

Our Manifesto

Working for parents, employers and
childcare providers across the UK



Foreword

The 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly Elections present a real opportunity for our political parties and elected representatives to set out an ambitious platform for a better Northern Ireland. One where barriers to work, education and training have been overcome, and businesses can prosper. Where we are on course to eliminating poverty from our society. Where all of us are able to achieve our potential, and children and young people have the best start in life. Where we have truly ‘built back better’ from the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic and the challenges of the previous years.



Achieving this will require bold decisions and strategic investment. But the consequences of not doing so would be serious and far-reaching, as well as costly – impacting negatively not just in 2022, but on generations to come.

Employers For Childcare’s policy manifesto sets out key issues that must be addressed as priorities for the new mandate, for the benefit of children and parents, for the local labour market and economy, and for society as a whole. Evidenced through our work and research we present clear ‘calls to action’ for our elected representatives, which should be embedded in a new Programme for Government. If enacted, these will have a real, positive impact on all of our people, right across Northern Ireland.

In particular, we are calling for work that is underway on a new - and long overdue - Childcare Strategy, to be a day one priority for the new Executive. The Covid-19 pandemic has helped shift public understanding of how childcare supports children, families and the economy as a whole. There is real scope now for Northern Ireland to secure a world class, ambitious and properly resourced Childcare Strategy. Given the guaranteed return on such an investment, and the benefits it will bring in both the short and long term, neither we – nor the parents, childcare providers or employers who we work with – believe this is too much to ask.

Marie Marin, Chief Executive

About Employers For Childcare

Employers For Childcare was established more than 20 years ago, and comprises a registered charity and a social enterprise. 100% of the profits from our social enterprise businesses – a Childcare Voucher administration service, a recruitment and AccessNI service for childcare providers, and High Rise indoor adventure centre - are invested into our charity.

As a charity, our aim is to make it easier for parents with dependent children to get into work and to stay in work. We address childcare as a labour market and economic issue, as well as a social one and help parents maximise their incomes, manage childcare costs and achieve a positive work-life balance. This is critical for employers who, as a result, are better able to recruit and retain the key staff they need. In turn, the economy as a whole benefits through more people being able to progress in work, and increased levels of productivity and engagement.

We undertake research which provides us with evidence to campaign on issues relating to childcare, family and work.

We also operate a Family Benefits Advice Service offering free, confidential and impartial advice and guidance on the financial support families are entitled to. Over the last five years alone, Employers For Childcare has supported families to unlock **£54.5 million** in financial support that they did not know they were entitled to. In enabling many more to access childcare and progress in work this will have resulted in an even greater impact across the Northern Ireland economy.

You can find out more on our website: www.employersforchildcare.org

1. Value and invest in our critical childcare infrastructure

Childcare enables parents to access work, education and training and allows employers to recruit, develop and retain the skilled, experienced workforce they need. It is a key enabler of economic growth and development, and will be essential in reducing Northern Ireland’s high level of economic inactivity. In removing barriers to employment, childcare helps address structural inequalities, tackle poverty and improve lives. Children who benefit from quality childcare achieve better educational outcomes and, over their lifetime, have higher earning potential.

And yet, Employers For Childcare’s most recent [Northern Ireland Childcare Survey](#) highlights that Northern Ireland could be facing into a childcare crisis that would have a severe impact on parents’ ability to work. The continued absence of a Childcare Strategy, together with systemic lack of investment in this vital sector over many years, has resulted in a situation where childcare providers struggle to break even while parents find the cost of quality childcare to be unaffordable.

Over 40% of the working population are parents with dependent children. If challenges in accessing and affording childcare results in 40% of the workforce struggling to work, that would have a major impact on every aspect of life – from our economic growth and development, to our ability to access critical services.

Just as we spend public funds on health care, education and roads – it is right to invest in childcare and early education as a core public service – and now is the time, with work underway on a new Childcare Strategy for Northern Ireland.



The new Northern Ireland Executive must commit to:

Delivering an ambitious, inclusive and fully funded Childcare Strategy that:

- Enables **all parents** to access and afford the high quality childcare of their choice without it costing a significant proportion of their income
- Supports **all providers** to confidently deliver quality, accessible childcare sustainably while investing in their staff and provision
- Ensures **all children** can benefit from the significant developmental benefits of quality childcare, regardless of their circumstances
- Benefits **all employers** in being able to recruit, develop and retain the staff they need.

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2. Ensure all parents benefit from financial support they are entitled to with registered childcare costs

Most working parents can benefit from financial support with their registered childcare costs, yet many are missing out. That includes self-employed people and entrepreneurs, as well as employees across all sectors and income levels.

And yet many parents in Northern Ireland are **missing out** on financial support with the cost of registered childcare because they don't realise they are eligible. In our most recent [Northern Ireland Childcare Survey](#), almost a third of parents who were using childcare responded that they were not claiming any financial support.

Access to financial support can make a real difference, potentially saving families thousands of pounds on their childcare costs and, more critically, can make the difference in enabling parents to get into work or work more hours. Alongside this, ensuring parents know where to go for advice and guidance helps to relieve pressure and anxiety. Employers and childcare providers also need to be confident in knowing that support is available, and signposting parents appropriately.

Employers For Childcare operates the Family Benefits Advice Service, providing parents with information and personal advice on their entitlements. We know from our work with families that it can be confusing navigating the complex system of support, but we are here to help.

Over the last five years, our team has helped families identify **£54.5 million** in financial support they did not realise they were entitled to. Our service is well-established, yet we know many more parents are missing out because they are unaware of what support is available or assume that they will not be eligible.



