



CHILD  
CARE

Maximising the Economic  
Participation of Women

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## INTRODUCTION

The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland commissioned the Employment Research Institute at Edinburgh Napier University to produce an expert paper to advise them on the type, extent and delivery of childcare in Northern Ireland which would maximise the economic participation of women, alongside being in the best interests of the child, other members of the family, and the Northern Ireland economy. This is a summary of the main report.

The availability of affordable and appropriate childcare is a fundamental part of the process of mothers entering, remaining in, progressing in, or returning to work, and hence of employment equality. Of course, childcare should not be viewed in isolation in this context, but is part of a wider set of employability issues such as skills, confidence, the welfare system and labour demand.

The research was motivated by concerns that levels of childcare provision in Northern Ireland appear to be lower than the rest of the United Kingdom. Despite an increase in the number of places available since 1996, Northern Ireland has one of the lowest levels of childcare within the UK. In Northern Ireland, a child may be classified as being in childcare even if they are attending sessions of just 2.5 hours per day; which is usually insufficient for a parent to be in employment.

The methods used in the research included a review of existing literature, mapping an overview of current childcare provision in Northern Ireland, and interviews with stakeholders.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature from the UK and beyond shows that childcare may be necessary for greater employment of mothers, but it is not sufficient. Factors influencing employment include: the number and ages of children; the mother's employment history before the birth; their attitudes to work and mothering; the behaviour and employment status of their partner (having an unemployed partner has been linked to a lower likelihood of getting work); the types and conditions of available jobs including working hours; and access to transport. Some significant barriers to employment for mothers include a lack of the qualifications and confidence to enter the workplace, the complexity of the welfare system, disability (of parent or child) and the availability and affordability of childcare. In addition to financial and practical barriers, the relatively low priority given to childcare for working parents and cultural attitudes towards working motherhood should be examined and challenged.

There are differences across European countries in the supply of childcare, childcare costs, and attitudes towards publicly or collectively provided childcare. The literature suggests that the most effective combination of family and childcare policies for encouraging female labour market participation is one that offers: a combination of well-compensated maternity and parental leaves for the period immediately following birth; flexible job arrangements in the following

years (including part-time jobs, flexible working hours, and job-sharing); and an adequate coverage of affordable, appropriate childcare facilities. Such a combination is largely provided in some countries (such as Denmark, Sweden, France, Belgium and Norway), where mothers' labour market participation rates are high.

## **MAPPING OF CHILDCARE PROVISION IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

The report sets out the major types of childcare provision currently in existence in Northern Ireland. Much of the childcare (e.g. playgroups, Sure Start centres) is not intended to facilitate employment, and its short, sessional format does not cover the hours that working parents require. For working parents seeking extensive hours of care, the available childcare includes: for 0-2 year olds, childminders and private day care, subsidised by tax credits dependent on income; for 3-4 year olds, free part-time nursery places are available, but additional care may also need to be purchased from a childminder or private day care facility, and must be paid for in similar ways as for 0-2 year olds; and for school age children options include child minding, breakfast clubs, after school clubs and holiday schemes, some fully or partially funded by government, but some private and fee-charging.

However, research has suggested that this provision is not always available or affordable for parents. Existing studies of childcare in Northern Ireland suggest that availability is patchy, insufficiently flexible, and not always of high quality, but prices are relatively high, especially when compared with average family wages. Some types of family may also face additional barriers to accessing childcare, such as those in rural areas, parents with disabled children or parents with more and/or very young children.

## **STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS**

Stakeholders were interviewed to gather insights into the key issues facing working families and those providing and co-ordinating childcare. The organisations interviewed included: those representing childcare users; those involved in the provision of childcare; and government departments or other organisations with responsibility for employability and/or childcare issues. This provided views on current issues with childcare provision in Northern Ireland, and how it, among other things, needs to be improved in order to encourage more mothers into employment.

### ***Gaps in childcare provision***

In general, parents face a number of difficulties in accessing and affording suitable childcare to enable them to enter and maintain employment. Day care for the 0-2 age group and out of school provision were found to be particularly lacking. Other major factors contributing to poor access to childcare were inflexible opening hours, the high price of childcare, and insufficient information about what exists and the help that is available to pay for it.

