



Northern Ireland Childcare Survey

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



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●●● 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)

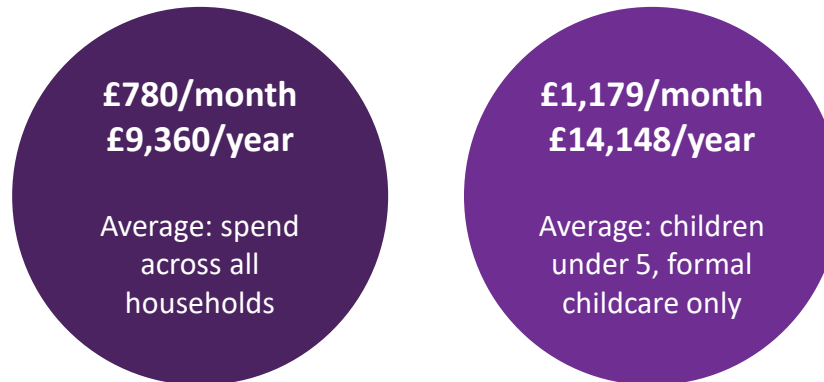
“It is likely we will close in the next few months. The sector is in crisis.

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

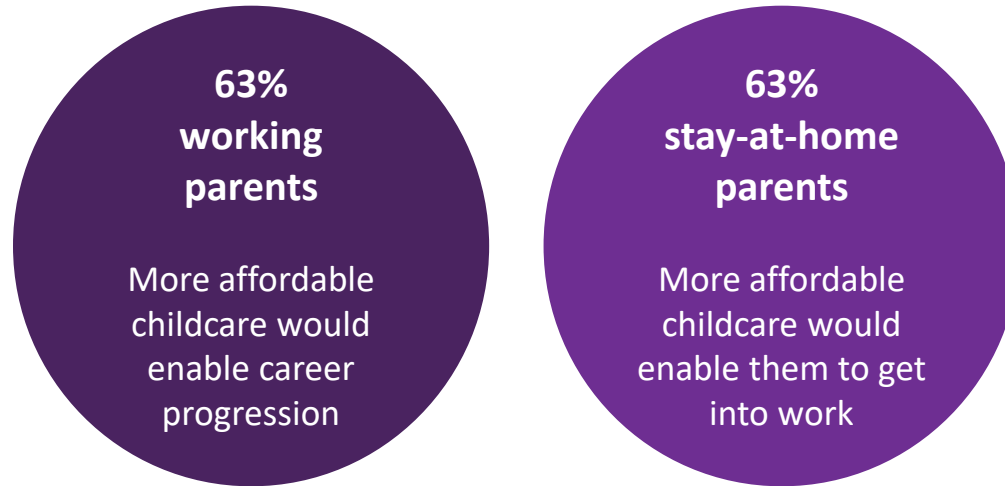
95%

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 ●●●



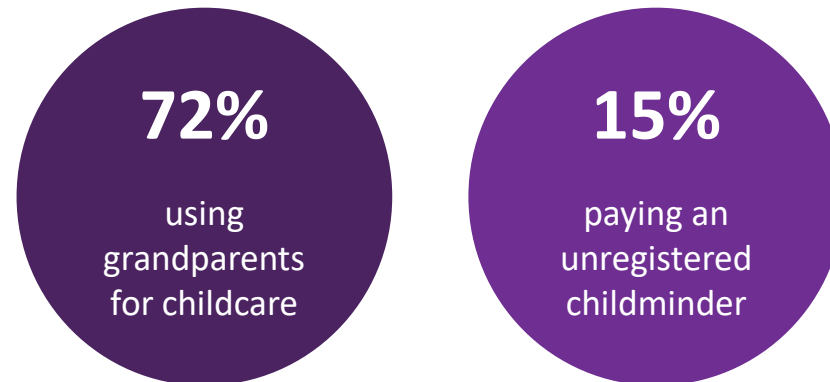
- 89% of working parents said being able to access more affordable childcare would impact on their career including enabling them to progress (63%), or to participate in education, training or skills development (48%).
- 63% of stay-at-home parents said they would be able to get back into work if they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

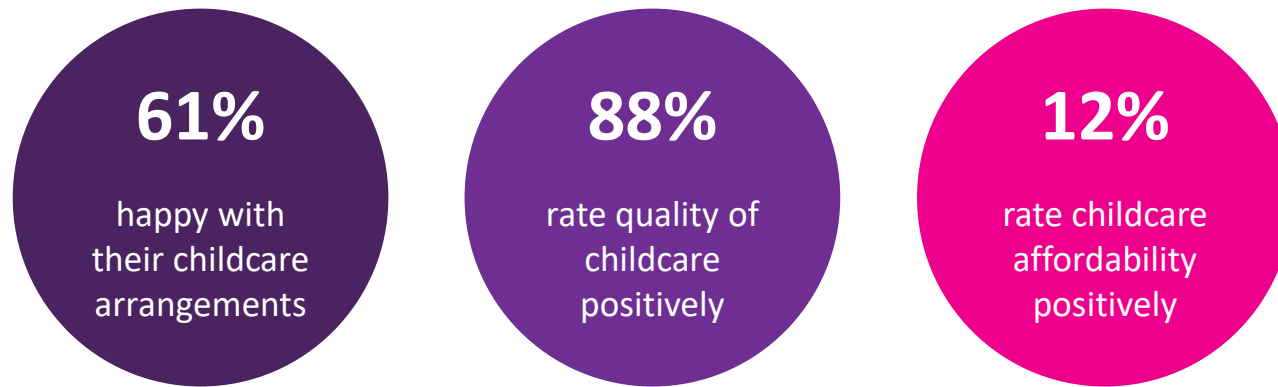
- For some time, childcare providers have raised concerns about growing numbers of unregistered childminders.
- For the first time, this year's survey explored use of 'casual' childcare – **paid for care with someone who is not registered such as an unregistered childminder, a babysitter, or a family 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)

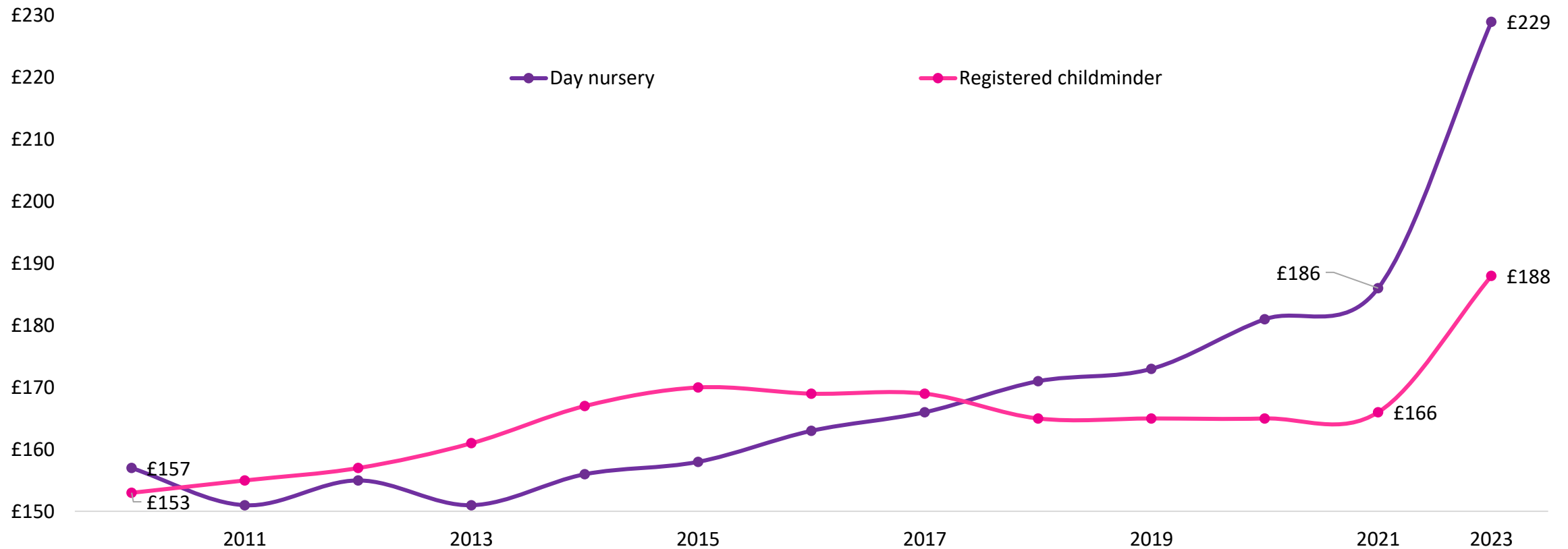
Section 1:

The cost of a childcare place in Northern Ireland

- Cost of a full-time childcare place per week
- Variation across Northern Ireland
- Cost of school age childcare per week
- Support for parents with the cost of childcare
- Reported change in fees in the last 12 months
- Reasons for an increase in fees in the last 12 months
- Anticipated change in fees in the next 12 months
- Reasons for an anticipated increase in fees
- Reasons for anticipating keeping fees the same
- Providers reporting a change in family usage



●●● Cost of a full-time childcare place per week



The chart shows the cost of a full-time childcare place with a registered childminder or a day nursery from 2010 to 2023. The acceleration of increase in the cost since 2021 is evident.

●●● Cost of a full-time childcare place per week

Average cost of a full-time childcare place per week	2021	2023	Change (£)	Change (%)
All	£170	£193	+\$23	+14%
Day nursery	£186	£229	+\$43	+23%
Registered childminder	£166	£188	+\$22	+13%



The average cost of a full-time childcare place with a day nursery has increased by 23% and with a registered childminder by 14% since 2021.

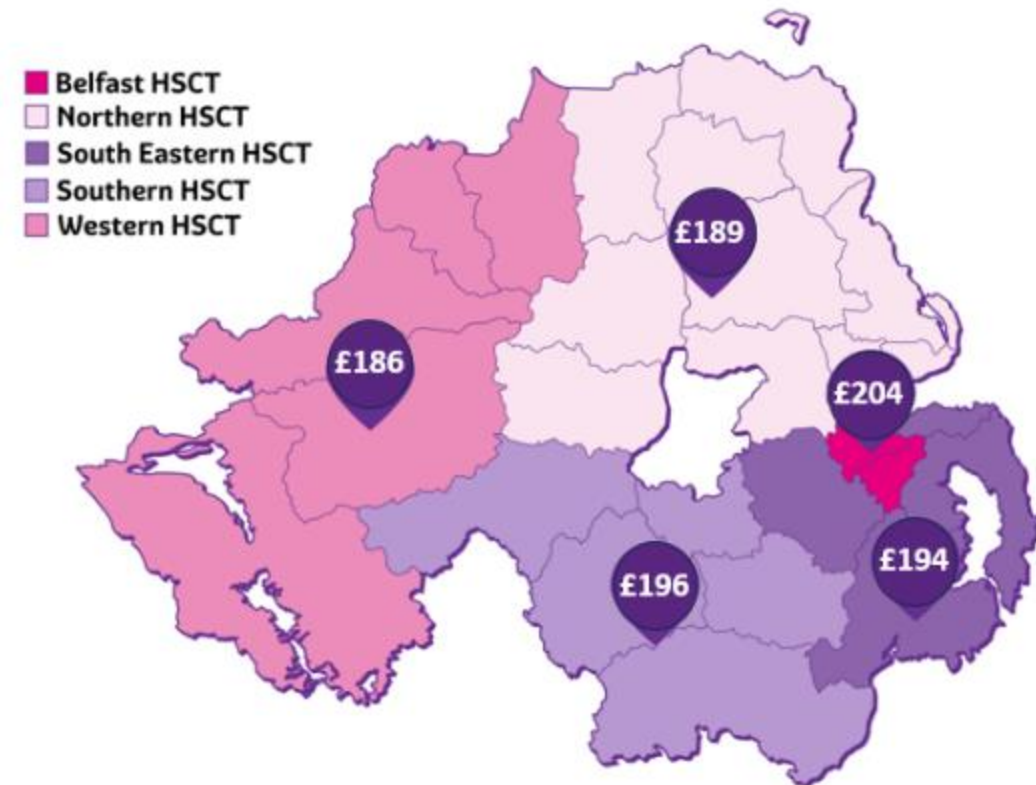
On average, a full-time day nursery place costs £11,908 per child. This is £2,236 more than in 2021. This fee is greater than the amount for which parents can claim support through Tax-Free Childcare (£10,000 per child).

Within day nursery settings there is a variation between the average cost of a week in a private setting - £246 - and a charity or social enterprise day nursery - £194.

Using the [Bank of England inflation calculator](#) we can see the average cost of a full-time day nursery place has increased by more than the rate of inflation since 2021, while overall, the average cost of a full-time childcare place has increased just below the rate of inflation. This may be due to a rebalance by day nurseries who limited fee increases during the Covid-19 pandemic. Day nurseries are also more likely than registered childminders to offer discounts.

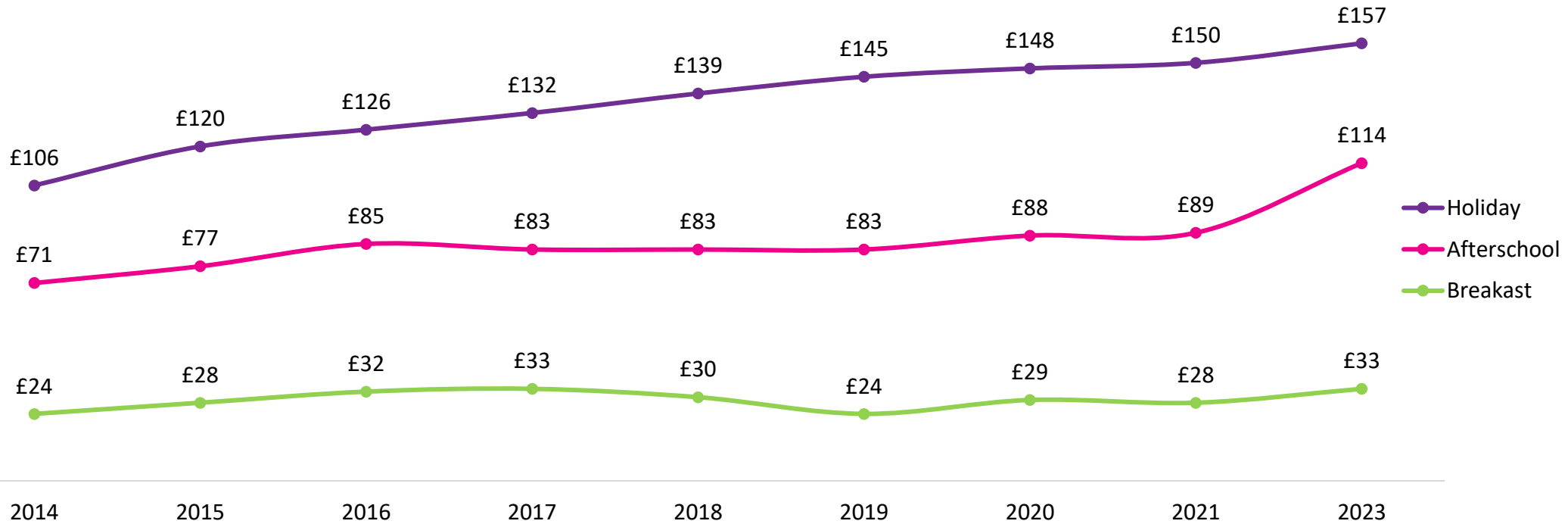
●●● Variation across Northern Ireland

Trust area	2021	2023	Change (£)	Change (%)
Belfast HSCT	£181	£204	+£23	+13%
Northern HSCT	£168	£189	+£21	+13%
South Eastern HSCT	£168	£194	+£26	+15%
Southern HSCT	£170	£196	+£26	+15%
Western HSCT	£162	£186	+£24	+15%



The cost of a full-time childcare place varies by Trust area, with the highest average in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, and the lowest in the Western Health and Social Care Trust. The table shows that the cost of a childcare place has risen across all Trust areas by at least 13%.

●●● Cost of school age childcare per week



The average cost of out of school childcare has increased across all types of provision. The largest increase is in the weekly cost of afterschool provision which has gone up 28% since 2021.

Note, the figures above include standalone school age childcare provision and provision offered at day nurseries.

●●● Cost of school age childcare per week

Average cost of an out of school childcare place per week	2021	2023	Change (£)	Change (%)
Breakfast childcare	£28	£33	+\$5	+18%
Afterschool childcare	£89	£114	+\$25	+28%
Holiday childcare	£150	£157	+\$7	+5%

28% increase in average cost of an afterschool place since 2021

Average cost of an afterschool place is **£4,332** a year

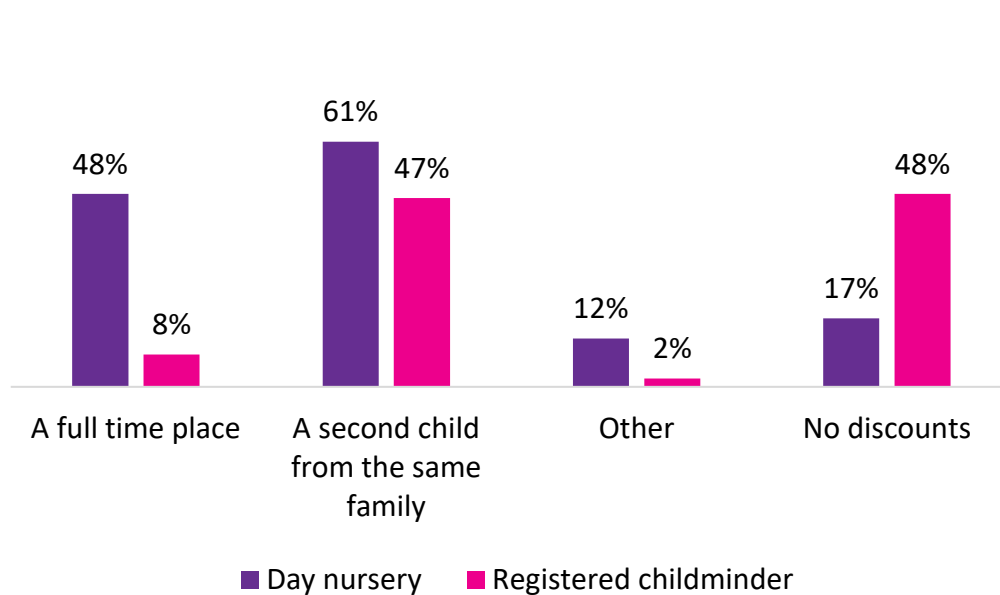
The [Bank of England inflation calculator](#) suggests we could expect services costing £89 in 2021 to cost £105 in September 2023, based on inflation.

The average cost of an afterschool place has risen from £89 to £114 - more than the rate of inflation.

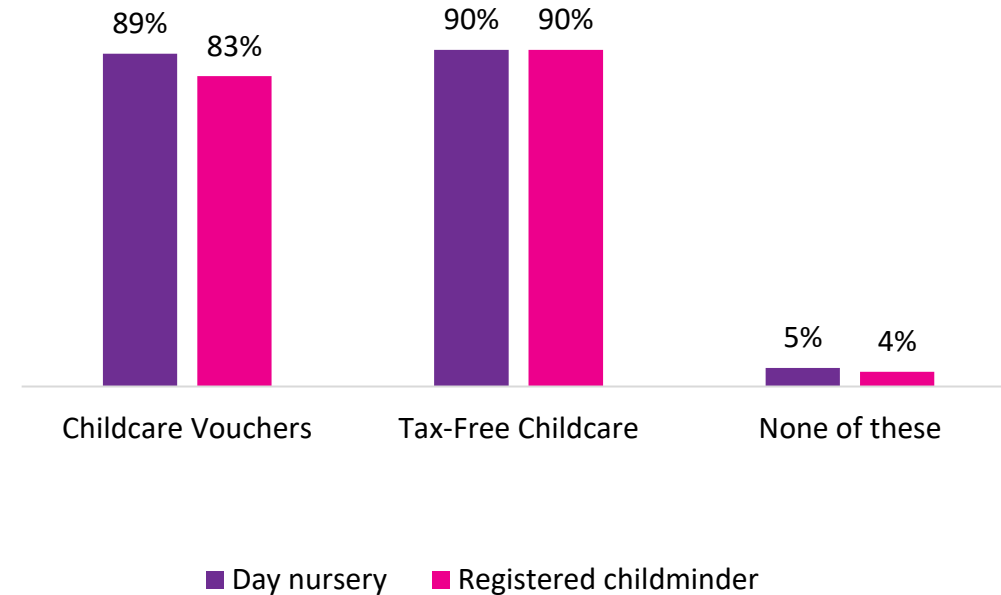
The average cost of breakfast childcare has risen in line with inflation, while the average cost of a holiday childcare place has risen below inflation.

