

Tackling disadvantage through childcare in Northern Ireland

January 2024



Contents

Executive summary	2
Introduction	4
Disadvantage in Northern Ireland.....	4
Early learning and childcare in Northern Ireland.....	5
Policy change proposed to tackle disadvantage through early learning and childcare	14
Bibliography	25
Notes.....	29

Executive summary

Early learning and childcare is key to lifting families out of poverty and giving children the best start in life, but, at present, the system in Northern Ireland is letting families down and not achieving its potential to tackle disadvantage.

The system in Northern Ireland has reached a breaking point – for parents and for early learning and childcare providers

- Early learning and childcare is not affordable for families. While UK-wide support is available for eligible parents, and children can benefit from an allocation of funded pre-school provision in their immediate pre-school year, this is not enough. The system of support is complex and, for many households, the unaffordability of childcare is leaving parents questioning whether they can afford to work – particularly when their children are very young.
- Providers are also contending with rising costs. High staff turnover and recruitment and retention challenges across the sector impact the quality of provision as it is increasingly difficult to secure and progress skilled staff. Low pay is a major problem across the sector.
- There is no sufficiency duty requiring the government to ensure there are sufficient childcare places to appropriately meet the needs of all families, including those who have a child with a disability. Families face a range of barriers to accessing quality early learning and childcare.
- The multi-regulatory environment is complex, and it can be difficult to access multidisciplinary support where it is required.
- Lower-income families are least likely to benefit from quality childcare, reducing household incomes as a result of working fewer hours or stopping work altogether. Disadvantaged children are therefore missing the benefits of quality provision.

Recommendations to tackle disadvantage through early learning and childcare

With work ongoing on a new Early Learning and Childcare Strategy, there is a generationally significant opportunity within Northern Ireland to design and invest in a new model of integrated early education and childcare.

- New legislation is required to establish a statutory basis for the financing, supervision and coordination of the delivery of early learning and childcare services, together with a clear sufficiency duty. In tandem, the development of a Workforce Strategy for the sector must be informed through a meaningful review of childcare regulations and standards.

Northern Ireland requires a bespoke funding model for the sector to better meet the needs of all families but with a focus on disadvantaged children. Experiences from the roll out of schemes elsewhere in the UK and in Ireland have been taken onboard to develop the following proposals:

- The universal, free provision of 22.5 hours of early learning and childcare for children in their immediate pre-school year. This would benefit all families, including those who are disadvantaged, with no work or income-associated criteria for access.
- A core-funding subsidy for all registered childcare providers covering a portion of their costs of delivering quality early education and childcare, enabling them to reduce the fees they charge parents. The subsidy should be increased over time, and as public finances allow, further reducing fees for parents.
- A strengthening of the support aimed specifically at tackling disadvantage, including targeted subsidies for providers and expansion of Sure Start services.

These are an initial suite of measures to be taken in the first half of a new 10-year Early Learning and Childcare Strategy. They are aimed at addressing the issues set out above without destabilising the sector or introducing unintended consequences that could work against the objective of tackling disadvantage.

For the second half of the new strategy, there will be a much stronger foundation on which to build a more responsive co-funding model, taking account of household income to determine what families pay for their childcare bill on the basis of what is affordable to them. For families in poverty, this will mean they are able to access an allocation of quality early learning and childcare that is fully funded.

Further work is needed to develop the proposals set out in this report, but they offer a starting point from which to work collaboratively across the sector to co-design an early learning and childcare system that achieves its greatest potential for all children and families.

Early Learning and childcare must be recognised as a critical pillar within a wider support system for families.

Employers For Childcare and Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Introduction

This briefing addresses the role of early learning and childcare in tackling disadvantage in Northern Ireland. It explores the current system, the extent to which it is delivering for children and families, and the policy change needed to ensure early learning and childcare is equipped to tackle disadvantage.

It accompanies a Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) and Coram Family and Childcare (Coram) report, 'Tackling disadvantage through childcare', published in May 2023, which sets out proposals for a reformed childcare system in England that would unlock the potential of childcare to tackle disadvantage through enabling parents to work and boosting children's outcomes.¹ The report found that existing policies and new proposals from the UK Government risk worsening, rather than improving, an unequal system. With differences in childcare infrastructure and associated support across the UK, a need was identified to develop specific briefings for each of the devolved nations to accompany the report.

This Northern Ireland briefing is particularly timely as a new strategy is long overdue. Work is underway to develop a new Early Learning and Childcare Strategy with costed options at an advanced stage. A draft was consulted on in 2015 but not taken forward. Executive Ministers must be in place to agree on which options to take forward; this has not been possible in the absence of an Executive, first between January 2017 and January 2020, and subsequently since February 2022. As of December 2023, the UK Government is facilitating intensive talks aimed at re-establishing the Executive, and a potential financial package for Stormont has been identified. Progress on early learning and childcare must be a day-one priority for a new Executive. This briefing, read in the context of the wider JRF and Coram report, can help inform ongoing work to develop options for the new strategy.

Methodology: This briefing was informed through extensive desk study involving a wide range of sources including academic, social policy, independent research and government publications. A full glossary is available at the end of the report and relevant references are made throughout. Informal interviews were conducted with a range of colleagues from across the sector on an advisory basis.

Acknowledgements: We are grateful for support from colleagues within PlayBoard NI, the Northern Ireland Childminding Association, Save the Children NI, Stranmillis University College, the Community Daycare Network and an Early Years social worker in a Health and Social Care Trust (HSCT) who took the time to discuss the issues raised within this briefing. These were advisory discussions only. This report is not an agreed statement of views.

Disadvantage in Northern Ireland

More than 10 years on from the first statutory child poverty strategy, child poverty levels are stubbornly high. Of the 240,000 families in Northern Ireland with dependent children, 18% live in relative poverty and 15% in absolute poverty.² Children are at higher risk of poverty than any other age group, especially children under five.³ One reason for this is a higher incidence of parents or carers not being in employment; a key driver of which is the affordability of childcare.

Extensive research shows the impact of long-term disadvantage on future life chances – from physical and mental health to social connections and educational achievement. A Fair Start report showed a clear link between educational underachievement and lower socio-economic background.⁴ A well-designed, functioning early learning and childcare system is a key tool in tackling poverty and disadvantage through the following:

- Helping families increase earnings by enabling parents to work, increase their hours and progress in the workplace – also reducing the gender pay gap.
- Improving long-term educational, developmental and employment outcomes for children and countering some of the negative effects of poverty.
- Enabling the early identification of special educational needs and disabilities in children.

Most parents with dependent children are working, however this varies by the age of the child. Parents, particularly mothers, are more likely to be economically inactive due to caring responsibilities in the first two years of their child's life and more likely to work part-time when children reach pre-school and primary school age.⁵ Of children in poverty, 63% live in a household where at least one adult is in work.⁶ Reducing families' outgoings by limiting the amount of a parent's wages spent on childcare is an effective way to support families.

Childcare and early learning cannot tackle disadvantage in isolation. Both, however, have a key role to play alongside aspects such as an effective social security system, health system and other initiatives to address low pay⁷. Importantly, the early learning and childcare system must be well designed to remove disadvantage rather than exacerbate it. At present, high costs and barriers to access make it difficult for parents to afford the childcare they need, which can prevent them generating income through work.

Early learning and childcare in Northern Ireland

Overview of the existing infrastructure

Childcare providers are categorised in the Minimum Standards for Childminding and Day Care.⁸ They include full day care, sessional day care (including wraparound childcare for school-aged children), and home-based providers such as registered childminders and Approved Home Childcarers. Day care is offered by a mix of private and voluntary/community providers. Registered childminders make up the largest number of providers while day nurseries offer more places. Figures on 31 March 2023 showed a 14% decrease in the number of registered providers since 2019/20, and a 7% decrease in places.⁹

The Pre-School Education Programme (PSEP) is a fully-funded, universal, non-compulsory early education service for children in their immediate pre-school year. It is delivered through statutory (nursery schools and nursery units in primary schools) and non-statutory (private, community and voluntary sector) provision. Places cannot be provided by childminders. PSEP is only available during the school term with 40% of places full-time (22.5 hours/week) and 60% part-time (12.5 hours/week). Voluntary and private sector providers can only offer part-time sessions. A place is guaranteed for every target-age child whose parents want it. In 2022/23, 91% of eligible children took up a place.¹⁰

While many parents see pre-school provision as part of their childcare mix, the Department of Education classifies it as early education, not childcare. Legislation requires settings, through their admissions criteria, to prioritise children from socially disadvantaged circumstances. A review of the criteria in 2021

explored the removal of this requirement while standardising session times. In 2022, Education Minister Michelle McIlveen announced a proposal to standardise pre-school education to 22.5 hours per week. Funding has been allocated to develop a costed delivery plan and timetable.

