



# Childcare & Caring



Quarterly Zine  
Quarter 3  
2023



# INTRODUCING OUR QUARTERLY ZINE CHILDCARE EDITION

By Megan McClure Botha | WRDA

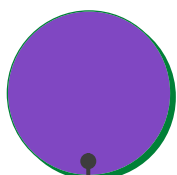
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The cost of living crisis continues to deepen and is exacerbating the existing crisis in childcare provision. This is impacting on women across the generations, preventing women from accessing education and employment, and highlights the urgent need for a childcare strategy.

Our first piece looks at the additional impacts lack of childcare has on rural women as well as making the case for linking childcare costs to the child, not parental income. We then look at the critical role childcare plays in enabling women to access education and participate in society before finally looking at the particular impact the crisis in childcare provision is having on older women.

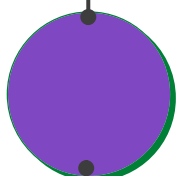
We hope you find the information contained in this edition useful as we continue to ensure a voice for women from disadvantaged and rural areas.

# IN THIS EDITION



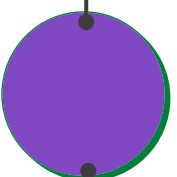
## NIRWN

Cost of childcare should be linked to child's needs not parental income



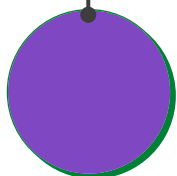
## Women's Tec

Childcare critical to enabling women to access education



## Women's Centre Derry

Childcare is preventing women's full participation in society



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The Impact of informal childcare on older women



# COST OF CHILDCARE SHOULD BE LINKED TO CHILD'S NEED, NOT PARENTAL INCOME

By Louise Coyle | NI Rural Women's Network

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NI is the only jurisdiction across these islands without a Childcare Strategy. The lack of a NI Childcare Strategy since the Good Friday Agreement has played a huge role in ensuring it remains an urgent issue. The last Executive Minister for Education, Michelle McIlveen in September 2022 provided an update on the plans for an integrated Early Learning and Childcare Strategy in line with commitments set out in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. This included a move towards expanded pre school provision for all children in Northern Ireland. At that point the Department of Education stated that they were continuing to work on the development of the Strategy, and costed options should be ready for consideration by the Executive by March 2023. We are currently without a NI Executive to progress any of the outstanding 'New Decade, New Approach' commitments. It was recently announced in the UK Spring Budget that 30 free hours of childcare will extend to children aged over 9 months from September 2025 but due to the lack of a functioning Executive, this will not apply to Northern Ireland.

According to '[Employers For Childcare](#)' who have been tracking the views of parents and childcare providers in NI since 2010; they have recorded:

- Rising costs for parents across the board – with the largest increase in day nurseries, where the average cost for a full-time place has gone up by almost 20%.
- 41% of parents report regularly having to use means other than their income to pay for childcare including savings, overdrafts, credit cards and even payday loans – rising to 55% of lone parents.
- Rising costs for childcare providers – 71% of whom reported they were either just breaking even or making a loss in their 2021 Report.
- The negative impact of Covid-19 both on childcare providers and on families, but also the model of Government support for the sector during this period which provided a real lifeline.
- Parents – particularly mothers – continuing to be squeezed out of the workforce by the cost of childcare which, consistently for a third of households, is their largest household bill, ahead of their mortgage or rent.
- Emerging challenges for childcare providers, including difficulties recruiting and retaining the vital staff they need, as they try to balance investment in their settings with limiting fee increases to parents – all in the absence of a Childcare Strategy and much needed Government investment .

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***Vulnerability to debt is higher for low-income households and evidence has shown that for working parents the costs of childcare can be a route to in-work poverty.***

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The reliance on means other than income for 41-55% of parents is particularly concerning when we take account of [The Women Living with Debt](#) research which included a number of women who had borrowed through paramilitary lenders. Vulnerability to debt is higher for low-income households and evidence has shown that for working parents the costs of childcare can be a route to in-work poverty.