Support for parents with the cost of childcare

Discounts offered by providers



Financial support accepted by providers



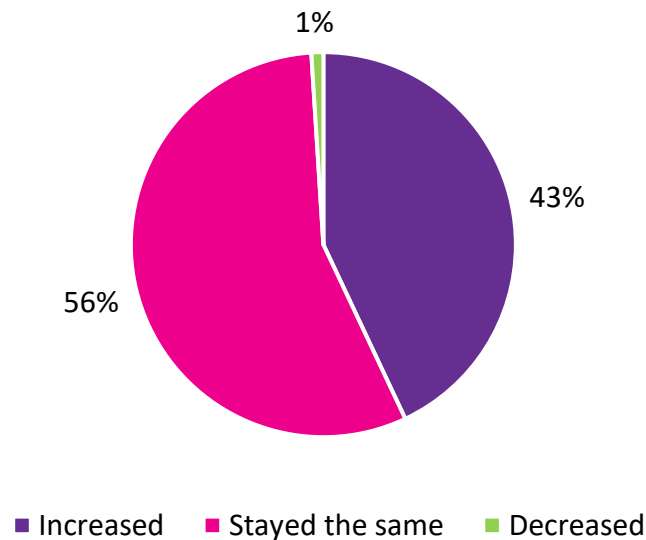
Most providers offer discounts for families including for a full-time place or where there is a second child from the same family.

‘Other’ discounts were available where a family provides their own food for the child, where there were children of staff members (in a group setting), or for where there are three or more children from the same family. Day nurseries are more likely than registered childminders to offer discounts.

Most providers accept both Childcare Vouchers and Tax-Free Childcare as means of payment, enabling parents to use these forms of Government support with their costs.

Reported change in fees in the last 12 months

Provider fees in the last 12 months

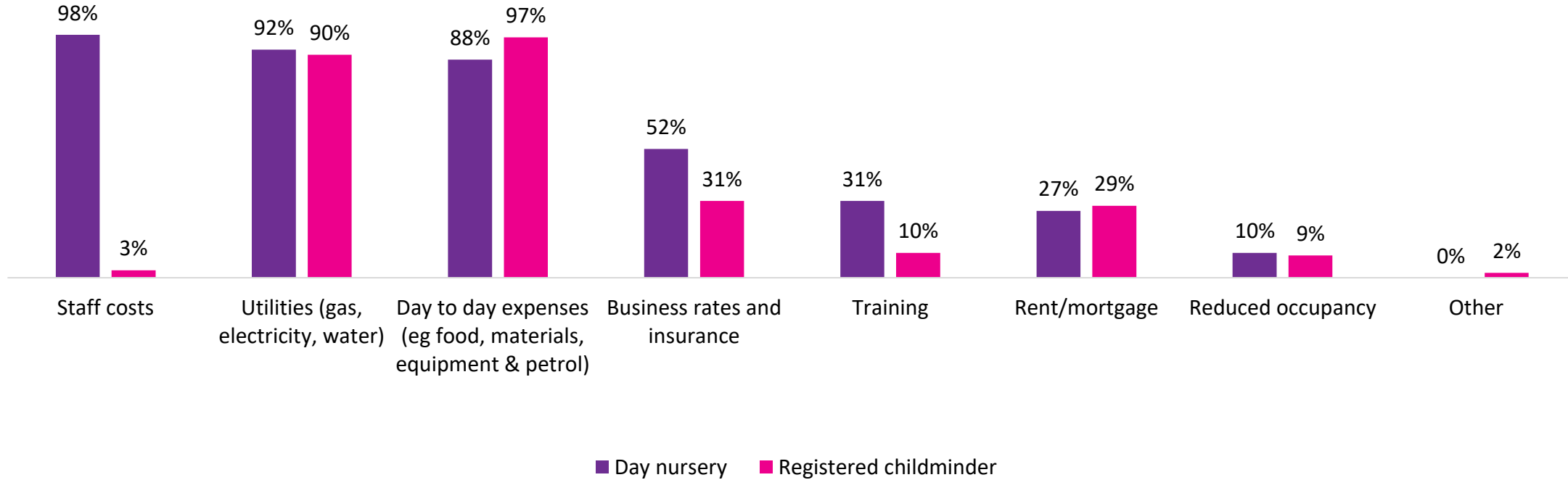


	Increased	Stayed the same	Decreased
All	43%	56%	1%
Day nursery	81%	19%	0%
Registered childminder	38%	61%	1%
Out of school	52%	48%	0%

43% of providers increased fees in the past 12 months, significantly higher than the 17% in 2021 who did so. This was mainly due to day nurseries, 81% of which increased their fees in the past year.

An important context is the Covid-19 pandemic across 2020 and 2021. While providers and parents faced significant challenges during that time, the Department of Education provided significant financial support to the sector through the Covid-19 Childcare Support Scheme. At the same time, UK wide support schemes – such as the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (furlough) and Self-Employment Income Support Scheme – provided much needed financial assistance to the sector. The 2021 Northern Ireland Childcare Survey highlighted that, as a result, many providers sought to minimise fee increases during that time.

Reasons for an increase in fees in the last 12 months



Day nurseries were more likely to identify staff costs as a driver for increasing fees. Registered childminders who are more likely to be working on their own, without staff costs, reported the cost of day-to-day expenses as a key reason for an increase in their fees. All types of provider also rated utility costs as a significant factor.

‘Other’ reasons included the cost of outings and not having put rates up for a long time previously.

●●● Reasons for an increase in fees in the last 12 months



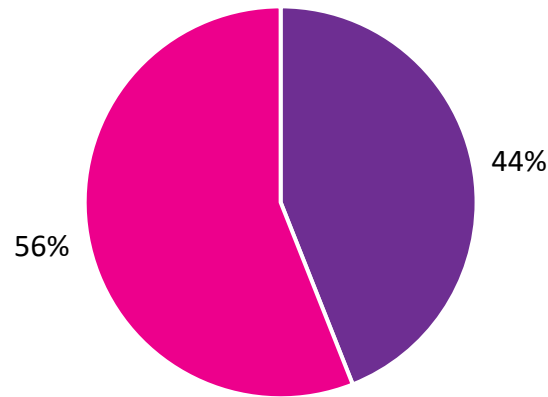
“Utilities up! Cleaning supplies up! Arts and Crafts up! Oil up! Electricity up! Training up! Public liability insurance up! Membership fees up! Activities and outings for children up! Basically everything going up but the wages!!!”

“With the high costs of food, electric, gas and petrol – not to mention the mortgage and insurance going up. Also resources for crafts, toys etc are continuing to increase.”

“The minimum wage increase cripples us each year. We pay some staff more due to qualifications. Our staff are worth MUCH more than that but without government support we can't afford to pay more.”

●●● Anticipated change in fees in the next 12 months

Anticipated fees in the next 12 months



■ Increase from what they are now ■ Stay the same

	Increase	Stay the same	Decrease
All	44%	56%	0%
Day nursery	77%	23%	0%
Registered childminder	40%	60%	0%
Out of school	54%	46%	0%

Average fee increase of 8% anticipated

44% of providers anticipate that their fees will increase in the coming year.

More than three quarters of day nurseries anticipate that they will have to increase their fees from what they are currently.

Where an increase in fees was anticipated, the average amount was 8% however figures given ranged up to 25%.

●●● Providers planning to increase fees



“With grandparents offering 'free' childcare childminders can't fill spaces every day. I was charging under the NICMA price guidelines but I can't make ends meet now without an increase.”

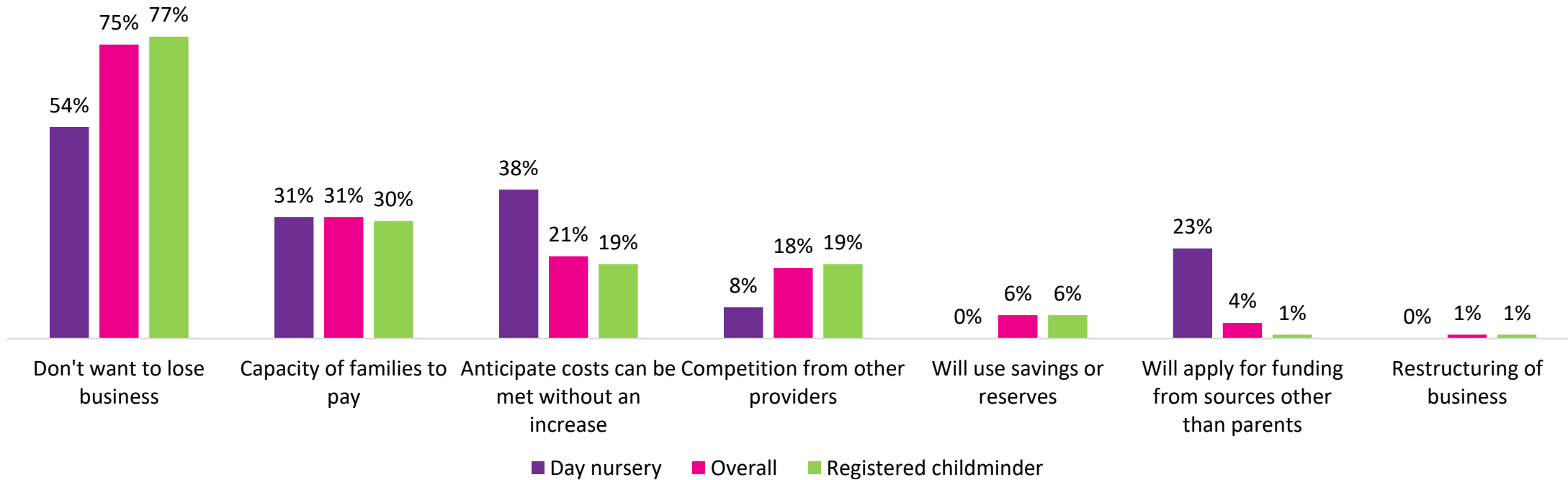


“It is increasingly difficult to retain experienced staff due to workload and pay. Staff are leaving the sector to work in schools for better hours, pay and conditions. Utility costs are also a major concern. The sector has no option but to increase fees to parents who are already stretched financially.”



“The cost of providing a good standard of service is increasing. We put fees up earlier this year but that simply covered the increase to staff wages and running costs. We will increase fees next year as the cost of running the nursery is rising. We hope to be able to give staff raises rather than make an increased profit.”

Reasons for anticipating keeping fees the same



A key reason for not changing fees is to keep business, however almost a third are also concerned about the capacity of families to pay.

This suggests some providers are not changing fees as a result of external factors. This may put the financial sustainability of their provision at risk or impact their ability to invest in it further.

●●● Providers planning to keep fees the same



“I will not be increasing my prices but with the cost of food, heating, electricity, fuel, interest rates etc continuously going up the cost of running my childcare business is just going up. I am trying to buffer these costs so I don't have to pass them on to the parents.”



“Although the cost of living is going up I am trying not to pass on too much to families as I am aware they are struggling too. I need to keep business and don't want to see clients leave.”



“I feel I can't increase my rates without losing business. Parents are struggling with increasing prices in other areas. The cost of providing quality childcare will undoubtedly keep rising but there's nothing I can do about this. Yet I've to compete with unregistered childminders who aren't insured, take more children, and charge less.”

●●● Providers reporting a change in family usage

Childcare Setting	Reduced or stopped childcare hours due to cost
Overall	53%
Day nursery	83%
Registered childminder	50%
Out of school	38%

“A lot of parents cannot afford the fees or are struggling and have no other option but to take their child out of childcare.”

“Parents are cutting their working hours and their use of childcare to try and save money.”

“More parents are asking grandparents to help out more instead.”

53% of providers report that, in the past year, one of more families have reduced or stopped their childcare hours with them saying they could no longer afford the costs. This rises to 83% of day nurseries.

With many providers set to increase their fees in the coming 12 months this will be of concern to the sector. It also indicates that many families are using fewer hours of formal childcare than they would like to be able to. This means children may be missing out on the benefits of formal early education and childcare and could have an impact on parents' ability to work.

Section 2:

How are families using childcare?

- Children in the family
- Definitions of childcare used
- Types of childcare used
- Frequency of childcare used
- Use of casual childcare
- Lower income families use less childcare
- Specific forms of provision used by families
- Factors influencing the choice of childcare
- Hours of childcare used
- Funded pre-school provision

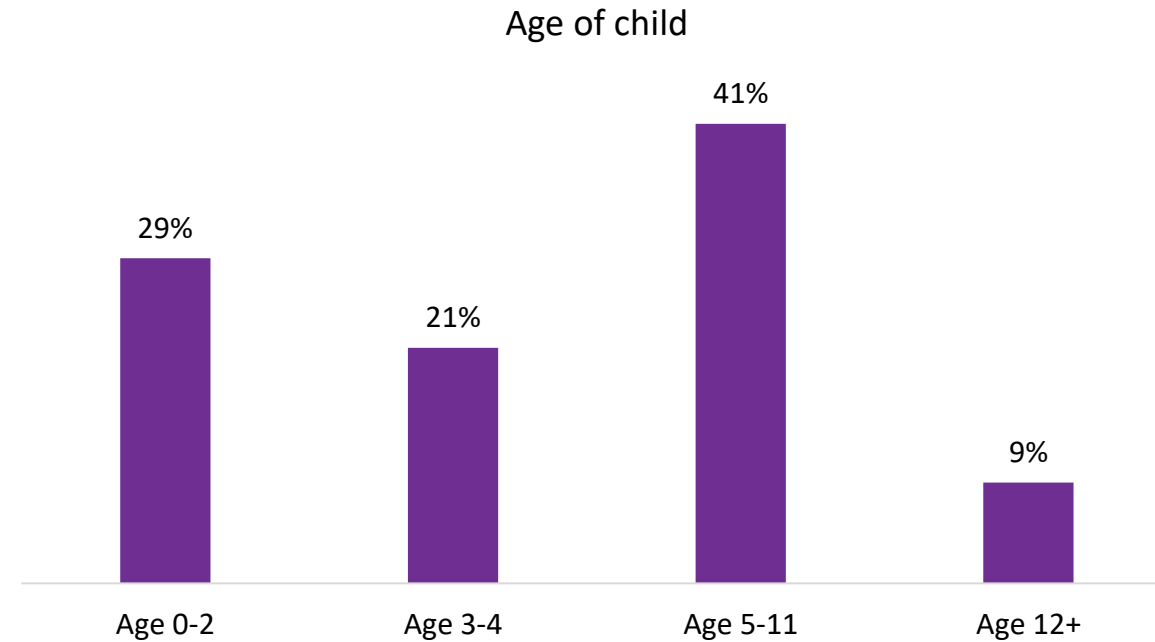


●●● Children in the family

The survey represents 3,924 children

10% have a disability that requires additional or special care

Average of two children per household



Exactly half of children reflected in the survey are under compulsory school age (age 4 or under) and half are age 5 or over.

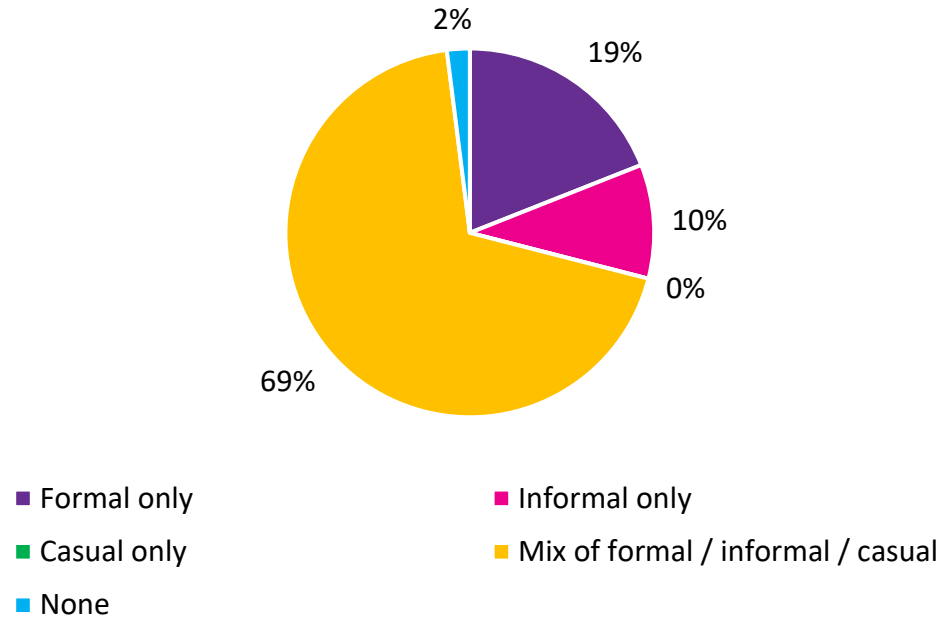
●●● Definitions of childcare used

Type of childcare	Definition
Informal childcare	Care provided by family or friends for which they receive <u>no payment</u> that allows you to access work, education or training.
Formal childcare	<u>Paid for care</u> that allows you to access work, education or training provided through registered providers such as day nurseries, registered childminders or out-of-school clubs.
Casual childcare	<u>Paid for care</u> that you use to access work, education or training but is provided by someone who is not registered, such as an unregistered childminder.

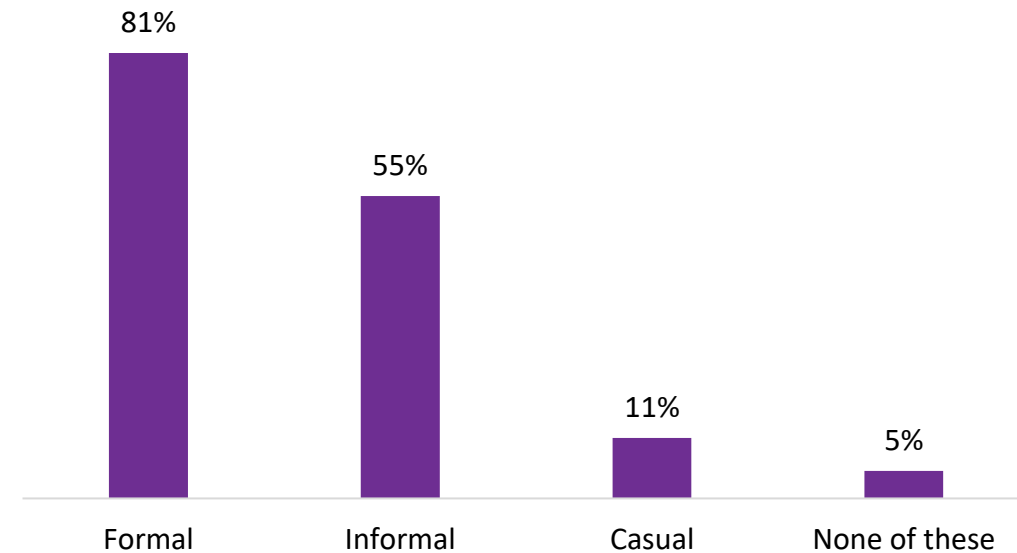
This year, for the first time, we have asked families about their use of 'casual' childcare so some results in this section may not be directly comparable to findings from previous years.