A high proportion of families use informal childcare, provided by a family member such as a grandparent or friend, that is not paid for. In 2023, 72% of families reported using grandparents for some or all of their childcare. This is higher than in England where, in 2022, 21% of families reported using grandparents for some or all of their childcare needs.¹¹ In recent years, there has been growing concern at the number of unregistered childminders illegally providing a paid-for service that is not regulated or registered. In 2023, 15% of parents reported using an unregistered childminder for some or all their childcare needs.¹² Some families may benefit from Sure Start, which supports children under age four, and their families, living in the most disadvantaged areas in Northern Ireland.

Box 1: Overview of support for families

0–2 years
<p>This most expensive period of childcare makes it difficult for parents (especially mothers) to return to work.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No funded or subsidised childcare for children in this age group. • Parents are reliant on income to pay for childcare, supplemented by UK-wide support schemes such as Tax-Free Childcare and Universal Credit if they are working. • Rising costs are making this increasingly unaffordable; for some families, it does not make financial sense for one parent to work or to work full-time. • Parents who are not working are not entitled to support. This can lock them out of opportunities to benefit from education and training to help them access work or develop their careers and lock their children out of the benefits of quality childcare.
3–4 years
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funded pre-school provision universally available the year preceding primary school. • Positive for child development but duration is inconsistent and provision is inflexible. In 2023, 60% of families accessing a pre-school place said it made no difference to their overall childcare bill, while for 12% it increased it.¹³ • No funded or subsidised childcare for children in this age group either to wraparound pre-school provision or during holiday times. • Parents must rely on their income to pay for wraparound childcare, supplemented by UK-wide support schemes such as Tax-Free Childcare and Universal Credit if they are working.
Age 5 and over
<p>The risk of disadvantage does not end when a child starts primary school. Families need to be able to access affordable, quality wraparound school-age childcare. This supports parents to work as well as continuing the benefits of play-based learning for children.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No funded or subsidised wraparound childcare for children in this age group. • Parents must rely on their income to pay for wraparound childcare, supplemented by UK-wide support schemes such as Tax-Free Childcare and Universal Credit if they are working.

Source: Employers For Childcare.

There has been a year-on-year increase in the uptake of Tax-Free Childcare and Universal Credit since the schemes were introduced in 2017. In 2022/23:

- Across the year, 14,720 families had used a **Tax-Free Childcare** account, around 6% of the population of households with dependent children.¹⁴

- **Universal Credit** childcare support was accessed by around 6,610 households, just under 3% of the population of households with dependent children.¹⁵
- Parents receiving Universal Credit or other income-based benefits could get a non-repayable grant through the **Adviser Discretion Fund** to help with their initial upfront childcare costs if moving back into work or increasing their hours.

This is a complex landscape and parents can find it challenging to navigate support – or even know it is available. Employers For Childcare operates an independent Family Benefits Advice Service enabling parents to find out what support they are eligible for and what is the best option. In 2022/23, this service helped over 11,000 people and identified £12 million in financial support.¹⁶ The Department for Communities (DfC) runs the Make the Call helpline aimed at improving the uptake of benefits. What’s missing is a large-scale, ongoing public campaign which is needed to encourage families to find out more about the financial support they are entitled to.

Overview of financial support for the childcare sector

PSEP is fully funded but there is limited supply-side funding for childcare. There are a range of smaller supply-side funding streams available to providers in the sector. Existing support schemes include the following:

- **Pathway Fund:** Awarded almost £4 million in 2022/23 to around 170 providers supporting high-quality early learning for children aged 0–4 at risk of not reaching their full educational potential.
- **Fair Play Fund:** Awarded £341,000 in funding in 2022/23 to provide additional staff capacity to support the inclusion of children with a disability or going through an assessment process.
- **Bright Start:** Provided around £1 million in funding to 51 school-aged childcare settings, including (approximately) £124,000 to support 434 children with additional needs across 12 settings in 2022/23.
- **Childcare Partnership Regional Small Grants Scheme**, through the **Early Years Development Fund:** A competitive fund for community and voluntary providers to apply for a grant between £300 and £1,500.
- **Women’s Centres Childcare Fund**, through **Department for Communities (DfC):** £763,000 was awarded to 14 providers through the fund in 2020/21.

In 2022/23, successful applicants for funding of around £5 million through Pathway, Fair Play and Bright Start represented less than 10% of the provider population due to their competitive nature and eligibility criteria.¹⁷ These schemes are short-term in nature. In 2023, funding was at risk as the Department of Education (DE) sought to reduce expenditure. Following a successful campaign by the community and voluntary sector, DE announced it would not proceed with proposed cuts to early years programmes.¹⁸

Outside of the provision of PSEP, providers typically rely on fees from parents as their main source of income. Some fundraise or apply for grants through trusts and grant-making bodies, while others are taking out bank loans. The sector’s finances are precarious. Of providers, 84% are just breaking even or are making a loss, while 43% are struggling or distressed.¹⁹

Regulation of the sector

No single government department has sole responsibility for childcare policy or regulation in Northern Ireland. While this reflects the cross-cutting nature of early learning and childcare, it also creates complexity in terms of regulation:

- The **Department of Education (DE)** has policy responsibility for childcare and is currently tasked with developing a new Executive Early Learning and Childcare Strategy.
- The **Department of Health (DoH)** has statutory responsibility for the registration and inspection of childcare for children under the age of 12 years against the Minimum Standards.²⁰ The Minimum Standards set out requirements in terms of care, the physical environment, staff–child ratios, qualification requirements by role and physical space. Annual inspections are carried out by social workers from HSCTs who check the suitability of the premises, the people providing care, the standard of care and equipment. Inspection reports are not publicly available but can be requested.
- PSEP is administered by the **Education Authority (EA)** and inspected by the **Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI)**. Inspections are carried out in a cycle over several years. Inspection reports are published and rate the outcomes for learners, quality of provision, and leadership and management. Around one in ten childcare settings offer PSEP places meaning that they are inspected both by HSCT and the ETI.

Work to progress an Executive Early Learning and Childcare Strategy

Northern Ireland remains without a Childcare Strategy despite the 2011–15 Programme for Government²¹ committing to its development, a pledge that was reiterated in the New Decade, New Approach Agreement in 2020.²² A draft strategy was consulted on in 2015 but not progressed. Since 2021, work has recommenced on a new strategy to support child development and parental employment. This included a Strategic Insight Programme, an independent review of childcare, and convening a Stakeholder Engagement Forum. DE has engaged with the All Party Group on early education and childcare and other government departments through the Early Learning and Childcare Programme Board. All political parties have stated a commitment to progressing policy and investment in childcare. Costed options for the new strategy are at an advanced stage but a sitting Executive is required to agree on the direction and budget for a way forward.

How well is the early learning and childcare system delivering for children and families?

This section explores how the early learning and childcare system in Northern Ireland is delivering across the building blocks of affordability, quality, access, integrated and family-centred.

Affordable: the cost of childcare must not be a barrier to work or childcare use for parents

Under current plans, the UK Government will buy 80% of all of England's childcare by the end of 2024. In Northern Ireland, outside of funded pre-school provision, parents must rely on their household income to cover their childcare bill, supplemented by support schemes such as Universal Credit or Tax-Free Childcare, if eligible. Wages in Northern Ireland remain relatively low when compared to the UK as a whole,²³ meaning working families are particularly vulnerable to childcare fee increases. In the absence of schemes to fund or subsidise delivery, providers have little choice but to raise parents' fees to meet their own rising costs.

UK-wide financial support schemes are inadequate to address affordability challenges for parents. Complex eligibility criteria apply, and some families can miss out on support they are entitled to. The Tax-Free Childcare scheme has remained unchanged in its thresholds and level of support since it was introduced in 2017. In this time, the average cost of a full-time place in a day nursery in Northern Ireland has risen by 38%. The Northern Ireland Childcare Survey 2023²⁴ shows the average cost for a full-time place, at £10,036 a year, is now higher than the maximum childcare costs supported through Tax-Free Childcare, and is likely to rise again following the uplift in the National Living Wage and minimum wage in 2024. Additionally, these schemes are only available for working parents.

This means that, in Northern Ireland, **childcare is not affordable** for families to access or for providers to deliver. Well-paid and secure work is a key route out of poverty, but for some families, the cost of childcare can leave them feeling financially worse off when moving into work or increasing their hours. This can prompt parents to consider if the lower-income earner in a two-parent household, or the sole earner in a lone parent household, can afford to work. In 2023, 88% of parents reported having changed their work arrangements due to the cost of childcare, including reducing their working hours, passing on promotions, not pursuing education and training, and even leaving work altogether.

