

**Employers
For Childcare**

Working For Parents

Manifesto 2017



employersforchildcare.org

At Employers For Childcare we are committed to supporting local parents and families. This manifesto sets out the key social policy areas that we feel must develop in order for our Assembly to proactively meet the needs of families in Northern Ireland. Without political will and policy development change will not happen.

We are calling on our local politicians to put families first by investing in vital services, creating supportive workplaces, tackling economic inactivity and growing the Social Enterprise sector”.

**Marie Marin,
Chief Executive,
Employers For Childcare**

Who we are and what we do...

Who we are...

Employers For Childcare aims to make it easier for parents with dependent children to get into work and to stay in work.

Established in 1998 as a community project, the organisation has grown to encompass a campaigning charity and three successful Social Enterprises.

What we do...

Our range of charitable services aims to support families.

Research, Policy and Lobbying

We undertake both qualitative and quantitative research which provides us with the evidence to lobby Government on childcare, family and work related issues.

Family Benefits Advice Service

Our specialist Advisors carry out personalised benefits checks and better off calculations to ensure that every parent is claiming all the financial help they are entitled to, particularly with the cost of childcare. We also deal with queries on all childcare and work related issues.

To fund the work of the Charity we operate **three** Social Enterprises:



Employers For Childcare Vouchers

Since 2004 we have been working with employers across the UK to offer the Childcare Voucher scheme to help parents save money on the cost of registered childcare.



Employers For Childcare Solutions

We recruit, train and provide employment opportunities for those interested in a career in childcare. We provide recruitment services to day nurseries and other childcare settings.



Employers For Childcare Training

We provide a range of courses for childcare providers, parents and employers. Popular courses include Paediatric First Aid and Promoting Positive Behaviour.

Key asks

This manifesto sets out the issues that must be addressed in the next Programme for Government for the benefit of parents and families, but also the local labour market and economy.

Each of our **five key asks** are based on areas of need which are evidenced by our own work and research.



1. Address the problems associated with childcare provision urgently

We were encouraged that a commitment to develop a Childcare Strategy was given in the Programme For Government 2011-15 and that the Executive made its first steps towards addressing the problems associated with childcare through the Bright Start Framework in 2013. In 2015 the Executive launched a consultation on a full Childcare Strategy for Northern Ireland.

The draft document highlighted some of the main concerns and issues about existing childcare provision, such as unaffordability, inflexibility and under-provision.

The consultation closed in November 2015 and we are disappointed that a full strategy has not yet been finalised.

Childcare is both a social and an economic issue. Our annual Childcare Cost Surveys clearly show that the cost of childcare acts as a barrier to employment.

Indeed, in 2016 50% of our 6,000 respondents commented that they had reduced their working hours or left work altogether due to the high cost of childcare.

The existing system of childcare makes it difficult for parents to access childcare through unaffordability and inflexibility.

Our results show that this puts pressure on family finances, wellbeing and the older generation. The Executive should prioritise childcare as an issue which needs urgent action.

Actions:

- **Publish and implement the Childcare Strategy as a matter of urgency.**
- **Ensure adequate funding is available to finance the strategy.**

2. Raise awareness of the financial help available to families

There are a wide range of family benefits and entitlements available to families. At a time when finances are tight for many households, it is important that parents are claiming all the support they can to make ends meet. Yet, last year, 50% of parents in our annual survey could not say with certainty that they were claiming all the financial help available to them.

The cost of childcare is a significant monthly payment for families. 63% of parents told us they struggled with their childcare bill either throughout the year or at some point during it.

55% said their childcare bill placed them under increased financial pressure. More worryingly, 25% of parents regularly relied on credit cards, loans, overdrafts or payday loans to meet their childcare bill.

There is help available to families with the cost of childcare, through the Childcare Voucher scheme and the childcare element of Working Tax Credit. Both these forms of help come directly from the UK Government and not the Northern Ireland block grant.

A new government scheme, Tax-Free Childcare, will be rolled out in 2017 and add to the complexity of the landscape. In 2016 we asked 6,000 local parents about their understanding of Tax-Free Childcare.

Only 31% had an awareness of the scheme, and only 15% could say they had a good understanding of how it would work.

Employers For Childcare operates the Family Benefits Advice Service, providing parents with information and personal advice on their entitlements. Our service is well-established, but we have limited resources to promote it widely enough to ensure that all parents are fully aware of their entitlements. Many more parents could be availing of support but are unaware of their entitlements.