Types of childcare used

Childcare mix used by families in 2023



Types of childcare used at least regularly



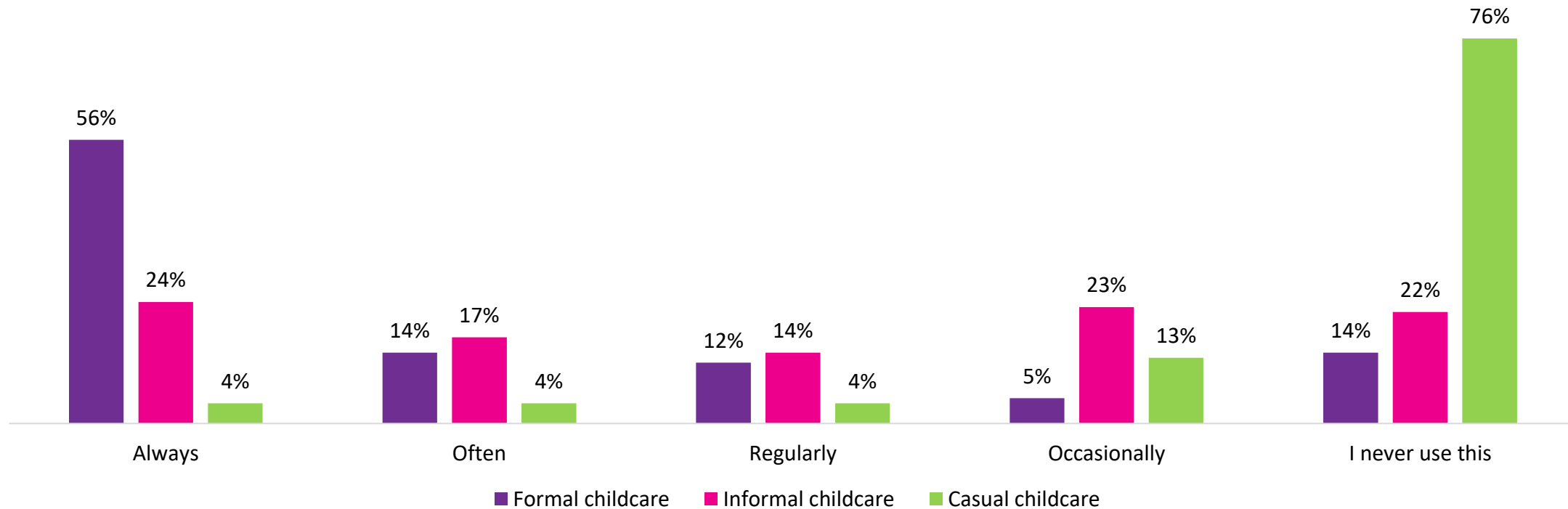
More than two thirds of families (69%) combine formal, informal and casual childcare to meet their childcare needs.

Families who have a child with a disability are twice as likely to be using no childcare at all and more likely to be using informal childcare only (15%).

Fewer families (19%) report using formal childcare only compared to 2021 (34%). This may reflect changing patterns of behaviour due to changing work patterns and higher fees.

More than one in ten families are using casual childcare at least regularly.

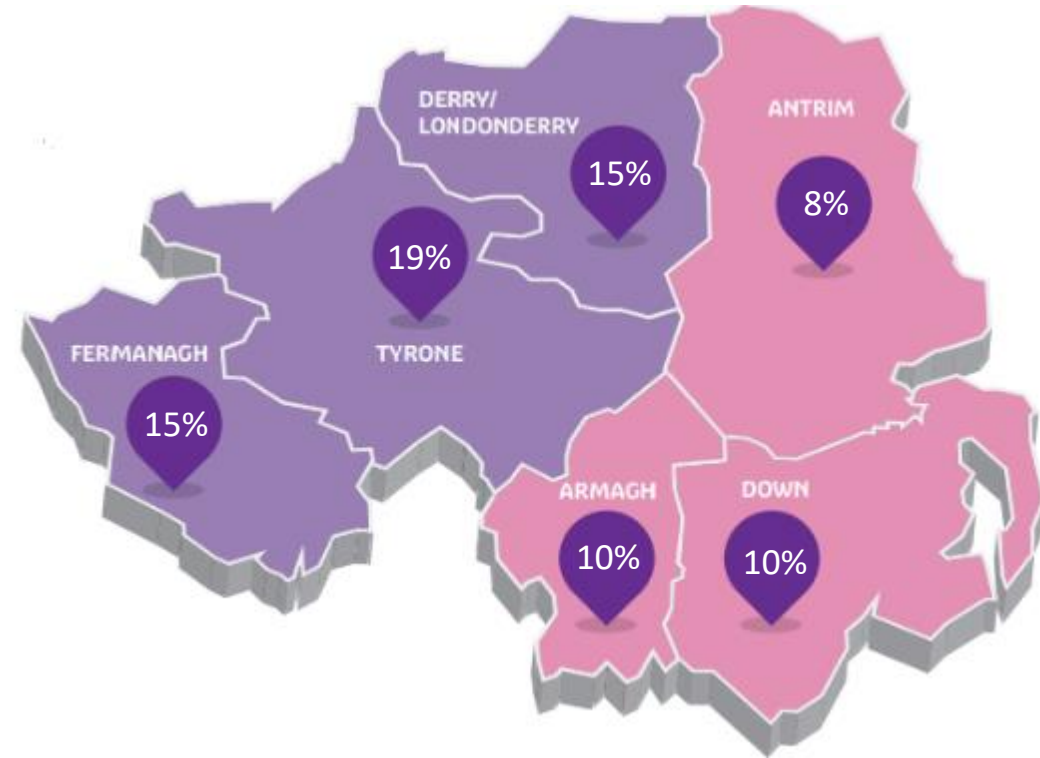
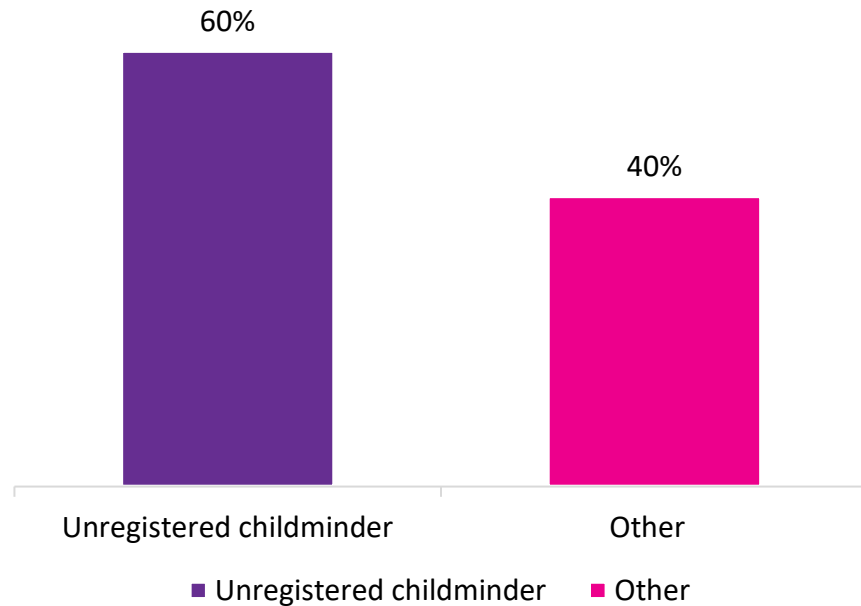
●●● Frequency of childcare used



Families using formal childcare tend to use it more frequently.

Informal childcare and casual childcare arrangements are more likely than formal childcare to be used occasionally – potentially to supplement formal childcare or when a formal childcare arrangement breaks down.

Use of casual childcare



Of families using casual childcare, 60% report using an unregistered childminder. ‘Other’ here includes those paying a friend or family member, unapproved nannies in the home, classes at or outside of school that are not registered childcare and other parents.

Families in counties Tyrone, Derry/Londonderry and Fermanagh are more likely to report using casual childcare. In Tyrone, almost 1 in 5 families report using casual childcare at least regularly.

●●● Lower income families use less childcare

Regular use of childcare types by household income



Lowest income households least likely to use formal childcare

Lowest income households most likely to use casual childcare

The table shows that lower income families (less than £30k) are much more likely to use casual childcare than higher income households, and less likely to use formal childcare.

●●● Specific forms of provision used by families

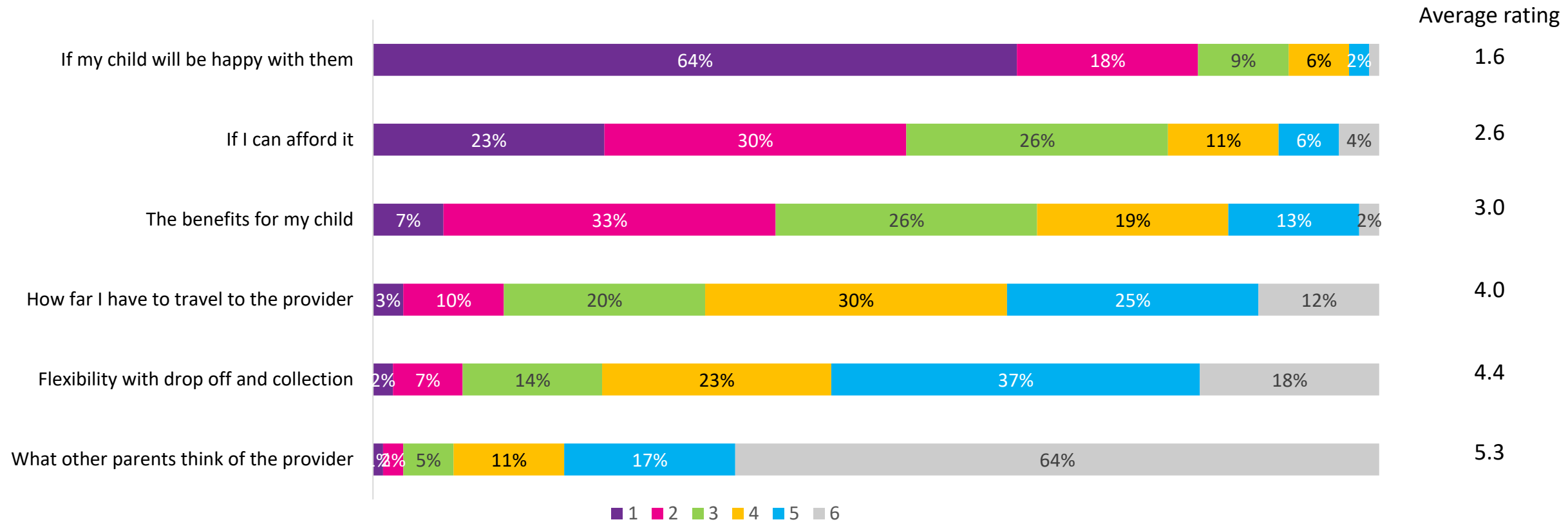


72% of families use grandparents to provide some or all of their childcare – an increase from 55% in 2021, and closer to pre-pandemic levels. This likely reflects the caution of using older, potentially vulnerable, family members for childcare during the pandemic.

A higher proportion of families report using out of school childcare than in 2021 – 44% compared to 31% - which may be attributed to the high proportion of people still working exclusively or mostly from home in 2021.

Of concern, 15% of families report using an unregistered childminder for some or all of their childcare needs.

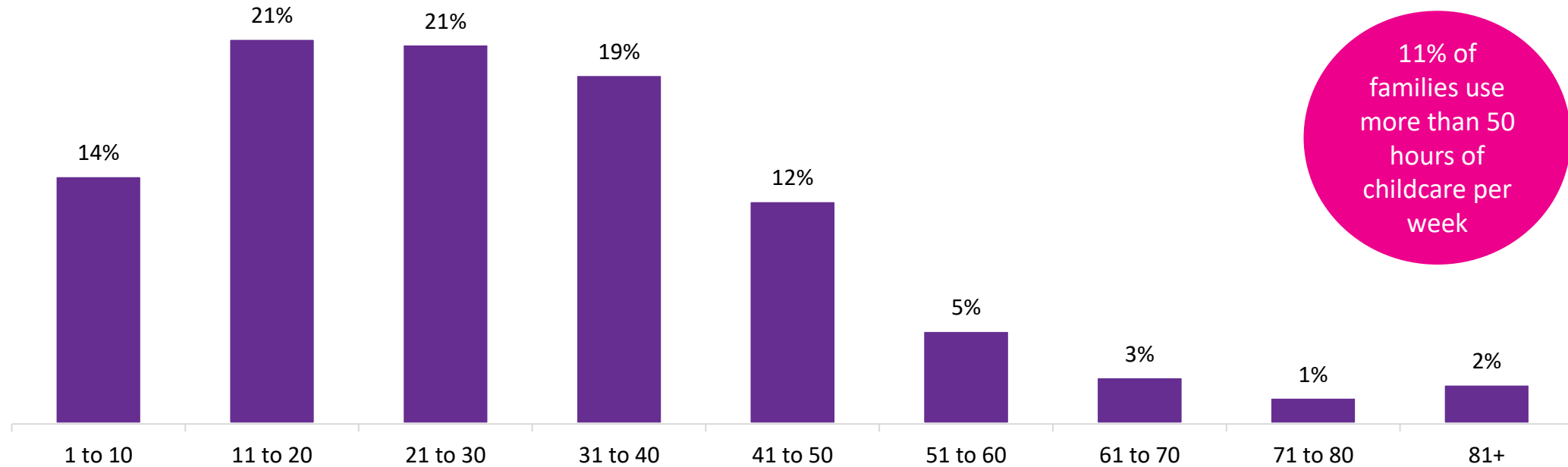
●●● Factors influencing the choice of childcare



Parents were asked to rank a series of factors from most important (1) to least important (6) when choosing childcare for their child.

The most important factor is whether their child will be happy there. The next most important factor is whether they can afford it, followed by the benefits for their child.

Hours of childcare used



The chart shows how many hours a week families use childcare for all their children (excluding families not using childcare). The median band is 21 to 30 hours.

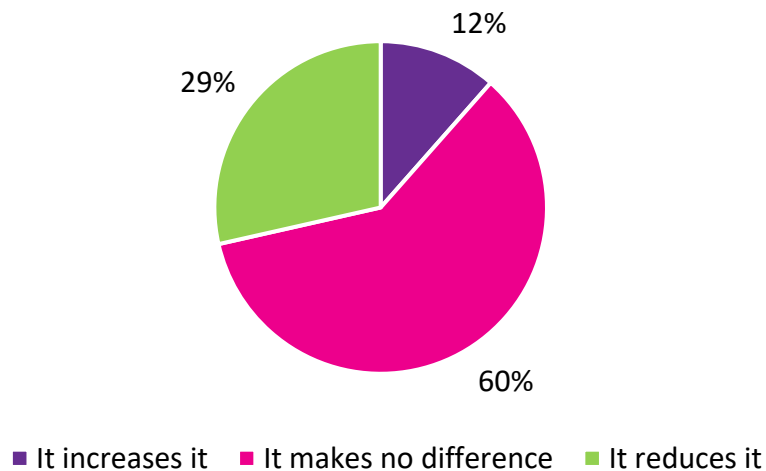
Families who have a child with a disability use fewer hours of childcare – 23% report using 1 to 10 hours per week.

Families with the lowest household incomes use fewer hours of childcare:

- 21% of families with a household income of up to £20,000 report using 1 to 10 hours per week, compared to 11% of those with a household income of £80,000+
- 21% of households with an income of £80,000+ report using more than 50 hours of childcare per week, compared to 1% of households with an income of up to £20,000.

●●● Funded pre-school provision

Impact of pre-school provision on the childcare bill for that child



“When my child is in pre-school I still have to pay a full day rate to my childminder so as a working parent this makes no difference to our finances. I am happy my child is at school and value the education but find this very frustrating.”

“All children no matter their circumstances should get full time pre school education.”

“My child is still full-time in nursery so the 2.5 hours in pre-school per day ends up costing more - nursery fee is the same then we pay snack at preschool and fees for activities.”

“Pre-school is great for the children and providers are fantastic, but 2.5 hour slot in the middle of the day is so inconvenient - hard to navigate for working parents, having to rely on grandparents to help.”

Of families who have a child in a funded pre-school education place, 39% are using full time provision (up to 4.5 hours per day, or 22.5 hours per week) and 61% part-time provision (2.5 hours per day, or 12.5 hours per week).

For 29% of those families, having a child in a funded pre-school place reduced the childcare bill for that child. This rises to 34% of those accessing a full-time place, compared to 25% of those with a part-time place.

Several respondents expressed frustration with the current pre-school admissions criteria which they perceive penalise parents not in receipt of benefits, and mean their children are less likely to be allocated a full-time place.

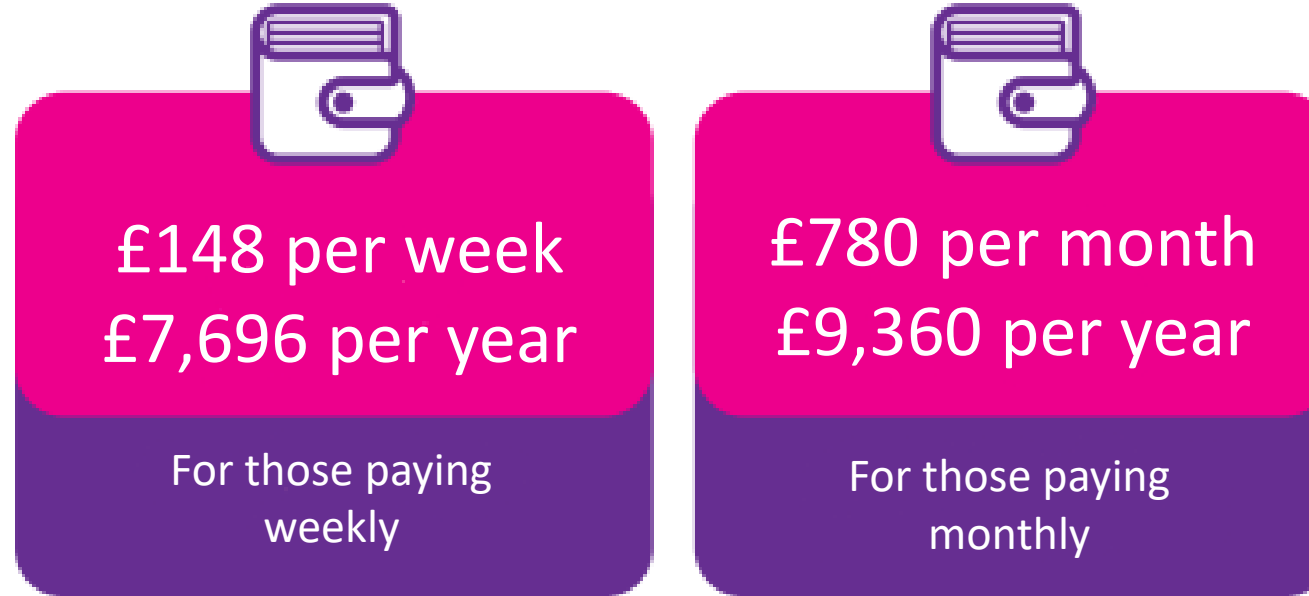
Section 3:

What are families actually spending on childcare?

