

“Childcare should not be a luxury”

Exploring
experiences
of formal and
informal childcare
in **North East
England**



Acknowledgements

Authors:

Natalie Bennett (University of Manchester), Amanda Bailey (North East Child Poverty Commission), Ang Broadbridge (Ways to Wellness), Lisa Crowe (Newcastle University), Joanna Unthank (North East Combined Authority), Vici Richardson (Disability North), Charmele Ayadurai (Durham University), Xiaofei Qi (Durham University), Viviana Albani (Newcastle University), Steph Scott (Newcastle University), Ruth Boston (Northern Health Science Alliance).

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Foreword

High quality, affordable and accessible childcare is vital in supporting families to thrive, and in enabling our economy to grow.

It means that parents and carers – and let's be honest, primarily women – can go out to work. This, in turn, should help to make work pay for more families and reduce the number of children growing up in poverty. Our economy could not function without this piece of essential infrastructure.

Importantly, excellent early years education also helps to ensure children have the best possible start in life, and are ready for their next steps into school. I know that our early years workforce across the region are working tirelessly every day to deliver just that.

Yet, as this report highlights, the current childcare funding landscape can be extremely complex for far too many families to navigate. It can act as a blocker to opportunity, not the enabler it should be – and particularly for those on the lowest incomes.

That's why I want to start tackling the barrier that childcare costs can create for families in our region who want to get on, as part of my vision for the North East to become the real home of opportunity and a place where everyone thrives.

We have already begun this work by trialling a Mayor's Childcare Grant throughout the course of this year. This is testing how we can make it simpler for parents and carers to access the support they need with childcare costs as they move into employment or training, or if they want to extend their working hours.

Learning from the findings of this pilot, we will then roll out this support to more parents and carers across the region as part of my wider plans to build the infrastructure of opportunity for North East children and families.

This report clearly illustrates why we need to do more to make high quality, affordable and accessible childcare a reality for more of our families in the region – because this really shouldn't be a luxury.

Kim McGuinness
North East Mayor



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Executive summary

60 second summary

The cost of living crisis has hit families with young children hard, particularly those on low incomes. Increasing childcare costs and a benefits system which prioritises participation in the workforce, regardless of whether the work hours fit around the caring responsibilities of parents, has seen families struggling to access and afford childcare which meets their needs. This picture is starker for families in the North East of England where high levels of disadvantage are widespread and the ratio of childcare places to children is poorest.

In this report, we explore people's experiences of childcare provision in the North East. We expose the immense emotional burden of managing childcare, as well as the practical and financial challenges it places on parents and carers. The difficulties faced by providers to provide a high quality service in a sector which has typically low pay and high staff turnover is also examined.

Childcare must be recognised as a vital piece of national and regional economic infrastructure. It offers an opportunity to alleviate poverty by supporting parents to return to work, improving both household income and wellbeing. It also plays an important role in child development and school readiness.

Key findings

The emotional labour and burden of managing childcare

Most parents and carers struggled to access childcare which met their needs, resulting in knock-on effects for both employment and wellbeing, as well as for childhood development and school readiness.



Mums talked about the loss of identity they felt. For some, this led to anxiety, isolation and loneliness. They also struggled with finding time for themselves and for their partner beyond work and childcare.



Some of the dads we spoke to had taken on the role of primary caregiver because they were worried about their partner's mental health and wellbeing and/or because they had more flexible jobs.



Financial juggles, cutbacks and impacts to employment

All of the families we spoke to said a huge chunk of their salary was spent on childcare costs.



Many talked of the complexity of balancing childcare costs alongside of other essential costs, and all had been forced to make changes and cut backs due to the cost of childcare.



Employment impacts to parents were not solely financial and had repercussions for career trajectory and links to overall job satisfaction; with some parents acknowledging that having the capacity to be able to go to work was a form of self-care for them.



Both mothers and fathers emphasised the importance of having an empathetic, understanding and flexible employer.



For families living in poverty, accessing childcare and being able to work was described as a 'chicken or the egg' scenario – often parents needed to already be in employment to access the childcare provision that they needed to be able to take up employment.



For families accessing funded places linked to disadvantage, this came with limitations such as interactions with other benefits including Universal Credit. Some parents reflected on the complexity of negotiating the Childcare Choices system and – separately – the impacts of the two-child limit.



Sector pressure on providers and staff

Childcare providers and staff recognised the significant financial and emotional pressure faced by most of the families they support.



For providers supporting families living in poverty, this intersected with other aspects of marginality, vulnerability or complex needs such as families in which English is the second language, SEND or medical need, families experiencing separation and families experiencing addiction recovery.



