

## Northern Ireland Childcare Survey 2020

### Executive Summary





*"Covid-19 has brought into very sharp focus just how much we rely on those who look after our children and the massive benefit they have provided to them. The relationships between children and carers are so important and it was lovely to see the happiness at being back together. Aside from the fact that childcare allows us to work without worrying about children, the educational / social / emotional support they provide for our children is invaluable."*

*"Nurseries and childcare are critical to parents. They play such a vital role in allowing parents to work... Please do not let the schools and child care settings close again!"*

*"Currently 90% of my salary goes on childcare. Both myself and my husband are in good jobs but struggle to make ends meet and have had to cut back on essentials to afford childcare and essentials for our child, at present, there is no way we could afford a second child as childcare costs would mean we could not afford our mortgage, groceries, and heating."*

*"Minimum wage increase adds thousands to our wage bill that we can't cover without raising costs - alongside increasing running costs, we are at risk of closing services." Childcare provider*

*"We currently are using our annual leave, but that will run out very soon. So we will end up with no childcare and no annual leave to look after them during school holidays."*

*"Due to the pandemic our childcare provider closed down. Grandparents were self-isolating so no childcare there. I have had to take redundancy while my partner works extra shifts."*

## Key findings

In 2020, Employers For Childcare conducted two surveys examining childcare in Northern Ireland – one prior to the pandemic, in February and March 2020, and one in September 2020, following months of lockdown and as children started to move back into school. The findings provide a vital insight into the childcare challenges of 2020 – those which it is clear existed prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, and those that have been exacerbated by it.

**What emerges is a strong evidence base for strategic investment in this vital sector, to ensure that quality childcare is sustainable, accessible and affordable, and a plea that childcare is central to Government planning and policy-making, with the childcare sector exempted from any further lockdown. Otherwise, the risks are clear:**

- A collapse in the supply of quality childcare and increase in costs for parents and providers
- Parents having to reduce their hours at work or leave work altogether
- Our overall economic and societal recovery from Covid-19 will be held back
- Increase in levels of household and child poverty
- Prolonged negative impact on the social and educational development of our children.



### Families and childcare providers at financial breaking point prior to Covid-19

- The childcare bill is the largest monthly outgoing – ahead of their mortgage or rent – for a third of families
- 44% reported regularly using means other than their income to pay for childcare including savings, overdrafts, credit cards and even payday loans
- 50% of parents report that their family is 'going without' in order to meet their childcare costs
- Almost one third of childcare providers (32%) reported a decrease in their income in the previous year, with 72% having either just broken even or made a loss.



## Parents already struggling to access the childcare they needed to work

- At the start of the year, 61% of parents reported that there was not sufficient provision of childcare in their area, an increase from 51% in 2019
- Over half (52%) of parents had experienced a change in their working hours in the previous year, and the most common reason given for this was the cost of childcare.

## Inability to access childcare impacted on ability to work in the initial months of the pandemic



- 74% of parents were not able to access any childcare for some or all of this time
- 64% experienced a change to their working arrangements during the pandemic, whether that meant working from home, changing their hours of work or being placed on furlough.
- Where childcare was impacted, the effect on parents in terms of their work was clear:
  - 18% had to use unpaid leave or annual leave to manage childcare – rising to 20% of mothers, and 31% of lone parents
  - 28% had to work outside of their normal working hours to manage childcare – rising to 31% of mothers and 38% of lone parents
  - 57% had to balance working alongside childcare responsibilities – rising to 61% of mothers and 82% of lone parents
  - 2% had to leave work entirely – rising to 3% of mothers and 8% of lone parents.

## Looking ahead to the longer term impact on families and on a sector that was already struggling



This has been a deeply stressful time for many parents who expressed concern at any prospect of returning to a situation where they could not access childcare, and would have to balance caring, home schooling and working. They point to the impact on their ability to work, but also their mental health and well-being and that of their children.

- 65% of parents report they would not have access to back up childcare to enable them to work if their childcare was temporarily unavailable due to Covid-19. With informal childcare options reduced, many anticipate having to use annual or unpaid leave, or leave work altogether
- By September 2020, 35% of families had been able to return fully to their normal pre-Covid-19 childcare arrangements, and this is set to rise. However, looking ahead, over a third expect to use less childcare than they did before.
- This may cause worry for the childcare sector which relies on fees from parents, and has experienced a drop in income due to the lockdown and increased costs associated with the pandemic – but is a fluid situation, which will likely continue to develop.
- While 51% of parents anticipate their employer will be more open to remote, flexible working in the future, comments from parents highlight that – for those with younger children in particular – this would not negate the need for access to affordable childcare.



## The childcare sector provided critical support for key worker parents and families

Perhaps more than ever, the importance of the childcare sector in enabling parents to access work, and in supporting the social and educational development of children, has been highlighted. Many parents also reflected on how much they had previously relied on family members – particularly their children's grandparents – for informal childcare, and that this may change going forward.



## Important role for employers

- Almost two thirds of parents felt that their employer understood that they were juggling work and childcare, was supportive, and adjusted their expectations as a result.
- However, one in five felt their employer had not been supportive, understanding, or had failed to adjust their expectations. In some cases, this led to parents having to take lengthy periods of unpaid leave, or to leave work altogether.
- In important learning for employers, there is a clear link between facilitating a more flexible, agile working life moving forward and staff loyalty, productivity and overall well-being.