- Household spend on childcare
- Variations in household spend on childcare
- Accessing support for childcare costs
- Using means other than income to pay the childcare bill
- Comparing the childcare bill to other household bills



●●● Household spend on childcare

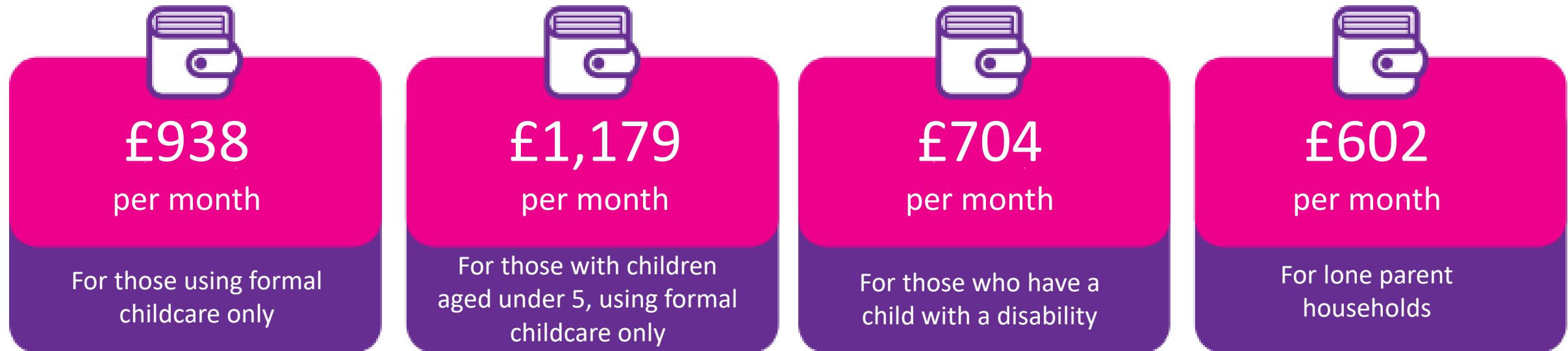


This year, families were asked to provide a figure for their childcare spend in a typical week or month. Many parents noted costs can increase significantly during school holidays.

On average, families paying for childcare monthly have a bill of around £9,360 per year. Families paying for their childcare weekly have a bill of around £7,696 per year.

A quarter of families are paying more than £1,000 a month for their childcare. Some are paying upwards of **£3,000 per month – or £36,000 a year – for childcare.**

●●● Variations in household spend on childcare

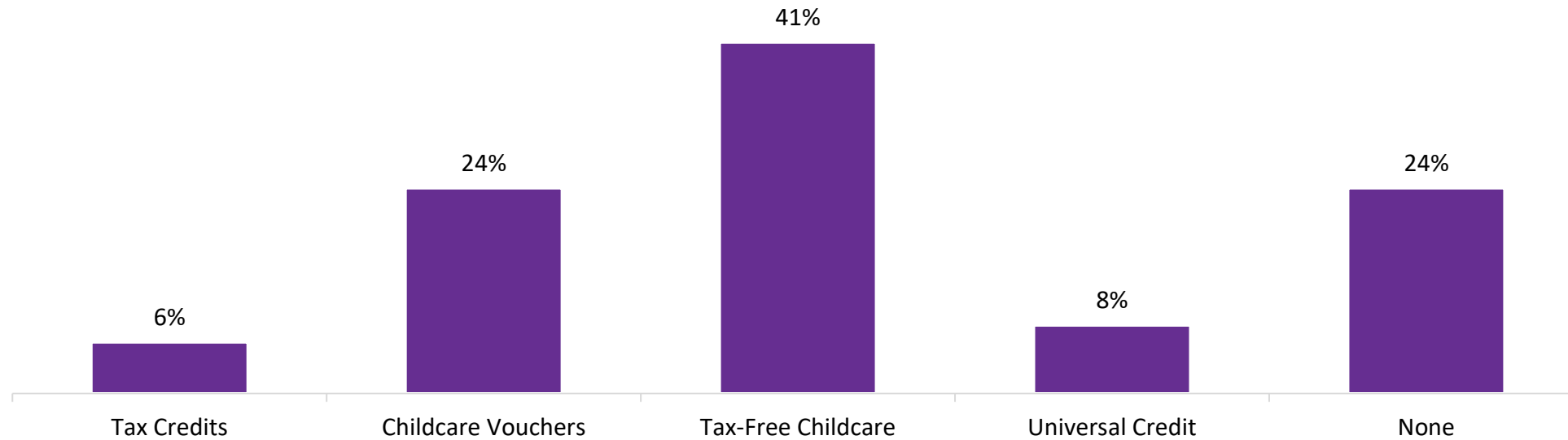


The highest average spend is by families with children under the age of 5, who are using formal childcare only – around £14,148 a year.

Families who have a child with a disability, and lone parent households, have a lower average monthly spend on childcare. This is related to their lower use of formal childcare compared to other households.

●●● Accessing support for childcare costs

Financial support accessed by families



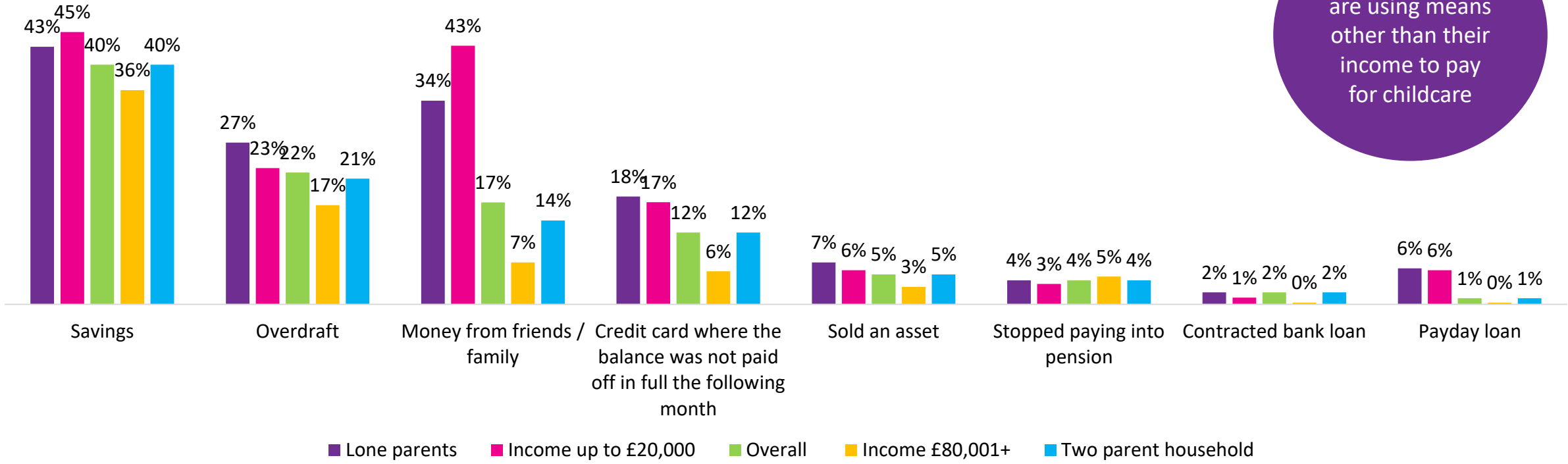
Almost a quarter of families are not claiming financial support towards their childcare costs

Almost a quarter of families who are paying for childcare are not accessing financial support with the cost. This has decreased from 2021, when the figure was just under a third, but still reflects the importance of a widespread information campaign to encourage all parents to find out what support they are entitled to.

Since 2020, there has been a significant increase in the proportion of households who report using Tax-Free Childcare – from 15% to 41%.

Using means other than income to pay the childcare bill

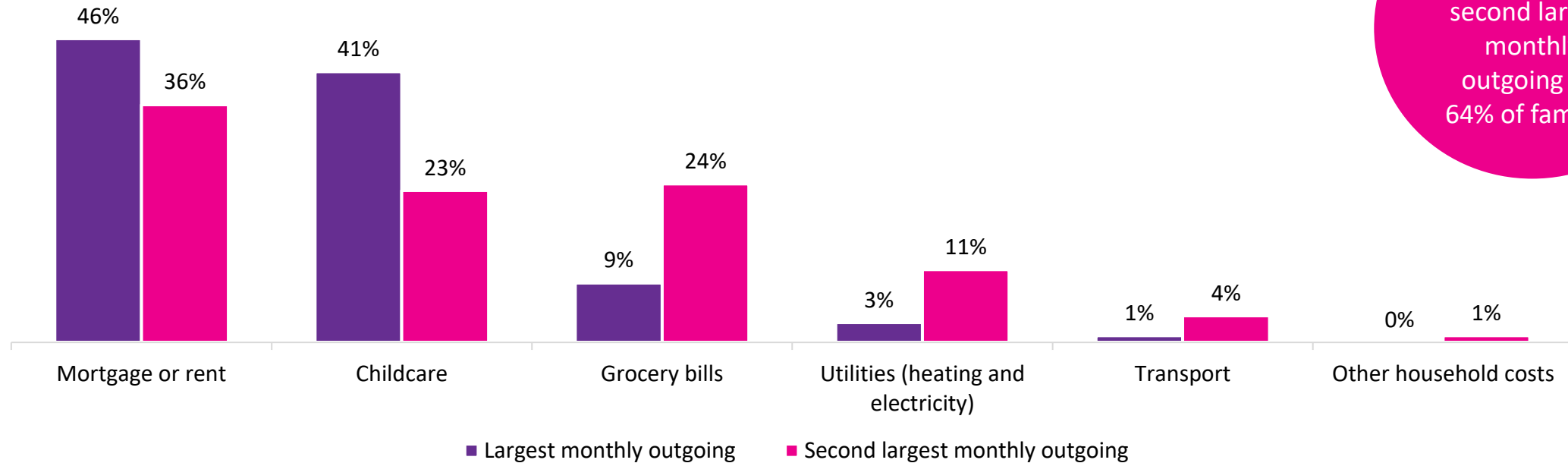
56% of families are using means other than their income to pay for childcare



56% of families report using at least one means other than their income to help pay for childcare, rising to 69% of lone parent households. This is higher than 2021, when the figure was 41%, rising to 55% of lone parent households.

Savings and an overdraft facility are the means most likely to be used. However, lone parents and lower income households are significantly more likely to use money gifted or borrowed from family or friends. They are also more likely to use a credit card where the balance is not paid off in full or to turn to payday loans.

Comparing the childcare bill to other household bills



Childcare is the largest or second largest monthly outgoing for 64% of families

For two fifths of families – 41% - childcare is their largest monthly outgoing ahead of their mortgage or rent. This is higher than the 2021 figure of 34%.

64% of families report that childcare is their largest or second largest monthly outgoing, compared to 57% in 2021.

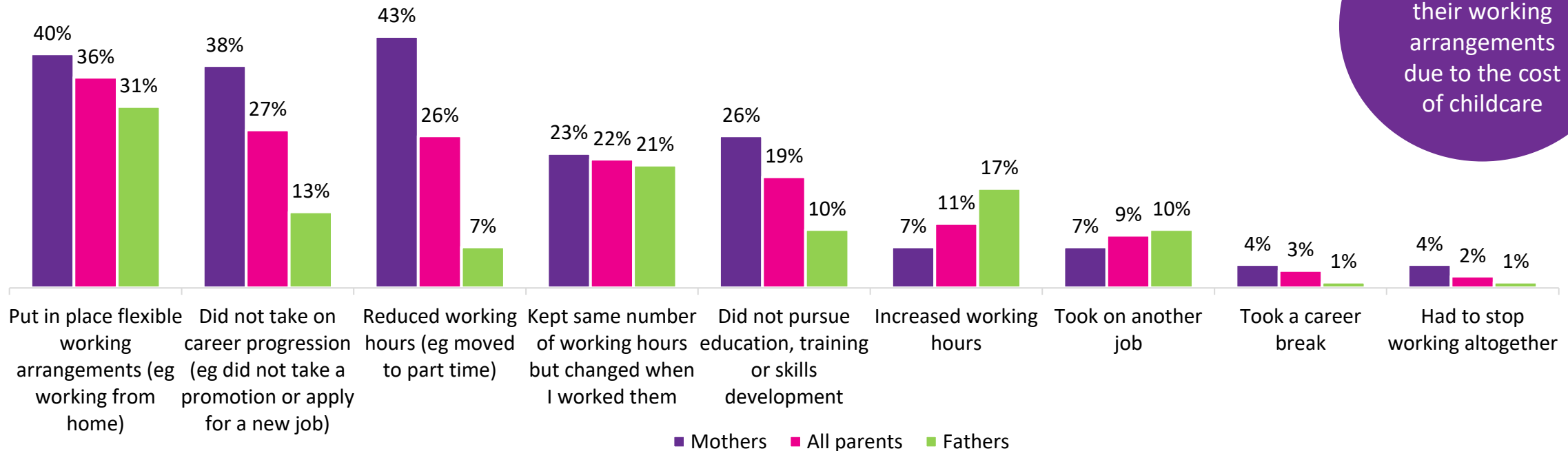
Section 4:

Impact on work and career progression

- Changes to working arrangements due to cost of childcare
- Lower income households more likely to have had to stop work due to childcare costs
- Changes to working arrangements due to being unable to find childcare
- Extent to which childcare stress impacts on productivity in work
- Times when it is more difficult to afford or find the childcare needed to work
- Anticipated changes to working arrangements due to childcare over the coming year
- Job industry of parents likely to leave their job in the next year due to childcare
- Impact on career if could access more affordable childcare
- Impact – other than career – if could access more affordable childcare
- How can employers support parents with childcare



Changes to working arrangements due to cost of childcare



88% of parents have changed their working arrangements due to the cost of childcare

90% of mothers and 75% of fathers changed their working arrangements due to the cost of childcare.

Mothers are more likely to have reduced their working hours or limited their career prospects – either through not taking on career progression or not pursuing education, training or skills development.

Fathers are more likely to have had to increase their working hours, impacting on the time they can spend with their family.

Changes to working arrangements due to cost of childcare

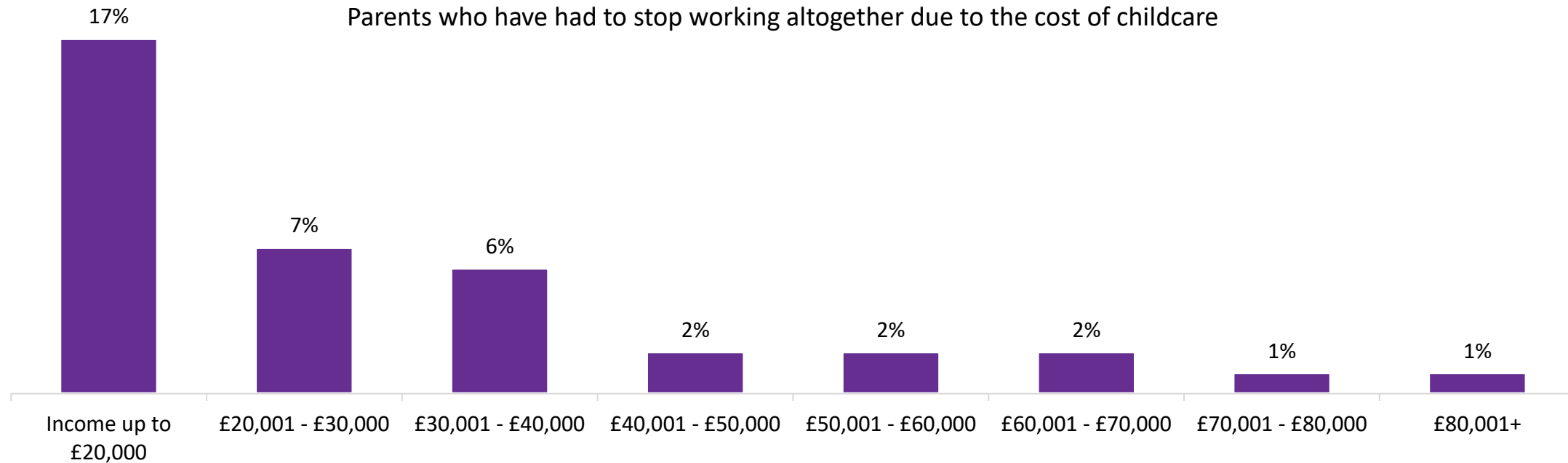


"I had to leave my job in which I had worked 13 years to get to where I wanted to be. I took on a part time admin job at a far lower pay band in order to look after my children as childcare costs were so high."

"Extended maternity leave to include unpaid leave because returning to work and paying for three children in childcare was not cost effective. Now I can't work because of the availability and cost of childcare, it is ridiculous and outrageous."

"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'm paying into my pension and can't progress in my career. I tried to go back to education but even with the tech offering free courses, I can't afford childcare. I feel there are barriers everywhere for women getting back into the workplace."

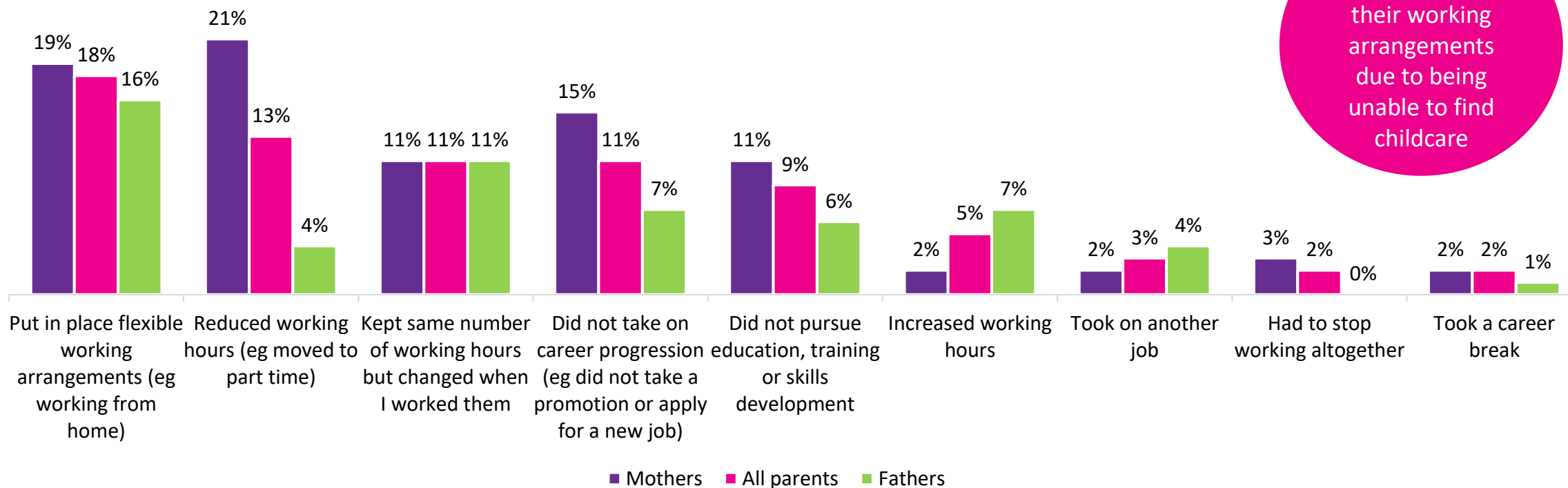
Lower income households more likely to have had to stop work due to childcare costs



17% of parents with a household income of up to £20,000 reported that they had had to stop working altogether due to the cost of childcare, compared to 1% of those in households with an income over £70,000.

Changes to working arrangements due to being unable to find childcare

49% of parents have changed their working arrangements due to being unable to find childcare



51% of mothers and 42% of fathers made changes to their working arrangements due to being unable to find the childcare they would need.

Mothers are more likely to have reduced their working hours or to have limited their career prospects – either through not taking on career progression or not pursuing education, training or skills development.

Fathers are more likely to have had to increase their working hours.

... Changes to working arrangements due to being unable to find childcare



"I had to take extra leave and ask for support from grandparents as I was unable to secure a place for my son until he was 15 months (booked from 6 months old)."