Several of the providers we spoke to have a food bank on site to support families.



Staff flagged delays with referrals to other services, such as speech and language, that compounded the level of support they, in turn, provided to families.



Some providers stressed the need to recognise the importance of childcare provision to school readiness and to the development of social skills in childhood, rather than simply as a mechanism of allowing parents to go to work.



The emotional toll on childcare providers' staff was also highlighted, whose role tends to be low paid and some of whom are in very similar positions to the parents they support.



Several nursery managers outlined the barriers they currently face recruiting and retaining staff.



All childcare providers acknowledged crucial gaps in knowledge and skills in relation to particular communities (such as working households and 'hidden' poverty, SEND, high medical need, cultural diversity) as well as specific provision schemes (including wraparound care, childcare for older children, holiday childcare, flexible childcare).



Recommendations

1

Reform childcare funding and benefits

- Ensure childcare funding is transparent, sustainable, and fully covers costs.
- Review the benefits systems to better support parents balancing work and caregiving.

2

Conduct a North East childcare assessment

- Commission a detailed regional study on childcare sufficiency, accessibility, and impact.
- Prioritise families with additional needs.

3

Expand childcare for child development

- Increase investment in early years education to reduce inequalities.
- Recognise childcare as essential for both workforce participation and positive child outcomes.

4

Improve workforce pay and conditions

- Raise wages and career opportunities for childcare workers to reduce staff shortages.
- Provide better training and support, especially for SEND care.

1. Introduction

The research upon which this report is based examines childcare provision in North East England and how this impacts everyday life, employment and health. It represents a partnership between the Northern Health Science Alliance's Health Equity North, Newcastle University, Durham University, the North East Child Poverty Commission, Ways to Wellness, North East Combined Authority and Disability North. This introductory chapter first unpacks what we already know about the importance of childcare provision, burden and cost before outlining how children and families are currently supported in local and national policy. **Chapter 2** explores people's experiences of childcare provision in North East England. Whilst individual participants reflected on 'childcare' in its broadest sense in their narratives at times, in this report, we predominantly focus on Early Years Education (EYE) and childcare. We spoke to 31 parents, carers, childcare providers and people with statutory responsibility for childcare provision. Our qualitative analysis highlighted that most of the parents and carers that we spoke to were struggling to access childcare which met their needs, resulting in important knock-on effects for both employment and wellbeing, as well as for childhood development and school readiness. For low-income households, childcare had significant financial repercussions. Meanwhile, childcare providers told us about the pressure they experience as a sector both to support families who need them the most and to deliver affordable, high quality care. We provide some concluding thoughts in **Chapter 3**.

Finally, **Chapter 4** summarises four co-produced recommendations for change developed during a multi-disciplinary workshop with policy and practice partners who had expertise in childcare provision across North East England. Opportunity for all, including childcare and early education, are key policy priorities nationally and regionally. The mission to create a North East which is the 'home of real opportunity', and a commitment to tackle child poverty, form the cornerstones of Kim McGuinness' successful election manifesto as the first North East Mayor, and are key commitments within the North East Combined Authority corporate plan. Meanwhile, a national child poverty strategy is widely expected to launch later in 2025 covering four key themes: increasing incomes and supporting parents into employment; reducing essential costs; increasing financial resilience and better local support, particularly within children's early years. Childcare should not be a luxury in 2025. Yet, for many families, the high cost of childcare remains a significant barrier to financial stability and renders access to formal childcare provision increasingly unaffordable. Meanwhile, this picture is starker for families in North East England who are more likely to miss out on childcare places, where high levels of disadvantage are widespread and where the ratio of childcare places to children is poorest.

1.1 Child and family poverty in North East England

From 2021, the UK experienced a rapid rise in inflation, outpacing wages, meaning everyday essentials have become less affordable. This has led to rises in food insecurity and fuel poverty, with an estimated 60% of low-income households, equating to seven million people, going without essentials including skipping meals, reducing heating and bathing¹. Such a widespread squeeze on living standards across the country has been termed a 'cost of living crisis'. This current economic climate compounds the detrimental impacts of a decade of austerity and the uncertainty of Covid-19 on poverty and inequalities, resulting in what many have described as a 'polycrisis'². These sequential challenges and crises have impacted the North of England particularly severely. Children in the North are among the most vulnerable to the detrimental impacts of the cost of living crisis³. In the North East, 89% of constituencies have at least one in four children growing up in poverty⁴. Research shows that the cost of living crisis has impacted families with young children particularly severely, especially those on low incomes. Child poverty in England has been rising since 2020⁵, with recent data showing that 30% of children are living in poverty.



