

Improving the provision of childcare isn't just good for women - it's good for us all ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

My daughter, Elana, has just turned 10 months old and, like all first-time mums, I'm getting to see the world in a new way; the intrigue and delight that can be taken in discovering for the first time previously nondescript household items such as a remote control, or discovering boundless joy from endless games of peek-a-boo because of the smile and giggle you get in return.

This new understanding of the world from a parent's perspective is incredibly positive, but it also brings with it new pressures, not least that of finding quality, affordable and convenient childcare.

This difficulty is something I've always been aware of, but the scale of it is something that I hadn't appreciated. Until now.

I have been able to pursue my desire to go back to work after my maternity leave. I've been able to do this because of the support I get from both sets of newly retired grandparents.

While they should be - and they certainly deserve to be - enjoying the new-found freedom that retirement brings, they have put this on hold to help mind our daughter until we find an accessible, affordable and sustainable childcare provider.

I realise and appreciate how incredibly lucky we are to have this support. It's an option not everyone has.

As a society, thankfully, we are moving to a better place, where childcare is seen as a privilege and a duty for both mums and dads. But, in most cases, it is still the mother who takes on this caring role.

I fully respect a parent's choice - be it to stay at home, or return to work. What I do have an issue with is the removal of that choice, because of the staggering cost of childcare.

The average of £164 a week is just shy of half the average income here, and £200 a week for is not uncommon.

In fact, the 2015 Northern Ireland Childcare Cost Survey found that the average weekly childcare payment was £25 per week more expensive than the average weekly mortgage payment.

This is a problem that is not getting any easier as wages fail to keep pace with inflation.

It is not uncommon for a parent to have to work until Wednesday, or Thursday, in their working week before they begin to make money.

As a result of this pressure, many feel they are better off staying at home and, so, are forced to give up their foothold in the labour market and to forfeit their ability to keep their skills sharp and current.

It is still largely women who assume this role in this situation, and the years they take off work beyond maternity leave substantially decreases their lifetime earnings, including their pension and National Insurance contributions. It is here where we often find the beginning of the gender pay-gap.

We hear political parties talk about the need to ensure that women are properly and equally represented in public and private sectors.

But for this to happen, we must invest in childcare and ensure that women, in particular, are not left with the choice between a fulfilling career and the security of knowing that their children are in good care.

The increased provision of subsidised pre-school childcare is not just a well-intentioned desire; its economic benefits are well-documented and reach far beyond the household budget.

Where implemented, greater childcare provision has proven to be a key catalyst in bolstering the economy and putting skilled people back to work.

It means more people in work, more people paying taxes, more money for our public services and a multiplier effect, where more jobs are created in the childcare sector.

As well as relieving the pressure on household incomes and the wider benefits to the economy, the benefits of childcare to the early development of children is well-documented.

A recent study by NICVA found that access to good-quality childcare enhances a child's cognitive skills, such as language development, logic, reasoning and concentration, improving their academic potential with consequent effects for employability in later life.

In recognition of the pressures facing parents who want to return to work, and in light of all of the benefits increased subsidised pre-school childcare places brings to the child, the family and economy, the SDLP has called on the Executive to provide 20 hours' free childcare for every child this year, moving to 30 hours next year.

We have pointed out where funding for this can come from - including the previously unspent Child Care Fund.

Parents in England are now entitled to 30 hours of free childcare for two years. Why can't parents here have the same? They can.

All of the parties in the Assembly supported this call. The question now is, will the parties in the Executive make it happen?

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Region: Europe ^[3]

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