Some families have additional issues in accessing childcare. Childcare provision for disabled children was identified as very deficient, with not enough suitable facilities for them. Childcare in rural areas was identified as severely lacking, made difficult by poor transport links and problems with sustaining providers. Lone parents experience more acutely many of the issues faced by couples, and have their own additional practical and psychological barriers to using childcare and finding and maintaining employment. Parents with more than one child, and those with young children also face high childcare costs and difficulties in balancing work and childcare. Finally, migrant, minority ethnic and Traveller families have additional requirements from childcare services that are not necessarily being fully met at present. Some face cultural and language barriers, services are not inclusive and aware enough, and childcare costs are important, as they are often a lower income group.

### ***Childcare provision***

The sustainability for providers of childcare was raised. In some cases issues with quality were identified, which not only mean that children are not getting the best possible care, but also that parents may be discouraged from using childcare and thus from employment. Childcare quality standards need to continue to be improved. In general the workforce needs to be more highly skilled, and the profession needs to be more valued and recruit more men and older workers.

### ***The need for strategy, accountability and priority***

In order to improve childcare provision in Northern Ireland, what is required is better, more joined up co-ordination and organisation, with clear, accountable leadership. The way in which government departments work in 'silos' with their own objectives means that departments do not at present effectively work in partnership to improve childcare as a whole, and especially childcare that seeks to meet the needs of parents seeking or sustaining employment (in addition to its other educational and welfare objectives). The childcare strategy needs to take a cross-cutting perspective but one that takes employment for parents, and especially mothers, seriously and consistently.

The issue of childcare needs to be a higher priority for policymakers, and greater action is needed on improving childcare that assists in helping parents into employment. At the societal level, attitudes are changing with respect to parenting and the extent to which men might be expected to take on these responsibilities as well, but parenting currently remains an issue that disproportionately affects women. Cultural change, at all levels, is thus crucial for addressing the impact that children have on mothers' labour market participation.

## OPTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Improvements to childcare provision in Northern Ireland are central to equality, economic prosperity, poverty reduction and other government aims. In recommending options for policy change, we have set out a vision for childcare provision in Northern Ireland that might help contribute to the economic participation of mothers. We have identified minimum changes in light of deficiencies identified, and recommend that these are considered for implementation as a first step. However, the aspiration is to move towards a stronger vision of childcare provision that adequately supports parents seeking employment or progression in employment in a way that also meets the wider family needs and promotes gender equality. Strategic action for this is also presented.

Five main areas for potential reform are identified from our analysis of the literature, data and stakeholder perspectives on childcare: the need for a childcare strategy, the supply of childcare, equality of access to childcare, addressing barriers to employment and attitudes to childcare and mothers' employment. Based upon the consultations and evidence review, the policy options are set out in a way that makes the case for reform, and then recommends both immediate and more aspirational changes. The main issues and the broad strategic actions that should be reviewed and considered in order to deliver a vision of childcare that supports gender employment equality are:

### **1. The need for a childcare strategy**

An overwhelming message coming out of the research was the need for a childcare strategy that sets out what requires to be achieved, and assigns some responsibility for ensuring its implementation. Currently there is a lack of centralised strategic direction; elements of responsibility sit with different government departments, but no single department is responsible for ensuring that overall provision is adequate and meets the needs of working parents. Government support for childcare should have clear leadership and be strategically integrated across departments, agencies and other bodies and funding streams.

There is also a need to better align the different rationales for different kinds of childcare. If working parents are to be supported, it is necessary to consider the extent to which other kinds of childcare (e.g. that provided for educational reasons) might be used to meet aims such as enabling parental employment.

Childcare should receive greater priority because of its crucial role in helping parents to work, but it needs to be funded in a realistic and sustainable way that shares – between the government, parents, childcare providers and employers – the burden of an adequately resourced childcare system that provides good outcomes for children. It is recognised that there are limited public sector resources in the current economic and budgetary environment; however, childcare resources need to be substantially increased, as well as efficiency and effectiveness improved, if significant progress in childcare provision is to be made in order to minimise gender inequalities in employment.