Restrictions on government support provided to families are thought to play a part in these figures. For example, there is a strong correlation between places with high child poverty rates (including in the North East) and places with high proportions of children impacted by the 'two child limit', a policy introduced by the then government in April 2017 to limit child tax credits and the child element of Universal Credit to two children, for almost all families with children born after its implementation⁶. Further, families affected by the two-child limit are still very likely to have a child aged under 5, given it only affects those with children born after 6 April 2017. Recent analysis by the Child Poverty Action Group highlighted that removing the two-child limit could lift around 350,000 children out of poverty⁶. Whilst the Scottish Government has pledged a willingness to remove the two child limit for families in Scotland from 2026-2027, there has been no such commitment from UK ministers to date, who have yet to confirm their planned approach to the two child limit.

1.2 Defining childcare provision in England

Childcare is an essential service for families and children and recognised as a vital piece of economic infrastructure. Crucially, childcare presents a vital opportunity to alleviate poverty - and particularly child poverty - by facilitating parents to return to work, improving both household income and wellbeing^{7,8}. Meanwhile, there are wider benefits to children in terms of school readiness, with high quality childcare provision presenting a possible opportunity to tackle the education attainment gap^{9,10}. However, it has not received the same level of research or policy focus that fuel poverty and food insecurity have had within the context of the cost of living crisis.

'Childcare' can be defined as 'any form of care for a child, including education or any other supervised activity'¹¹. It is colloquially delineated as 'formal' and 'informal' provision. Formal provision includes early years providers including childminders registered on the Ofsted Early Years Register; a childminder or childcare provider registered with a childminder agency which is itself registered with Ofsted; or schools taking children age two and over which are exempt from registration with Ofsted as an

early years provider¹². Conversely, informal childcare tends to be referred to as support from grandparents, other relatives and/or close friends, which is sometimes formalised to set days/times¹³. There remains very little direct academic attention on the burden of childcare and inequalities in access. What we do know about barriers to childcare provision tends to stem from associated fields of study, such as work focusing on gender roles, employment and mental health. From this literature we know that the burden of childcare is likely to particularly impact upon women (who are both more likely to be the primary carer and more likely to live in poverty), single parent families (85% of which are headed by women across the UK) and families with additional, complex needs¹⁴⁻¹⁶.

1.3 How are families currently supported with childcare needs in England?

Childcare, whether formal or informal, is a vital provision for facilitating economic activity and social participation in families. The UK has experienced large increases in health-related economic inactivity, with rates remaining higher in the North East than the UK average at 26.1% of 16-64 year olds¹⁷. In response, a £125M national investment has recently been unveiled across England and Wales, to mobilise local work, health and skills support¹⁸. At regional level, this includes funding for three NHS trailblazer 'accelerator' areas (North East, South Yorkshire and West Yorkshire). Nevertheless, available, affordable, accessible and good quality formal childcare remains a barrier for many. Childcare costs have increased year on year¹⁹ with over a third of parents finding it difficult to afford childcare costs in 2023²⁰. New funding entitlements have however begun to make improvements in affordability, with 25 hours a week of childcare for an under two now costing £66.98 in the North East²¹. However, parents not in work, meeting the income threshold or missing other criteria pay an average of £105 for the same

care²¹. This means that disadvantaged children are less likely to be able to access the same formal early education environments as children from working families. Low income and single parent families are also more likely to have parents working 'non-standard' hours, which are more difficult to find formal provision for and are usually charged at a premium²².

The issue of childcare access and affordability has been recognised by recent UK governments, with a range of support available including wraparound care provided around the conventional school day at local authority level and funded hourly childcare for children between nine months and four years of age (15 or 30 hours per week). Schemes to support parents with this provision include tax-free childcare and childcare voucher schemes. This has gone some way to improving the affordability of childcare, with parents eligible for the new 30 hours of additional support reporting the changes improved their finances and quality of life²⁰. For many, however, this does not go far enough and negotiating complex benefit systems, lack of sufficiency, inflexible provision and quality remain significant barriers. Crucially, to be eligible for most funded childcare provision you must be in employment. Yet, it is difficult to secure stable, viable employment without childcare provision already in place. Meanwhile, elements of the childcare system are simply not compatible. For example, Universal Credit childcare costs tend to be paid retrospectively in pre-determined assessment periods; they also cannot be used in conjunction with tax free childcare. Meanwhile, there are large geographical variations in childcare coverage, with some parts of the North East having five times the average ratio of childcare places to children, while other areas of the same Combined Authority have some of the lowest coverage in England²³.