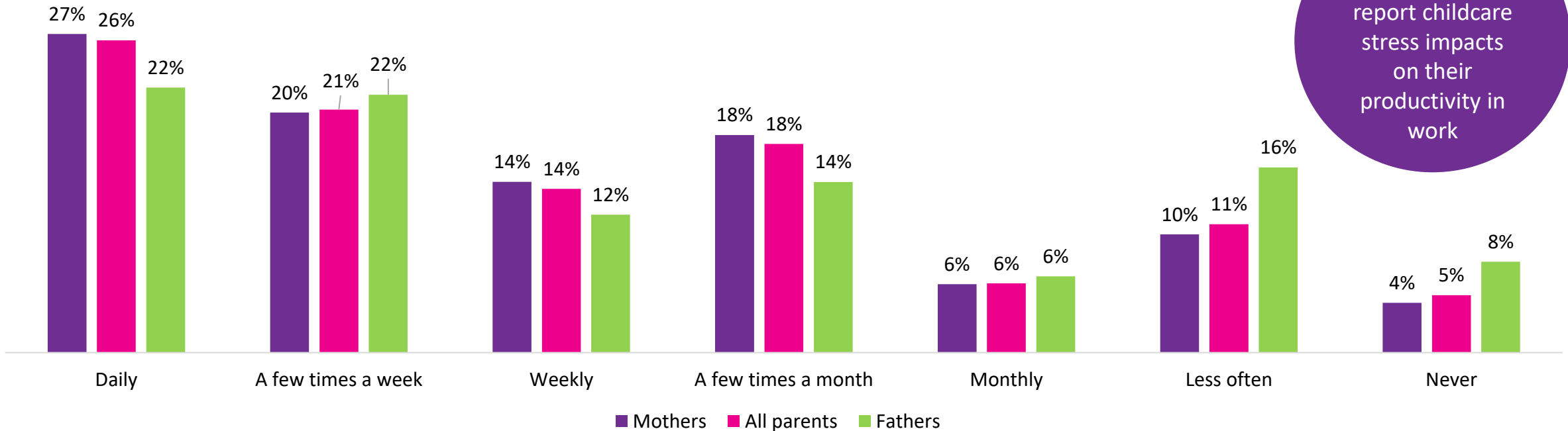


"Had to take a large chunk of annual leave after moving to another area as there was no daycare with space for my children."



"Left a very lucrative job with career progression for a more flexible, lesser paid role."

Extent to which childcare stress impacts on productivity in work



95% of parents who are using childcare say that childcare stress impacts on their productivity in work.

61% of parents report that this stress impacts their productivity at least weekly.

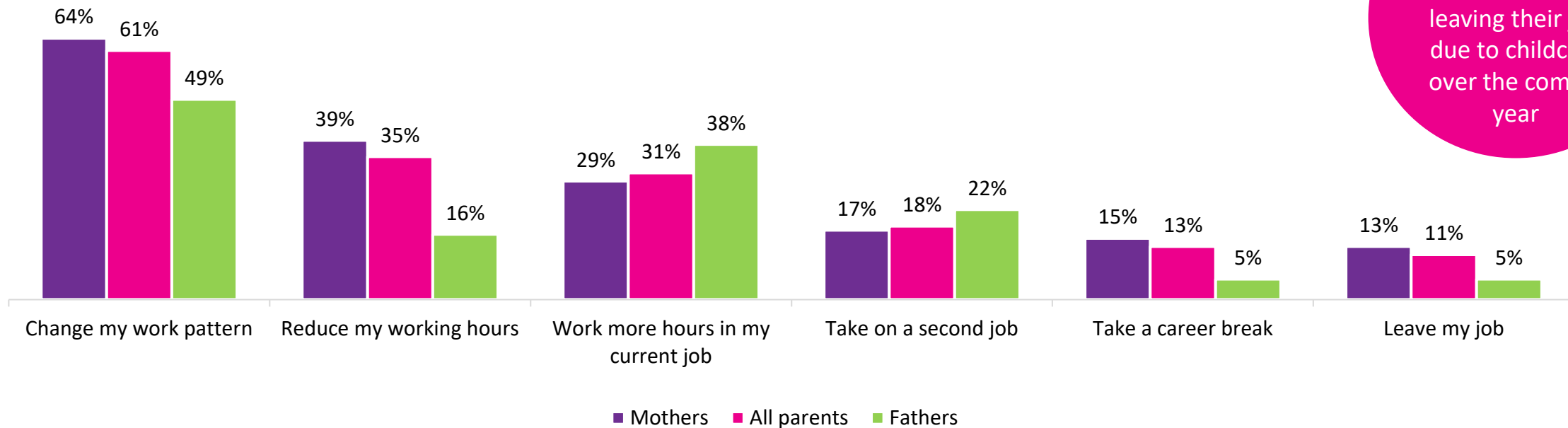
Times when it is more difficult to afford or find the childcare needed to work

	More difficult to afford the childcare needed to work	More difficult to find the childcare needed to work
Returning to work from parental leave	43%	33%
Child aged 0-2 years	60%	36%
Child aged 3-4 years	35%	19%
Child in primary school	10%	15%
Child in post-primary school	2%	4%
During the school holidays	36%	33%

Parents report that it is more difficult to afford or to find the childcare they need to work when children are younger – before they progress into the school system – and during the school holidays.

Anticipated changes to working arrangements due to childcare over the coming year

More than 1 in 10 parents are considering leaving their job due to childcare over the coming year

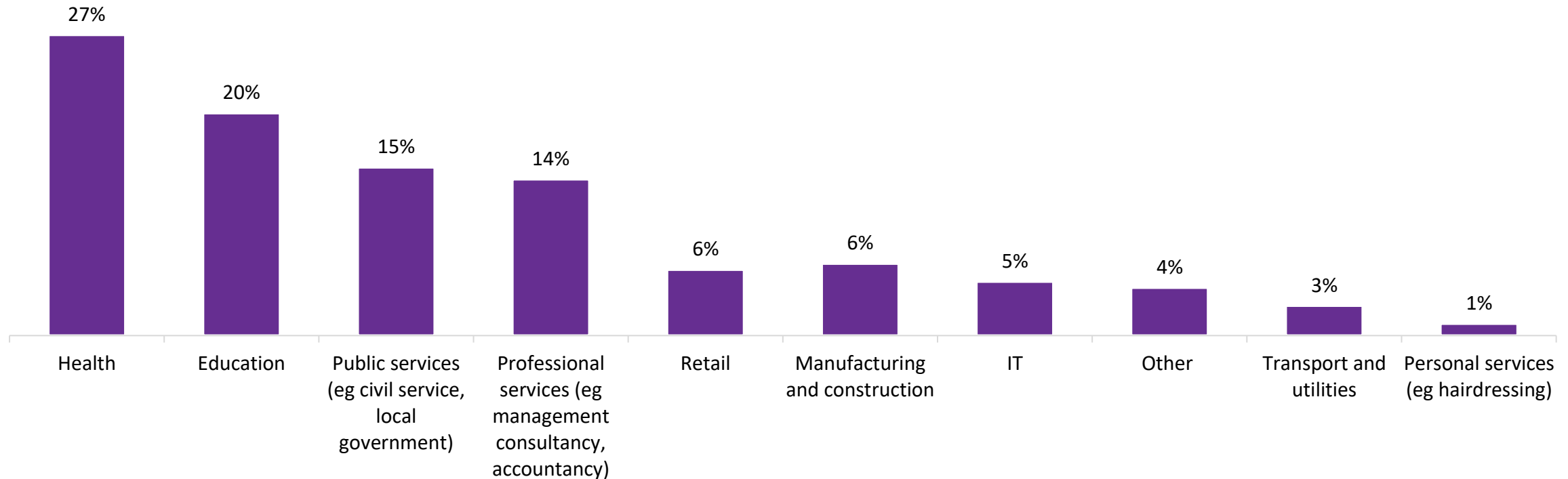


This chart shows the percentage of parents likely or very likely to change their working arrangements due to childcare over the coming year. It excludes those not working.

76% are likely or very likely to change their working arrangements in some way.

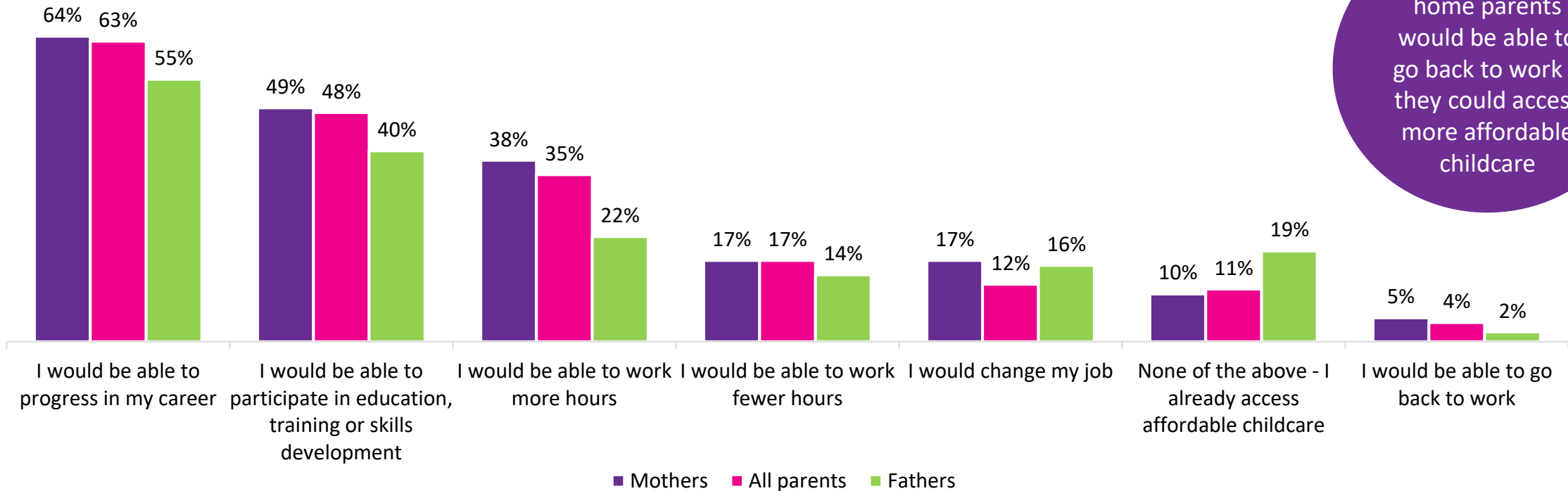
20% of lone parents are likely or very likely to leave their job due to childcare over the coming year. They are also more likely to anticipate taking a career break (19%).

Job industry of parents likely to leave their job in the next year due to childcare



11% of parents reported that they are likely or very likely to leave their job in the next year due to childcare. Of those, 56% work in the public sector, 35% in the private sector and 8% for a charity or social enterprise. Almost half work in health or education.

Impact on career if could access more affordable childcare



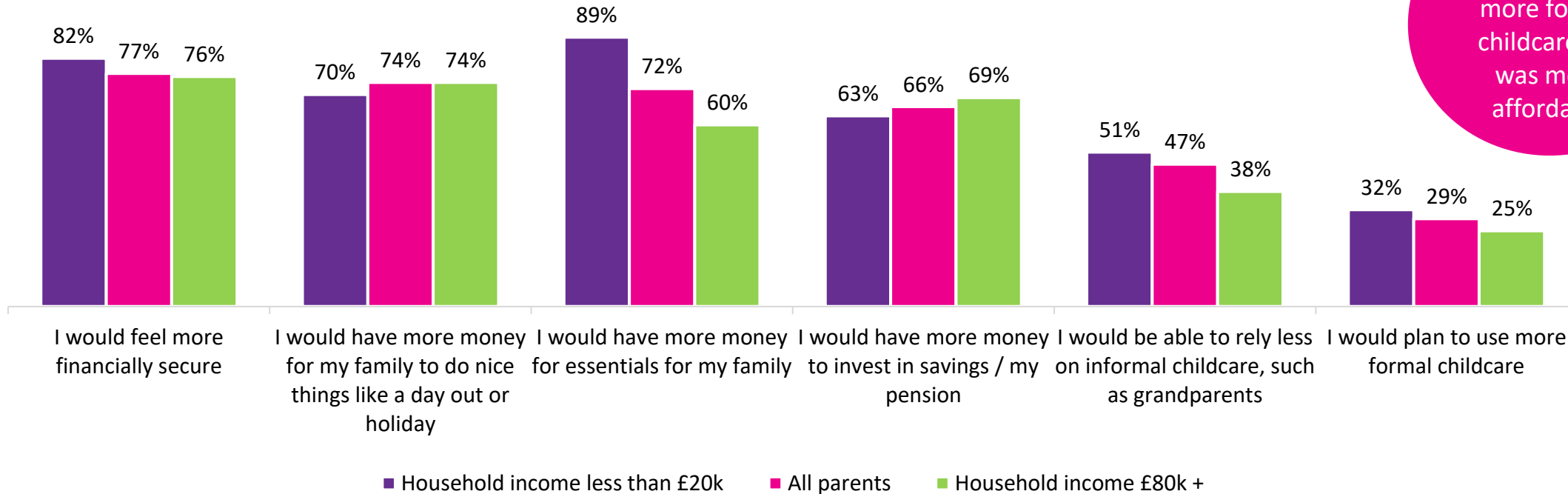
63% of stay-at-home parents would be able to go back to work if they could access more affordable childcare

89% of parents said it would impact on their career if they could access more affordable childcare, enabling many more to progress or to participate in education, training or skills development.

The figures for those who report they would be able to go back to work rise to 63% of stay-at-home parents.

Impact – other than career - if could access more affordable childcare

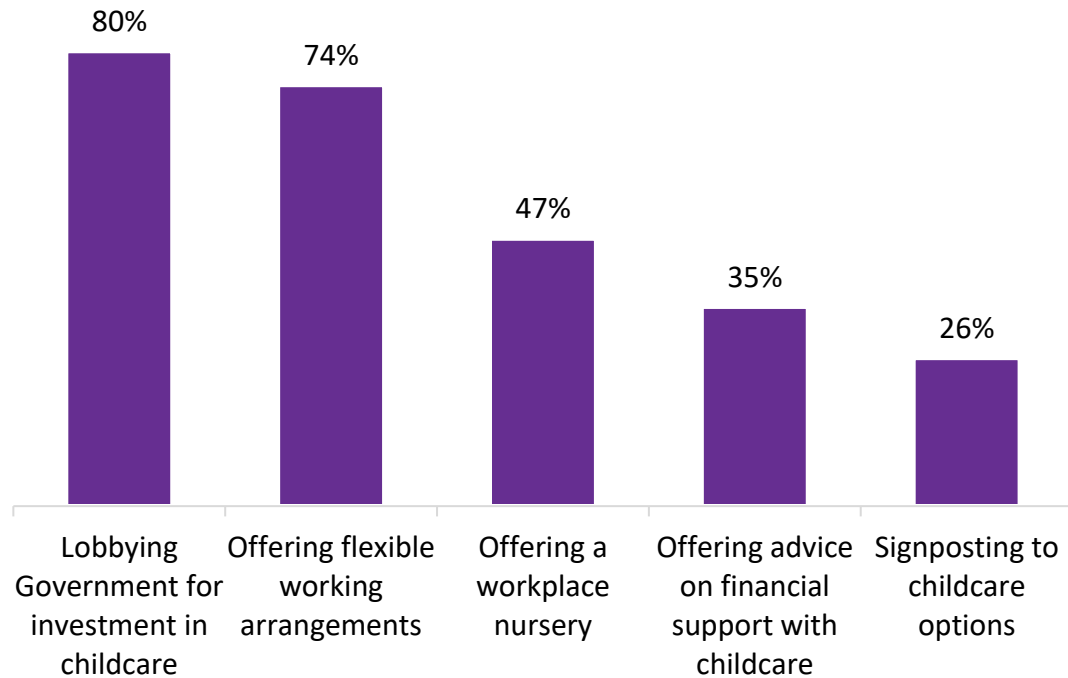
29% of parents would use more formal childcare if it was more affordable



More than three quarters of parents would feel more financially secure if they could access more affordable childcare.

Parents in lower income households are more likely than parents from a household with an income of over £80,000 to say they would have more money for essentials for their family, and that they would be able to rely less on informal childcare, such as grandparents.

●●● How can employers support parents with childcare



“Adopting a flexible attitude day to day, accept that sometimes something has to give, and frame it as an issue affecting all parents rather than just mothers.”

“Advocate for working parents employed by them and highlight how not having them in their workforce negatively impacts the economy.”

“Offering help with local to home nursery. We have a nursery for staff/students, but it is not convenient when you're working from home some days.”

“Employers need to be much more flexible to allow parents to get the most from a full day of childcare, condensed hours etc for working hours into shorter time frame of days.”

Over recent years there has been a greater recognition that employers have a key role to play in providing a flexible, family friendly working environment to support their staff, and facilitate recruitment and retention.

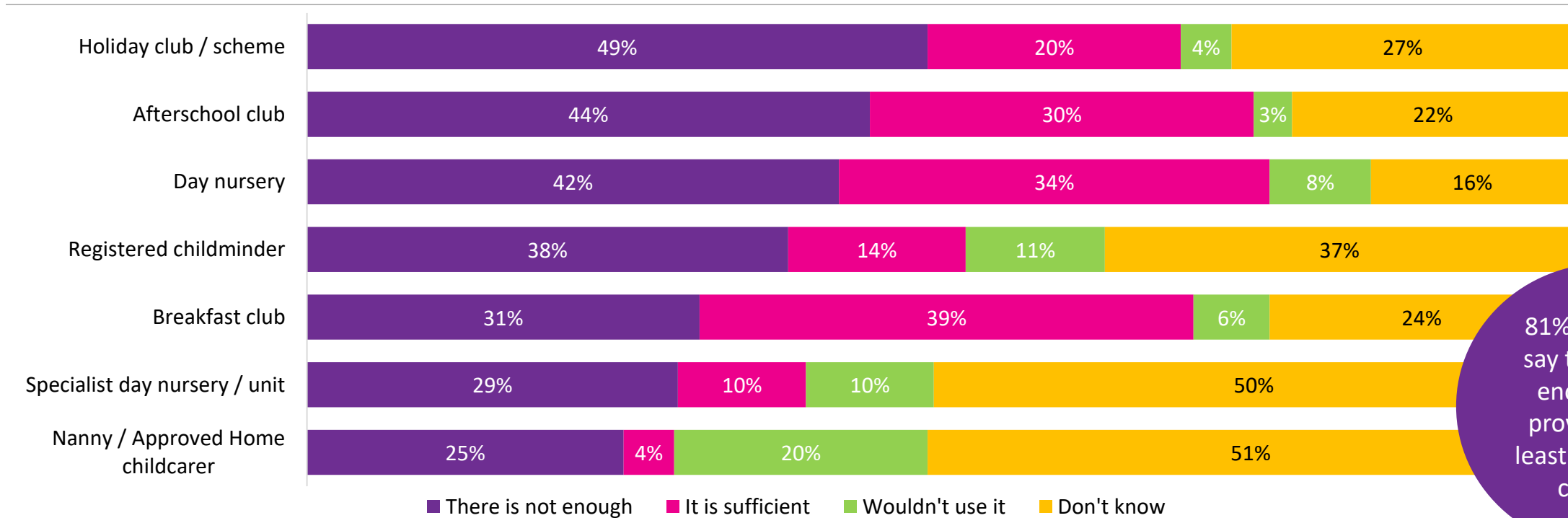
Section 5:

Are families able to access the childcare they need?