NI needs a Childcare Strategy which mitigates against in-work poverty for low-income families. The WRC argues that; if we are to give all our children the best start in life, then the cost of childcare should be linked more closely to the child and their needs not to their parents' income and benefits. Calculating benefit entitlement can make it very difficult for families to assess whether a return to work or education and training is a financially viable option for them. This is an advice and support area that needs to be addressed particularly since the lack of a NI Executive has meant that recommendations by the [Welfare Mitigations Review Independent Panel](#) have not been considered since publication. There has been little forward motion in progressing the timeline for the [Social Inclusion Strategies](#); particularly the Anti-Poverty Strategy; Gender Equality Strategy and Disability Strategy; the resourcing and implementation of which would arguably, go some way to alleviating pressure and address the inequalities and obstacles of caring and income that directly affect the everyday lives of women living in disadvantaged and rural communities.

It is part of our cultural tradition in NI that women in families bear most of the caring responsibilities in terms of childcare, elder care and caring for those with a disability. Caring responsibilities often isolate women, particularly those in disadvantaged and rural areas who may become excluded from fully participating in social, economic, and community-based activities. Flexible, affordable, accessible quality childcare is particularly difficult to find in rural areas and this has been exacerbated by a reduction in provision post Covid. Distance from work means rural women's childcare needs to start earlier and end later, up to two hours a day more than their urban counterparts. This can make childcare unaffordable and work/life balance unrealistic. The Income Crisis has also had an impact on grandmothers, who are increasingly required to shoulder greater childcare responsibilities. The research shows that childcare provision is much more than a useful extra which 'helps' women to participate it is more correct to say that without it, many women from disadvantaged and rural areas are entirely unable to consider education or work at all.

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According to the 2021 Census there are over 220,00 people providing unpaid care in Northern Ireland and there is substantial evidence of poor outcomes for unpaid carers, who are predominantly women. Data from the Northern Ireland Life and Times survey found that one quarter of carers said that they themselves had a long term physical or mental health condition or illness, which was higher than for non-carers. Research from Carers NI in 2022 found that a significant number of unpaid carers were experiencing financial pressure and 1 in 6 said they were struggling with the cost of food. Informal childcare is often carried out by grandparents, particularly grandmothers.

These caring responsibilities are unpaid and aside from the social isolation and impact on health and well-being they are in some cases, contributing to poverty. Members have reported that the cost of fuel; driving children to and from school and heating extra rooms in the house together with providing meals is creating difficult economic circumstances for them. This experience was echoed again when conducting focus groups with Consortium members: *'women are now child-minding their grandchildren on a full-time basis and are not free to attend social opportunities. It is assumed that the woman of the house will provide the care to whoever needs it in the family'*. Families in NI need actions, furthermore they need these actions resourced, led by one Department and robustly monitored and evaluated for success. Elder care was identified in NIRWN research as an inhibiting factor to: rural women's participation; financial and employment security and on their mental health and well-being. *'Older women looking after older parents is on the increase, because the pension age is now 67 there isn't the opportunity to cut working hours to care for older parents so you either have to try and go to work and do the caring before and after work time (on call 24/7), go part time or give up work, that puts women in poverty!'* 75% of carers worry about continuing to juggle work and care going forward.

We are an ageing population; The percentage of the population that is 65 years or older is growing. It increased between 1975 and 2015, from 14.1% of the population to 17.8%. It is projected to continue to grow to nearly a quarter of the population by 2045. Our health services are under increasing strain trying to meet rising demand and still maintain standards. It is falling to family members and, particularly women to care for family members and they require more support than is currently available to them.

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We need energetic, time bound progress to developing actions to go alongside a Childcare Strategy for NI which takes account of rural needs. We need a functioning Executive to progress all the outstanding Strategies and policy commitments to address poverty, care, disability, welfare and gender inequalities. The lack of a NI Childcare Strategy since the Good Friday Agreement has played a huge role in ensuring it remains an urgent issue.



## CHILDCARE CRITICAL TO ENABLING WOMEN TO ACCESS EDUCATION

By Amy Nolan | Women's Tec

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At WOMEN'STEC, we're dedicated to breaking down barriers and empowering women in traditionally male-dominated fields, but we also understand that many women face difficult challenges on their learning journeys, particularly when it comes to childcare. We recognize that for many of our learners, balancing childcare and education can be a daunting task. That's why so many of our courses at WOMEN'STEC include free childcare with our on-site creche Wee Chicks.

Childcare at WOMEN'STEC isn't just about supervision; it's about creating an environment where women can focus on their growth without the worry of figuring out childcare. By providing a safe and nurturing space for children, we enable their mothers to fully engage in whatever training they're undertaking with us. The impact of this is wonderful. It means our students can explore career opportunities, learn new skills and enjoy themselves, all whilst knowing their child is safe in the next room.