2. Our Research

2.1 What we did

In-depth interviews and group discussions:

We conducted in-depth interviews and group discussions with 31 parents, carers and people with responsibility for childcare provision in North East England. All interviews and group discussions took place between October 2023 and February 2025. Most were conducted remotely via Teams, Zoom and over the telephone; two interviews and two group discussions took place in person. Partway through our project, we identified that the voices of fathers, racially minoritised communities and families with children who have complex, additional needs were missing. In response, we extended recruitment with our community partners, links and gatekeeping organisations to ensure diverse voices were amplified and heard.

Professionals with responsibility for childcare provision included people in local authorities, private, voluntary and independent nursery managers/owners, and childminders. One participant took part in a dual capacity as both a parent and a childminder. Two of our group discussions took place with mothers experiencing significant inequity and disadvantage, one at a baby and toddler group designed to provide women with peer support; the other at a community group set up to support ethnically diverse women who had recently resettled in North East England. Both of these sessions were attended by six women. Across our entire sample of participants, for parents, the number of dependents ranged from 1 to 5 ranging in age from under 1 to 17 years old; three were single parents and five were male.

Co-production workshop:

In September 2024, we held an online workshop with a diverse range of attendees including representation from childcare providers, charities, local government and third sector organisations. During the workshop, informed by the early themes of our interviews and group discussions, we worked with attendees to discuss recommendations for what childcare could and should look in the North East. This workshop lasted approximately two hours and was live scribed by an illustrator from Nifty Fox Creative. These visuals are used throughout our report to illustrate both our findings and the recommendations that we subsequently co-

produced with our workshop attendees (see Figures 1-3).

Workshop attendees flagged from the outset that our discussions were being held in a time of political flux and change. They identified that positive steps had already been made towards improving childcare affordability and accessibility in recent years regionally and nationally and these were welcomed. This meant that whilst all attendees acknowledged there remained much to build upon, there was a demonstrable sense of possibility, passion and hope among attendees.

2.2 Our Findings

Whilst the complexity of providing and negotiating childcare manifested itself in different ways for different people, for all, it represented a constant battle. Most of the parents and carers that we spoke to were struggling to access childcare which met their needs, resulting in important knock-on effects for both employment and wellbeing, as well as for childhood development and school readiness. For many, it represented yet another layer of poverty and must be viewed through the same lens as housing, food, utilities and healthcare access.

Reflexive thematic analysis involving a collaborative coding approach was used to analyse our data. This was designed to develop a richer, more nuanced reading of the data rather than to simply seek consensus on meaning²⁴. This approach also recognised the positionality of the research team, most of whom had personal and professional lived experience of parenting and childcare. This analysis yielded three overarching themes: (1) the emotional labour and burden of managing childcare; (2) financial repercussions and impacts to employment; and (3) sector level pressure on providers and staff. These themes are detailed in depth in the sections which follow. Importantly, the themes intersected in people's lives, meaning they should not be interpreted in silo. Throughout, we use quotes from our participants to contextualise our findings. To safeguard anonymity, pseudonyms have been used.

“I’m just a mum, that’s all it is. I’m not Amy anymore, I’m just Mum...” – the emotional labour and burden of managing childcare.

Parents talked extensively about the constant, daily juggle associated with managing childcare, and this had repercussions for the mental health of all parents and carers that we spoke to. Nevertheless, this was felt



most acutely by those experiencing particular inequalities, such as single parent households, families with complex educational, mental health, physical or medical needs and those with no family support networks nearby (with particular impacts for rural and migrant communities). Where it was possible to do so, families leaned heavily upon informal childcare, particularly care from grandparents to soften the financial, practical and emotional burden. Nevertheless, this often came with its own challenges – such care can be unstructured, insecure and seen as ‘goodwill’.

“I struggle with [son]’s behaviour. I think he’s got autism or ADHD...I only work 6 hours, which is a Sunday when my mam can have the bairn... I’ve lost out on going to work because of that, due to childcare... I largely give up work because I couldn’t find a job that would fit around it...obviously I’m only on universal credit because I don’t get paid a lot...I’ve got me rent for me house...then I’ve got Council tax. Then I’ve got gas, electric... I’m left with really little money...I’ve also got severe mental health issues... so when I can’t do what I want to do for them, it does get us down...” [Nathan, dad]

“...when I came into the UK...I struggled with childcare because that’s not something that I worried about back home. I know that I can go to the market and leave my child playing with my neighbour’s kids... And then when I wanted to go to college or look for a job or anything, childcare was always the main issue, yeah. And now, I’m expecting...before I even go for my maternity leave, I’m thinking about childcare and I’m on maternity for one year, but I’m already so worried about childcare.” [Maz, mum]

