

Written evidence submitted by Employer For Childcare (MEM0010)

Employers For Childcare information: The experience of minority ethnic and migrant people in Northern Ireland

About Employers For Childcare

Employers For Childcare is a charity and social enterprise that supports families by campaigning to address the barriers that prevent parents from entering into, and staying in, the workforce. We address childcare as both an economic and a social issue and lobby for investment in our childcare infrastructure to benefit children and families, as well as the local labour market and economy. We undertake research which provides us with evidence to campaign on these and a range of issues relating to childcare, family and work. Most notably the ability of parents to access affordable, appropriate childcare and the impact this has on families, both financially and in terms of their well-being.¹ We also operate a Family Benefits Advice Service offering free, confidential and impartial advice and guidance on the financial support families are entitled to. Last year, this service helped over 8,000 people, and identified £12.6 million in additional financial support for parents.²

Working with minority ethnic and migrant families in Northern Ireland

Through our work with families in Northern Ireland, we engage with minority ethnic and migrant parents to help them identify the financial support they may be entitled to, both with the cost of childcare (if applicable) and more broadly.

Earlier this year, we engaged directly with a range of local programmes for parents and children, specifically to better understand issues experienced by minority ethnic and migrant families in accessing childcare, and to offer information sessions about benefits and financial support. All of the programmes provided support to these families, 63% on a regular basis and 37% occasionally.

We used a survey to explore two main areas with staff in those programmes:

- What are the barriers to minority ethnic and migrant families in accessing information on benefits and childcare, and
- What are the barriers then to these families in accessing registered childcare.

Barriers to accessing information on benefits and childcare

- Language barriers and a lack of interpreting or translation services
- Unfamiliarity with support infrastructure, where to find information and the benefits system
- Digital access.

The 'language barrier', and a lack of interpreting or translation services, were the key barriers identified to families accessing information. As well as posing a barrier to the understanding of often complex information, this can also put individuals and families off contacting services due to a lack of confidence in their ability to do so.

"Language is a big barrier in the understanding of the content of forms and information."

¹ <https://www.employersforchildcare.org/report/northern-ireland-childcare-survey-2020/>

² <https://www.employersforchildcare.org/report/social-impact-report-2019-20/>

“Having the finance to pay for interpreting or translation service.”

“Lack of confidence and self-esteem re lack of English.”

Additionally, knowing where to go for information, advice and guidance – and an ‘unfamiliarity’ of the area, as well as of the system itself – posed a challenge for families.

“Not understanding the systems we have in place in regards to benefits.”

“No employment, unfamiliarity of area and amenities.”

“Lack of understanding of how the system works/ knowing where to go.”

“Not knowing where to access information - or even that places exist to access it.”

Digital access, or not having the required technology to engage with online information or apply for support, is also a real issue.

“Issue re technology for accessing online information. We have observed a number of barriers including digital barriers.”

“Knowing were to access the information or have no access to the internet.”

“The pandemic has highlighted a number of cultural differences too in the use of say mobile phones/tablets – in some communities phones are often used for phonecalls only and many have limited digital presence-we find translated leaflets and interpreter support best for information sharing.”

Barriers to accessing registered childcare

- Cost
- Knowledge of provision and availability
- Shifts and working patterns
- Language
- Transport
- Cultural belief and practices.

Similar barriers exist for minority ethnic and migrant families as exist for many other families when it comes to accessing registered childcare in Northern Ireland (including availability, accessibility, affordability and flexibility) but for minority ethnic and migrant families, there can be additional layers of challenge from language barriers to a lack of knowledge about provision and availability within their area, or how to find out more.

An important dimension to consider is the ‘cultural’ aspect in relation to how families approach and consider formal, registered childcare. Within some communities, there is a strong reliance on informal childcare or on care being provided by a mother. This can mean that families do not seek to access registered childcare, but it can also be problematic where a family does not have strong connections within their community or is separated from their wider family.

“A barrier in how registered childcare translates culturally to some ethnic minority groups. For example, we work largely with the Roma community in Ballymena-many families are on zero hour

contracts and rely on informal childcare within their own community. Even attendance at creche can sometimes be seen as alien until visited a number of times. We have also observed this within the Polish and Lithuanian communities we work with.”