"I left my job in which I'd worked 13 years to get where I wanted to be. I took on a part time admin job for lower pay to look after my children as childcare costs were so high."

"I wish I could go back to work full time, but the cost of childcare outweighs the benefits. I'm stressed about how little I pay into my pension and can't progress my career."

Source: <https://www.employersforchildcare.org/report/northern-ireland-childcare-survey-2023/>

Parents from lower income households are less likely to be using childcare and more likely to have had to stop work due to the cost of childcare. Of parents from the lowest income households, 17% reported having stopped work due to the cost of childcare, compared to 1% from the highest income households.²⁵ When they are using childcare, they are more likely than higher income households to report using

unregistered childcare, which is paid for care with someone who is unregulated and uninsured. This does not deliver the quality needed to address disadvantage and poses safeguarding issues.

The economic inactivity rate in Northern Ireland (26.9%)²⁶ remains consistently higher than the UK figure (21.1%).²⁷ Women are more likely than men to be economically inactive and more likely to work in part-time, precarious employment. Of women with a child aged 1–4, 28% are economically inactive, compared to 8% of males.²⁸ Children under 5 are more likely to be in poverty, correlating with parents (particularly mothers) being less likely to be in work. Evidence points to a link with an inability to afford childcare.²⁹ If this failure can be addressed, 63% of stay-at-home parents said more affordable childcare would enable them to get into work. Of working parents, 35% said it would enable them to work more hours.³⁰

Quality: provision must be high quality in order to improve outcomes

To impact positively on outcomes for children, childcare needs to be high quality. Quality is particularly important for disadvantaged children, with research evidencing its role in closing early developmental gaps caused by poverty and its long-lasting impact on children’s education and later life.³¹ A relentless focus on quality and outcomes for children requires:

- clarity and consistency in what is meant by quality, and the measurement of quality indicators
- high-quality standards and conditions for those working within the sector
- an ability for providers to invest in quality infrastructure and equipment.

In Northern Ireland, childcare providers operate in a highly regulated environment. The DE Review of Childcare Services in NI (2023) found most stakeholders, including HSCT Early Years Teams, agreed that childcare provision is of a high quality.³² In 2023, 88% of parents who responded to the Northern Ireland Childcare Survey gave a positive rating to the quality of childcare they access for their children, and in particular the people who deliver it.

What is meant by quality and how is quality measured?

In a complex regulatory environment, childcare providers may be inspected by a range of organisations each considering different criteria. An overdue review of the Minimum Standards against which all registered providers are inspected is now planned for 2024. This is an important opportunity to consider, across the sector, agreed indicators of quality early learning and childcare. Government subsidy of the sector would provide a lever through which to shape and drive-up levels of quality.

High-quality standards and conditions for the workforce

Those who work within the sector are key to ensuring provision is high quality. Staff qualifications are a key determinant of quality. However, it is important to reflect that the absence of investment to address low pay across the sector will make it difficult to secure and progress skilled staff at all.

Recruiting and retaining high-quality people has emerged as a key challenge for the sector. This requires workers to be attracted by pay and conditions that reflect the qualifications, experience and professionalism they bring to their role. They need to feel valued for the critical role they play in the early learning and development of children. For many, this is not the case. For existing staff, moving into education, hospitality or retail offers a higher salary with fewer responsibilities and more flexibility. For potential recruits, the sector does not offer an attractive route for career progression. In 2021/22 there

were over 2,000 childcare staff vacancies, and the number of childminders has decreased. 70% of day nurseries identify staff recruitment, and 60% staff retention, as major challenges.³³

*“There’s a push towards a degree led workforce. People with degrees don’t want to work for minimum wage. Professionalising the sector requires funding to pay a decent wage.”
(Childcare provider)*

“It is a real challenge for our sector. Demotivated staff that don't feel valued, low morale due to pay rate. It’s a sad time for childcare.” (Childcare provider)

Source: <https://www.employersforchildcare.org/report/northern-ireland-childcare-survey-2023/>

Qualification requirements for those working within the sector are set out in the Minimum Standards.³⁴ From 2018 to 2020 the proportion of staff with L3 and L6+ qualifications increased. 80% hold at least L3. 26% are educated to degree level. This is comparable to England. Providers interviewed for the 2023 DE Review of Childcare Services felt the standard of training and qualifications was high. At the same time, some suggested the format of qualifications could incorporate more practical experience in the workplace, as has been done in England.³⁵

The Fair Start report makes proposals in relation to training, qualifications, a Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Strategy for the Early Years workforce, and a move towards graduate-led provision. While acknowledging the complexity of the sector, it noted evidence linking quality and outcomes for children with the qualification levels of staff and leaders or managers. Statutory provision of PSEP is already graduate-led. A recent ETI Pre-school Phase report found the overall quality of learning and teaching to be good or better in 71% of pre-schools inspected.³⁶

Surplus to invest in quality infrastructure and equipment

To reinvest into their settings, providers require a surplus of income. This is what enables them to go on, or send staff on, training courses, and to enhance the space and learning environment for children in their care. Yet just 16% of providers reported making a financial surplus in the last year.³⁷ With costs for equipment and resources rising, and in the absence of government funding to enable this investment, settings have little choice but to increase fees for parents to drive quality.

Accessed: disadvantaged children need to be able to take up early education and childcare

Children can only benefit from early education and childcare if they are able to attend it. On both counts, the sector in Northern Ireland is struggling. Unlike other parts of the UK, there is no statutory duty to ensure sufficient childcare places. Of parents, 81% report that there is **not enough local provision** of at least one type of childcare, with parents in some areas more likely to report insufficient provision, particularly more rural areas.³⁸ Of parents, 49% report having made changes to their working arrangements due to being unable to find or access childcare.³⁹ More than half of providers report demand is outstripping capacity for children aged 0–2 years.⁴⁰ Parents also report finding it difficult to access school age early learning and childcare.

For children aged 3–4 DE guarantees a pre-school (PSEP) place for every eligible child, with settings giving priority in admission criteria to socially disadvantaged children. In 2020/21, 16% of children in their immediate pre-school year met these criteria. Of those children, around 68% accessed a full-time PSEP place, 28% of all the full-time places available. Proportionately, more children from socially disadvantaged circumstances access full-time pre-school.⁴¹ In one sense, this compares favourably to England where a maximum of 15 hours of early education and childcare is available universally, including to disadvantaged families. In England, however, the funded provision can start the term after a child turns 3, including in the middle of the academic year. This means that some families can benefit from up to two additional terms of early learning and childcare.

Outside of PSEP, however, barriers preventing children from taking up an early learning and childcare place include affordability and accessibility, such as for those with additional needs or for whom English is a second language. While the 2023 DE Review of Childcare Services found broadly sufficient places for children with a disability, this does not mean that supply is meeting demand in all areas or for all families.

There are questions over whether settings have the staff, equipment and training to properly cater for all children. Providers reported that caring for a child with a disability, or for whom English is a second language, can incur additional costs.⁴² Childminders reported having to reduce the number of other children they could accommodate when taking on a child with a disability. Parents of children with additional needs, and those whose main language is not English, are less likely to use formal childcare.⁴³

Integrated: it must be part of a wider support system for families

To fully achieve its potential in tackling disadvantage, childcare must be an effective pillar of a wider support system. In Northern Ireland, the system is not currently working as collaboratively as it needs to. The 2023 DE Review of Childcare Services heard from providers who felt a lack of support from other agencies for children in childcare, often drawing comparisons with multidisciplinary teams supporting children with additional needs in educational settings. Having access to these teams, or a dedicated health visitor to help identify and assess a child's support needs, was seen as particularly important for children who had not yet reached school age, as it would allow early interventions to be put in place.

The dual regulatory environment of HSCT and ETI inspections (for those with PSEP places), does not lend itself to a joined-up, integrated approach. Instead, it can be perceived as artificially separating the care and learning of a child. There are also distinctions in relation to the integration of non-statutory and statutory pre-school providers within the wider system. An example is Operation Encompass, a partnership between the Police Service of Northern Ireland Safeguarding Board, Education Authority and schools, aimed at supporting children who witness domestic violence.⁴⁴ Statutory pre-school providers are currently included within the notification framework while non-statutory settings are not.

The Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015⁴⁵ requires children's authorities to cooperate with other service providers to contribute to the well-being of children and young people, including through the pooling or sharing of resources. Its potential, however, has not been fully realised. We need to see a greater emphasis on, and financial support for, effective collaboration between all service providers. Again, Sure Start is an example of a positive, multi-agency collaboration between statutory agencies, the community and voluntary sector, and the wider children's sector.