“I gave up working. We’re just now solely dependent on my husband’s wage... My mum was moaning all the time and I just thought, “Well, you’ve agreed to do it, so just do it.” ... you’re completely reliant on them. If you argue with them, you can’t go too far because then, if they said, “Right, okay, I’m not doing it anymore,” you’d be stuck. You’d be screwed.” [Joanne, mum]

“... initially the council turned around and said, well, just put them in a private nursery... they wouldn’t have accepted them really let’s be honest.” [Matthew, dad]

Mums in particular talked emotively and extensively about the loss of identity they felt and the pressure of having to ‘hold everything together’. For some, this led to anxiety, isolation and loneliness and what many struggled with was time for themselves – and for their partner – beyond work and childcare. They also articulated guilt for feeling this way and

even for their use of formal childcare. Meanwhile, the dads that we spoke to represented examples of a reversal of traditional gender roles by taking on the role of primary caregiver. Often, they did so because they were worried about their partner’s mental health and wellbeing and/or because – combined with the financial ability and social capital to do so – they had jobs more flexible than others (such as reduced/compressed hours or the ability to work from home). Yet, doing so had impacts to their own mental health - partly due to the fact that they felt that stepping outside of a traditional heteronormative family role was not recognised by wider society leading to stigma and judgement.

“I tell you what is strange though, every why not every but most of the blokes I speak to, when I tell them that, you get, like, a weird, dismissive, ‘oh, aye we’ve been there’. Or like, ‘oh, we did the traditional way’... I think it’s sad. I think it’s sad that they say it. But I’m not really like traditional like that you know. I find it weird. Like, the normal way is here. But yeah, it is what it is. And yeah, you know, I just find it difficult, there’s no one to talk to about your problems and stuff. Just to have a little whinge.” [Kev, dad]

“...since I’ve become a mum, it’s like I’ve totally changed. It feels like I’ve lost me identity a bit. You know what I mean? Like, I don’t even know who I am anymore... I don’t wear the same clothes as I used to. I don’t wear me hair the same, I don’t really have time to get ready unless I’ve got someone there to watch the kids and then I can like relax and get ready properly and that. But I think that’s why some days I feel a bit down and stuff because I just can’t make an effort with myself like I used to...” [Jess, mum]

“it’s massively impacted us, we’re in a situation that I’ve never been in before, and to be totally honest there was a month that I had to go and get a parcel, a food parcel” – financial juggles, cutbacks and impacts to employment

For all of the families we spoke to, a huge chunk of their salary was spent on childcare costs. Many talked extensively about the continual complexity of balancing childcare costs alongside of other essential costs, often referred to as ‘heating and eating’, and all households we spoke to had been forced to make changes and cut backs due to the cost of childcare. Many experiences were extreme (and included employment inactivity, accessing benefits, and food bank use), but others were described by participants as culling ‘the frills’ such as changing where they do their weekly food shop or foregoing personal care such as hair appointments.



Importantly, employment impacts to parents were not solely financial and had repercussions for career trajectory and links to overall job satisfaction; with some parents acknowledging that having the capacity to be able to go to work was a form of self-care for them. Linked to this, both mothers and fathers emphasised the importance of having an empathetic, understanding and flexible employer. For fathers we spoke to, this was linked to recognition of primary caregiver status, something that was often automatically afforded to their partner, meaning their employer often did not afford them the flexibility they needed. Meanwhile, some mothers we spoke to felt 'held back' or that they had lost their job for much the same reason, with the hours and days of work offered often incompatible with the nursery provision they had secured. Further, several parents held jobs without any leave for dependents or paid sick leave, meaning that if their child was unwell and could not attend nursery, they suffered the double cost of paying for provision they didn't actually receive and the loss of earnings for that day, impacts that are compounded by feelings of overwhelm, juggling and childcare-related stress.

"So like you know when you say, "Oh but you're on maternity leave, your money will go up." Well it doesn't really because then with childcare a good half of your salary or a third or whatever it may be then goes back on childcare costs..." [Rosalyn, mum]

"So if I put the child into childcare and then I had to take that day off, so they weren't well, they couldn't go to childcare so I had to stay at home to look after them, I wouldn't get paid. So I would then be down £60/£70 plus the money that I would have earned for that day..." [Kim, mum]

"I've had a massive fight to get to where I am... the management switched up and this is basically when it turned to hell on earth... my managers took me into the office and said your 7 till 3 working arrangement doesn't fit with what we want to do with the team. So I was like, right, OK, I guess, but [employer] has, you know, a flexible working policy. We have the work life balance policy etcetera, etcetera. And they basically dug their heels in and said no, you need to work 8.30 till 4.30 every Monday to Friday...I argued the point with them and said, look, we've been doing it for X amount of years at this point. I think it was five or six years that we'd been doing this and everything worked fine, no problems, no complaints. But no, they weren't having it. So I went to the unions and we went through the process with them..." [Will, dad]

