

# Childcare policy reforms are crucial for women and children <sup>[1]</sup>

More affordable, accessible childcare is needed in the North - for the sake of mothers and their children, argues IPPR North's Leah Millward.

**Author:**

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## AVAILABILITY

[Access online](#) <sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

Where you're from matters.

Fewer than half of children born into the poorest families in the North reach a good standard of development by the time they are five, 9% fewer than equally deprived children in London.

This can have a major impact on a child's whole life, affecting future education outcomes – and, in turn, job prospects.

Research suggests that good quality, affordable and accessible early years education makes a big difference to early years outcomes. But access to early years provision and levels of parental resource vary across the UK.

Where you live, work and have a family matters for a child's development.

In the UK, childcare is expensive.

The average price for a part-time nursery place for a child under two is £122 per week.

The biggest burden of childcare costs for many families comes between the end of paid parental leave and the start of the 30-hour offer, leaving low income families worst affected.

Government support for early years education and childcare hasn't kept pace with recent rises in the fees charged to parents. Even the maximum support falls short of covering the cost of a full-time place.

On top of this, families eligible for the 30-hour offer may struggle to access it as local authorities have revealed a severe lack of places.

This has an impact on mothers.

Not working is often assumed to be a choice that mothers make, but lack of affordable childcare paired with traditional perceptions of gender roles and limited paternity leave contribute to the decision about whether to work.

There is lower pay in sectors that vastly more women work in, women are more likely to be working part time, and in zero hours contracts.

If potential wages are less than the cost of external childcare provision, then it's more economically sensible for mothers to forego working.

Recent unemployment figures show that 628,695 women and 728,348 men are currently unemployed. But these figures don't include those who aren't actively looking for work – technically defined as 'economic inactivity'.

Clearly there are national changes to be made. The UK can learn from other countries.

Parental leave in Sweden is vastly more generous than the UK, providing for 480 days leave, 390 of which is paid at 80%, and a 'gender equality bonus' which incentivises sharing between parents.

In Norway, a similar level of women with young children work as those with none – this could be attributed to the 'daddy quota', resulting in 90% of fathers taking parental leave, and an increased provision of childcare facilities.

The retention of women in the workforce has built as much national wealth as Norway's oil resources.

We can also learn from previous IPPR reports, which have previously called for universal, high quality, affordable childcare and early years provision, as well as reforms to parental leave with flexible employment rights.

Moreover, we need reform to break down the barriers to opportunities for children.

Doing so would be an investment in communities of the future, reducing inequalities between places.

So in addition to national changes, we need to see local action. There are many questions about early years provision that need to be examined that we at IPPR North plan to explore through a Northern Early Years Commission.

We already know that devolving more funding to places like the North is necessary for all children to have access to good quality early years education.

Local authorities need adequate funds to ensure there are enough good quality childcare places too. And along with that funding, local leaders need the powers to use it in ways that work for their areas –like in New York City.

Further, to make work work for mothers, we need good jobs that pay real living wages, with flexible hours.

Local employment charters are emerging in the North. Metro mayors including Andy Burnham and Steve Rotherham have set out their aims to ensure good jobs through best practise standards and accrediting employers that meet them.

These reforms, which are at least as important as investing in faster trains between northern cities, could help to create a learning and working environment in the UK that gives people, wherever they're from and wherever they have a family, the opportunity to succeed.

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**Region:** [Europe](#) <sup>[3]</sup>

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