Family-centred: it must support a positive home-learning environment

The relationship between parents, providers and other professionals is key to developing a positive home-learning environment. In Northern Ireland, many providers are at the heart of the local community. Some offer regular advice sessions for parents or signpost them to financial and other support. Some, such as Approved Home Childcarers, work within a family's home. The Minimum Standards require providers to "work in partnership with parents to meet the needs of children both individually and as a group".⁴⁶ Where appropriate, providers must communicate with parents about their child's day and keep them informed about approaches used in the setting. While they are important aspects of communication, they do not establish a role for providers in supporting the home-learning environment.

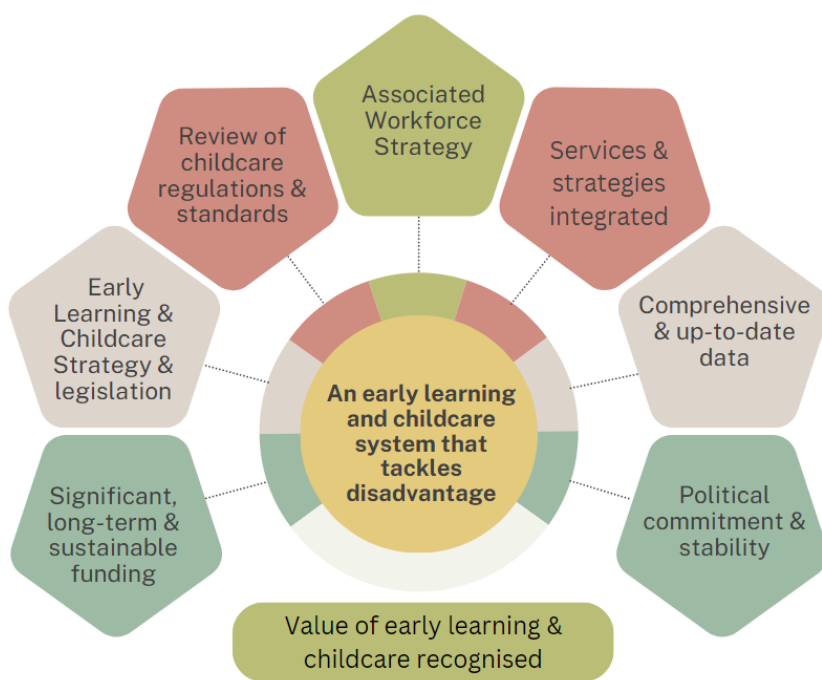
Sure Start: A family-centred model in Northern Ireland

It supports families in areas of greatest disadvantage to promote children's development, engaging with over 34,000 families in 2022/23.⁴⁷ Staff work with families incorporating outreach, one to one, and group-based support in 38 Sure Start projects across each HSCT in Northern Ireland. The Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services in Northern Ireland⁴⁸ recommended the expansion of Sure Start into more areas. A key principle of Sure Start is to involve parents and promote family participation. They link parents with other specialised services, including parenting programmes, play promotion, antenatal support and developmental programmes. The latest Sure Start Outcome Based Accountability Report Card⁴⁹ presents its impact over the last year, including enhanced parenting skills and parent progress in relation to child development, home, money and work. While some strategies used for family engagement may be more difficult to implement, or not be appropriate for childcare settings, there is learning to be taken from the model.

Policy change proposed to tackle disadvantage through early learning and childcare

Transformational change is needed in how the early learning and childcare infrastructure in Northern Ireland is supported and invested in to achieve its potential in tackling disadvantage and addressing poverty. With work ongoing on a new Early Learning and Childcare Strategy, there is a real opportunity to reimagine how services are designed, planned and delivered with children and families at the heart. We can build on the strengths within the system while addressing what isn't working, delivering wide-ranging benefits for our society and economy as a whole. This requires a fundamental shift in how early learning and childcare is valued and the **transformation of current stumbling blocks into building blocks**.

Figure 1: Components of an early learning and childcare system that tackles disadvantage



Source: Employers For Childcare.

The initial focus should be on developing a bespoke funding model, investing directly into the sector, to support its sustainability while addressing affordability and accessibility barriers for families. In tandem, we need to see the publication of an ambitious Early Learning and Childcare Strategy, supported by legislation, with short-, medium- and long-term plans to develop a world-leading early learning and childcare infrastructure. This is key to ensuring plans and initiatives are joined up and strategic. It is also essential in order to monitor progress and accountability, and will require the gathering of comprehensive, up-to-date data. To inform the new Early Learning and Childcare Strategy, the overdue review of childcare regulations and standards needs to be taken forward. This will also be relevant to the development of a new Workforce Strategy for the sector, and supporting the integration of services and strategies.

Significant, long-term and sustainable funding

Through significant, long-term and sustainable funding of the sector, the government can introduce and manage levers designed to tackle disadvantage. Using learning from the experience of schemes rolled out in England and Ireland, two universal, supply-side funding schemes are proposed:

1. **An allocation of fully funded provision:** For children in their immediate pre-school year, the government should fully fund a universal allocation of free early learning and childcare (22.5 hours per week during term time). This is already being scoped by DE as a standardisation of the existing pre-school programme.
2. **Subsidising the costs of all other early learning and childcare:** A core-funding subsidy should be available for registered community, voluntary and private childcare providers which covers a portion of their overall costs, enabling them to reduce the fees they charge parents for all provision outside of PSEP funded hours.

Our proposals build on strengths within the existing Northern Ireland system and incorporate elements learned from the experiences in England, Ireland and the other devolved nations, with a few examples listed below.

- In England, a universal offer of 15 fully-funded hours for early learning and childcare provision is available for all families with a child aged 3–4 years old, and 15 hours of free childcare for disadvantaged 2 year olds. However, additional funded hours are available for the children of working parents only, which, as research from the Sutton Trust highlights, is locking out some of the poorest families from benefiting; the very children who stand to benefit most from high-quality early education within this age group.⁵⁰ As set out in the Coram and JRF report, extending the scheme in England risks further entrenching this disadvantage.
- In Ireland, Core Funding⁵¹ is a new supply-side subsidy paid directly to registered childcare providers and designed to improve affordability, quality, inclusion and sustainability. It works alongside other schemes within Ireland aimed at supporting providers and families. It introduces greater public management into the sector with robust conditionality. At present, however, issues include a lack of regional variation in relation to rates of pay, continuing challenges for the sector in terms of recruitment and retention, and very few childminders who are registered in Ireland, meaning that there is large cohort within the sector that is not currently included within the scheme – there are plans, however, to address this.

Taking this learning on board offers scope to develop a bespoke solution in Northern Ireland to make quality early learning and childcare more affordable and accessible for all families. We also propose strengthened schemes specifically aimed at ensuring access to quality early learning and childcare for children from disadvantaged families, including where families are not working, for example a strengthened 2 Year Old Programme and targeted support for the sector to tackle disadvantage.⁵²

In developing our proposals, we considered a number of options, including:

- extending the allocation of free hours to younger children (before the PSEP year)
- a funding subsidy, making a payment to providers with conditionality attached
- universal or targeted schemes aimed at tackling disadvantage.

Having considered these options, we have not called for the further extension of ‘free’ places as an initial measure. This is based on concerns about the potential underfunding of such a scheme and the negative impact this could have on:

- the sustainability of the sector in the longer term
- terms and conditions for those working in the sector
- the quality of provision.

We are also concerned that, to provide an allocation of ‘free’ places, eligibility criteria would be required that could restrict access to families who otherwise would be able to benefit, such as in England where there has been a focus on extending free hours for working families. It could also result in higher fees for hours outside of the free allocation, or additional charges, as has been seen in England.⁵³

Instead, we propose an initial model of universal investment into the sector, driving up quality and supporting longer term sustainability, with additional support targeted specifically to address disadvantage. For the lowest income households, in practice, they would benefit from:

- 22.5 hours of fully-funded, high-quality early education and childcare in their child’s immediate pre-school year
- reduced fees for all other early learning and childcare that they require (wraparound and for younger and older children)
- additional support for working families, covering up to 85% of their childcare costs through Universal Credit and an Adviser Discretion Fund grant to assist with upfront childcare costs when returning to work or increasing hours
- targeted subsidies that support providers to remove barriers to the delivery of quality early learning and childcare, and to support families within their community
- expanded Sure Start support and a strengthened developmental programme for 2–3 year olds.