“The cultural translation of childcare-often families experience is of informal family arrangements and so the concept of a registered setting can get a little confused in translation from our experience. Or not understanding it is a service accessible by them-many families are surprised, and almost suspicious of what is on offer. Again this is a cultural barrier.”

Within some areas, the particular working patterns of many minority ethnic and migrant families can make it more difficult to access childcare, for example, parents working temporary, seasonal or zero hours contracts, or those working shift patterns and anti-social hours, may struggle to find suitable registered childcare.

“Different shifts and working times make it difficult to match the working hours of registered childcare.”

“Temporary/zero hour contracts are also a barrier-contracts can be so variable.”

Eligibility for financial support with the cost of childcare

There are four main forms of support that working parents can access to assist with the cost of registered childcare:

- Childcare Vouchers (now closed to new entrants)
- Tax Credits (now closed to new claimants)
- Tax-Free Childcare
- Universal Credit.

Tax Credits (Child Tax Credits and Working Tax Credits) and Universal Credit are public funds, meaning that individuals who are subject to immigration control and have no recourse to public funds will be unable to access them. Similarly, it is written into the legislation establishing the Tax-Free Childcare Scheme that a Tax-Free Childcare account cannot be opened by someone who is subject to immigration control with no recourse to public funds.

This was not the case with the Childcare Voucher scheme which operated via salary sacrifice, meaning that anyone who was employed and paying tax – provided they met the broader eligibility requirements – could receive financial assistance through the scheme for their registered childcare costs.

This poses a significant barrier to families in accessing and affording registered childcare, impacting on their children – in terms of their opportunity to benefit from developmentally enriching early education and childcare – and on parents who may be unable to work as a result. We strongly urge the Government to review the financial support it offers to families with the cost of registered childcare to ensure that this is available to minority ethnic and migrant families.

Set out below are case studies of parents who have contacted our Family Benefits Advice Service and have been unable to access financial support due to their immigration status:

Case study 1: Lina and Aleem are both subject to immigration control and have no recourse to public funds. Both are working, and they have two children. Lina and Aleem currently receive Childcare

Vouchers however, should they change jobs, they will lose access to this and any support with their childcare costs. This is despite their significant contributions through the tax system.

“If we change jobs we won't have access to any other childcare help however non-immigrant parents can access Tax-Free Childcare or other forms of support. Families like ours won't be able to afford the childcare we need, and one of us might end up having to quit work.”

Case study 2: Belinda and her husband are working in the UK on a skills Visa and discovered that they cannot qualify for Tax-Free Childcare or Universal Credit due to their Visa restrictions (they have no recourse to public funds). Belinda and her husband both work and are paying taxes. Belinda was starting to look for a higher paid job to enable her to progress her career however, because of the closure of Childcare Vouchers to new entrants, if she moves jobs she will lose access to the scheme and have no support with her childcare costs. She therefore feels 'locked in' to her job for at least the next four years until her youngest child no longer requires registered childcare. If Tax-Free Childcare were available to parents who are subject to immigration control, this scheme would pay for 20% of the family's childcare costs.

“Without support with my childcare costs I would not be able to work the hours I do. Childcare Vouchers have literally given me the freedom to do my job properly, knowing that I can afford quality childcare and my children are safe. However if I move jobs I will no longer qualify for any form of financial support. I'm devastated, because I was starting to look for a better paying job and now I am questioning whether I can afford to do so. It makes me angry that I am required to pay taxes and do so without complaint, and I'm allowed to vote, but I can't have the same childcare benefits... I am sure that mine is not the only family who is actually being penalised by the TFC system. This needs to be changed so that immigrants who are contributing to the economy can still access affordable childcare.”

Case study 3: Kaya and her husband have one child, aged 19 months. Kaya and her husband are both working but are subject to immigration control. Neither Tax-Free Childcare nor Universal Credit is therefore available to this family. Their visas state that they have no recourse to public funds.

“This makes me very angry, even though we are working and doing everything right, because of our visa restrictions we aren't entitled to any help. I really don't understand why, when we are paying taxes. Childcare may be just out of reach for us now.”

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