- Views on the local provision of childcare
- Variation across Northern Ireland
- When have parents experienced difficulties accessing childcare



Views on the local provision of childcare



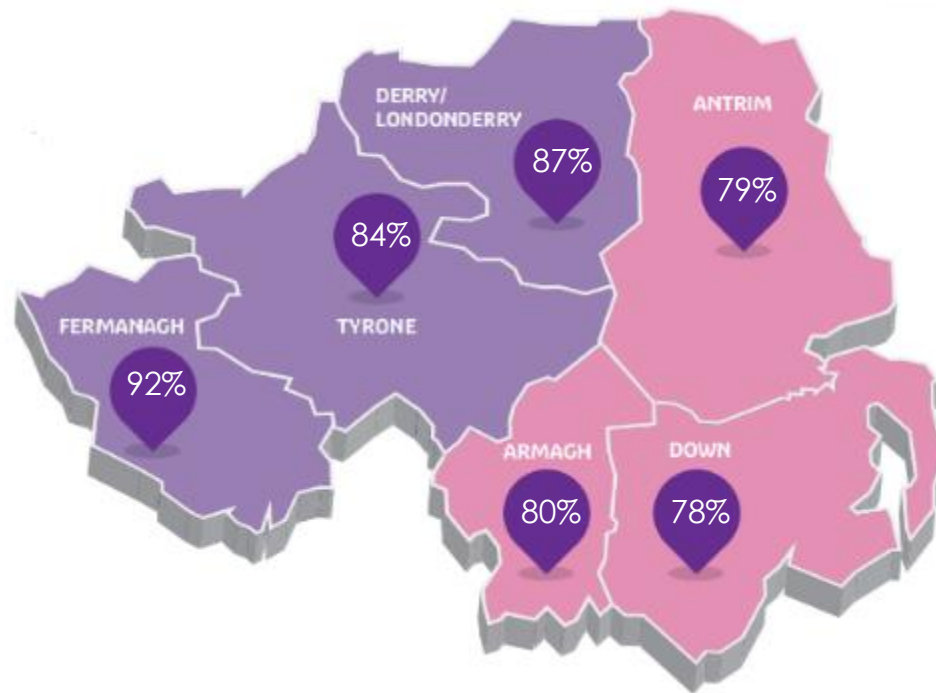
81% of parents say there is not enough local provision of at least one type of childcare

81% of parents report that there is not enough local provision of at least one type of childcare. This is higher than the 2021 figure of 69%.

Since 2021 the proportion of parents reporting that there is not enough day nursery or registered childminder provision has risen. Official statistics show that the number of providers has decreased. The [Children's Social Care Statistics 2022/23](#) (published 19 October 2023) highlight a 6% decrease in the number of providers compared to the previous year, and a 3% decrease in the number of registered places. This follows a 5% decrease in the number of providers reported in 2021/22.

43% of parents who have a child with a disability say there is not enough provision of specialist day nurseries or units, compared to 27% of parents who do not have a child with a disability.

●●● Variation across Northern Ireland

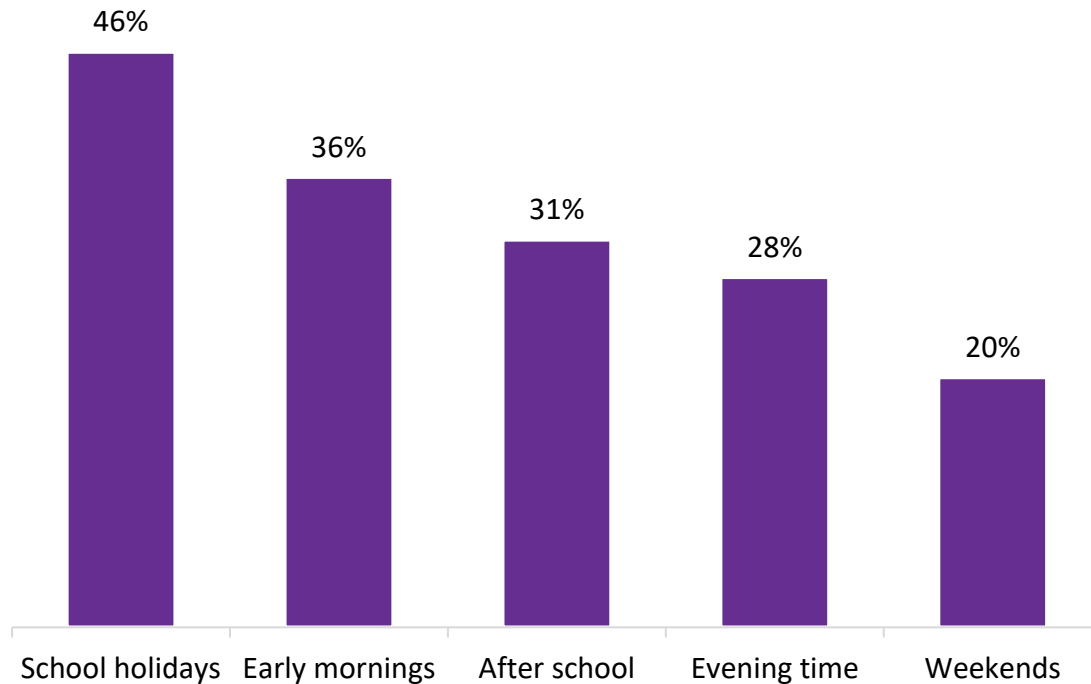


Council area	Not enough provision of at least one type of childcare
Fermanagh and Omagh	91%
Derry City and Strabane	89%
Mid Ulster	83%
Mid and East Antrim	83%
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon	81%
Newry, Mourne and Down	81%
Antrim and Newtownabbey	79%
Causeway Coast and Glens	79%
Ards and North Down	78%
Belfast	78%
Lisburn and Castlereagh	72%

Similar to previous years, parents living in counties Fermanagh, Derry/Londonderry and Tyrone are more likely to report insufficient provision of childcare in their area. The figure has increased across all counties since 2021.

In 2021, the Council areas where parents were more likely to report insufficient childcare provision were Mid Ulster and Derry City and Strabane. In 2023, they have been overtaken by Fermanagh and Omagh.

When have parents experienced difficulties accessing childcare



“Pick up is before 6 but I work in retail until 6 so I rely on my partner doing all pick ups – there is no way I could make it work by myself.”

“Last minute occasions where it is outside of our scheduled hours e.g. if a grandparent is sick.”

“School breakfast club doesn't open early enough for many parents to get to work so we use a more expensive private option.”

75% of parents have experienced difficulties accessing childcare during at least one of these times.

Section 6:

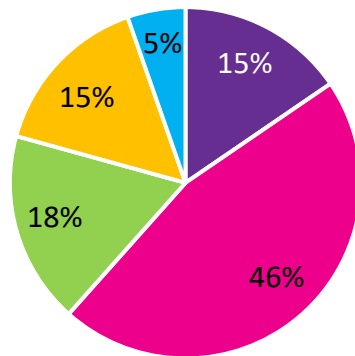
Parental attitudes regarding childcare

- Views on current childcare arrangements
- What would improve your perception of childcare?
- Overall experience of childcare
- What is good about childcare provision in Northern Ireland?
- Recommendations from parents to address childcare challenges



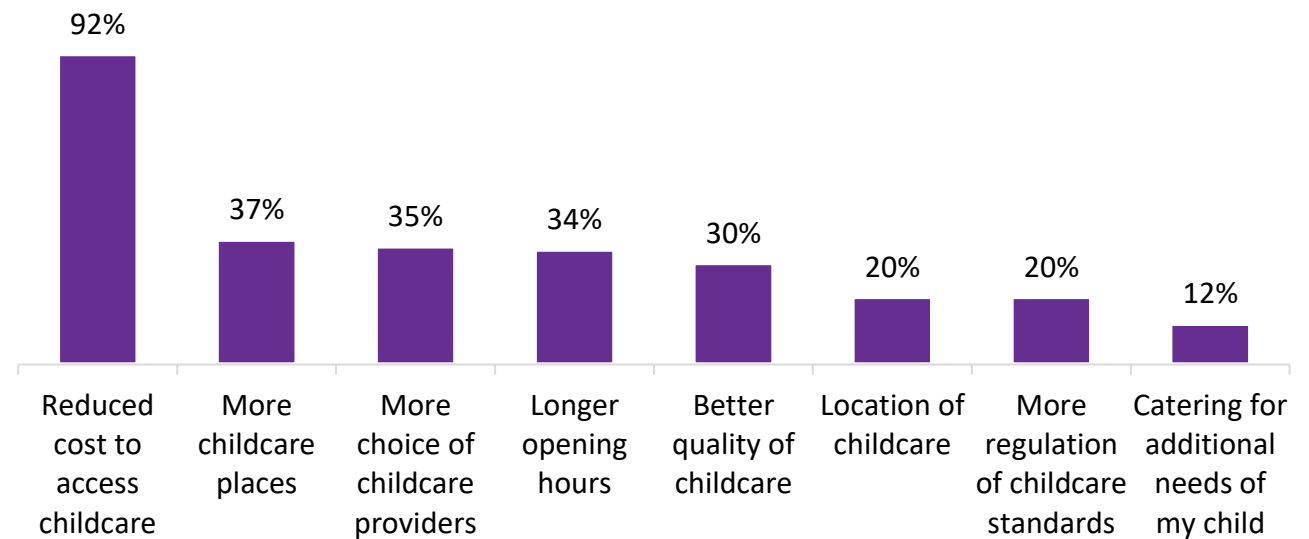
Views on current childcare arrangements

What do you think about your current childcare arrangements?



■ Very happy ■ Happy ■ Neither ■ Unhappy ■ Very unhappy

For those not happy, what would improve your perception of childcare?



61% of parents are Very happy or Happy with their childcare arrangements, with 20% Unhappy or Very Unhappy.

For those who are not happy with their arrangements, the key thing that would improve their perception of childcare was reduced cost to access childcare (92%).

Amongst families who have a child with a disability, and are not happy with their arrangements, 63% say catering for the additional needs of their child would improve their perception of childcare.

... What would improve your perception of childcare?

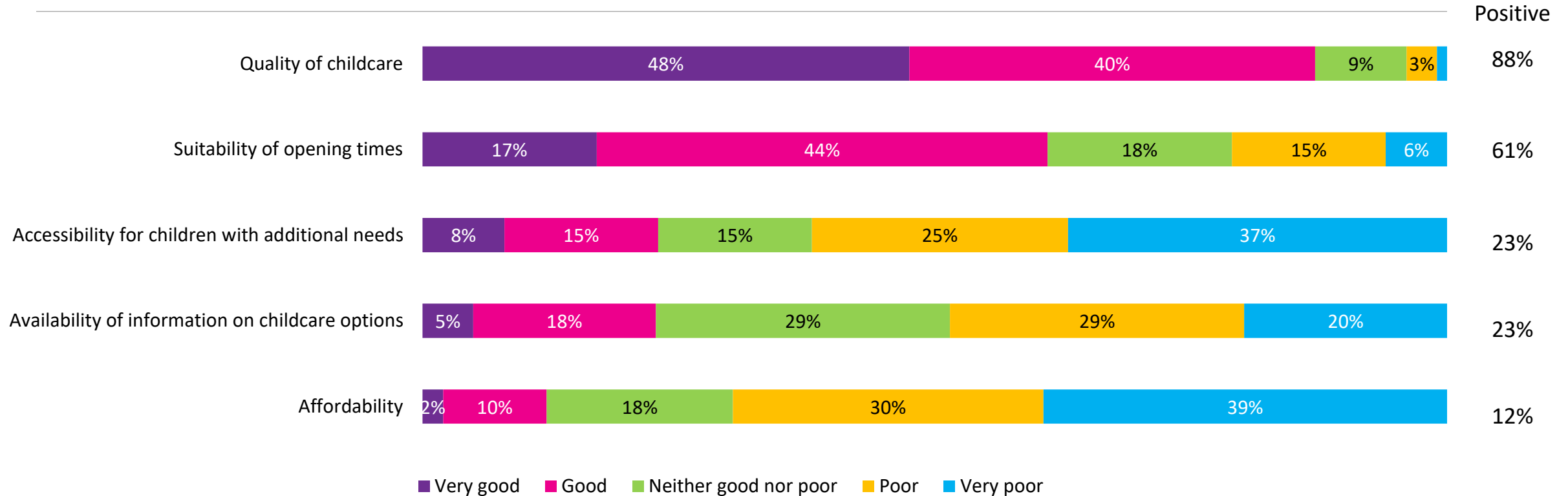


“Childcare for disabled children over 12. They do not stop needing the same support as they age. We still get child benefit up to 19 so why can't we access childcare. She is always going to need afterschool and holiday club access that meet her needs and there is NONE locally to us.”

“Flexible days as I am a shift worker in the NHS. My days change each week. I don't need formal childcare every day but have to pay to retain a place.”

“Getting more help financially with childcare, currently I work to pay childcare – I don't have anything left from my salary once I've paid my childcare bill.”

Overall experience of childcare



88% of parents give a positive rating (Very good or Good) to the quality of childcare, while just 12% of parents give a positive rating to the affordability of childcare.

18% of parents who have a child with additional needs gave a positive rating to accessibility for children with additional needs.

What is good about childcare provision in Northern Ireland?

Six key themes emerged, with a particular focus on their personal experience of excellent people working within the sector and the quality of care. This is seen as benefitting their children through nurturing their educational and social development and enhancing their overall well-being.

Many parents appreciated that the sector is well regulated, giving them confidence and reassurance.

Some noted that the availability of financial support schemes, while insufficient, makes some difference to “lighten the load” of their childcare costs.

It is important to note that many parents found nothing good to say pointing instead to their deep frustration with the cost and availability of the childcare they need. For some, this means they are unable to access the childcare they need or are being put under significant financial pressure. Others spoke of long waiting lists for places and a lack of flexibility.

Many who did share a positive experience qualified that experience by making reference to cost. Several referred to families in other parts of the UK and in Ireland being better able to afford the childcare they need because of support schemes that have been rolled out there.

There was a strong sense from parents that while they value the childcare sector in Northern Ireland they feel that the Government does not.



... What is good about childcare provision in Northern Ireland?



“When you can find it the quality and care given are amazing, the staff are fantastic but they do not get paid enough for what they provide either and so recognition that childcare is an essential part of a functioning and growing economy and society is essential!”



“Childcare provision is excellent - it is child-centred and promotes all areas of learning and development for children in a safe and friendly environment. Food made daily onsite is great for health and wellbeing. Our nursery brings the children outside as much as possible which is fabulous for their development. I am kept well informed every day.”



“Childcare services in Northern Ireland are regulated to ensure high-quality care and education, and safeguarding is of a high standard. It provides reassurance especially when trusting another with the precious people in your life.”

... What is good about childcare provision in Northern Ireland?



“The quality of childcare and the benefits my children receive through their childcare setting due to interacting with children their own age and the interaction with the assistants is exceptional.”

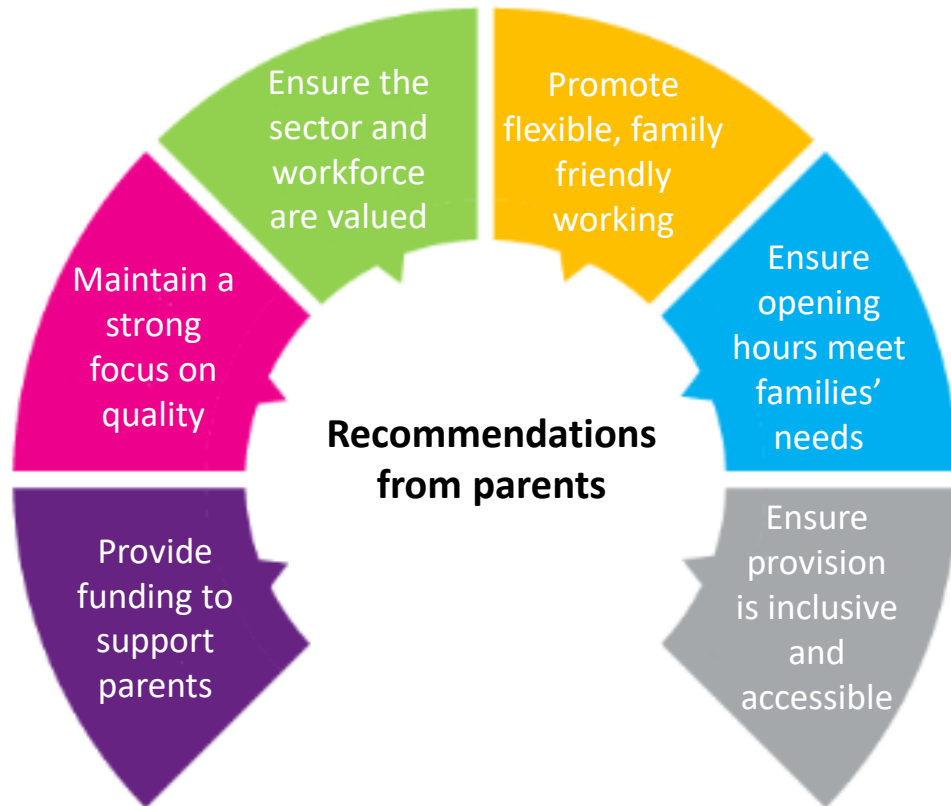


“There are committed and wonderful individuals who work in childcare, providing warm, friendly and engaging experiences for children which in turn enables parents to not only work but do so in confidence their child is well cared for.”



“My childminder is excellent. She has kept her costs down as much as she can. My child loves her and so do I. She deserves to be paid well for the job she does, shaping the minds of young children and providing them with a loving and caring environment.”

Recommendations from parents to address childcare challenges



Parents saw a key role for the Government in recognising childcare as infrastructure and investing in it accordingly – like primary and secondary education. There was deep frustration with the continued absence of a functioning Executive, seen as a barrier to progress. Many highlighted developments in other parts of the UK and Ireland and queried why Northern Ireland was being “left behind”. Several called for money allocated to Northern Ireland through the Barnett Formula because of childcare spend in England to be ringfenced for childcare in Northern Ireland.

A key recommendation was for funding to improve affordability for parents. Some referred to the 30 hours free childcare scheme in other parts of the UK, now being expanded in England. Others called for subsidies to be paid directly to providers enabling them to reduce their fees. Several called for a cap to set a limit on what parents must pay. There was a strong recognition that childcare providers also face challenges and that the workforce is not sufficiently well paid for the vital work that they do. Parents were also keen to see high quality maintained.

There was a call for financial support offered through existing schemes, particularly Tax-Free Childcare, to be increased and caps on support removed. Other recommendations included enabling financial support to be paid to informal and casual carers, such as grandparents and unregistered childminders, and standardising pre-school and primary school hours.

Many parents perceived a lack of wraparound childcare provision or settings that offer opening hours to meet the needs of working parents. This creates a challenge around drop offs and pick ups that requires them either to alter their working hours or avail of support from grandparents or other family members.

Parents who have a child with additional needs highlighted the importance of ensuring childcare provision is inclusive and accessible to all children.

••• Recommendations from parents



“The Government need to intervene and implement a childcare policy similar to 30 hours in England, Scotland and Wales. Northern Ireland has its hands tied behind its back when trying to get more people into the workforce by not enabling parents to be supported with reliable, well funded and available childcare options.”



“Better government funding and investment. Our tax free childcare barely touches the actual cost of childcare. Working parents need greater support as the pressure is huge and the worry with regards to being able to continue affording suitable childcare is ongoing. It is enough to cause sleepless nights if I think about it too much.”



“Invest in a long-term childcare strategy that benefits families and providers, but put supports in place immediately. Consider the economic impact of the Government supporting childcare and the ripple effect this will have across all sectors. I know of parents reducing hours or leaving jobs because there is not enough support for childcare.”

●●● Recommendations from parents



“We need more specialist early years, afterschool and holiday childcare provision especially for children with disabilities over age 12. Many childcare settings are just not accessible, and this is causing parents to be unable to work and means children with additional needs are missing out.”



“Ensure staff are properly trained and paid. Don't compromise on quality, training or ratios to lower fees. Recognise that quality affordable childcare is essential infrastructure for parents to work and support development of the next generation. Investing in quality childcare has a net benefit for everyone and we need to address the 'if you can't afford them don't have them' public attitudes.”



“The Government need to subsidise providers to enable working parents to access free or reduced cost childcare for under 5s. This would be LIFE CHANGING for families in NI. It would get parents back into work or increasing their hours. Investment in childcare for under 5s is one of the best economic decisions the government could make.”

