



Northern Ireland Childcare Survey: Key findings

2023

●●● Foreword

Two years ago, as I wrote the foreword to the Northern Ireland Childcare Survey 2021, I reflected on the theme that struck me most in the comments from parents and childcare providers. That theme was value. The value of childcare in enabling parents to work, in promoting the early development of children and young people, and in supporting families – and our economy - right through the Covid-19 pandemic. A value that had, rightly, been recognised in Covid-19 support schemes and promising progress towards a much-needed new Early Learning and Childcare Strategy. I expressed cautious optimism about the small, but important, steps being taken. Clearly my emphasis should have been on the caution, rather than the optimism.

The theme that strikes me in this year's survey is frustration. Deep frustration at a continued lack of progress resulting in Northern Ireland falling further and further behind developments elsewhere in the UK and Ireland in terms of investment in childcare. The research findings bring to life what that lack of progress means for families and childcare providers. Stress and financial anxiety for parents considering leaving the workplace, or reducing their hours because they can't afford the childcare they need. Children are being left with unregistered, unregulated and uninsured minds because of limited options in their area. Childcare providers are struggling to cover their outgoings and are worried about the impact of raising fees, and the consequences if they don't. A workforce that is underpaid and undervalued. This has a direct and profound impact on our society and economy, from stubbornly high rates of poverty, to employers struggling to recruit and retain vital staff.

We know political parties have expressed their commitment to investing in childcare and that costed options for the new Early Learning and Childcare Strategy are being finalised, but with the continued absence of a functioning Executive, plans and promises can have no impact. The longer this continues, the greater the challenge will be for our essential childcare infrastructure. Employers For Childcare commits to using this research to continue to press for meaningful progress, to ensure parents and childcare providers have a powerful voice in shaping an ambitious new Early Learning and Childcare Strategy.

Marie Marin, Chief Executive, Employers For Childcare



●●● Introduction

About Employers For Childcare

Employers For Childcare comprises a registered charity and a social enterprise. Our aim is to help parents with dependent children get into work and stay in work. Through working with employers and policy-makers, we seek to encourage and secure better support for families in the workplace and in public policy. We address childcare as a labour market and economic issue.

About the research

The Northern Ireland Childcare Survey is the longest running and most comprehensive study into the experiences of parents and childcare providers in the sector. Using robust data collection methods from the outset in 2010, the reports have been referenced by political parties at Stormont and Westminster to inform childcare policy development. To further extend the survey's credentials, Employers For Childcare has partnered with a professional research agency, CARD Group Research & Insight in 2023 to independently gather, collate and analyse the data. CARD Group has overseen the collection of a fully representative geographic and demographic sample to provide the most robust and reliable review of childcare experiences in Northern Ireland.

Thank you

Thank you to everyone who completed the Survey. This report highlights and reflects your views and experiences. Thank you also to colleagues from Early Years – the organisation for young children, NICMA and PlayBoard NI who generously shared their time to comment on draft questionnaires.



Methodology

2,750
responses
from parents
& childcare
providers

The research was carried out in two stages:

1. Exploratory work to gain context from parents, childcare providers and organisations working across the sector.
2. Two quantitative surveys gathering data from parents and from childcare providers.

Data collection took place in September 2023. Childcare providers and parents were invited to respond to an online survey that was circulated across a variety of networks and shared on social media. When duplicates and incomplete responses were removed, responses were analysed from **2,001 parents** and **749 childcare providers**.

There are approximately 380,000 parents of dependent children in Northern Ireland (based on [household composition figures from the 2021 census](#)). 2,001 responses from parents therefore gives a margin of error of 2% at a 95% confidence level, indicating a robust sample. Further detail on the profile of parent respondents is available in Appendix 1.

There are 3,397 individuals or facilities registered for the provision of day care for children under the age of 12 in Northern Ireland (figures from the [Department of Health Children's Social Care Statistics for Northern Ireland 2022/23](#)). 749 responses from childcare providers therefore gives a margin of error of 3% at a 95% confidence level, indicating a robust sample. Further detail on the profile of childcare provider respondents is available in Appendix 2.



●●● At a glance

- On average, parents are spending around £9,360 a year on childcare. This rises to over £14,000 for parents with a child under 5 who are using formal childcare only.
- The average cost of a full-time childcare place in Northern Ireland is now £10,036 a year, an increase of 14% since 2021 and more than the maximum costs supported through Tax-Free Childcare.
- 84% of childcare providers report that they are making a loss or just breaking even.
- 43% of childcare providers describe their financial situation as 'struggling' or 'distressed'.
- 88% of parents have had to change their work arrangements due to the cost of childcare.
- For 41% of families, childcare is their largest monthly outgoing ahead of their mortgage or rent.
- 56% are using means other than their income to pay for childcare including savings, credit cards and loans.
- 15% of families report using an unregistered childminder for some or all of their childcare.



