

PRESS RELEASE

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Inequalities Exposed: 70% of local parents worried about their children's future social development

Parenting charity fears children will fall behind unless the NI Executive focuses COVID catch up funding on families

7 in 10 (71%) Northern Ireland parents are worried about their children's social development and 1 in every 2 (52%) are concerned about their own wellbeing or mental health in the year ahead. These are the main concerns of local parents of young families, according to a new report published by Home-Start UK published today.

The report, entitled *Home Is Where We Start From*, was produced by Home-Start UK following their research to measure the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on parents of young families. The charity heard from some 1,200 families across the UK (including over 150 families from Northern Ireland) they support about the issues that had affected them most.

Findings revealed that families are facing unprecedented challenges, with the pandemic acting both as a magnifier of existing disadvantage, as well as putting hard working families under increased financial pressure. Combined with concerns around their children's social development, families are worried about the future as we emerge from lockdown.

Donna Kirk, a mum of three from Newry, is still reeling from the impact the pandemic has had on her family. "Before the pandemic we were already financially stressed. Lockdown nearly tipped us over the edge. When my daughter got COVID at school we had to shield for two weeks with no pay. It was a massive blow to our finances and we're still trying to recover. If it wasn't for Home-Start connecting us to grants for our gas and electric, and providing food, I honestly think we would have gone under. It affected my husband's mental health and he felt helpless and unable to provide for his family. It seemed so unfair there was no support for people who work, but were prevented from working because of COVID.

"During lockdown we've tried to keep our worries and anxiety from the children, but I see how it's affected their development, especially my two year old. He's not used to playing with children his own age. Being at home is all he is familiar with. At the time I thought the kids seemed okay, especially my older ones, but seeing their excitement and relief about going back to school made me realise they were perhaps not as happy at home as I thought. Children need to be with their friends and learning."

In light of these revelations Home-Start UK, the UK's leading charity supporting parents of young children, has stressed that the pandemic has exacerbated issues that were being faced before and during the pandemic, highlighting that now is the time to build a more compassionate and kind support system for the families that need it most.

In particular, the report has shown the value of volunteers in offering compassionate, confidential support to the families it works with. Of those surveyed locally, 76% said it mattered that the support they received was from a volunteer instead of a professional. For some contact from their Home-Start volunteer constituted the only meaningful conversation they had from week to week during the pandemic.

Home-Start UK is calling for systemic investment to redress the disparity, with a focus on building on the strength and resilience of local families and communities navigating unprecedented challenges. They're calling for the Northern Ireland Executive to:

1. **Build Back Better** – by redesigning the family support system to put families and children at the heart as we respond to the trauma of the pandemic and the shadow it has cast on child development
2. **Build Back Fairer** – by addressing the structural inequalities that result in poorer outcomes for ethnic minority groups, younger parents, lone parents and those on low-incomes
3. **Build Back Kinder** – by nurturing healthy relationships, ensuring safe home environments, and fostering kind, compassionate communities.

Jayne Murray, Northern Ireland Director, Home-Start UK said,

“For many local families, the daily grind of worries about putting food on the table, heating the house and providing basic items for their children have been their primary concern, and those worries won’t go away.

“We fully support the Executive’s commitment within Programme for Government that every child should have the best start in life, but are deeply concerned this outcome is at significant risk unless Northern Ireland COVID catch up funding focuses on these families.

“What happens next must reflect the impact of the pandemic, and use the groundswell of awareness around struggling families to bring about change. There is not just a moral imperative for this but an economic one too. Investment in early years has been shown time and again to be a wise use of public funds, saving future spending by avoiding costs to the public purse that arise from poorer life outcomes. Making a difference for families makes a difference for society.”

Becky Saunders, Head of Policy at Home-Start UK, child psychotherapist and author of *Home is Where We Start From* says:

“When we reflect on the pandemic and the wider system of family support that’s needed for those who are really struggling, we should be thinking about what has happened to families, rather than what is wrong with them. We should be supporting them to build their strengths, and addressing the systemic issues that create stress for families. We need to consider too, what has happened to ‘frontline’ organisations, and to the dedicated people who serve families if we are to respond appropriately to the individual and collective trauma that will shape experience over the coming years.”

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Notes to Editors

1. About the Report

Home Is Where We Start From was authored by Home-Start UK, based on findings from a survey commissioned by Home-Start UK, undertaken by Critical Research, of 1242 parents supported by local Home-Start's across the UK in the last year. It also includes information gathered from local Home-Starts and insights gained from discussions with local Home-Start coordinators and managers, Home-Start practitioners and volunteers.

The survey was open from 6th April – 26th April 2021:

- There were 153 responses from people in Northern Ireland.
- Total survey population of 1,238 responses, from those supported by c.125 local Home-Starts
- The report notes significant differences (at the 95% confidence level) by nation, age and other key groups where sample sizes allow).

2. About Home-Start UK in Northern Ireland

Home-Start UK in Northern Ireland is a local community network of trained volunteers and expert support helping families with young children through their challenging times. Families struggling with postnatal depression, isolation, physical health problems, bereavement and many other issues receive the support of a volunteer who will spend around two hours a week in a family's home supporting them in the ways they need.

Supported by local volunteers, our services are based in communities right across Northern Ireland. Starting in the home, our approach is as individual as the people we're helping. No judgement, it is just compassionate, confidential help and expert support.

www.home-start.org.uk