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# EMPLOYERS GUIDE TO CHILDCARE

Supporting employees to access childcare support

July 2022



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# **Employers For Childcare**

**Labour  
Relations**  
agency

improving employment relations



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# 1

## ABOUT THIS GUIDE

- 1.1** Childcare is a fact of life for many working families. Parents who can continue working when they have children bring significant benefits to themselves, their family, their employers, and the economy.
- 1.2** This guide will help **EMPLOYERS** understand the childcare infrastructure in Northern Ireland. In particular, it highlights the financial support that is available to assist working parents with their registered childcare costs. In doing so it will help employees maximise the support available to them.





# 2

## WHAT WE KNOW

*In the 2021 Northern Ireland Childcare Survey 98% of parents reported quality accessible and affordable childcare as key to enabling them to work<sup>1</sup>.*

- 2.1** **DID YOU KNOW** that **most** working parents will be entitled to financial support with registered childcare costs, at no cost to the employer, making registered childcare more affordable? Yet many parents are not accessing the support that they are entitled to.
- 2.2** For parents, difficulties in accessing or affording appropriate childcare, can be a barrier to employment. They can face the issue of identifying arrangements to meet both their childcare needs and the needs of their employer. It can also impact upon their ability to participate in training and upskilling opportunities.
- 2.3** Childcare is an important part of Northern Ireland's economic infrastructure. Access to suitable and affordable childcare can enable greater labour market participation. It can prevent parents from having to reduce their hours of work and can aid career progression. It enables employers to recruit and retain the staff they require to operate and grow their business.

1 Employers For Childcare; [Northern Ireland Childcare Survey 2021](#); November 2021



*If you have the same levels of men and women participating in the economy, it could increase GDP by 10 per cent by 2030<sup>2</sup>.*

- 2.4** Therefore, knowing where to signpost current and future employees to access advice on registered childcare and the financial support available, will bring benefits to both the employee and the employer.



# 3

## HOW DOES THIS HELP YOU, THE EMPLOYER?

**3.1** Providing the **right advice/signposting** at the **right time** to your employees or potential employees can benefit you in the following ways:

- **Direct savings** on employers' national insurance contributions if offering Childcare Vouchers. Tax and national insurance savings if offering a workplace nursery.
- **Indirect savings** by reducing staff attrition/absenteeism, reducing recruitment and training costs, enabling increased hours of work and increased productivity. Can also be used as a tool for recruitment - a competitive differentiator.
- **Other benefits** include employee well-being, a positive working environment, healthy management/employee relationship.

*Helping with the challenges associated with balancing work and childcare responsibilities is highly valued by employees.*





# 4

## BEST PRACTICE CASE STUDIES

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### 4.1 Employer 1: Employs 10 staff

A small but growing marketing firm, based in Belfast, engaged with their staff to better understand how they could support them to work flexibly. They identified that when staff were occasionally asked if they could work additional hours, outside of their normal contracted hours, this could present difficulties in relation to childcare. While staff were able to decline any request (such as due to childcare or other caring responsibilities), the firm also introduced a policy that they would pay employees any additional childcare costs required for hours worked outside of their normal contracted hours. This was warmly welcomed and has helped them to retain staff, who are able to work more flexibly in line with business needs.

### 4.2 Employer 2: Employs over 100 staff

A local technology company has invested in ensuring staff feel supported through all of life's milestones, and is proud that 20% of its workforce have been with them for ten years or more as a result. For example, the employer organises regular advice sessions for employees outlining the various types of financial support they may be eligible for, including childcare costs. The employees find these really useful. Almost 30% of employees who attended a recent session identified additional financial savings as a result.





### **4.3 Employer 3: Employs over 1,000 staff**

An established manufacturing company recognises that its people are its greatest asset and, through consultation with staff, has introduced key initiatives including new flexible working hours and supporting staff to access financial support with their registered childcare costs. This has been a particular focus during the Covid-19 pandemic when the firm identified that access to flexible, affordable childcare was a key requirement supporting the financial and mental well-being of staff.