*“The lack of childcare facilities during lockdown was detrimental to mine (as a lone parent) & my children's mental health. Working from home, trying to balance childcare was extremely difficult.”*

*“Because I was working around my caring responsibilities and home schooling, I had to work as and when I could and caught up when I got children to bed at night so I often had to work from 9pm- 11pm. I felt as if I had no escape from work and no work life balance.”*

*“Childcare remains vital for working families and if it's not accessible I feel it is a massive barrier to work for many people. It is too stressful to balance working from home effectively with small kids.”*

*“My childminder was wonderful – she stayed open for key workers, I'd have been lost without her – they deserve a medal for what they have done.”*

*“Our crèche care was fantastic. They may have been shut but posted articles on their FB page and shared news from the staff... families contributed with their news and activities and a real lifeline/highlight to remain connected.”*

*“My employer was exceptionally understanding of my childcare responsibilities over lockdown. My husband's employer was completely unsympathetic to my husband's childcare responsibilities. He had to use annual leave, unpaid leave, all whilst being harassed on a daily basis to get back into the office, despite his job being a desk bound position that could be done from home... My husband had to leave his job as a direct result of us not being able to access childcare during lockdown.”*



*“Covid -19 has highlighted the value and importance of affordable reliable and flexible childcare for working families.”*

*“If there is another lockdown childcare should not be closed. The early years are so important in children's long term development. Since going back to crèche our child's behaviour, demeanour and confidence have increased again.”*

*“It has shown the vulnerability for families, either paid childcare was closed or people relying on family for childcare did not have this available.”*

*“Grandparents definitely do not get enough recognition for the childcare they provide which allows parents to continue to work, I think the pandemic has highlighted the huge number of families who are reliant on grandparents to provide childcare and the impact to the workforce when they are unable to do so.”*

## Conclusions



The findings from these two surveys, one carried out prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, and one six months in, provide a valuable insight into the childcare challenges of 2020 – those which it is clear existed prior to the pandemic, and those that have been exacerbated by it. What emerges is a strong call from parents and childcare providers, for strategic investment in this essential sector, to ensure that quality childcare is sustainable, accessible and affordable.

Parents have issued a plea to Government not to limit access to childcare during any future potential lockdown, and for the vital role of childcare to be recognised as supporting them to work, assisting in the educational and social well-being of children, and facilitating mental health and well-being – both of parents and of children.

In the words of one parent, families were ‘vulnerable’ in the absence of childcare, highlighting how reliant so many of us are both on our formal childcare infrastructure, and our family networks.

Looking ahead, there is a strong consensus that the Government needs to take robust action to support families and the childcare sector, and that clear communication is key, in particular to mitigate the disruption of school and pod or setting closures due to Covid-19, with children sent home to self-isolate, or settings closed due to staffing issues.



This research has highlighted the struggle for many families during an already stressful time when parents were seeking to manage work, care for children at home for an extended period of time, and deliver home-schooling. Parents are

concerned that this struggle cannot be perpetuated in future, and that the Government needs to prioritise the childcare and education sectors, for the well-being of children and parents, and to ensure that the economy can rebuild.

The Covid-19 pandemic has increased the strain on a childcare sector that, as is shown by our findings, was already struggling – in need of investment and a long overdue Childcare Strategy, as committed to within the New Decade, New Approach deal. The crisis has exacerbated these challenges, impacting negatively on the financial sustainability of providers – a majority of whom were either just breaking even or making a loss even prior to the pandemic – and have subsequently experienced a significant decrease in income, operating now with increased challenges in terms of occupancy, staffing levels, cost of infection control measures and potential for temporary closures. This



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research also puts a spotlight on the many childcare providers who stepped up as part of the critical services responding to Covid-19, by remaining open to care for the children of key workers, providing a lifeline of support to families.

It is important to acknowledge that the Government has provided welcome financial support to assist the childcare sector in Northern Ireland to re-open and recover during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Further support is planned, to assist in the ongoing sustainability of the sector. However, in responding to the evidence in this report, based on the experiences of thousands of parents and childcare providers in Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Executive must build on this support to finally agree and publish a fully costed, comprehensive Childcare Strategy – one which parents and providers have been calling for, for years. Already long overdue, the challenges to the sector, and for families, which were building in its absence have been exposed and magnified by Covid-19. While the Covid-19 childcare support schemes provide some stability in the short term, without a robust strategy, the risks are clear:



- A collapse in the supply of quality childcare and increase in costs for parents and providers
- Parents having to reduce their hours at work or leave work altogether
- Our overall economic and societal recovery from Covid-19 will be held back
- Increase in levels of household and child poverty
- Prolonged negative impact on the social and educational development of our children.

## Our key ask: **Employers For Childcare**

### On behalf of parents and childcare providers:

- Continue to provide ongoing financial support to sustain the childcare sector at this time
- Set out a concrete timeframe for the finalisation of a Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy, incorporating learning from the Covid-19 pandemic, together with the existing evidence base – ensuring publication before the end of 2021
- Provide reassurance that families will be able to continue to access childcare during any future potential lockdown
- Ensure that childcare is embedded in all Covid-19 recovery plans – recognising its vital role to the economy and to society as a whole.



*“It is and continues to be very stressful trying to organize and plan childcare when the situation is continually changing. Currently my child’s crèche is closed for a week due to covid leaving me at short notice without childcare but still having to pay for that childcare which is extremely expensive and unfortunately is likely to continue to happen, probably with the result that I will be paying for childcare whilst taking unpaid leave to look after my child.”*

*“Disappointing level of communication from executive.”*

*“There should have been more support from the government during the lockdown to aid working parents with no childcare at all. Perhaps an extension of paid parental leave rather than us having to forfeit our annual leave to cover childcare. I think the treatment of working parents during this time with no childcare was very unfair.”*