●●● Key findings

Average childcare fees have increased across all types of provision ●●●

- The average cost of a full-time childcare place in Northern Ireland is now £10,036 a year.
- This is an increase of 14% since 2021 and is more than the maximum costs supported through Tax-Free Childcare.
- Day nursery costs are more expensive, averaging £229 per week, and increasing faster than inflation.
- Afterschool provision has increased by 28% since 2021, also faster than the rate of inflation.



“We have spent £200,000 in the past 12 years on childcare to enable us both to work in jobs that are contributing to society.”

(Family with two working parents)

●●● but many childcare providers are absorbing as much cost as they can

- While 92% of childcare providers said their costs increased in the last year, fewer than half increased their fees (43%). Day nurseries were more likely to have had to increase their fees (81%).
- Providers shared concerns about the capacity of parents to pay and the potential loss of families but feel they have no choice but to increase fees to stay in business.
- 53% of providers reported that some families had already reduced or stopped their childcare hours because they could no longer afford it. This rises to 83% of day nurseries.

43%

Proportion of
childcare
providers who
increased fees

8%

Average fee
increase
anticipated in
coming year

53%

Providers have
seen families
reduce or stop
childcare

- Providers are concerned about competing with unregistered childminders who do not have the same costs.

“The price of everything has gone up – for utilities, fuel, food and learning and play resources. We are really struggling but if our prices go up we might lose children to other providers.”

(Childcare provider)

“As a social enterprise we’re mindful of the financial burden childcare fees can be for parents & carers, this is reflected in our pricing structure. But I’m very concerned that when staff costs rise again we’ll have no option but to increase fees.”

(Childcare provider)

●●● and so some providers have reached their financial breaking-point.



What can be done: Childcare provider recommendations

- Recognise the true value of the sector and its workforce
- Introduce appropriate and significant infrastructural support
- Promote and support quality, training and qualifications
- Implement measures to address recruitment and retention challenges
- Prioritise the planned review of minimum standards
- Address the increase in unregistered childminders.

“I am slowly nibbling away at savings to keep myself afloat. I have to consider getting another part time job – either that or changing careers.”

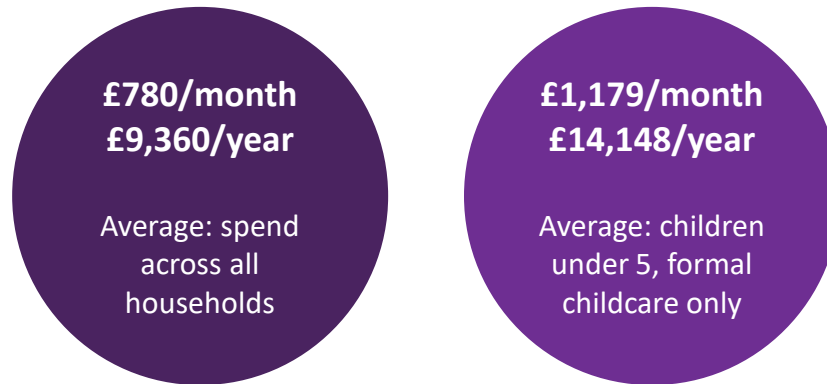
(Childcare provider)

“It is likely we will close in the next few months. The sector is in crisis. Experienced staff are leaving to find higher paid employment with less responsibility and I can’t afford to replace them.”

(Childcare provider)

Parents are struggling to afford and access the childcare they need ●●●

- On average, parents are spending around £9,360 a year on childcare. This rises to over £14,000 for parents with a child under 5 who are using formal childcare only.



- For almost two thirds of families (64%) childcare is the largest or second largest monthly outgoing.
- More than half of families (56%) are using means other than their income to pay for childcare including savings, credit cards and loans.
- 81% report there is not enough provision of childcare in their area.

“Childcare is the single biggest stress factor for me and my friends who have children. There is practically no financial support. It is causing a career crisis for women and having a poor impact on mental and financial health.”

(Lone parent)

“Some months, as a direct result of our childcare bill, we have to borrow money to buy food! This is not a sustainable way for anybody to live.”

(Family with two working parents)

●●● impacting on their ability to work and their productivity when in work.

- Parents are reducing their working hours, passing up on opportunities for career progression and, in some cases, leaving work altogether because of difficulties affording or accessing childcare.
- Parents in lower income households are more likely to have had to stop work due to the cost of childcare.
- More than three quarters (76%) are likely or very likely to change their working arrangements in some way due to childcare.
- Most parents using childcare (95%) report that childcare stress impacts on productivity at work, 61% report this is at least weekly.