Over time, further support can be phased in, moving towards a means-tested co-payment system that would increase the number of children who can benefit from fully-funded, quality early learning and childcare outside of PSEP.

Short- to medium-term recommendations

We propose a universal entitlement to a minimum of 22.5 hours of early education per week, across term time, for all children in their immediate pre-school year, irrespective of a child’s circumstances. Funding and support will be required to develop capacity across the wider sector in order to accommodate this provision. Funding levels must be consistent across all settings (statutory and non-statutory) and set to enable a relentless focus on quality and on a professional workforce.

Importantly, this must be recognised as part of the wider early learning and childcare mix for families in Northern Ireland, otherwise it will lose the added value of the investment in early education to also support parental employment. This means it must be complemented by affordable, quality and accessible early learning and childcare outside of the funded hours, including during school holidays, with effective transitions across providers where necessary.

This can be achieved through a core-funding subsidy for registered community, voluntary and private childcare providers providing early learning and childcare to children of all ages, including school-age

children. This supply-side funding will provide a source of stable, guaranteed income for the sector, contributing to their overall costs for staff pay and conditions, overheads and administration. It will give the government 'conditionality' levers to tackle disadvantage and drive up quality. As a condition of funding, providers would be required to:

- reduce parental fees (fee structure to be determined)
- uplift staff salaries in line with a new Workforce Strategy
- meet agreed quality standards in relation to outcomes for children
- maintain high levels of financial probity and of governance and information transparency.

It will be essential that this is robustly regulated to ensure funding is used as intended across the sector to deliver the objectives of the scheme. The rate of subsidy and framework for parental fees must be in line with what it costs to deliver a quality place, with consideration given to regional variations. This will require either enhancing the powers of an existing regulator or establishing a specific agency properly resourced to regulate the scheme. There may be scope to allocate resources through reform and streamlining of the existing regulatory framework. This will shift the relationship between the government and the sector towards greater partnership working and public management of provision as a condition of funding. It will also require the collation of robust data from the sector and families in order to monitor implementation and assist in ongoing development of the scheme.

It is anticipated the new Early Learning and Childcare Strategy will be a 10-year strategy. In the first half of the strategy, the core-funding subsidy should be phased in gradually, starting immediately with an initial fee freeze. Over the next five years, providers would be required to significantly reduce the rate of fees that they are charging for **all hours** of the early learning and childcare they provide, enabled by the core-funding subsidy. For example, by year two of the scheme, fees will be reduced by 25% from the baseline year, and by 50% by year five.

Parents will still be required to pay for all hours of childcare that they access outside of the fully-funded hours in their child's immediate pre-school year (including wraparound provision in the pre-school year and all hours used for younger or older children), but at a reduced rate than it would otherwise have been. All hours will be partially funded through the core-funding subsidy and parental fees, with the balance shifting over time towards a greater amount being covered through the core-funding subsidy.

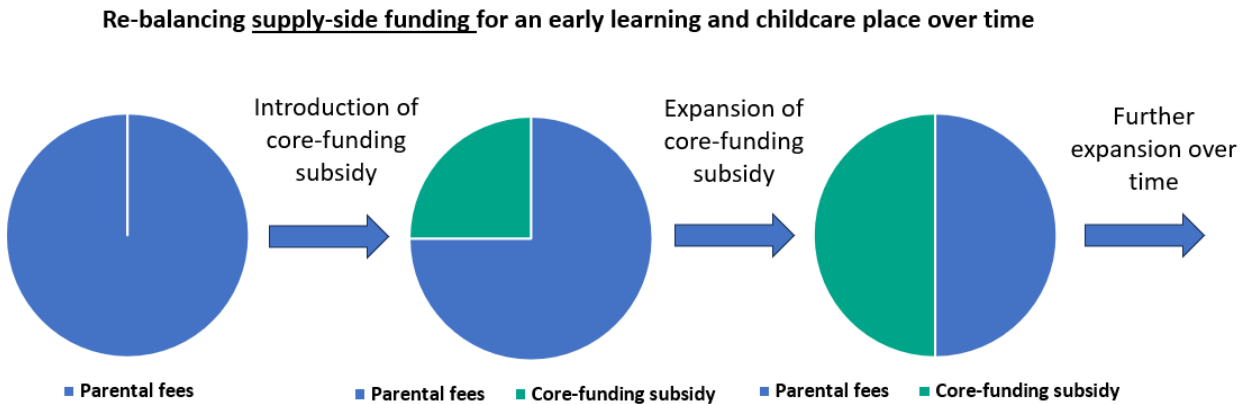
Reduced childcare fees would be universal with no parental conditionality, such as being in work or earning a certain amount. The reduction would apply across the full calendar year rather than only during term time. The rate of subsidy for providers will determine the reduction in fees for parents. This will require a detailed analysis of what it costs to deliver a high-quality childcare place for children of all ages, recognising that costs will be higher for younger children and a higher level of subsidy will be required.

The subsidy could incorporate:

- a main base rate based on staffed capacity, duration and age group
- additional premiums for graduate-led provision.

The combination of income from parental fees and from the subsidy needs to cover the realistic costs of delivering quality services and uplifting staff salaries, and not create a situation where providers are unwilling or unable to participate.

Figure 2: Re-balancing funding for early learning and childcare



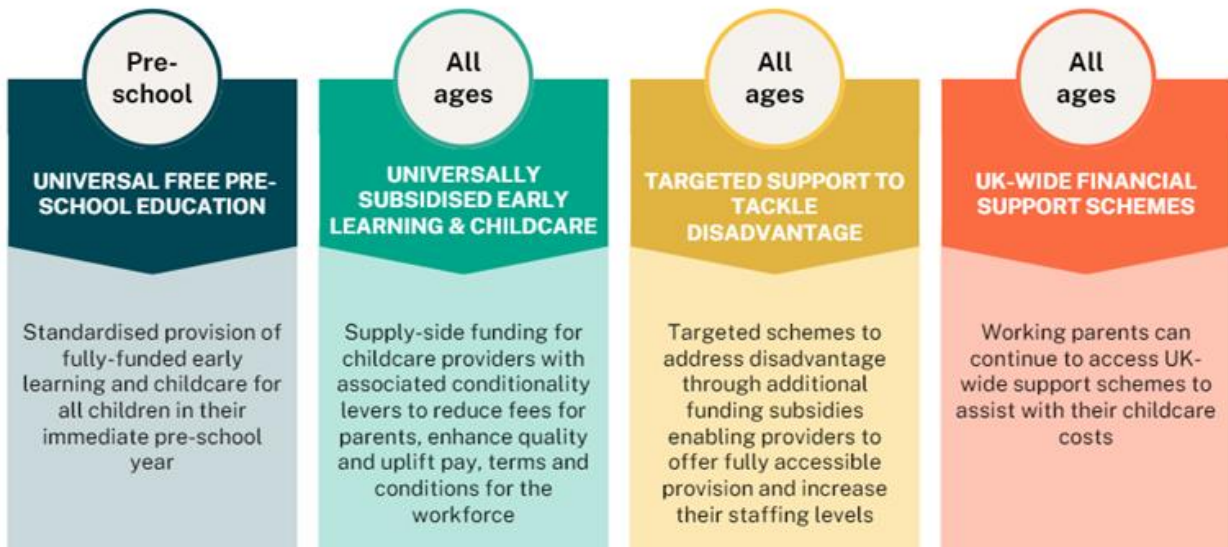
Source: Employers For Childcare.

Eligible parents can continue to access demand-side financial assistance with their fees through existing, UK-wide financial support schemes such as Universal Credit and Tax-Free Childcare. This will further improve affordability for families and will mean that households are less likely to reach a 'cap' on the support they can avail of through these schemes.

Alongside the two universal funding schemes, targeted supply-side subsidies must be in place and functioning effectively to address disadvantage by providing additional payments to providers to cover the increased costs of removing barriers to access, making childcare fully accessible for children with a disability or to recruit additional staff. This also requires investment in order to strengthen and expand existing Sure Start provision. Targeted support is a critical pillar that must be in place to tackle disadvantage. These would enhance funds currently available in Northern Ireland and would be open to all community, voluntary and private sector providers.

Together, these would comprise four pillars of support in the short to medium term.

Figure 3: Four pillars of support



Source: Employers For Childcare.