One of our courses which included childcare was our Building Independence Programme, 'Time4Me' class. This course was made possible through the generous funding from the Rosa fund and the Smallwood Trust. What set this programme apart was its participant-driven nature, designed to cater specifically to the unique needs of the students. This vital initiative was tailored to support young mothers, aged 16 to 30, in cultivating essential confidence and soft skills imperative for future employment prospects.

A high number of these women would have faced significant barriers to participation were it not for the provision of childcare services. Overcoming this obstacle was pivotal in enabling them to progress towards further training, education, or entering the workforce.

Our dedicated programme for young mothers not only equipped them with practical skills in DIY and construction, but also fostered a sense of community and mutual support. This camaraderie aided their personal development and as their children approached school age, these young mothers were primed and prepared to take meaningful steps forward in their own journeys. Our coordinator for this class Amanda Ferguson said, *'The onsite childcare was invaluable to our Young Mum's Programme. Almost all of the young women were single parents with little or no support, without childcare it would have been impossible for them to attend. The fact it was onsite childcare was also great as those Mum's who were nervous leaving their little ones in the creche were put at ease knowing they were very close by if needed.'*

Additionally, we use a creche as part of our Connect4Women programme. This is a collaborative programme between WOMEN'STEC, GLOW NI, and Shankill Women's Centre which offers women opportunities to take part in training, learning, and personal development. This programme offers women a variety of courses from GCSE English and Maths to Personal Development, as well as OCN NI courses in both trades and IT.

We offer women a personalised pathway of training and development in a way that they feel would be most beneficial to them. Our coordinator for this course Patricia Fleming said, *'Childcare is a huge barrier for many women accessing training and they would not be able to access our courses if we did not provide free childcare. The fact that it is onsite is also really important to our students.'*

Our CEO, Lynn Carvill said, *'Childcare is not just a service; it's an essential bridge that allows women to access the opportunities we offer at WOMEN'STEC. We understand that for many of our learners, balancing family responsibilities can be a significant challenge. Our commitment to providing childcare support is a testament to our belief in the power of education to transform lives. It means that every woman, regardless of her circumstances, can come here to learn, grow, and build a brighter future. Education should be accessible to everyone and childcare shouldn't be a barrier to achieving it.'*



Women's Centre Derry  
ACCESS & EMPOWERMENT

# CHILDCARE IS PREVENTING WOMEN'S FULL PARTICIPATION IN SOCIETY

By Rayna Downey | Women's Centre Derry



## Variation across Northern Ireland

There is considerable variation across Northern Ireland in relation to the cost of a full-time childcare place, with the highest average in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, and the lowest in the Western Health and Social Care Trust.

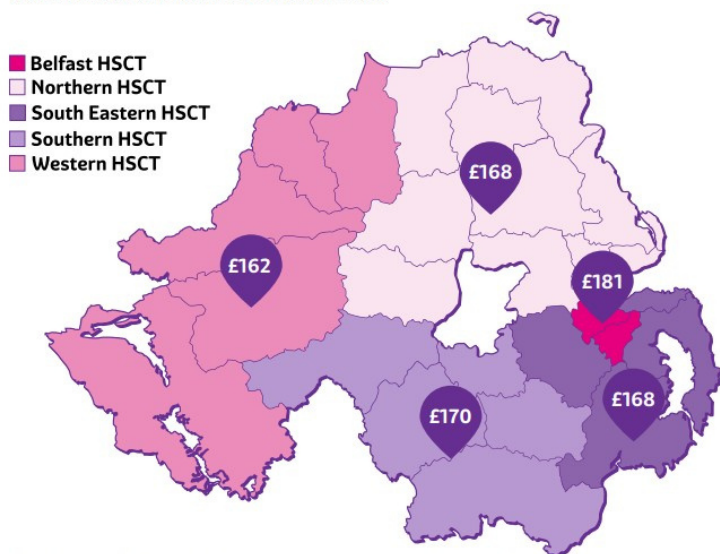


Figure 2: Average full-time childcare costs across Health and Social Care Trusts

Having access to affordable childcare options today is like mission impossible, the rising costs of childcare and lack of available spaces is forcing women out of work and back into the home. The staggering costs of a full-time creche place can be between £1,000 and £1,200 a month for 1 child. This is quite simply an unrealistic cost for some women.