## 1. POLICY OPTIONS - STRATEGY AND REGULATION

### 1.1 Agreeing and implementing the proposed childcare strategy

**Immediate action:** A childcare strategy that: addresses the full range of childcare need, explicitly links childcare and employment and assigns responsibilities across government and other relevant actors. Ensure that current equality obligations under s75 (especially in terms of gender and those with dependent children) are fully promoted.

**Strategic action:** A statutory duty upon a nominated governmental body to promote, and seek to ensure that there is, adequate childcare.

### 1.2 Making childcare a higher priority for government

**Immediate action:** A single department should be given responsibility for leading a childcare strategy, although all departments (and other bodies) must play a full role in its development and implementation.

**Strategic action:** The creation of a Minister for childcare. The successful and continuous development and implementation of the childcare strategy.

### 1.3 Improving inter-departmental co-operation

**Immediate action:** Childcare should feature as part of the objectives of all relevant departments (with one department having central accountability).

**Strategic action:** Addressing the institutionalised 'silo' thinking that characterises each department's approach to childcare.

### 1.4 Developing a realistic and sustainable funding model

**Immediate action:** Investigating and supporting the expansion of a variety of new and existing suppliers of childcare, including social economy models of provision.

**Strategic action:** Review demand-side funding policies (e.g. tax credits) and overall funding of childcare to improve stability and development of childcare provision, as well as choice for parents; consider some redistribution of expenditure towards provider subsidy.

### 1.5 Raising minimum standards of childcare provision

**Immediate action:** Voluntary codes of good practice should be strengthened and expanded beyond the legal minimum.

**Strategic action:** Review legal requirements and standards to bring these up beyond current minimum standards.

## 2. The supply of childcare

This research suggests that there is insufficient childcare, particularly for certain groups (see below under access) but also more generally for the youngest children (aged 0-2 years old) and out of schools provision for school-aged children.

The childcare that does exist often does not meet the needs of working parents. It may be insufficiently flexible, not covering the right hours to enable parents to take up employment opportunities, may not cover all holiday/break periods adequately, or especially due to its high cost relative to wages, may be too expensive. Furthermore, parents may simply be unaware of suitable childcare that does exist, and the support that they could get to help access it, such as tax credits and childcare vouchers.

## 2. POLICY OPTIONS - SUPPLY OF CHILDCARE

### 2.1 Increasing the supply of childcare

**Immediate action:** A childcare strategy urgently needs to address gaps in the areas of little or no supply, particularly for the 0-2 age group, in some rural areas and for out of school care.

**Strategic action:** The supply of childcare provision should be expanded for all age groups, with attention and resources focused on the high cost of care for younger children (under 2s) and the limited pre- and after-school facilities.

### 2.2 Better aligning childcare provision with the needs of working mothers

**Immediate action:** It is recognised that some childcare is for particular educational and social reasons, and that the child should always be at the centre of childcare provision. However, in addition, explicit consideration should be taken of the likely impact of childcare provision policies and practices on the employment of mothers. For instance, the opening hours of existing provision may need to be extended, so that it starts early and finishes late enough to allow employment and commuting.

**Strategic action:** The government should co-ordinate and support a childcare sector that offers a range of affordable childcare options that cover the necessary hours that would enable all mothers to take up and sustain employment opportunities if they wish to do so.

### 2.3 Improving information on the supply of, and demand for, childcare

**Immediate action:** The current database of childcare providers should be better publicised and the interface simplified for use by parents as well as others. Relevant information on local childcare provision should be provided at an early stage (even before the child's birth) to support mothers in taking concrete decisions concerning their future employment options. It is important to ensure that mothers of all community backgrounds feel able to access all childcare.

**Strategic action:** The government, or a nominated body, should conduct on-going evaluation of the extent of demand for different types of childcare (e.g. nurseries, childminders, after school clubs, etc.) and how such demand can better be met.

### 2.4 Reconsidering the distribution of the costs of childcare

**Immediate action:** More financial assistance from the Government for parents of 0-2 year olds to meet the particularly high costs of care for this age group, due partly to the high staff ratio. The Government should review the revenue streams and costs of childcare provision, and explore innovative ways of funding childcare.