Longer-term aspirations

Over time, the core-funding subsidy for providers should be increased, conditional on the further reduction of fees for parents. In the second half of the 10-year Early Learning and Childcare Strategy, once the system has been established and learning incorporated, we recommend a UK-wide move towards phasing out demand-side financial support schemes. The equivalent funds should be used to further enhance the supply-side core-funding subsidy, increasing the amount paid to providers. This would enable the introduction of a means-tested co-payment model where families co-pay only what they can afford. The rest of what it costs to deliver the high-quality early learning and childcare place will be met through government subsidy. This would work alongside the standardised provision of universal, free early learning and childcare in each child's immediate pre-school year. The details would still need to be worked out but could involve an allocation of fully-funded provisions for younger children from disadvantaged households, with other families paying for early learning and childcare at a rate that is set based on their household income. This is a longer-term aspiration both because:

- it will require the development of a co-payment, means-testing mechanism and
- until an effective childcare affordability scheme is established in Northern Ireland, there is a risk that withdrawing UK-wide support schemes could mean parents are not able to access any support with their childcare costs.

Childcare policy is devolved in Northern Ireland, meaning responsibility lies with the Stormont Executive. While funding is allocated to deliver PSEP, there is no other scheme to subsidise childcare for families. At present, these UK-wide schemes are the only forms of support assisting parents with their registered childcare costs in Northern Ireland. Government spending in England informs funding allocations for each of the devolved nations through the 'Barnett Formula'.⁵⁴ A phased expansion of the existing, free childcare offer for working families in England was announced by the Chancellor in his Spring Budget in

2023.⁵⁵ This will result in associated Barnett consequential for Northern Ireland. At present, funding allocated to Northern Ireland through the Barnett consequential associated with childcare spend in England is not ringfenced for childcare. Going forward, money allocated to the Northern Ireland budget due to childcare investment in England must be clearly identified and allocated for sustainable investment in early learning and childcare in Northern Ireland. Political instability continues to hamper strategic decision making and the setting of longer-term budgets.

What will this mean for families in terms of the affordability of early learning and childcare?

Table 1: Summary of proposals to enhance affordability of early learning and childcare for families

Age group	Current system	Short to medium term – outcomes for families	Longer term – outcomes for families
0 to 3 years	<p>No funded childcare.</p> <p>Sure Start support for eligible families including 2 Year Old Programme.</p> <p>Universal Credit and Tax-Free Childcare support for working parents.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hourly/daily/weekly rates for early learning and childcare is reduced. Universal Credit and Tax-Free Childcare support can be accessed by eligible parents to further assist with costs. Strengthened 2 Year Old Programme and expansion of Sure Start support for disadvantaged families. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Through a means-tested co-payment model, families only pay an hourly/daily/weekly fee based on what they can afford, with some paying nothing. 2 Year Old Programme and Sure Start support for disadvantaged families.
3 to 4 years	<p>One year of universal, funded pre-school education in a child’s immediate pre-school year: minimum 12.5 hours per week during term time, some settings offer up to 22.5 hours per week.</p> <p>Universal Credit and Tax-Free Childcare support for working parents.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All children receive one year of free, quality, universal pre-school provision of 22.5 hours per week during term time. Rates for wraparound and holiday early learning and childcare provision are reduced. Universal Credit and Tax-Free Childcare support can be accessed by eligible parents to further assist with wraparound and holiday costs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All children receive one year of free, quality, universal pre-school provision of 22.5 hours per week during term time. Through a means-tested co-payment model, families only pay an hourly/daily/weekly fee for the wraparound and holiday early learning and childcare they need based on what they can afford.
5 years +	<p>No funded childcare.</p> <p>Universal Credit and Tax-Free Childcare support for working parents.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rates for wraparound and holiday early learning and childcare provision are reduced. Universal Credit and Tax-Free Childcare support can be accessed by eligible parents to further assist with wraparound and holiday costs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Through a means-tested co-payment model, families only pay an hourly/daily/weekly fee for the wraparound and holiday early learning and childcare they need based on what they can afford.

Source: Employers For Childcare.

Ambitious Early Learning and Childcare Strategy underpinned by legislation

An ambitious new Early Learning and Childcare Strategy is required as an immediate priority, setting out short-, medium- and long-term plans. This should include the introduction of legislation, such as an Early Education and Childcare Act, providing a statutory basis for the financing, supervision and coordination of the delivery of early education and childcare services.

As elsewhere in the UK, it should establish a statutory duty for the provision of sufficient places to meet the needs of families, and a childcare entitlement guarantee that every child and family can access a childcare place that fully meets their needs. This is particularly important for children with special educational needs and disabilities who, too often, struggle to find a childcare place. This requires sufficient capacity within the system to meet the demand. At present, there is around one childcare place for every six children in Northern Ireland. A comprehensive assessment of demand and supply needs to be completed on the basis of a reformed system incorporating core-funding for providers, thus reducing fees for parents. While not every family will want or need registered childcare, it is likely that improving the affordability of childcare will impact demand. If the capacity is not there within the system, then a childcare guarantee or entitlement will be meaningless to those families who cannot access a space because it is not available.

In England, local authorities are required by legislation to: ‘Secure sufficient childcare, so far as is reasonably practicable, for working parents, or parents who are studying or training for employment, for children aged 0–14 or up to 18 for disabled children’.⁵⁶

Review of childcare regulations and standards

The overdue review of the Minimum Standards needs to be prioritised, offering an opportunity to reimagine childcare regulations to ensure a relentless focus on quality and safeguarding, outcomes for children, raise standards and build capacity. The scope of the review must be wide-ranging, multi-disciplinary and reflect the diversity of the sector. This must be done in close consultation with stakeholders. The review needs to be evidence-based, drawing both from international best practice and from experience within Northern Ireland. It provides scope to streamline the inspection processes with consideration given to a joint approach with a single Early Years Childcare quality outcomes framework, incorporating an age- and stage-appropriate programme for settings and relevant quality and safeguarding indicators. This could also align expectations and standards, ensuring parity across the statutory, voluntary, community and private sectors.

Development of a Workforce Strategy

Evidence links the delivery of high-quality early learning and childcare to the skills, experiences and qualifications of the workforce. At present, recruiting and retaining high-quality people is a key pressure point within childcare, impacting the ability of providers to deliver a quality service. Therefore, a robust, funded Workforce Strategy is required, reflecting the diversity of the sector while ensuring a competent, confident and appropriately qualified workforce. A Workforce Strategy should do the following.

- Integrate with the core-funding subsidy, resourcing providers to increase pay rates for those working within the sector without having to pass associated costs on to parents. In Ireland, Employment Regulation Orders have resulted in improved pay for approximately 73% of those

working in the sector.⁵⁷ This could provide a model to establish a meaningful pay framework. Learning can also come from Scotland, where the Scottish First Minister confirmed funding will be provided to ensure staff are paid a minimum of £12 an hour, alongside plans to recruit more registered childminders.⁵⁸ Levers to enforce this may include the development of a sectoral agreement in relation to wages, terms and conditions, and enhancing the inspection regime.

- Identify enhanced support for graduate-led provision outside of PSEP through graduate premiums within the core-funding subsidy.
- Promote and professionalise the sector as a career of choice, offering career pathways, training and skills development and CPD linking closely with local providers of further and higher education, apprenticeship places, and skills academies.
- Support the establishment and operation of a professional body for early learning and childcare.
- Address recruitment challenges related to delays in accessing, and transferability of, the HSCT vetting checks and staff health declarations which must be signed by general practitioners.

Integrating services and strategies

At present, accessing support can be a complex, cluttered and conflicting experience for parents while providers are subject to a range of regulatory regimes. In addressing this, there is learning from the Sure Start model and from community day care providers who have taken a family-led and place-based approach to understand local needs and support families within disadvantaged areas.

Consideration should be given to having one lead department responsible for childcare, ensuring a cohesive approach to streamlining regulation, minimising duplication, coordinating collaboration and overseeing implementation of the new strategy.

Better collaboration is needed between providers, regulators and agencies to facilitate the sharing of best practice, raise standards and ensure every child is linked into the support they need to give them the best start in life. This is particularly important to tackle disadvantage, support children with additional needs or a disability, and those for whom English is a second language. For example, providers should be able to provide direct referrals where appropriate, such as to educational psychology, to speech and language therapists or to access support through dedicated health visitors. At present, while a provider may raise concerns with a parent, it is then up to the parent to seek further support. As well as supporting every child, this also opens up opportunities to support parents and the wider family network through linking with community groups, statutory agencies and wider support networks that are available.

Gathering and maintaining up-to-date data on the sector

Comprehensive and up-to-date data is essential for the effective planning of services and to keep parents informed. Consideration should be given to a regular census of the sector to gather key information in areas such as staff qualification profiles and children with additional needs. This could accompany the sufficiency duty, as up-to-date information will be needed to assess levels of supply and demand. Core-funding of the sector could be a lever through which to mandate this information. Care will need to be taken to ensure administrative requirements are not onerous.