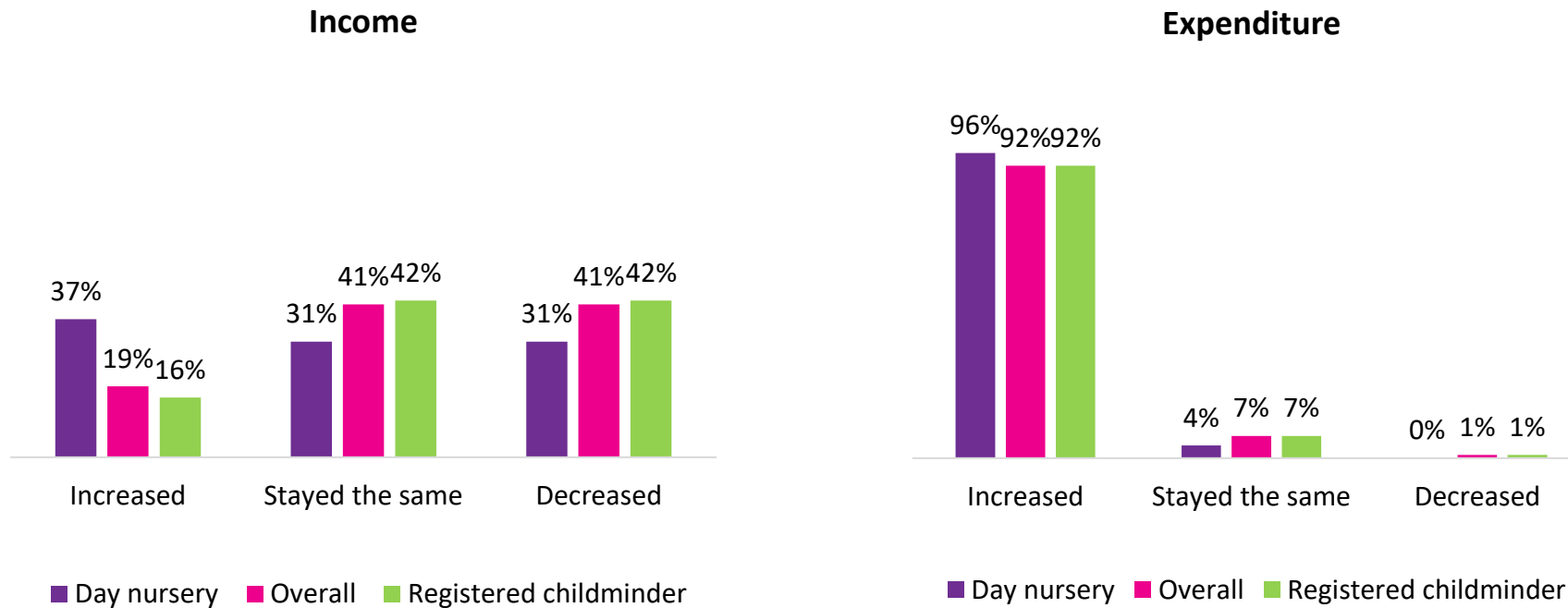
Section 7:

Experiences of childcare providers

- Changes to income and expenditure in the last 12 months
- Current financial situation
- Financial outlook
- Changes to income and expenditure anticipated in the next 12 months
- Main challenges facing day nurseries in the next 12 months
- Main challenges facing registered childminders in the next 12 months
- Current capacity within the sector
- Recommendations from childcare providers for how the sector can be better supported



Changes to income and expenditure in the last 12 months



“Bills have increased while money in is the same.”

“We’ve had problems recruiting staff and had to keep child numbers low due to staff/child ratio. This has reduced our income.”

“ALL the costs of running the establishment have gone up to the point where we are losing money every week.”

In the last 12 months, 92% of providers reported an increase in expenditure – the money going out – compared to 19% who reported an increase in income – the money coming in. This is not sustainable.

Day nurseries are more likely than registered childminders to have seen an increase in income but are also slightly more likely to have seen an increase in their expenditure.

●●● Current financial situation

	Making a loss	Breaking even	Making a surplus
Overall	24%	60%	16%
Day nursery	30%	61%	9%
Registered childminder	21%	62%	17%

84% of providers are just breaking even (60%) or are making a loss (24%)

"I am actually leaving Childminding as it is no longer financially viable for me."

"I am slowly nibbling away at savings to keep myself afloat. I am considering doing another part time job or changing careers."

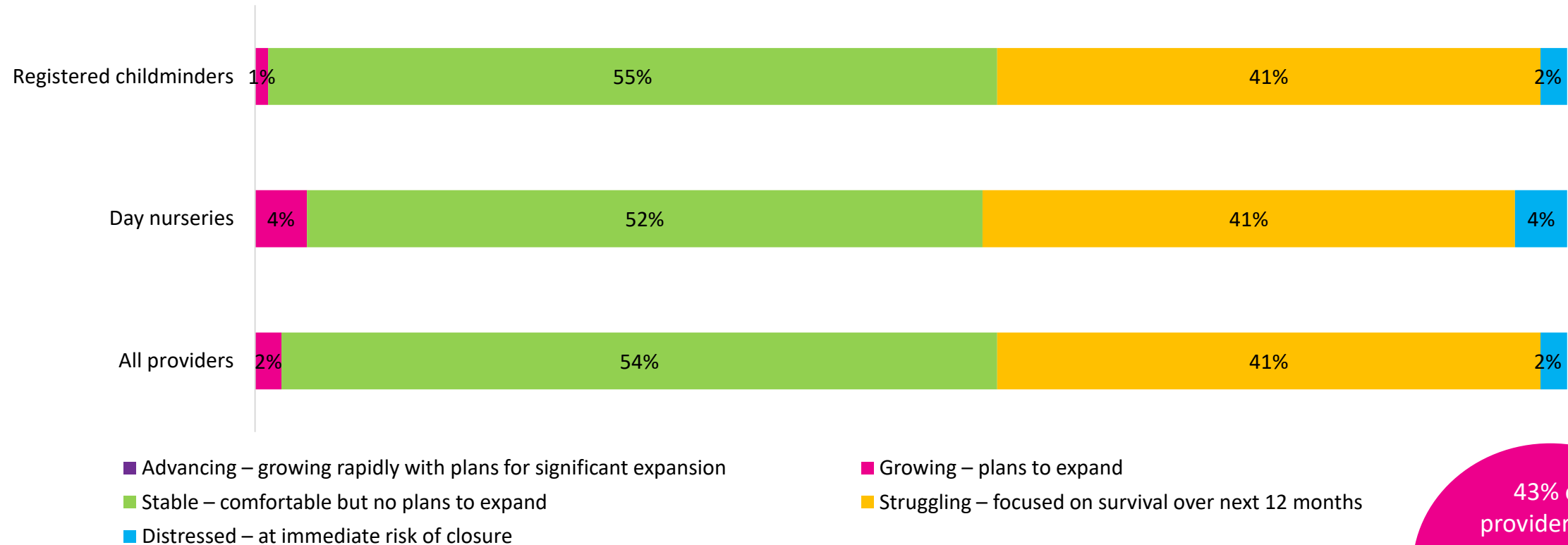
"As costs rise and we need to increase staff wages, to avoid making a loss we have to increase fees."

"We needed to fundraise to cover the rent and other expenses by running a table quiz and having raffles."

84% reported that they were breaking even (60%) or making a loss (24%).

Day nurseries were more likely to report that they are making a loss, and fewer than 1 in 10 day nurseries report that they are making a surplus that they can reinvest into their setting.

Financial outlook



43% of providers say they are 'struggling' or 'distressed' financially

No providers describe their financial outlook as advanced. Just over half report that they are stable, but critically 43% are struggling – focused on survival over the new 12 months – or distressed – at immediate risk of closure. This is higher than the figure of 31% in 2021.

●●● Financial outlook



“10% increase in childcare fees will not cover rising costs but I cannot introduce more than that as I want childcare to remain accessible to as many families as possible. I worry therefore about reduced occupancy which I am already seeing in our 0-2 room.”

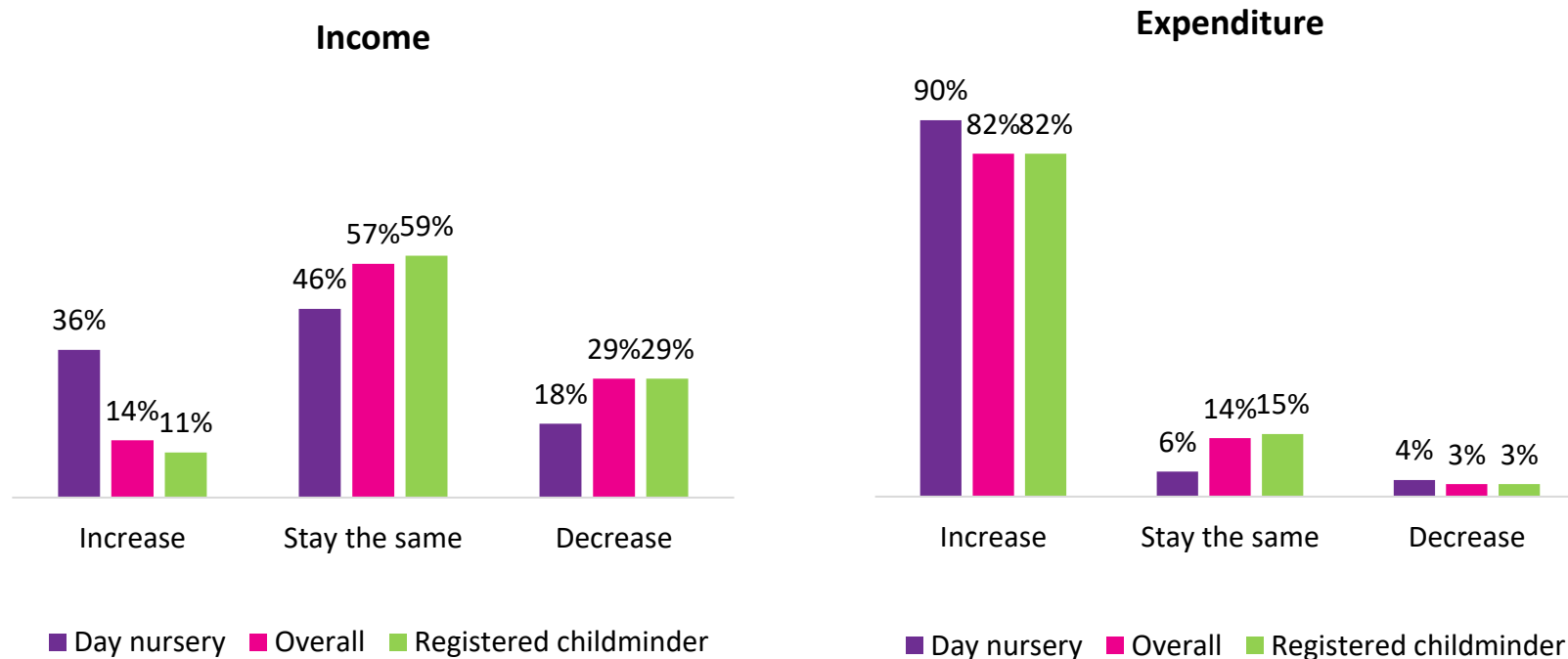


“Lots of reduced days requested now, work is more bitty as parents compressing hours at work, working from home, using grandparents more as childcare costs so prohibitive and a complete lack of help in N.I. regarding funding, free hours or childcare strategy.”



“Our bills seem to be constantly going up and staff costs have greatly increased - we really struggled last year with children who had additional needs and needed support but there was no funding available to help us so we ended up getting a £10,000 loan to help.”

Changes to income and expenditure anticipated in the next 12 months



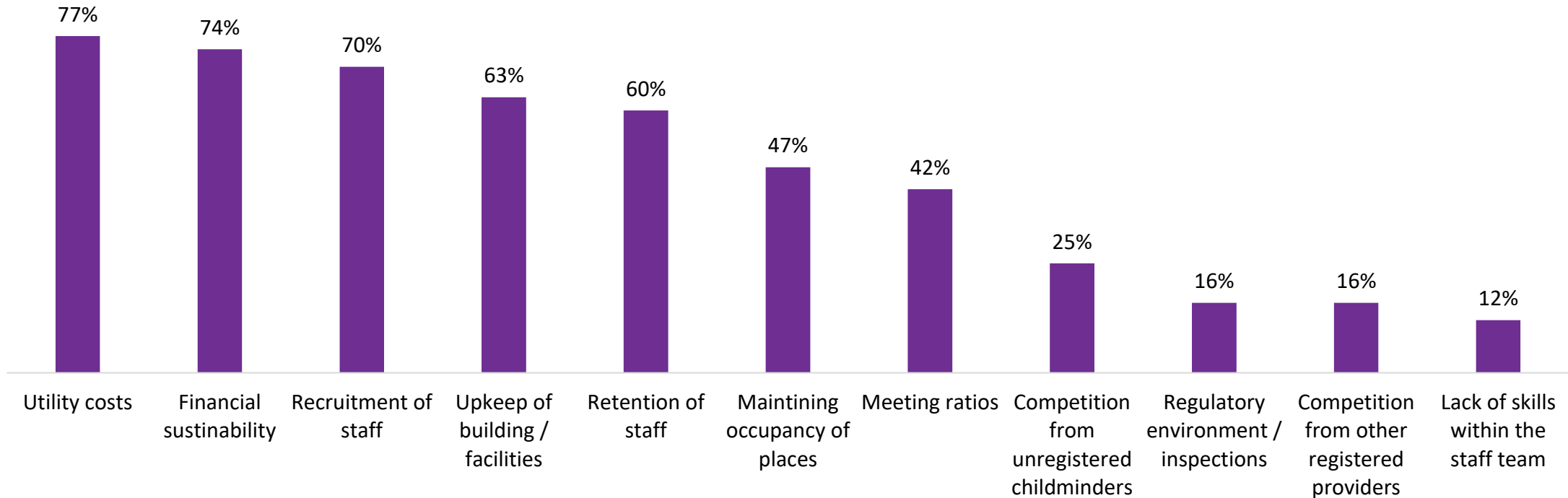
“Increases to minimum wage in April 2024 and increases due to gas and electric, especially over the Winter months.”

“With increased expenditure and reduced numbers it is getting to the position where the business is not viable.”

Looking forward, while 82% of providers anticipate their expenditure – their money going out – will continue to increase in the coming year, just 14% think their income – their money coming in – will increase. 29% anticipate a decrease in their income.

Day nurseries are more likely than registered childminders to anticipate an increase in their income but are also more likely anticipate an increase in their expenditure.

●●● Main challenges facing day nurseries in the next 12 months



Childcare providers were asked to identify the main challenges facing their setting in the next 12 months from a range of options.

●●● Main challenges facing day nurseries in the next 12 months



"I'm very concerned about keeping my staff team, it is increasingly difficult to motivate staff. I feel the demands of regulations and paperwork need to be reduced. We have also seen an increase with children who present with additional needs, increasing the workload for already stretched staff."

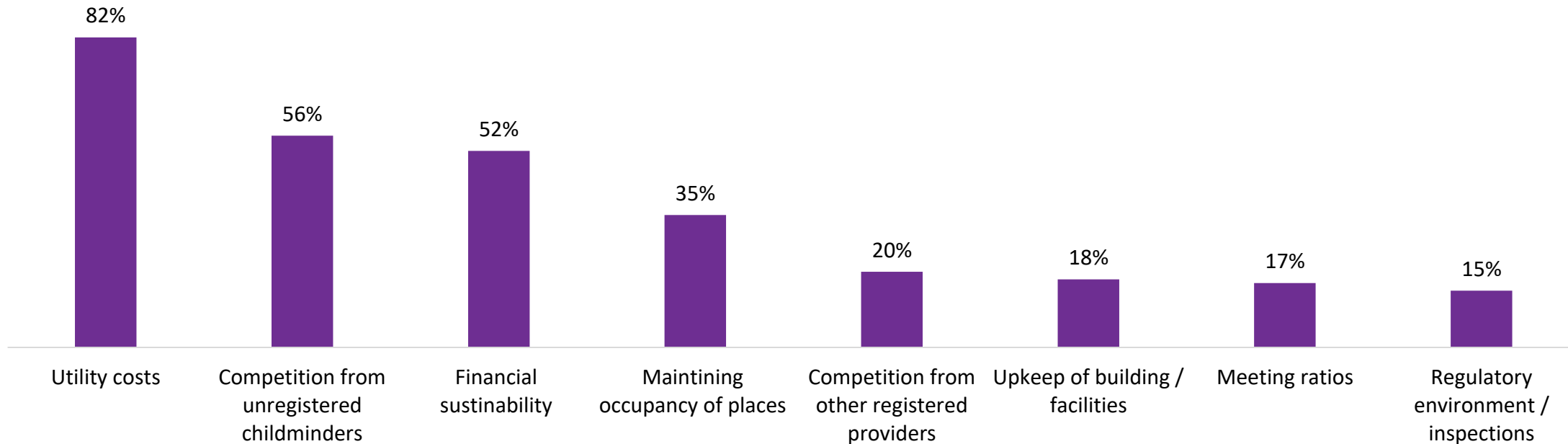


"It is a real challenge at the moment for our sector. Demotivated staff that don't feel valued, low morale due to pay rate. Encourages students who trained in early years to work in schools instead. It's a sad time for the childcare sector."



"Low wages make it difficult to retain or recruit staff. The government needs to help financially - pay should reflect what the job entails - carers, educators, first aiders, caterers etc. Childcare wages are and always have been the least paid for the most vital services."

●●● Main challenges facing registered childminders in the next 12 months



For registered childminders, alongside the financial challenges, more than half – 56% - referred to the challenge of competition from unregistered childminders.

●●● Main challenges facing childminders in the next 12 months



“If childminder ratios could increase that would help my running costs and I would not have to ask parents to pay more. Because of restrictions I cannot take on more children despite high demand, even when they only overlap by an hour. I am constantly turning families away.”



“Unregistered childminders have increased significantly and are competing for children, undercutting those of us who play by the rules. After expenses and working a 50-55 hour week I earn the equivalent of minimum wage.”



“School wraparound care is having a direct affect on my afterschool spaces being filled as they are cheaper. I can't compete with £2 a day for after school places.”

... Main challenges facing childminders in the next 12 months



"All challenges are financial. Costs have risen for home utilities, travel, food and activities. Depending on credit cards to get through the month. But I can't increase my fees as parents can't afford it. I used to have extra money to supply art, toys etc now I have to be really careful and save up."

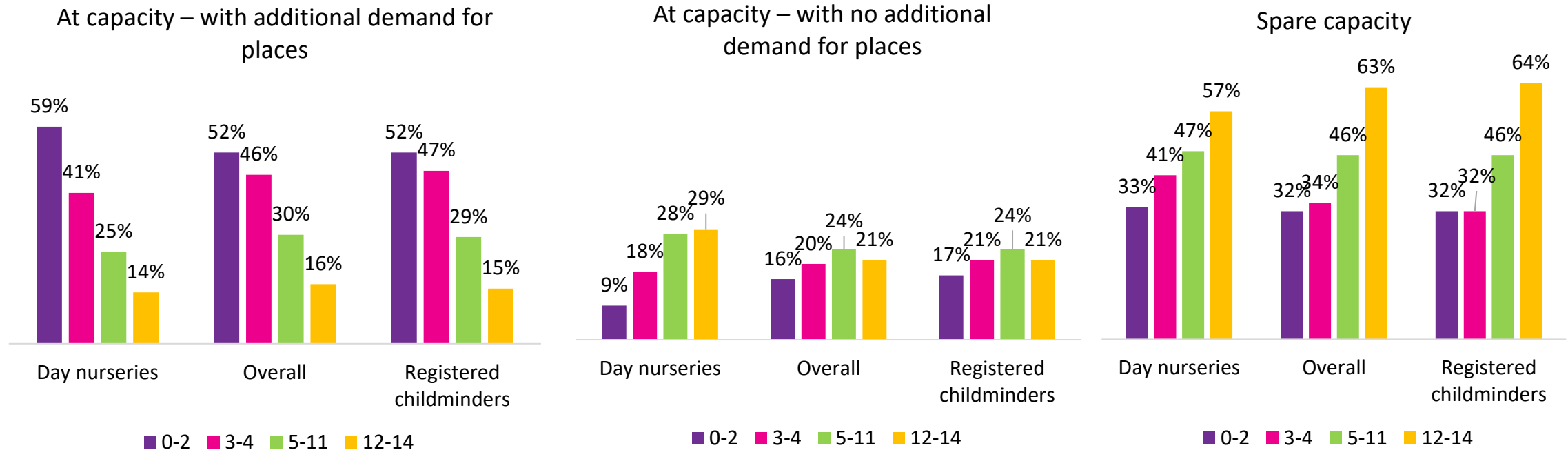


"The media and how they portray that childcare costs are too high. They don't see the time, effort that's not only put into the working day, but also the time spent late nights, weekends planning, risk assessments, training etc the cost is nearly not enough to cover that!!!"



