

Childcare costs: Call for rollout of free preschool care in Northern Ireland ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Parents in Northern Ireland have called for a scheme in England that offers up to 30 hours of free preschool care to be rolled out in their area.

Childcare is the biggest monthly bill faced by 35% of families in Northern Ireland, costing more than mortgages or rent, according to a survey.

The Employers For Childcare poll found the average cost of full-time childcare is £8,632 per year in Northern Ireland.

That figure equates to 37% of the average household income.

For some families, childcare costs are even higher.

Parent Gemma Blake told BBC News NI that, at one point, her family was paying more than £1,000 in childcare bills each month.

"When you're a working parent here, the government support doesn't actually support parents at all," she said.

"I think what there is doesn't go far enough and until we get an executive in, that's going to go nowhere," she added.

On 1 September 2017, a new government policy was introduced in England which entitled most working parents of three and four year olds to 30 hours' free childcare a week.

Under UK devolution, different schemes are operating in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The cost of childcare is a concern for employers and nursery education providers, as well as parents.

Employers for Childcare's policy manager Aoife Hamilton said: "Families recognise that it is costly to deliver quality childcare, which is why they are expressing their frustration that the sector here is receiving less investment than in other parts of the UK.

"Parents, employers and childcare providers are missing out on this support. We think there does need to be a childcare strategy in place.

"What we do need is an executive back in place in order to do that," she added.

A spokesperson for the Department of Education said: "A draft 10-year executive childcare strategy was launched for consultation in the latter half of 2015."

It added that proposals for finalising the strategy have "been prepared but must await an incoming education minister and executive to decide on future policy and associated budgetary requirements".

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