every single staff member continued to come to work each day, potentially putting themselves and their families at risk of catching the virus, in order to provide essential childcare services for local families. The Centre came up with creative ways to manage and mitigate against this risk; for example, by dividing staff into two teams which rotated shifts on a one-week-off one-week-on basis, in case of any positive cases emerging and staff being told to isolate. The need for PPE was explained to children in a friendly and age-appropriate manner such as singing songs, so that children would feel safe and comfortable while accessing the Centre's childcare services.

On a regular basis, staff training, risk assessments, and sanitisation processes were carried out, prioritising the health and well-being of the Centre's staff, the children in its care,

and the families of staff and children. Online quiz nights were held to boost staff morale, at a time when they had limited social contact during work due to social distancing rules. The Centre have also provided support to local families in other ways, such as; delivering food parcels, helping out with electricity and gas bills, and checking in with them regularly to offer support.

To conclude the presentations, we heard from Suzie Douglas; a registered childminder and member of Unite the Union registered childminders branch. Suzie began by highlighting that childcare is a vocation, which brings immense satisfaction and joy, but which can be extremely difficult in times such as these. Over the course of the last year, there has been considerable financial strain on the childcare sector; costs have increased, business has decreased, and forward-planning has become incredibly difficult. The registered childminders branch of Unite the Union was set up in March 2020 when the impact of the pandemic on the childcare sector became clear, and now has approximately 400 members. Suzie spoke about some of the difficulties she and other childminders have experienced during the pandemic, such as; having to turn away families who needed childcare support due to reaching full capacity, being excluded from rates relief and small business grants, and having to lose up to 50% of her income.

As highlighted in each of the presentations we heard today, the childcare sector is facing a sustainability crisis which must be urgently addressed by elected officials. As Suzie explained: “If we cannot secure funding in the here and now to get us through the next few months, there are going to be many registered childminders who are forced to close their doors for good, and this will be a huge blow to the childcare sector.” When lockdown ends, childminders also fear there will be fewer childcare spaces, and for those still available, they will have higher costs. This decreased availability and increased cost will predominantly affect women, who are the primary users of these services.

The final discussion, where questions were put to each of the speakers, was an informative and constructive conversation around where Northern Ireland currently stands in relation to childcare provision and what the childcare sector urgently needs from the government. Ultimately, the speakers concluded that a Childcare Strategy must be implemented as soon as possible and must represent everyone in the childcare sector, in a way that adequately meets their needs and reflects their lived experiences. Furthermore, action must be taken to end temporary funding arrangements for the voluntary and community sector (a sector predominantly made up of women), so that employees can plan financially on a longer-term basis.

This year, Northern Ireland’s theme for International Women’s Day 2021 is ‘The New Phenomenal,’ highlighting the importance of not merely returning to a ‘new normal’ after the pandemic, but using the crisis as an opportunity to build a ‘new phenomenal,’ where women’s roles in society are valued, funded and respected. The Webinar ended on a positive note of appreciation and respect for all the work done by childcare providers in the past year who have kept the economy going and supported families through such a difficult time. These are truly all ‘phenomenal women.’