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Investment in Childcare must be a policy priority

It Childcare is of crucial importance in the lives of every working parent. It often dictates the choices they are able to make about where they work, what hours they work, or even whether they work. And, of course, it has a huge influence on the welfare and development – and the happiness - of their children.

The Equality Commission is particularly concerned about this issue, as difficulties in accessing affordable, high quality childcare have a significant impact on the lives and employment prospects of women as well as on the options open to families.

When we look at the reasons why people present as unavailable for work, for example, we find that one in twenty men link that situation to family or home commitments. The comparable figure for women is one in three.

Despite an increase in the number of childcare places available over the past twenty years, Northern Ireland has one of the lowest levels of childcare within the UK. Added to that, childcare costs in Northern Ireland are high, at around 44% of an average income - almost four times the EU figure of 12%. It is hardly surprising that around two-thirds of all mothers who responded to research commissioned by the Equality Commission said that the cost of childcare influenced the hours they were able to work.

So when childcare is unaccessible, for whatever reason, it is still, for the most part, mothers who will be required to make the difficult career choices or sacrifice job opportunities as a result. That is why the Equality Commission has been recommending to Government that it needs to take more urgent action to improve childcare provision in Northern Ireland, and that the issue needs to be a higher priority for policymakers.



Five main areas for potential reform are: the need for a childcare strategy, the supply of suitable childcare, equality of access to childcare, addressing barriers to employment and attitudes to childcare and mothers' employment.

Addressing these issues and barriers to childcare and employment should also form part of government's current work to develop a gender pay strategy and action plan for Northern Ireland.

We say that a Childcare Strategy should have clear leadership and be strategically integrated across Government departments, agencies and other bodies and funding streams that are realistic and sustainable.

The supply of childcare is insufficient, and that which does exist is often not sufficiently flexible, nor does it always cover the right hours or holiday periods, to meet the needs of working parents. And, of course, it is often too expensive. Parents need to be made aware of the support available for them, such as tax credits and childcare vouchers.

There are also issues with equality of access to childcare for specific groups of parents. Rural families; parents with disabled children; families with more than two children; Traveller, migrant and minority ethnic families and low-income; and single parent families, find their access to childcare limited.

Barriers to employment related to childcare should not be viewed in isolation but as part of a programme of employment and employability support; of welfare and family policies and subsidies, and statutory flexible work arrangements. In addition, employers have an important part to play in accommodating working parents' greater need for flexibility and understanding.

If we are ever to achieve true equality at work for women and men, efforts have to be made to change attitudes towards caring responsibilities. The old gendered divisions, with mothers responsible for care work and fathers for earning, have seen significant change in recent years but it still persists to a degree and must be challenged. We would also encourage action to tackle the low numbers of men working in childcare and the lack of diversity generally.

We await the outcome of the Executive's consultation on a draft childcare strategy, undertaken in November 2015, and we are keen to see the implementation of an effective strategy. This will be essential to support what needs to be a growing childcare sector in Northern Ireland. It will not be easy, and will need investment at a time of pressure on public finances, but the rewards for our economy and for our whole society make it necessary.

We will also continue to engage with government to highlight the important role the planned gender pay strategy and action plan must play in addressing barriers associated with childcare and caring. We cannot develop and prosper without ensuring that all working parents are facilitated to play a full role in the labour market. If we fail to do this it will be the most vulnerable within our community - our children - will ultimately pay the price.