"I was working full-time and then I asked for reduced hours to return back off maternity leave...But my work declined it, they said that it was business needs, I sought legal advice and things like that. They basically said that I had to go back full-time or not at all..." [Charlie, mum]

Whilst childcare costs were felt keenly by all families, for families living in poverty, accessing childcare and being able to work was described as a 'chicken or the egg' scenario – in other words, often parents needed to already be in employment to access the childcare provision that they needed to be able to take up employment. Financial cost was also associated with other practical barriers such as transport and the need to be able to access provision within 'pram pushing distance'. Meanwhile, employment opportunities offered sometimes meant it was not financially viable or practical to work. For example, some families accessing what the sector term 'working family' funded places were described as the 'working poor' and - whilst 15 and 30 hour schemes were supportive - often these were not enough and did not map onto work patterns or full/half day provision offered; there were also unexpected 'top up' costs to contend with for items such as nappies, wipes and food. For families accessing funded places linked to disadvantage, this came with limitations such as interactions with other benefits including Universal Credit; with some parents reflecting at length on both the complexity of negotiating the Childcare Choices system and – separately – the impacts of the two-child limit.

"I think Childcare Choices has far too many barriers. You can't get through the blooming telephone system, you can't get through online, it freaks families out...I think the system is just broken and it needs a

revamp. I also think it's really hard to get benefits and stuff, there's got to be an easier way. We're just over complicating things. And I'm not saying that from the nursery point of view, we try to keep our systems as simple as possible, but even, for example, I was at a meeting last Monday about the new passports coming in. It's like all these new systems are coming in place, some way they've got to be interlinked... There's just got to be magic buttons somewhere that someone can make everything a lot simpler than what it is..." [childcare provider, female]

"...people using their entitlement for the first time, for 15 hours for under two and 30 hours next year are being ripped off by the day nurseries. They are charging them extra...we have got to do something about it... what day nurseries used to do is cross-subsidise...they're now saying you get your free place and you need to pay for breakfast, lunch and dinner... and they're not going to be paying that in wages...there's an issue which could explode if the councils and DfE don't do something about it... the idea that we've now got this entitlement is exposing a problem..." [childcare provider, male]

"...always I want to I look for job, I look for, go to school myself as well but nothing, but always I listen, people say childcare, childcare. But where is this childcare? Where can I get this childcare? I'm in job centre, I went to job centre one day, I asked them, to go to college... College said just do assessment and then we look for childcare. I did the assessment. Everything. No childcare..." [Nura, mum]

"It's just not fair and it's not right and it's not equitable and it's not OK. You've got a family...But just like a really quick example of a family who got sanctioned for their benefits because Mam didn't take a job that she was offered. She was offered a job, she's a single parent, she was offered a cleaning job, expected to go and do a cleaning job at 7:30 in the morning when she had two school age children and one under 3. By herself. She couldn't have any childcare. She couldn't pay for the childcare, she couldn't get them to school. She was by herself. She got sanctioned. She got her housing benefit took and went into rent arrears and then was potentially going to be evicted. And we had to, like, unravel all of that and work with her through all of that because she didn't accept a job that she couldn't do because she's on her own with three children. So things like that drive me insane." [childcare provider, female]

"Heat, light and power are an issue. Food is an issue. Basic toiletries and needs and those kinds of things are issues for our families. So we support with all of that..." – sector pressure on providers and staff

Childcare providers and staff recognised the significant financial and emotional pressure faced by most of the families they support. For those supporting families living in poverty, this intersected with other aspects of marginality, vulnerability or complex needs such as families in which English is the second language, SEND or medical need, families experiencing separation and families experiencing addiction recovery. Several of the providers we spoke to even had a food bank on site to support families. Staff flagged delays with referrals to other services, such as speech and language, that compounded the level of support they – in turn - provided to families.

Here, some providers ardently reinforced that such support needs must come first – before the markers of education 'quality' that they will be measured against if inspected. Meanwhile, other providers stressed the need to recognise the importance of childcare provision to school readiness and to the development of social skills in childhood rather than simply as a mechanism of allowing parents to go to work.