For parents, Family Support NI provides a searchable database⁵⁹ of all registered childcare providers in Northern Ireland. This is an invaluable resource but does have limitations. It cannot currently provide an up-to-date record of availability. A technological solution may assist in making it easier for providers to

keep their public records up-to-date. Information gathered and shared through Family Support NI should be reviewed in consultation both with providers and parents.

Political commitment and stability

The impact of having no functioning Executive in place is clear. Major policy decisions, strategic direction and the setting of budgets are all paused. The long-overdue Early Learning and Childcare Strategy is a victim of this; work cannot progress until a direction of travel is agreed upon by the Executive based on costed options. All parties have expressed commitment to progressing childcare policy as a day-one priority but, as the absence of the Executive continues, more and more issues will need to be prioritised. A restored Executive and political stability are urgently needed to enable the development and implementation of the new Early Learning and Childcare Strategy.

Recognition of the value of early learning and childcare

Underpinning all these recommendations is a concerted shift in how early learning and childcare is valued by governments and across society. This means recognising childcare as a public good; not simply as somewhere children are 'minded', but as critical educational, social and economic infrastructure. This is necessary to secure the long-term investment needed for a world-leading system tackling disadvantage and child poverty through enabling parents to increase their incomes through work.

There have been improvements in this area in recent years, reflected in the breadth of stakeholders from across all sectors who engage with the All Party Group on Early Education and Childcare at Stormont. Early learning and childcare is now routinely on the agenda within business audiences and all government departments are engaged in the development of the new strategy. However, there is still a long way to go. Recognition of the value of the sector also needs to translate into the following:

- Recognition that early learning and childcare is a rights-based issue in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.⁶⁰
- A clear commitment to Early Learning and Childcare in the next Programme for Government.
- Early learning and childcare reflected in associated strategies on anti-poverty, economy and skills.
- Ambitious, and Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development-leading, funding as a proportion of GDP.
- Adjusting the terminology used for the sector and its workforce.
- Addressing unregulated childcare provision that risks undermining the profession as a whole.
- Promoting the importance of play, in terms of the well-being and development of children.

Bibliography

Corfe, S (2022) Childcare costs and poverty. Social Market Foundation.

Children Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) (2015). [Online] Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2015/10/contents/enacted> [Accessed: 5 January 2024]

Department for Communities (2023) Universal Credit statistics. [Online] Available at: <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/universal-credit-statistics-august-2023> [Accessed: 3 January 2024]

Department for Communities (Northern Ireland) (2023) Poverty and income inequality report (2021-22). [Online] Available at: <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-poverty-and-income-inequality-report-2021-22> [Accessed: 19 December 2023]

Department for Education (2015) Effective pre-school, primary and secondary education project (EPPSE 3–16+). [Online] Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a803cb240f0b62305b89fbf/RB455_Effective_pre-school_primary_and_secondary_education_project.pdf.pdf [Accessed: 19 December 2023]

Department for the Economy (2023) Labour market statistics. [Online] Available at: <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/news/labour-market-statistics-56> [Accessed: 19 December 2023]

Department for Education (2023) Childcare and early years survey of parents. [Online] Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/childcare-and-early-years-survey-of-parents> [Accessed: 19 December 2023]

Department for Education (2023) Early education and childcare: Statutory guidance for local authorities. [Online] Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/658309fd23b70a000d234d34/Early_education_and_childcare_statutory_guidance_-_April_2023.pdf Accessed: 19 December 2023]

Department for Education (2023) Spring budget 2023 childcare expansion: Policy costing information note. [Online] Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/64b8f5f0ef537100147aef30/Spring_Budget_2023_Childcare_Expansion_Policy_costing_information_note_July_2023.pdf [Accessed: 19 December 2023]

Department of Education (2021) Consultation on review of pre-school admission socially disadvantage circumstances criterion. [Online] Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/consultations/consultation-review-pre-school-admission-socially-disadvantaged-circumstances-criterion> [Accessed 5 January 2024]

Department of Education (2021) A fair start: Final report and action plan. [Online] Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/fair-start-final-report-action-plan> [Accessed: 19 December 2023]

Department of Education (2023) Department of Education protects funding for vulnerable children and young people. [Online] Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/news/department-education-protects-funding-vulnerable-children-and-young-people> [Accessed: 5 January 2024]

Department of Education (2023) RSM (2023) DE review of childcare services in NI. [Online] Available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/rsm-2023-de-review-childcare-services-ni-final-report> [Accessed: 19 December 2023]

Department of Education, Health and Social Care (2023) Sure Start outcome based accountability report card 2022–23. [Online] Available at: https://www.familysupportni.gov.uk/Content/uploads/userUploads/OBA_2023.pdf [Accessed: 19 December 2023]

Department of Health (2012) Childminding and day care for children under age 12: Minimum Standards [Online] Available at: [https://www.familysupportni.gov.uk/Content/uploads/userUploads/early-years-standards-full-version%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.familysupportni.gov.uk/Content/uploads/userUploads/early-years-standards-full-version%20(1).pdf) [Accessed: 19 December 2023]

Department of Health (2023) Children’s social care statistics for Northern Ireland 2022/23. [Online] Available at: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/child-social-care-22-23.pdf>

Early Education and Childcare Coalition (2023) Retention and return: Delivering the expansion of early years entitlement in England. [Online] Available at: <https://www.earlyeducationchildcare.org/early-years-workforce-report> [Accessed: 19 December 2023]

Education and Training Inspectorate (2021) Pre-school phase report September 2018 – December 2020. [Online] Available at: https://www.etini.gov.uk/sites/etini.gov.uk/files/publications/pre-school-phase-report-September-2018-December-2020_0.pdf [Accessed: 19 December 2023]

Employers For Childcare (November 2023) All Party Group hears about the experience of support for childcare in ROI. [Online] Available at: <https://www.employersforchildcare.org/news-item/all-party-group-november-23/> [Accessed: 19 December 2023]

Employers For Childcare (2023) Northern Ireland childcare survey 2023. [Online] Available at: www.employersforchildcare.org/report/northern-ireland-childcare-survey-2023 [Accessed: 19 December 2023]

Employers For Childcare (2023) Social impact report 2022/23. [Online] Available at: <https://www.employersforchildcare.org/?download=file&file=13875> [Accessed: 29 December 2023]

End Child Poverty (2023) Local indicators of child poverty after housing costs. [Online] Available at: <https://endchildpoverty.org.uk/child-poverty/> [Accessed: 19 December 2023]

Family Support NI. Childcare support and advice. [Online] Available at: <https://www.familysupportni.gov.uk/Section/Childcare/138> [Accessed: 19 December 2023]

Family Support NI. The different types of childcare. [Online] Available at: <https://www.familysupportni.gov.uk/Support/43/the-different-types-of-childcare> [Accessed: 19 December 2023]

Fitzpatrick, C, Loader, R, McCartney, S, McConnell, B, McMullen, J, Murray, C, Orr, K, Purdy, N, Simms, V (2023) The consequences of the cuts to education for children and young people in Northern Ireland. [Online] Available at: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4494674 [Accessed: 19 December 2023]

HMRC (2023) Tax-free childcare statistics, June 2023. [Online] Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/tax-free-childcare-statistics-june-2023> [Accessed: 19 December 2023]

House of Commons Education Committee (2023) Support for childcare and the early years, fifth report of session 2022-23. [Online] Available at:

<https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/41066/documents/200023/default/> [Accessed: 19 December 2023]

Jones, R (2023) Report of the independent review of children's social care services in Northern Ireland. [Online] Available at: <https://www.cscsreviewni.net/publications/report-independent-review-childrens-social-care-services-northern-ireland> [Accessed: 19 December 2023]

Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2023) Tackling disadvantage through childcare. Coram Institute. [Online] Available at: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/tackling-disadvantage-through-childcare> [Accessed: 19 December 2023]

Keep, M (2023) The Barnett formula and fiscal devolution. House of Commons Library. [Online] Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7386/> [Accessed: 5 January 2024]

Members of the Anti-Poverty Strategy Co-Design Group (2022) Recommendations on the development of an Anti-Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland. [Online] Available at: https://www.nicva.org/sites/default/files/d7content/attachments-articles/recommendations_for_an_ni_anti-poverty_strategy_-_a_paper_from_members_of_the_aps_co_design_group_september_2022.pdf [Accessed: 19 December 2023]

Northern Ireland Executive (2012) Programme for government 2011-2015. [Online] Available at: <https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/publications/programme-government-2011-2015> [Accessed: 29 December 2023]