88%

Changed work arrangements due to cost of childcare

1/10

Considering leaving their job due to childcare difficulties

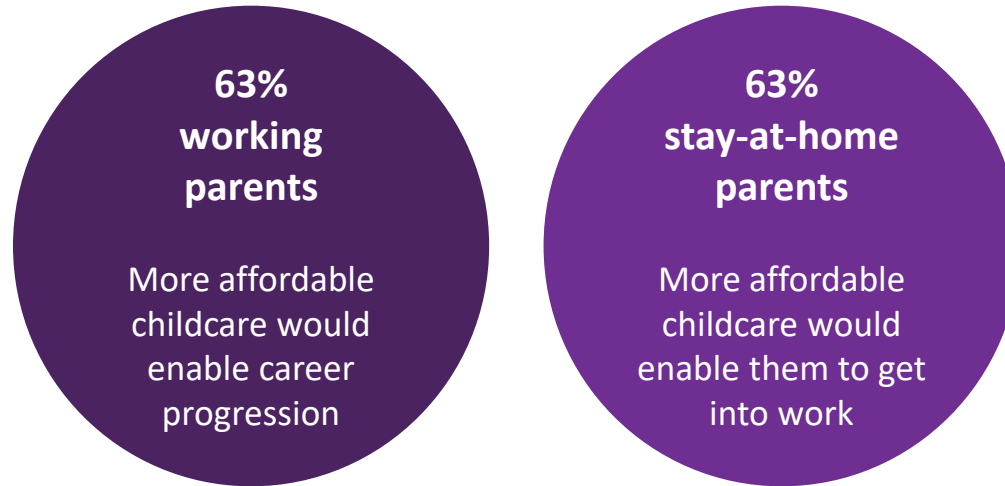
95%

Childcare stress impacts on work productivity

“I work for the NHS and have had to condense my hours. We can’t get childcare due to the demand and frankly could not afford to pay for full time childcare in our area, luckily we have parents to help out but why should we have to rely on them to do something the government has already promised to help with but has not followed through!”

(Family with two working parents)

Affordable childcare is key to enabling work and skills development ●●●



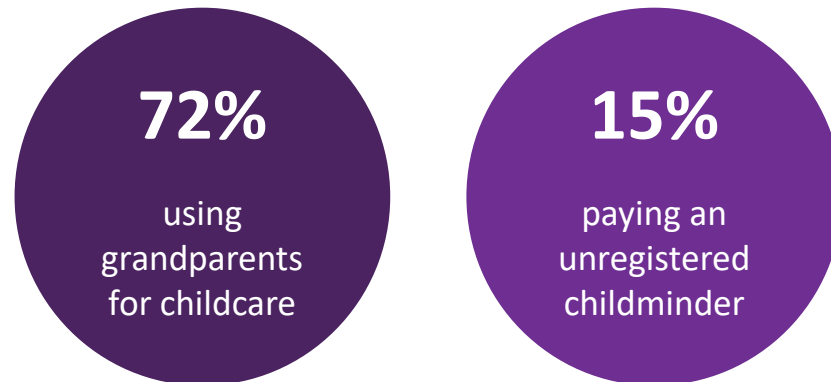
- 89% of working parents said being able to access more affordable childcare would impact on their career including enabling them to progress (63%), or to participate in education, training or skills development (48%).
- 63% of stay-at-home parents said they would be able to get back into work if they could access more affordable childcare.

“Childcare is becoming so unattainable for working parents that it is more affordable to either reduce working hours or stop work altogether. The government need to acknowledge this gap for working parents and ensure costs are subsidised to allow those who wish to work to do so. This will assist our economy overall.”

(Parent)

●●● but some parents are turning to unregistered options to meet their childcare needs.

- For some time, childcare providers have raised concerns about growing numbers of unregistered childminders.
- For the first time, this year's survey explored use of 'casual' childcare – **paid for care with someone who is not registered such as an unregistered childminder, a babysitter, or a family member or friend.**
- Families in the west of Northern Ireland are more likely to report using casual childcare.
- Families with the lowest household incomes are 138% more likely than families with the highest household incomes to use casual childcare.