"...our families are predominantly part of the BME [Black and Minority Ethnic] community, so we also have English as an additional language, we employ directly from the Community, so we as an organisation speak like 11 languages across our team, so we're able to connect with families, which we need to given the complexity of their lives when they're coming in to be able to give the support. But that can be a barrier as well. And so that's a challenge. And then for those families with complex lives, sometimes there's a lack of trust. You have to really work with families if

they've had social care involvement in the past to kind of connect with what they view as professionals. It can be a bit of a challenge. You've got to do a lot of work, kind of building trust and not putting, just making sure you're presenting a non-judgmental kind of welcome. So there's a whole load of stuff to get over before you even think about your curriculum before you even think about what you're delivering during the day. Your quality of learning. All the things that Ofsted come and inspect like you've got about 90% of your work has to happen before you can start that and then you only really get judged on the 10%... Curriculum, education. What's progress? What's going on? How school ready are they? Well, actually, how hungry are they?" [childcare provider, female]

"In the winter, we know that it's a bit of a struggle to kind of keep warm and things. So what we do is we offer hot cups of coffee and just a safe space to come and sit. I mean, to us, it might just be a coffee, but it's a chat. It's a warm place. It's a safe space and it's a space that we want to really work on as a community." [childcare provider, male]

"... I think the working poor is a very real thing... the working poor that are working every hour they can work and they're still not covering their costs and they're still not able to have the quality of life that they should be able to have been working full time. Like it's very real thing..." [childcare provider, female]

As well as recognising pressures faced by families, providers discussed the emotional toll on their staff teams, whose role tends to be low paid and some of whom are in very similar positions to the parents they support. Several nursery managers outlined the barriers they currently face recruiting and retaining staff and flagged levels of disquiet about current levels of training, experience and qualifications amongst some now working within the sector. Finally, all childcare providers we spoke to – at statutory and setting level - acknowledged crucial gaps in knowledge and skills in relation to both particular communities (such as working households and 'hidden' poverty, SEND, high medical need, cultural diversity) as well as particular provision schemes (including wraparound care, childcare for older children, holiday childcare, flexible childcare).

"I'm no longer a manager sort of thing. I think I'm everything. I'm the support worker. I'm the SENCO. I'm the person that makes phone calls to chase everyone. So the role of the manager no longer exists, in my opinion, that role's not there. We're just like every other role combined." [childcare provider, female]

"...we would have space to expand. But we can't staff it...For the previous two years until, like literally the last couple of months, we have not been able to recruit. And actually I used to have a policy when I first joined, I'll only recruit Level 3s and above then I changed that to oh go on then, we'll take Level 2s. And then it went into OK, we'll take a portion of unqualified and I just felt that we're compromising on quality and especially when in the times of the government saying, oh, like, you know, early years language is so important, support children with SEN is so important and yet they're giving us the opportunity to kind of have less competent staff. And then also bringing in the ratio change for two year olds. That wasn't at all useful...so instead of like being 1:4 you could go 1:5 and we've had to do it, at times we've had to do it and we didn't want to but by contrast like agency staff cost over double...and that just wasn't a sustainable model..." [childcare provider, female]

"Your people are delivering your frontline service. You have to care for them. You have to look after their wellbeing. You have to make sure they're well and they're looked after it because if they burn out, you've got no service delivery... it's a very responsible job for not very much money... we pay people more to care for our coffee than we do to care for our children. Our staff could earn more working in Costa..." [childcare provider, female]

"...we're really conscious that they've got young children themselves...so by time a staff member gets into nursery they're absolutely frazzled...so we have like breakfast cereals upstairs for the staff and we've got their teas, their coffees... we haven't got a lot of funding...we have the fruit, all staff are allowed a meal at nursery, they can have their breakfast with the children, they can have their lunch with the children, they can have a snack with the children, they can have tea with children. Or they can order a lunch and they can have it on their lunch break... Some of my staff are on benefits as well as earning... It's horrible..." [childcare provider, female]



3. Conclusions

For the parents and carers we spoke to, negotiating childcare was a constant emotional, practical and financial challenge. Most were struggling to access (formal or informal) childcare which met their needs, with repercussions to their own mental health, wellbeing and employment prospects. For low-income households, these repercussions were exacerbated. Meanwhile, childcare providers shared the importance of supporting families who need help the most whilst emphasising the difficulties they face in providing a good quality service for children and parents when provider pay is typically very low and staff turnover is high.