We need viable options, we need a childcare strategy, we need our Elected Officials and government to implement change. We cannot expect women to stay home because these barriers are preventing them from being able to provide for their families. It isn't fair to force these women into low paying part-time work because they can't afford to do anything else!

Image credit: Employers for Childcare  
northern-ireland-childcare-survey-2021.pdf

We are currently living in the worst Cost of Living Crisis we have ever experienced, families are living in poverty because they cannot afford to take on full-time employment to help alleviate the burden. Having no options creates severe stress and mental health problems, having no support makes these women feel like they are failing their children. This is simply unacceptable.

We have the highest childcare costs in Europe, with no government assistance or intervention, yet we are expecting these women to stay above the poverty line, to say that this is unrealistic is an understatement. It isn't feasible to ask grandparents in their 60's and 70's to help bridge this gap because our government is unable to.

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Women and our children deserve better, we deserve to thrive and not just survive, we deserve the chance to contribute to the society we live in, we deserve the opportunity to provide for our families and should not be made to feel less just because we are part of a very broken system.



# THE IMPACT OF INFORMAL CHILDCARE ON OLDER WOMEN

By Bethany Moore | FWIN

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Northern Ireland remains at a disadvantage when it comes to childcare provision, compared to other regions in the UK. We are currently the only region without a Childcare Strategy, despite calls for implementation of such began a decade ago.

While NISRA confirmed that the female economic inactivity rate has been declining over the last decade, women still remain more likely to be economically inactive than men. Statistics show that this is largely due to caring responsibilities, confirming that women in NI remain disproportionately affected by lack of a Childcare Strategy.

- **Difficulties in accessing or affording childcare impacts 58% of mothers abilities to work, compared to 27% of fathers.**
- **More than half (51%) of men under 35 said they are the main carer for their children, compared with 73% of women aged under 35.**
- **Just 33% of women who take time out of the workplace to be a carer plan to return to work, compared to 59% of men.**

As a result, childcare responsibilities often fall on other female family members. An ESRI Study published in January highlighted that mothers in NI are more likely to rely on part-time work and childcare from friends and family, compared to mothers in the Republic.

Lack of free or affordable childcare places affects women across their lifespan. Many young women believe they have missed out on career progression as a direct result of having childcare responsibilities. This is extremely difficult for women as they generally enjoy their jobs more than men, but experience career achievement at a lesser rate. The anxiety around care provision also fails to end at the end of a woman's professional journey. When asked about their own future care, women were more likely to say they do not want to be a burden on their own children should they need care themselves in the future.

Sky high childcare costs are one of the reasons why older women feel the need to help and support their families to deal with the immediate caring crises. Older women can often feel they are sandwiched between providing childcare and caring for older parents. Many grandmothers remain of a working age. Consequently, those in this position face an agonizing dilemma over whether to enter early retirement or go part-time and endure a decreased salary; in order to allow their daughter or daughter in law to return to work. **The choice to continue to work is being taken out of many older women's hands.**

It's extremely unfair to older women to be put in this position, due to lack of affordable childcare. Many older women feel they are underrepresented in politics, business and the media, as they already face inequalities in their working life. In 2020/2021, the largest gender pay gap across all age groups in NI occurred in the 50 to 59 age group, where men earned almost £2.50 more per hour than women. This is equivalent to a 16% pay gap.

Melted Parents NI emphasize that physical and mental issues can arise from older individuals having to spend the entire day looking after a child. They note; **"Additionally, it can strain family relationships due to resentment or guilt... Grandparents should be able to enjoy their retirement, maintain a social life, and spend their money on themselves instead of being forced into 'free' labour to fill the gap caused by the lack of a proper childcare strategy. And yes, we understand that many grandparents willingly choose to support their children and grandchildren, but this should be a choice, and for many families, it is the only option available."**

In the absence of a government, it is important to highlight how grandparents who are caring for grandchildren under 12 could qualify them for national insurance credits, which can increase their income in retirement. This system of transferable national insurance credits means that grandparents need no longer lose out on building up a full state pension.

**It is evident that a Childcare Strategy needs to be an immediate priority for The Executive upon its return, in order to advance gender equality and stop forcing women of all ages out of the workplace.**

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