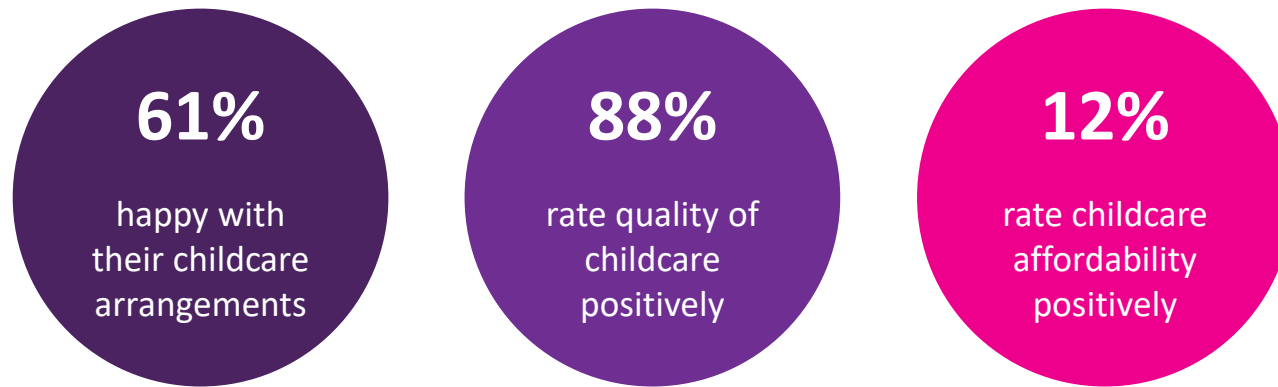


“Unregistered childminders are competing for children undercutting those of us who play by the rules. I don't feel I can increase fees with people already struggling. After expenses and working a 50-55 hour week I earn the equivalent of minimum wage.”

(Childcare provider)

●●● Overall, parents are happy with the quality of childcare but affordability needs to be addressed.

There was a deep frustration at the lack of a sitting Executive which is seen as hindering much needed progress and a sense that families and the sector in Northern Ireland are being left further behind developments in the UK and Ireland.



“The standard of care by our formal childcare is excellent. I feel happy my daughter is safe, well looked after and her needs are being met. If I could afford to put her there full time I would.”

(Parent)

“Stormont needs to get back to work and support citizens who are growing the next generation. They need to look to the future and implement a childcare plan. It’s an embarrassment being from NI at present.”

(Parent)

●●● Conclusions

The findings of the Northern Ireland Childcare Survey 2023 paint a very challenging picture for families and for childcare providers.

Fees have increased across the board and are expected to increase further over the next 12 months. More childcare providers are in a distressed or struggling financial situation than two years ago and only a minority are making any surplus that they can reinvest into their setting. A significant majority are seeing their expenditure increase without a corresponding increase in income. Group settings are struggling to recruit and retain staff who they recognise are underpaid and many of whom are feeling undervalued, while a number of childminders told us they are planning on leaving the sector. This is not sustainable.

Fewer families report using formal childcare only, with a higher proportion having to jigsaw together a range of forms of provision to address the challenges both of cost and availability. A majority of families report that there is not enough local childcare provision, and this may be a factor behind the 15% of parents choosing to use an unregistered childminder for some or all of their childcare needs.

A quarter of families are paying more than £1,000 a month for their childcare, but some are paying considerably more. Childcare is now the largest or second largest monthly outgoing for 64% of families and more than half are turning to means other than their income – such as savings, credit cards and loans – to meet the childcare bill each month.



This is impacting on the ability of parents to work. 88% of parents have changed their working arrangements due to the cost of childcare, with some leaving work altogether. It is parents from lower income households who are most likely to have had to stop work due to childcare costs. For those who are working, 95% report that childcare stress impacts on their productivity in work. And looking ahead, 76% of parents are likely to change their working arrangements, with more than 1 in 10 considering leaving their job due to childcare over the next year.

At the same time there is clear recognition of the vital role of childcare for children, for families and for our economy. A significant majority of parents rate the quality of childcare positively and many shared positive experiences of particular settings, excellent staff and the developmental benefits they see for their children.

If childcare was more affordable, the research is clear that more parents who are not currently working would be able to go back to work. Parents would feel better able to progress in their career, to increase their hours at work and to participate in education, training or skills development. This is vital in the context of the achievement of the 10X Economy Strategy for Northern Ireland and a world class economy that everyone across society can benefit from. Parents would also feel more financially secure, have more money for their families and be able to invest in savings or their pension.

The findings of this research highlight the critical role of childcare as economic, educational and societal infrastructure. Yet they also reflect how a lack of investment and meaningful progress on the new Early Learning and Childcare Strategy is failing the sector, failing parents, failing employers and – most importantly – failing children. While childcare can be the key to unlocking so much potential instead – as a result of this failure – it is increasingly being framed as a barrier. We have all the components for a world class childcare infrastructure – excellent people, dedicated providers and a generationally significant opportunity to learn from experiences elsewhere to target much needed investment. What is needed now is for the plans and the promises to translate into progress on the ground.





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