

Equality Commission for Northern Ireland

MLA Briefing: NI Assembly Motion on High Quality Affordable Childcare, 12 February 2024

The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland has for over a decade called¹ for action to deliver **appropriate, accessible and affordable childcare provision to meet the specific needs of parents, carers, and children from across the range of equality categories.**

Delivering improvements to early education and childcare has the **potential to advance equality of opportunity** for parents, particularly mothers, carers and children, including those with a disability and those from minority ethnic backgrounds.

Childcare must meet the diverse needs of children, families, employers, service providers and the wider economy. While recognising the current context, including pressures on available resources, **the Commission urges prompt action to advance equality via the provision of appropriate, accessible and affordable early-years education and childcare provision.**

Equality of opportunity for Parents and Carers

Effective childcare provision is key to increasing economic participation and economic independence and in promoting equality. The Commission has for many years highlighted that the lack of childcare provision impacts women disproportionately and that lone parents are likely to be particularly affected.

The availability of appropriate, accessible and affordable childcare is a fundamental part of the process of assisting parents and carers (particularly mothers) to enter, remain in, progress in and return to work. By way of example, 2023 Research commissioned by DE² found that around half of all respondents said that a lack of access to formal childcare had prevented them or their partner from increasing their hours of work (49%, rising to 77% for very low-income households).

There is a need to address stereotypes and to better encourage and facilitate both women and men to better share childcare responsibility (including parental leave). In 2021³, 31% of women with dependent children worked part-time, compared with only 5% of men with dependent children.

We recommend continued efforts to maximise the flexibility offered by employers to employees with caring responsibilities; to ensure childcare provision fits with the reality of modern working lives; and to tackle gender stereotypes concerning childcare roles – both in employment and in society - to promote greater equality. Related issues include to the undervaluation of paid and unpaid care work, and the lack of diversity in those working in childcare, particularly the low numbers of males in the

¹ ECNI (2013) [Policy Positions on Childcare](#)

² RSM (2023) [Review of Childcare Services in Northern Ireland](#), commissioned by DE, p. 141.

³ ONS (2021) [Families and the labour market, Northern Ireland](#)

profession. By way of example, the Department of Education reported⁴ that in 2022-23 100% of nursery school teachers in grant aided schools were female. A more diverse childcare and early education workforce could assist efforts to increase capacity and help to address some of the gender stereotyping around caring roles and responsibilities.

Aligned to this, **the childcare strategy should take account of the conditions that would facilitate parents /carers across the full range of equality grounds to enhance their employability skills and/or return to work.** For example, lone parents, and families with multiple children and younger children may have particular difficulties with childcare costs and balancing work / family commitments⁵. DE commissioned research⁶ from 2023 found that over half of respondents to the parent survey said that cost prevented them from accessing formal childcare (56%)

Equality of opportunity for children

High quality early years provision plays a key role in a child's development, and can have significant beneficial impacts for those children most at risk of educational underachievement. It has a significant impact on children from particular equality groups, including children from minority ethnic communities and Newcomers, where English may not be their first language, and children with disabilities.

Research⁷ has identified **key equality issues around access to childcare**, including for:

- **disabled children**, who may face difficulties accessing suitably adapted facilities or specially trained staff⁸. More recently, 2023 DE commissioned research⁹ also found that 46% of parent survey respondents whose children had disabilities, special needs or other additional needs said that they had experienced challenges in accessing childcare.
- **migrant, minority ethnic and Traveller families**, who may face cultural and language barriers¹⁰.

The 2023 Independent Review of Education in Northern Ireland¹¹ highlighted the **importance and impact of providing of high-quality early years provision for key equality groups:**

'investment that could improve access to special educational needs (SEN) services and provide support for other specific types of need (as experienced by disadvantaged families, newcomers and Roma/travellers) in early years could provide a significant long-term saving as well as improving long-term outcomes for children'.

For further information on the Equality Commission's recommendations, please see:

www.equalityni.org/Education/Policy
www.equalityni.org/Employment/Policy
www.equalityni.org/Gender

⁴ DE (2023) [Teacher workforce statistics in grant-aided schools in Northern Ireland](#), Section 2.

⁵ McQuaid, R., Graham, H. and Shapira, M (2013) [Child care: Maximising the economic participation of women](#), ECNI.

⁶ RSM (2023) [Review of Childcare Services in Northern Ireland](#), commissioned by DE, p. 130

⁷ McQuaid, R., Graham, H. and Shapira, M (2013) [Child care: Maximising the economic participation of women](#), ECNI.

⁸ McQuaid, R., Graham, H. and Shapira, M (2013) [Child care: Maximising the economic participation of women](#), ECNI.

⁹ RSM (2023) [Review of Childcare Services in Northern Ireland](#), commissioned by DE, pp. 46-47

¹⁰ McQuaid, R., Graham, H. and Shapira, M (2013) [Child care: Maximising the economic participation of women](#), ECNI.

¹¹ Independent Review of Education (2023) [Investing in a Better Future: The Independent Review of Education in Northern Ireland Volume 2](#), para 1.24.