**Strategic action:** Bring Northern Ireland government funding for childcare in line with funding in the other parts of the UK.

## 3. Equality of access to childcare

There are key equalities issues around access to childcare, with some groups less likely to be able to access childcare to permit employment. As well as the child age groups mentioned above, access to childcare is particularly limited for: rural families; parents with disabled children; families with more than two children; Traveller, migrant and minority ethnic families; low-income; and single parent families. For some of these family types, the issue is one of availability; there is a lack of suitable facilities for disabled children, and provision is variable outside of urban areas. For others, it is more an issue of affordability, for example for single parent families, who struggle to pay high childcare costs on a single income. For Traveller and minority ethnic families, the main barrier may be one of accessibility, with language and cultural barriers limiting access to childcare services. Some families will face more than one of these issues, and thus multiple barriers to accessing childcare and taking up employment.

### 3. POLICY OPTIONS - EQUAL ACCESS FOR ALL

#### 3.1 Childcare for families in rural areas

**Immediate action:** Investments in remote rural childcare facilities to increase capacity, including number of places and ability to transport children. Ensuring local provision is, and is felt by parents to be, available and open to all groups.

**Strategic action:** Increase the supply of, and hours covered by, rural childcare facilities, perhaps through support of multi-functional community hubs that offer childcare along with other services.

#### 3.2 Supporting the employment of parents with disabled children

**Immediate action:** Better co-ordination between the facilities that are available and the parents that need them. Ensure a more inclusive service provision for children suffering mental and physical disabilities.

**Strategic action:** Improve and upgrade facilities and ensure that staff undertake additional training where appropriate.

#### 3.3 Childcare for families with more than two children

**Immediate action:** Making the Approved Home Carer scheme less bureaucratic; this can potentially be a more cost-effective solution than daycare for larger families.

**Strategic action:** Greater childcare support for families with more than 2 children.

#### 3.4 Childcare for Traveller, migrant and minority ethnic families

**Immediate action:** A more inclusive perspective on service provision is needed. Better dissemination of information about available places to those with language barriers to accessing information. Among providers, examples of good practice in providing childcare services to these groups should be shared.

**Strategic action:** More funding for facilities to accommodate the additional needs of Traveller children and mothers. More broadly, efforts are needed to break down social or cultural barriers to using childcare services.

#### 3.5 Childcare for low income and single parent families

**Immediate action:** Consideration of additional subsidy to the poorest families to compensate for the proposed reduction in tax credit support for childcare.

**Strategic action:** Expand employment programmes to take participants beyond basic levels of qualifications, to facilitate career progression and the opportunity to earn an income that is sufficient to pay for childcare and support the family, even (and especially) in single parent households. Provision for emergency childcare (such as contingency arrangements are often expensive and potentially unaffordable for low-income families).

### 4. Addressing barriers to employment

Childcare issues related to employment should not be considered in isolation, but viewed as a part of a wider package that includes co-ordinated and holistic employment and employability support, welfare and family policies and institutional support for families in terms of childcare subsidies and flexible statutory work arrangements that support family-work balance. Employers also have a part to play in accommodating working parents' greater need for flexibility and understanding.

## 4. POLICY OPTIONS - OTHER EMPLOYMENT ISSUES

### 4.1 Promoting family- and child-friendly employer practices and policies

**Immediate action:** Employers should be encouraged to identify changes, such as job shares, flexible hours etc., that may make access childcare easier for staff. Examples of good practice in family-friendly workplaces should be rewarded and shared. The business case for improving childcare in order to attract, retain or progress the careers of mothers should be made by the Government and business development agencies. If businesses feel that they are too small to offer in-house childcare facilities, there may be scope for them to link together to procure a joint childcare facility; the Government could support them in doing so. Business support agencies should review their support for employers, especially small ones, in supporting and ensuring childcare facilities for mothers.

**Strategic action:** The public sector should lead by example in the operation of policies that help mothers to access and progress in childcare and employment. The government needs to consider how a large scale change in perceptions might be achieved, not just in working hours, but in employers' attitudes to flexibility and alternative forms and patterns of working.