The new Northern Ireland Executive must commit to:

Taking action to increase uptake of financial support with registered childcare costs through:

- An awareness raising campaign targeted at parents, employers and childcare providers to increase awareness that financial support is available
- Encouraging all parents to call Employers For Childcare's Family Benefits Advice Service on 0800 028 3008 for a personalised calculation
- Investing resources to support the provision of the independent advice service for parents.

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3. Support all employers and employees to benefit from flexible, family friendly working policies

The Covid-19 pandemic has made flexible and more family friendly working policies a universal issue that is resonating across many sectors. Importantly, this doesn't just include working from home, which is not an option – or a choice – for many of us. There are a wide range of ways employees can work more flexibly that enable them to better balance their caring responsibilities and life outside of work.

The positives of family friendly working extend beyond employees – there are significant business benefits too. At a time when many employers are already struggling to recruit and retain the staff they need, this is an issue that can't be ignored. Employers who respond to the needs of working parents and carers are shaping a workplace that is fit for an evolving, and increasingly selective workforce. In doing so, they are creating a space that staff want to remain in and avoiding the significant costs associated with losing staff, whether permanently or on a temporary basis.

Employers For Childcare works with employers across all sectors to support them to be more family friendly. We are pleased to be seeing a clear, and welcome, direction of travel. The UK Government recently consulted on making flexible working the default. In Northern Ireland, the Department for the Economy's new Skills Strategy includes a commitment to a 'Better Jobs' business pledge. This will recognise and promote companies that are fully engaged in the development of their staff. This marks a real opportunity to ensure employers across all sectors are rightly involved in supporting their staff to work more flexibly, but also to access the childcare they need. In turn, those employers will secure real business benefits.

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The new Northern Ireland Executive must commit to:

Ensuring all jobs are 'better jobs' where employees can benefit from flexible, family friendly working policies by:

- Ensuring that offering flexible, family friendly working arrangements and access to advice on childcare, are components of the 'Better Jobs' pledge
- Undertaking a review of how Government policies could better support those who are working and have caring responsibilities
- Embedding the critical role of childcare across all economic strategies
- Piloting the development of a 'workplace nursery' on the Stormont Estate and rolling out learning to all sectors of the economy.

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4. Ensure everyone in society can reach their potential and no-one is living in poverty

One in every five people in Northern Ireland is living below the poverty line, and most of those living in poverty are families with children. The majority of these families have someone in work. In recent years, in-work poverty has risen as reductions in benefit levels have impacted on low-income families. Added to this, many of us are struggling with the rising cost of living, as food, fuel, heating and electricity prices continue to go up.

A key factor in supporting families is to ensure that every parent can access and afford the critical childcare they need in order to get into, progress in and stay in work. Importantly, families also need to be aware of what financial support they are entitled to, and able to confidently access independent advice and guidance. This will help to maximise the income they retain, and reduce their living costs.

Critically, we also need to see the Northern Ireland Executive committing to the elimination of poverty through a robust Anti-Poverty Strategy, establishing new and ambitious actions for all Government departments, and underpinned by legislation that enshrines this commitment in law.

At the same time, it is essential that the social security system is strengthened to support families who are on a lower income. The system must prevent people from being pulled into poverty, with strong protection and mitigations for those affected by welfare reform in Northern Ireland. All of us rely on publicly funded services, from the health service to education and roads. Similarly, benefits are a vital public service to help those who are struggling keep afloat, and to loosen the grip of poverty.



The new Northern Ireland Executive must commit to:

Ending poverty by:

- ✓ Delivering an **Anti-Poverty Strategy** with ambitious targets and a clear action plan, that is informed by those with lived experience of poverty
- ✓ Strengthening the **social security system** so it supports families who would otherwise be struggling, and prevents them from being pulled into poverty
- ✓ Ensuring all families know about, and are able to access, **independent advice** about the financial support they are entitled to, and that helps parents get into, stay in and progress in work.

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5. Invest in the Social Enterprise sector as a key driver in a stronger, more prosperous Northern Ireland

Social enterprises are innovative, entrepreneurial businesses that can help to establish Northern Ireland as a global hub in key industry sectors. At the same time, they tackle social and educational inequality, helping everyone to reach their potential and benefit from a stronger, more prosperous, more resilient Northern Ireland. Employers For Childcare is a social enterprise. Over the last five years, through our business activities we have invested almost £3 million in our charity, which has unlocked £54.5 million in financial support for families, helping parents to get into and stay in work.

In 2021, the Finance Minister announced a new policy that will see social value embedded in public procurement contracts from June 2022. Tenders will be required to include a minimum of 10% weighting for social value, which could rise to 20% from June 2023. This is a truly welcome and important move – unlocking much greater social and economic impact from the £3 billion spent annually on procuring public services. But more can be done to ensure, across our economy, spending power is being used to deliver meaningful social impact.

Taking this a step further, there is a real need for a Social Value Act which would ensure that the social value which social enterprises bring to our local economy is realised. Northern Ireland is still behind the rest of the UK, where social value legislation has been in place for several years.

Across the full range of Government departments and strategies, the importance of social enterprises and social value must be embedded, particularly the 10X economic vision, Skills Strategy and associated action plans.



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The new Northern Ireland Executive must commit to:

Unlocking the added positive social value of a thriving social economy by:

- ✓ Introducing a **Social Value Act** that requires all public bodies to consider choosing providers based on the social value created and not on cost alone
- ✓ Developing clear guidance and training, co-designed with the sector, to support the scoring of social value in public procurement contracts.

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Employers **For Childcare**

Working For Parents

Employers For Childcare

Blaris Industrial Estate
11 Altona Road
Lisburn
BT27 5QB

028 9267 8200
Freephone 0800 028 3008
hello@employersforchildcare.org

Charity Registration No: 101176-0

employersforchildcare.org