Actions:

- **A commitment to ensure that all parents are aware of the financial support available to help them with the cost of childcare.**
- **Implement a promotional campaign, similar to the 'Make the Call' campaign, targeted at parents.**

3. Encourage the use of Family Friendly Working Policies

Each year Employers For Childcare holds the Family Friendly Employer Awards which celebrate and showcase some of the best family friendly employers in Northern Ireland. Although some employers offer innovative and forward thinking policies for their staff, many others offer little or no support for working parents.

Our Striking the Balance report, launched in 2015, clearly shows the difficulties parents face in reaching a suitable work-life balance. Staggeringly, 91% of our 4,200 respondents commented that it is difficult to combine work commitments with family responsibilities. 77% of parents agreed that it was more difficult to progress or develop a career after having children.

On a positive note, employees with supportive employers were more satisfied with their work-life balance. The benefits of supporting employees to help reach this balance include increased productivity, staff motivation and loyalty – a win-win for employers and employees.

Beyond those employers who do very little to facilitate working parents are those who actively discriminate against parents, particularly during maternity.

Statistics released by the Equality and Human Rights Commission state that 54,000 women in Great Britain suffer as a result of maternity discrimination each year. Over a third of local women participating in an Equality Commission NI investigation last year said they had been treated unfairly or were disadvantaged at work as a result of their pregnancy or having taken maternity leave.

Maternity discrimination is unlawful and more action needs to be taken to prevent women being discriminated against during and after pregnancy.

Actions:

- **Promote and encourage employers to implement family friendly working policies.**
- **End maternity discrimination by taking on board and implementing the proposals outlined in the ECNI report.**

4. Support the growth of Social Enterprise

Northern Ireland has a vibrant and innovative Social Enterprise sector. Social Enterprises are businesses set up for social good. Their aim in turning a profit is to fund their charitable activities and as such these organisations benefit the local economy and labour market while also addressing key social issues.

In England there has been a Social Value Act in place since 2012. The Act obliges all public bodies to consider how the services they procure will improve the economic social and environmental wellbeing of the area.

In Northern Ireland, annually around £3 billion is spent on procuring public services, and rather than weighting decisions on social and economic impact, tenders are awarded on price. This is an ineffective use of public money.

Since June 2008 Employers For Childcare has been financially independent and has invested £3 million of its own monies, generated through trading activities in the open market, into the local community through the provision of free family services.

These services support local parents, helping to increase families' incomes and improve children's outcomes. Despite our proven impact, we are a Social Enterprise which has lost tenders for public services due to the heavy weighting given to price. Investing public funds in social business is more value for money as it has a double impact.

A commitment was made to introduce a local Social Value Bill in January 2017. We are hopeful that this is introduced sooner rather than later and takes into account the guidance of Social Enterprise NI.

Actions:

- **Introduce a Social Value Bill in Northern Ireland.**

5. Tackle economic inactivity

The Economic Inactivity Strategy, which launched in April 2015, has not been fully implemented due to budget pressures. It was reported in November 2015 that only one of the 11 projects which make up the strategy has been taken forward.

The strategy was developed to tackle Northern Ireland's high rates of economic inactivity; currently almost 27% of working age adults are inactive, compared to the UK rate of 22%.

The rate of economic inactivity is a long standing problem in Northern Ireland. The strategy aimed to work with those who are economically inactive due to family commitments.

For many years Employers For Childcare has been working with parents to help them to access work and stay in work. We recognise the challenges that parents face in finding suitable work, balancing their work and family commitments and the barriers which can prohibit work altogether, such as the lack of affordable childcare.

From our own experience of working with parents we recognise that for many the decision to leave work is a last resort.

Indeed statistics included in the strategy's consultation showed that over 81,000 people are economically inactive due to family commitments.

18% of this group wanted to be in work and contribute to the economy. This equates to 14,500 people who are inactive but would like to be in work. Measures which will support and enable this group to return to work are welcomed.

Actions:

- **Make funds available to implement the Economic Inactivity Strategy.**

Summary of proposed actions

1. Address the problems associated with childcare provision urgently

- Publish and implement the Childcare Strategy as a matter of urgency.
- Ensure adequate funding is available to finance the strategy.

2. Raise awareness of the financial help available to families

- A commitment to ensure that all parents are aware of the financial support available to help them with the cost of childcare.
- Implement a promotional campaign, similar to the 'Make the Call' campaign, targeted at parents.

3. Encourage the use of Family Friendly Working Policies

- Promote and encourage employers to implement family friendly working policies.
- End maternity discrimination by taking on board and implementing the proposals outlined in the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland report.

4. Support the growth of Social Enterprise

- Introduce a Social Value Bill in Northern Ireland.

5. Tackle economic inactivity

- Make funds available to implement the Economic Inactivity Strategy.



100% of the profit made from our Social Enterprises is donated to fund our charitable services.

Employers For Childcare

Working For Parents

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