### 4.2 Focusing on employability as well as childcare

**Immediate action:** Expansion of current good practice in tackling unemployed or under-employed mothers' skill deficiencies in a way that is sensitive to their childcare needs, confidence issues and other factors that may vary from those faced other unemployed people. Skills and career development for those in work should also fully take into account childcare. The range of support for women returners, who often have high skills, which may need to be refreshed, should be considered specifically, from a perspective of their life-time career progression as well as their short-term re-entry into work.

**Strategic action:** There is a discontinuity between the modes of support for childcare while in training or education, and support for childcare in employment; the transition into employment would be smoother if mothers could expect some continuity in their childcare arrangements, at least for a temporary period.

### 4.3 Improving holistic support to find, maintain and progress in employment

**Immediate action:** Share examples of good practice in providing employability services to parents that deal with the full range of issues facing parents (particularly those offering holistic types of service). Consider using 'key worker' support where mothers can liaise with one key worker who can link them to the various forms of support required.

**Strategic action:** Increase availability of initiatives offering holistic, childcare sensitive services (both in existing initiatives and new initiatives).

## 5. Attitudes to childcare and mothers' employment

Attitudes towards mothers' roles as carers are crucial to why more mothers are not in work. The division of paid work and care in the household is often gendered, with mothers assuming greater responsibility for care work and fathers for earning; this situation has seen some change in recent years (e.g. due to the older age of having children, after careers are more firmly established), but a stark asymmetry remains. There is also a lack of diversity and inequality in terms of low numbers of men working in childcare.

## 5. POLICY OPTIONS - ATTITUDES

### 5.1 Challenging gender stereotyping in parenting and employment

**Immediate action:** Continue and increase efforts to tackle gender stereotypes, concerning childcare roles, to promote greater employment equality. Monitor and improve understanding of the position of mothers in the labour market and the role of childcare in this (including mothers who are in work, seeking work and not-seeking work).

**Strategic action:** Greater emphasis on both genders taking childcare responsibility (including parental leave) and building suitable childcare around this.

### 5.2 Increasing quality and diversity in the childcare workforce

**Immediate action:** Encourage more diversity, especially of men, in childcare employment. Monitor age and gender of staff. Encourage greater productivity in childcare and better paid childcare workers while raising standards of childcare.

**Strategic action:** Greater professionalization of the childcare workforce, through investment and qualifications. Analysis of how to raise the productivity (including raising the quality) of childcare provision. Move towards a virtuous circle of well trained staff who are productive and well paid (possibly with higher staff/child ratios which might help fund such an approach) and provide excellent childcare; rather than moving to a low paid, low productive staff.

## CONCLUSIONS

The review of the literature, data and stakeholder opinion in this report found that there is a need for a strategic approach to childcare, which allocates responsibilities among government departments, and other key actors; but also has some central accountability for ensuring that overall strategic aims, implementation and monitoring are achieved. There are a number of issues around the supply of childcare that need to be addressed in order to make it suitably available, accessible, affordable and high quality for working parents. In addition, crucially, a number of other employment and employability barriers to employment need to be addressed alongside the inadequacies of childcare provision. Finally, the changes that need to occur are not only financial and practical, but attitudinal, in the sense that the issue needs to be prioritised, and cultural attitudes towards working motherhood should be examined and challenged.

In considering options for change, the report looked within and beyond Northern Ireland for examples of good practice in childcare and maternal employment. It would seem that the most effective combination of family and childcare policies for encouraging female labour market participation is one that offers a combination of paid parental (maternity and paternity) leave and flexible job arrangements (including part-time jobs, flexible working hours, and job-sharing), alongside an adequate coverage of affordable childcare facilities. The Government should consider the current effects of such policies, or limitations of them, in Northern Ireland.

The recommended options for policy change set out a realistic vision for childcare provision in Northern Ireland that might help maximise the economic participation of mothers. We have identified minimum changes in light of deficiencies identified, and we recommend that these are all assessed and considered for implemented as a first step. However, the aspiration is to move towards the vision of childcare provision, through the strategic action presented here. Improvements to childcare provision in Northern Ireland are long overdue, and central to economic prosperity, poverty reduction and other Government aims, and should be treated as a priority. The further the Government can progress along the recommended direction of change, the closer they will be to achieving the more equitable labour market participation of mothers.

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