Northern Ireland Executive (2020) New decade, new approach. [Online] Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5e178b56ed915d3b06f2b795/2020-01-08_a_new_decade_a_new_approach.pdf [Accessed: 29 December 2023]

Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) (2022) Women in Northern Ireland 2020/21. [Online] Available at: <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/women-in-northern-ireland-2020-2021> [Accessed: 19 December 2023]

Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) (2023) Annual survey of hours and earnings. [Online] Available at: <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/labour-market-and-social-welfare/annual-survey-hours-and-earnings#:~:text=The%20key%20points%20from%20the,the%20second%20largest%20on%20record> [Accessed: 19 December 2023]

Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) (2023) Annual enrolments at schools and in funded pre-school education in Northern Ireland. [Online] Available at: [Annual-enrolments-schools-and-funded-pre-school-education-northern-ireland-202223-0](https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/annual-enrolments-schools-and-funded-pre-school-education-northern-ireland-202223-0) [Accessed: 19 December 2023]

Office for National Statistics (2022) Families and the labour market, Northern Ireland. [Online] Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/datasets/familiesandthelabourmarketnorthernirelandmaindatasetusingthelabourforcesurveyandannualpopulationsurvey/2020> [Accessed: 29 December 2023]

Office for National Statistics (2023) Economic inactivity. [Online] Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/economicinactivity> [Accessed: 19 December 2023]

PlayBoard Northern Ireland (2023) The value and benefits of play-based school-age childcare within the Early Learning and Childcare Strategy. [Online] Available at: <https://www.playboard.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Play-based-School-Age-Childcare.pdf> [Accessed: 5 January 2024]

Police Service of Northern Ireland. Operation Encompass. [Online] Available at: www.psni.police.uk/safety-and-support/keeping-safe/protecting-yourself/domestic-abuse/operation-encompass [Accessed: 29 December 2023]

Pollard, T, Coote, A, Stephens, T, Ewart-Biggs, H (2023) A fair start for all. New Economics Foundation. [Online] Available at: <https://neweconomics.org/2023/11/a-fair-start-for-all> [Accessed: 5 January 2024]

Reimagine Children’s Collective (2023) Reimagining children’s social care services in Northern Ireland. Available here: <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-11/Reimaging%20Children%27s%20Social%20Care.pdf> [Accessed: 19 December 2023]

Save the Children (2017) Tackling the poverty-related gap in early childhood learning in Northern Ireland. [Online] Available at: <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/content/dam/global/reports/education-and-child-protection/tackling-poverty-related-gap-ni.pdf> [Accessed: 19 December 2023]

Scottish Childminding Association (2023) Early learning and childcare audit 2023. Available here: <https://www.childminding.org/news/early-learning-and-childcare-audit-2023> [Accessed: 5 January 2024]

Social Market Foundation (2022) Childcare costs and poverty. [Online] Available at: <https://www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Childcare-costs-and-poverty-July-2022.pdf> [29 December 2023]

Scottish Government (2023) Equality, opportunity, community. Our programme for government. [Online] Available at: <https://bit.ly/3RKSgLy> [Accessed: 19 December 2023]

Scottish Government (2023) Programme for government 2023 to 2024. [Online] Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/programme-government-2023-24/pages/8/> [Accessed: 19 December 2023]

The Sutton Trust (2020) Early Years workforce review. [Online] Available at: https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Early_Years_Workforce_Review_.pdf

The Sutton Trust (2021) A fair start? Equalising access to early education. [Online] Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/a-fair-start-equalising-access-to-early-education/> [Accessed: 19 December 2023]

Together for Better (n.d.) Core funding. [Online] Available at: <https://first5fundingmodel.gov.ie/core-funding/> [Accessed 29 December 2023]

Unicef. How we protect children’s rights with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. [Online] Available at: <https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/> [Accessed: 19 December 2023]

Notes

- ¹ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2023) Tackling disadvantage through childcare
- ² Department for Communities (Northern Ireland), Poverty and income inequality report 2021/22
- ³ Save the Children (2017) Tackling the Poverty-Related Gap Early Childhood Learning in Northern Ireland
- ⁴ Department of Education (2021) A fair start: Final report and action plan
- ⁵ Office for National Statistics (2022) Families and the labour market, Northern Ireland
- ⁶ End Child Poverty (2023) Local indicators of child poverty after housing costs, 2021/22
- ⁷ Members of the Anti-Poverty Strategy Co-Design Group (2022) Recommendations on the development of an anti-poverty strategy for Northern Ireland
- ⁸ Department of Health (2012) Childminding and day care for children under age 12: Minimum Standards
- ⁹ Department of Health (2023) Children’s social care statistics for Northern Ireland 2022/23
- ¹⁰ NISRA (2023) Annual enrolments at schools and in funded pre-school education in Northern Ireland
- ¹¹ Department for Education (2023) Childcare and early years survey of parents
- ¹² Employers For Childcare (2023) Northern Ireland childcare survey
- ¹³ Employers For Childcare (2023) Northern Ireland childcare survey
- ¹⁴ HMRC (2023) Tax-free childcare statistics
- ¹⁵ Department for Communities (2023) Universal Credit statistics
- ¹⁶ Employers For Childcare (2023) Social impact report 2022/23
- ¹⁷ Department of Education (2023) RSM (2023) DE review of childcare services in NI
- ¹⁸ Department of Education (2023) Department of Education protects funding for vulnerable children and young people
- ¹⁹ Employers For Childcare (2023) Northern Ireland childcare survey
- ²⁰ Department of Health (2012) Childminding and day care for children under age 12: Minimum Standards
- ²¹ Northern Ireland Executive (2012) Programme for government 2011-2015
- ²² Northern Ireland Executive (2020) New decade, new approach
- ²³ Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (2023) Annual survey of hours and earnings
- ²⁴ Employers For Childcare (2023) Northern Ireland childcare survey
- ²⁵ Employers For Childcare (2023) Northern Ireland childcare survey
- ²⁶ Department for the Economy (2023) Labour market statistics
- ²⁷ Office for National Statistics (2023) Economic inactivity
- ²⁸ NISRA (2022) Women in Northern Ireland 2020/21
- ²⁹ Social Market Foundation (2022) Childcare costs and poverty
- ³⁰ Employers For Childcare (2023) Northern Ireland childcare survey
- ³¹ Department for Education (2015) Effective pre-school, primary and secondary education project (EPPSE 3-16+)
- ³² Department of Education (2023) RSM (2023) DE Review of Childcare Services in NI
- ³³ Employers For Childcare (2023) Northern Ireland childcare survey
- ³⁴ Department of Health (2012) Childminding and day care for children under age 12: Minimum Standards
- ³⁵ Sutton Trust (2020) Early Years workforce review
- ³⁶ Education and training Inspectorate (2021) Pre-school phase report September 2018 – December 2020
- ³⁷ Employers For Childcare (2023) Northern Ireland childcare survey
- ³⁸ Employers For Childcare (2023) Northern Ireland childcare survey
- ³⁹ Employers For Childcare (2023) Northern Ireland childcare survey
- ⁴⁰ Employers For Childcare (2023) Northern Ireland childcare survey
- ⁴¹ Department of Education (2021) Consultation on review of pre-school admission socially disadvantaged circumstances criterion
- ⁴² Department of Education (2023) RSM (2023) DE review of childcare services in NI
- ⁴³ Department of Education (2023) RSM (2023) DE review of childcare services in NI
- ⁴⁴ Police Service of Northern Ireland, Operation Encompass
- ⁴⁵ Children’s Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) (2015)
- ⁴⁶ Department of Health (2012) Childminding and day care for children under age 12

-
- ⁴⁷ Department of Education, Health and Social Care (2023) Sure Start outcome based accountability report card
- ⁴⁸ Jones, R (2023) Report of the independent review of children’s social care services in Northern Ireland
- ⁴⁹ Department of Education, Health and Social Care (2023) Sure Start outcome based accountability report card
- ⁵⁰ Sutton Trust (2021) A fair start? Equalising access to early education
- ⁵¹ Together for Better, Core funding
- ⁵² Family Support NI, The different types of childcare
- ⁵³ House of Commons Education Committee (2023) Support for childcare and the early years
- ⁵⁴ The Barnett formula and fiscal devolution (2023)
- ⁵⁵ Department for Education (2023) Spring budget 2023 childcare expansion
- ⁵⁶ Department for Education (2023) Early education and childcare: Statutory guidance for local authorities
- ⁵⁷ Employers For Childcare (2023) Presentation to All Party Group on early education and childcare
- ⁵⁸ Scottish Government (2023) Programme for government 2023 to 2024
- ⁵⁹ Family Support NI, Childcare support and advice
- ⁶⁰ Unicef, How we protect children’s rights with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child