Overall, we outline four co-produced recommendations for change. Here we also draw attention to broader dynamics in our data which warrant academic, policy and practice attention. First, we note the significant mental health burden faced by parents and carers, particularly those in single-parent households or who find themselves in disadvantaged or marginalised circumstances. Of course, the impacts of parenting upon mental health and wellbeing are commonly recognised^{25,26}. Nevertheless, further research is warranted into impacts which stretch beyond perinatal and early years, and which focus on the impacts upon both mothers and fathers. In addition, the experiences of those with limited support mechanisms such as migrant

populations, single parents, rural households and families navigating medical or complex needs are under researched. Second, our work hints at differences within some families in relation to who takes on the role of primary caregiver. Nevertheless, we stress: (1) for most people in our study, traditional gender dynamics remained; and (2) the dads we interviewed are dads who chose to speak up and – statistically – remain the exception rather than the rule. Finally, for many of our participants, childcare represented yet another layer of poverty and must be viewed through the same lens as housing, food, utilities and healthcare access.

Unheard Voices

Whilst we spent a great deal of time and care ensuring that diverse voices were amplified and heard, this report can never reflect the full story of childcare cost and burden. The voices of same-sex partners, grandparents and nursery/school staff are missing from this report. Meanwhile, the voices of single parents, racially minoritised communities, rural households and families navigating medical or complex additional needs are only partially heard here and must be elevated. Our future work will strive to listen to the voices of new or previously unheard groups.

4. Recommendations for policy, practice and future research

This research resulted in four co-produced recommendations for change:

1. A more joined up approach is imperative to understand and support families with the interrelated issues of childcare and economic activity.

Childcare must be recognised as a vital piece of national and regional economic infrastructure. Many parents relied upon informal childcare routes to plug gaps (referred to by childcare providers as their ‘grandparent army’). Meanwhile, the ‘chicken-egg’ scenario of not being able to access work without childcare support, and not being able to access childcare support without work was commonly discussed by participants and stakeholders. Benefits systems which prioritise participation in the workforce – regardless of whether the work hours fit around the caring responsibilities of parents – should be carefully scrutinised. Parents and providers alike recognised the complexity of navigating childcare schemes and their processes. Further, a spotlight must be shone upon families who are unable to meet the ‘top-up’ costs of childcare added to nursery bills for “consumables” such as food, nappies and milk. The government has recently announced (some) measures to address this; doing so would reduce the funding gap burden being placed on parents and remove ambiguity as to what is “funded” childcare (with many families still receiving large monthly bills despite being funded “free”).

2. A specific sufficiency and impact assessment of childcare in the North East is necessary, as well as further academic research into issues unique to Northern England.

In our discussions, we identified a lack of a clear and comprehensive understanding of specific local needs with regards to childcare affordability, accessibility and availability in the North East. This was considered to be compounded by a lack of academic research on

these same aspects and how they impact everyday life for parents and carers. All local authorities are required to conduct childcare sufficiency assessments in their local area, and to publish an annual report to share the findings. However, whilst broad, these assessments lack evidence of impact, quality, detail as to whether provision meets objectives and does not specifically consider provision for children and families with additional needs.

Our recommendation goes beyond financial affordability - improved recognition is needed of the increased significance of local and practically accessible support and childcare options for families experiencing disadvantage, heightened medical or SEND needs. Participants and workshop attendees emphasised the importance of locally accessible services (‘pram pushing distance versus childcare deserts’). They stressed that the area for which support was possible for parents to access was often smaller than assumed, owing to difficulties in travelling, competing demands on drop off and pick up times and work location.

3. Greater emphasis, aside from enabling parents to participate in the workforce, should be placed on the value of formal childcare provision for school readiness, educational support and forging a thriving future population and workforce.

The economic arguments for the provision of appropriate childcare for facilitating and increasing parental economic activity are undeniably strong and important. However, participants and workshop attendees agreed that the additional value of formal childcare provision to child development and school readiness is often overlooked. Academic literature suggests increased hours of formal childcare attendance improves later life educational outcomes^{10,27-29}. Research from the UK indicates this may have a particularly beneficial impact for disadvantaged children⁹. Increased childcare provision could therefore contribute to narrowing educational inequalities.

4. We need recognition that childcare is a key employment sector, particularly for women. Childcare provider pay should be increased in order to aid staff retention, improve availability and support quality childcare provision.

Childcare providers at our workshop emphasised the difficulties they faced in providing a good quality service for children and parents when provider pay is typically very low, there is a lack of progression/ career development opportunities and staff turnover is high. Childcare centres often have limited space for more children due to staff numbers, undermining valuable policies helping to provide free childcare. Further,

high staff turnover presents a challenge to staff training, meaning provision for SEND and children with complex needs which requires further training is often lacking.

Childcare providers described the extended support they often offered to parents which they shouldered the costs for – including providing refreshments for struggling parents, stretching opening hours for those working inflexible hours and signposting to further support, as well as the additional toll this took on staff who were often facing the same difficulties. Aligned with the above, better recognition of the broader role that childcare providers often play in the lives of families who are struggling is needed.



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