"I feel there is way too much paperwork involved in the job. Too much pressure at inspection time. Surely we could be inspected every three years, rather than annually, unless something has changed?"

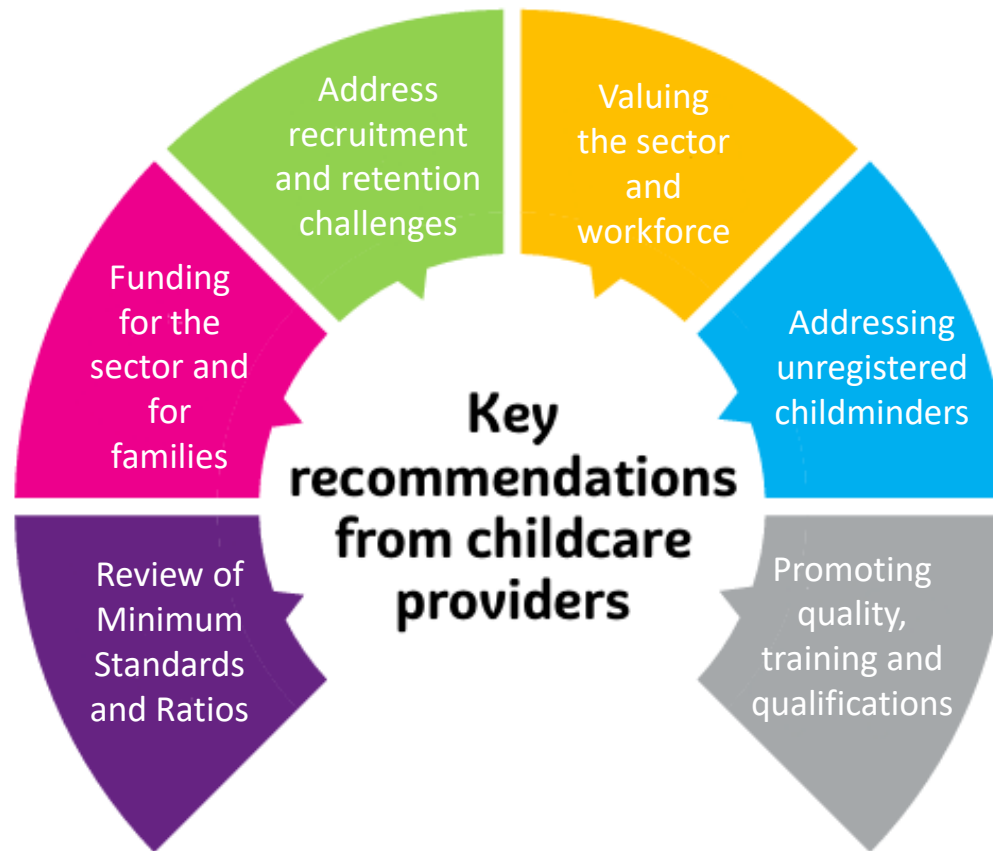
●●● Current capacity within the sector



Providers are more likely to have spare capacity for older children, and most likely to be at capacity for younger children, those under age 5.

More than half of providers report that demand is outstripping capacity for children aged 0-2 years.

Recommendations from childcare providers for how the sector can be better supported



Six key areas emerged as recommendations from childcare providers for how the sector can be better supported. These are explored in more detail on the following pages.

Recommendation: Review of the Minimum Standards



"I think we should have an inspection every 2-3 years unless there are major changes. Especially for those registered for 5 or more years. The pressure and paperwork is a job in itself after looking after children all day."

"Minimum standards are an excellent way of making sure everything is in place and runs smoothly. But all trusts need to be on the same page regarding this. During inspections different social workers interpret them differently."

"Work in conjunction with experts in the field (practitioners) to adapt and modernise the standards to be practical and achievable."

"A review is necessary and should be done as a matter of urgency (and in line with the strategy)."

Many childcare providers called for the delayed review of the Minimum Standards to be conducted urgently and in close consultation with childcare providers, staff and parents. Providers referred to the value and importance of having standards that can assist in promoting quality care, but that this must be balanced to support the viability of the sector and to mitigate against what can be perceived as too much bureaucracy, paperwork and inconsistency in inspection processes.

Childminders referred to the stress associated with the inspection process and perceived that the process can vary in terms of what is expected both across Trusts, and from social worker to social worker, adding unnecessary worry and anxiety. Several providers suggested reducing the frequency of inspections where no issues have been identified in the previous inspection, and there were calls for inspection windows to be narrowed.

●●● Recommendation: Ratios



“Allow flexibility and bring ratios for registered childminders in line with the rest of the UK and Ireland. This will meet current demand and help sustain and grow the sector.”

“Increasing ratios puts a bigger pressure on overstretched staff, won't be safe for the kids and won't impact our fees.”

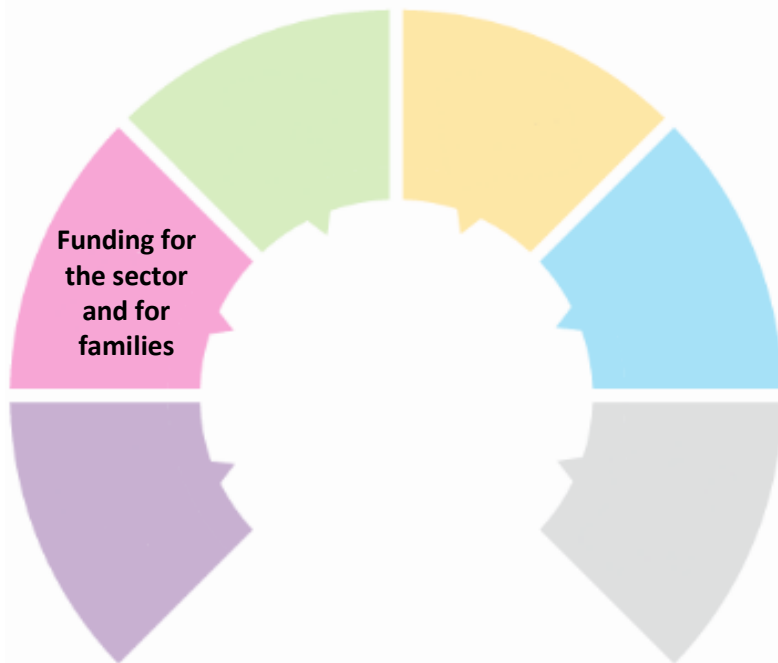
“Give flexibility for management to use judgement about ratios when low on staff and to amalgamate rooms if necessary to keep services running.”

“Easements during the pandemic were extremely helpful for staffing - would like confirmation this could continue.”

On ratios, there was a wide variety of views. There was clear learning from the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic when easements introduced a degree of flexibility for some ratios. Within group settings, some providers felt increasing the child to staff ratios puts more pressure onto overstretched staff, would not impact on the fees they would charge and could impact negatively on quality. Others welcomed the flexibility, particularly in cases of staff absence, and were keen they should continue. Many called for funding from Government to help accommodate where one-to-one support is required for a child with additional needs.

There was a strong call from childminders for a review of their ratios in line with those elsewhere in the UK and Ireland. Many called for an increase in the number of children under the age of five who they can care for or, at a minimum, for flexibility for an overlap during the day to accommodate children in pre-school. At present, children who are at pre-school are included in the under 5 ratio and therefore require a full-time place to be held, a place that could otherwise have been taken by a baby or toddler.

Recommendation: Funding for the sector and for families



“The system needs to provide funding for parents and providers. If childcare was subsidised there could be a cap on how much parents pay but wages could continue to rise for staff.”

“Learn from the mistakes in England re funded places - design a bespoke and forward thinking funded approach to childcare ensuring the sustainability of the sector.”

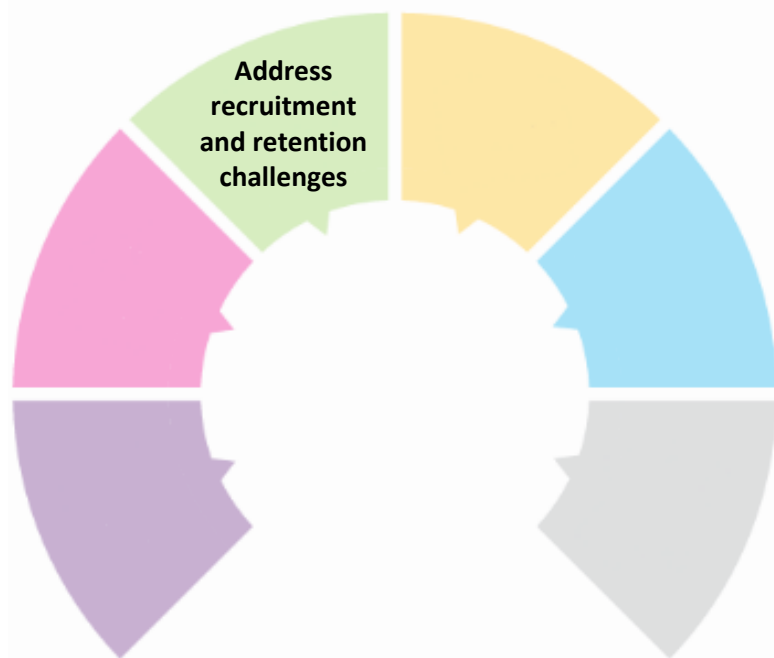
“More funding needs to be put into the sector for staffing, recruitment, training, updating equipment and to support parents with costs.”

“Funding to make adaptations to premises, purchase or rent equipment and invest in staff training to support children with additional needs and SEN – key to supporting inclusion.”

Childcare providers called strongly for investment in the sector with significant funding required to ensure that it can remain sustainable, delivering a vital service to children, families and to the economy. They articulated the challenges in delivering quality childcare at a price families can afford. Without funding, there is real concern providers will be forced to close or reduce capacity, impacting on the availability, affordability, accessibility and quality of childcare. Alongside funding for core costs – such as staff wages and utilities – many pointed to a need for targeted funding to support them in taking on children with additional needs.

Many providers also referenced the need for funding to also be targeted to support parents, making the cost of childcare more affordable for them. It was suggested this funding could be in the form of subsidies paid directly to providers, enabling them to offer places at a reduced rate or for free. Some providers pointed to the 30 hours childcare scheme in England as a model, while others called for a bespoke system and expressed concern about how the scheme in England is funded.

Recommendation: Address recruitment and retention challenges



“Investment to recognise the value of the early years practitioner to ensure the pay rate reflects the professional service they provide, is competitive and reflects the level of qualifications and training, skills and experience required.”

“There is a push towards a degree led workforce. Well people with degrees don’t want to work for minimum wage. Professionalising the sector requires funding to pay them a decent wage for the work they do.”

“A quicker vetting system. It can take 6 to 8 weeks to get someone vetted. GP health declaration takes from 4 weeks to 8 weeks. This is too long when staffing levels are low. Puts everyone under pressure.”

“Better financial support will enable us pay the staff what they deserve - increasing NMW is crippling our ability to pay over minimum wage - we have always been able to pay over until the most recent increase and it’s just not sustainable.”

A fundamental concern is that the sector is seen as undervalued and underpaid, so it is not offering an attractive career prospect. For many existing or potential staff, moving into education, hospitality or retail offers a higher salary with fewer responsibilities and more flexibility. To attract and retain high quality, experienced staff it is key that providers can improve pay, terms and conditions – otherwise the sector will remain seen as low paid and under valued. This requires significant Government investment. Several referred to developments in Ireland with the approval of a new pay agreement for early learning and childcare workers in 2022.

Many group settings also referred to the length of time taken for the vetting process when recruiting a new member of staff, particularly the GP health declaration which can take up to two months. As well as putting pressure on settings when they are short staffed, it is causing recruits to look elsewhere for a role where they can start more quickly. There were recommendations to reduce the time this takes and allow for vetting to be transferrable to a new setting.

Recommendation: Valuing the sector and workforce



"We are extremely undervalued and are seen as a glorified babysitter."

"To increase interest in this fantastic career and enable current childminders to feel valued, I strongly believe a Government investment campaign is needed specifically promoting and transforming perceptions of the childminder role as a professional in the sector."

"There is no respect for the sector so staff are feeling undervalued and have low morale at present. In the media we only ever hear about the cost nothing about the excellence in this sector."

"Need to see recognition for day care and early years services in terms of the profession and the quality services provided."

Many respondents flagged that they felt the sector, and those who work within it, are undervalued. Providers called for those working in the sector to be recognised as dedicated professionals, who are not 'babysitters' as they are sometimes perceived. Similarly, there was a strong call for a shift from a focus on childcare from an exclusively 'safeguarding' perspective to a model where there is a greater focus on the early years as an integral part of a child's education and social development, offering vital play-based activities, particularly in their first 1,000 days. There is a call for the vital role of those who work in the sector to receive a good salary that is commensurate with the levels of professionalism, dedication and commitment they deliver. Making this possible is closely linked to ensuring that the sector is invested in and receives proper funding from the Government. It was suggested that this could also help in promoting the sector as a career of choice, addressing the current challenges in recruitment and retention.

Recommendation: Addressing unregistered childminders



"Target illegal childcare providers and enforce the current laws as a deterrent."

"Encouragement or an incentive to report unregistered childminders - especially during summer there are a lot advertising on social media. At present registered childminders feel nothing gets done and it's not worth the hassle."

"Massive problem with unregistered child minders around me hard to compete. Should see fines imposed on them."

"More attention to unregistered childminders so that they are encouraged to become registered."

Many providers, particularly childminders, called for more to be done to address the numbers of individuals who are operating, illegally, as 'unregistered childminders'. These are individuals who are not working to the Minimum Standards, operate without insurance and are charging for services that parents cannot access financial support to assist with.

Recommendation: Promoting quality, training and qualifications



“Quality comes from experience, skills and attributes. We need a fully funded workforce strategy with pathways for staff development.”

“Help and funded courses for current staff wanting to up-skill. Also funding so we can increase staff wages and ensure the retention of qualified and experienced staff in the childcare sector.”

“Recognition that low fees do not equate to quality childcare provision.”

“Childcare providers need to become Employers of Choice to attract a talent pool with knowledge and experience. This requires investment and initiatives such as extended training and CPD to allow for upskilling of existing staff and a Staff Wellbeing Program. If staff aren't cared for how can they give quality care?”

Quality is seen as a top priority across the board, and there is a strong sense that quality will suffer without significant new investment in the sector – to enable providers to attract and retain quality staff, to maintain training and qualifications, and to provide excellent physical facilities that are fully accessible. Quality was also linked directly with the ability to support children with additional needs.

Providers advocated for a Workforce Development Strategy a key component of the new Early Learning and Childcare Strategy and highlighted the importance of training and qualifications for those working in the sector and advocated for more funding and support to enable staff to access courses. There was also some support for continuing access to online training, where appropriate, as this can be more accessible.

Conclusions



●●● 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.



Appendix 1:

Profile of parent respondents



●●● Location of parent respondents

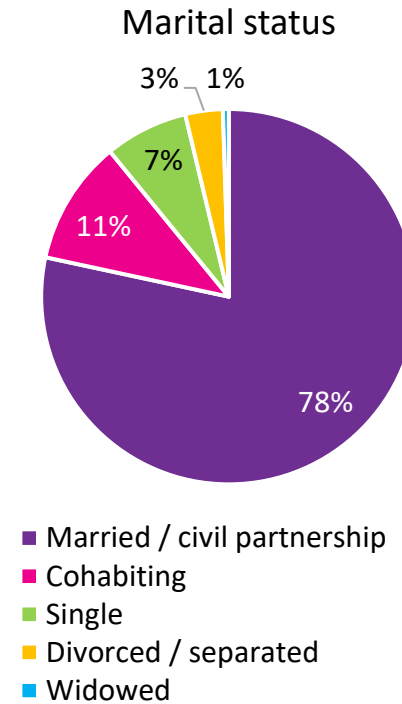
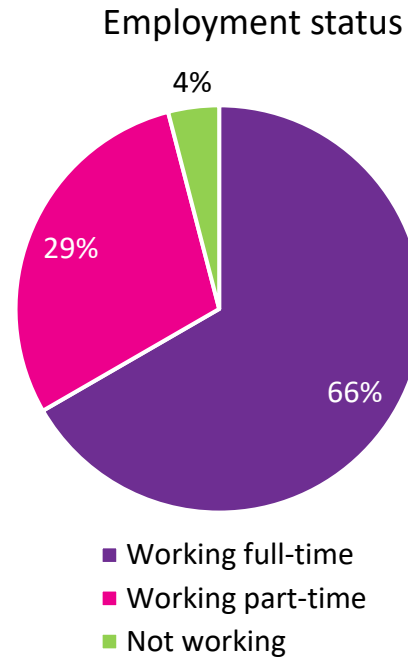
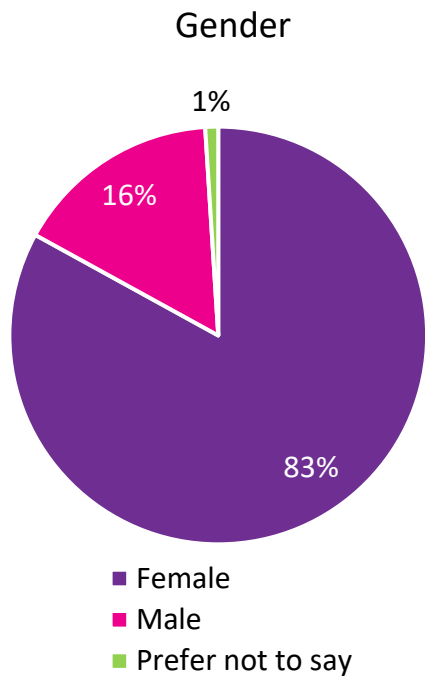
Council area	Respondents	Overall population
Belfast	20%	18%
Lisburn and Castlereagh	14%	8%
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon	9%	11%
Newry, Mourne and Down	9%	10%
Mid Ulster	8%	8%
Fermanagh and Omagh	8%	6%
Derry City and Strabane	7%	8%
Antrim and Newtownabbey	7%	8%
Ards and North Down	7%	9%
Mid and East Antrim	6%	7%
Causeway Coast and Glens	5%	7%



In total we received 2,001 responses to the Parent Survey. Respondents came from all over Northern Ireland, and the breakdown of respondents per Council area is largely reflective of Council populations.

Council population statistics: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/383775/northern-ireland-regional-population-uk/>

●●● Characteristics of parent respondents



The majority of respondents are female, working full-time and married or in a civil partnership. 4% belong to a minority ethnic group and 4% have a disability.

Respondents who are not current working include stay at home parents, those who are unemployed and looking for work, and those not working due to caring responsibilities.

Appendix 2:

Profile of childcare provider respondents



●●● Characteristics of childcare provider respondents

Health and Social Care Trust	Respondents
Northern Health and Social Care Trust	26%
South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust	24%
Southern Health and Social Care Trust	19%
Western Health and Social Care Trust	19%
Belfast Health and Social Care Trust	12%



In total we received 749 responses to the Childcare provider Survey. Respondents came from all over Northern Ireland.

The majority of respondents – 82% - were registered childminders. 8% were day nurseries, 4% standalone out of school providers and 5% other forms of childcare provision. At 31 March 2023, 9% of providers in Northern Ireland were day nurseries, 6% standalone out of school providers and 62% childminders. [Children in need | Department of Health \(health-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/children-in-need)



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