The company now also offers financial planning and budgeting support including retirement planning, as well as information on childcare benefits. The introduction of these initiatives has led to less staff turnover with a reduction in recruitment agency expenditure.

### **4.4 Employer 4: Employs over 2,500 staff**

A large private sector employer offers enhanced maternity, paternity, adoption, and shared parental pay to all eligible staff. Experience over time supporting parents led them to develop a dedicated parental toolkit to guide staff through the parental leave process and support them in their subsequent return to work. They also introduced workshops for expectant parents as an opportunity to proactively share information on benefits, financial support entitlements, as well as family support services and policies.

The company provides a quota of fully paid emergency childcare sessions per year. This ethos has enabled the employer to retain and support many employees and they are pleased to have seen an increase in the uptake of shared parental leave.



#### 4.5 What does this mean to employees?

These initiatives can make a real difference to employees, enabling them to remain at work. The testimonials below illustrate the significant benefits to working parents.

**Elaine:** *“Our supportive working environment makes it easy for me to balance work life with family life. I set my own working hours and can schedule them to match my childcare needs, without feeling that the responsibility to look after my family is detrimental to my career.”*

**Christopher:** *“I have been with my employer for over seven years. They have been hugely supportive of my family needs, and allowed me flexibility of working hours which complement my childcare arrangements and provide the best for my family.”*

**Laura:** *“When I returned to work after having my children I was told about financial support to help with my childcare costs, and that I could work condensed hours. This allows me to leave early on a Friday meaning we have no childcare costs for that day and I get more time with the kids which is a real bonus.”*





# 5

## FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE WITH CHILDCARE FOR FAMILIES

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### 5.1 Tax-Free Childcare

This allows eligible working families to claim 20% of their childcare costs from the Government, up to a maximum of £2,000 per child per year (£4,000 for a child with a disability). This may enable employees to access more hours of childcare facilitating increased weekly working hours. Parents, or a single parent in a lone parent household, can earn up to £100k per annum and be eligible for support through Tax-Free Childcare.

It can be used to pay for registered childcare, however, the childcare provider must be signed up to the scheme.

Website: [Tax free childcare | www.gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk/tax-free-childcare)  
[Help paying for approved childcare | nidirect](https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/help-paying-for-approved-childcare)

### 5.2 Universal Credit (UC)

Universal Credit is a payment for people over 18 but under State Pension age who are on a low income (working or self-employed) or out of work.

Parents who are claiming UC or are in receipt of other income-based benefits can struggle to move into employment, return to work from parental leave, or increase their hours of work, due to the considerable barrier posed by having to pay initial upfront childcare costs.



Entitlement will depend on household circumstances but Universal Credit can pay up to 85% of registered childcare costs, up to a maximum of £646.35 for one child, and £1,108.04 for two or more children, per month.

It is important to note that, you cannot receive Universal Credit and Tax Free Childcare at the same time.

Website: [Universal Credit \(UC\) - nidirect](#)  
[Universal Credit \(UC\) - two child limit - nidirect](#)

Leaflets: [DfC Universal Credit Info for Childcare Providers](#)  
[DfC Universal Credit Childcare Costs - Parents](#)

From 25 October 2021, eligible parents can access a non-repayable grant through the Advisor Discretion Fund (ADF) to pay for their initial upfront childcare costs. This will be made directly to their childcare provider.

Website: [Adviser Discretion Fund \(ADF\) | nidirect](#)

### **5.3 Child Tax Credit**

Tax Credits are means-tested benefits for workers or families on a low income. They are administered and paid by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC).

Tax Credits are being replaced by Universal Credit. It is now only possible to make a claim for Child Tax Credit or Working Tax Credit if you already receive the other type of Tax Credit.

The amount received will depend on the number of children and whether it's a new claim or an existing claim.

Website: [Child tax credit | www.gov.uk](#)



## 5.4 Childcare Vouchers

Some employees may also benefit from childcare vouchers offered through their employer, but only if they are already availing of the scheme. It is now closed to new applicants. However, parents may be able to avail of another form of support, such as Tax-Free Childcare, if they are no longer eligible.

Website: [Childcare vouchers | www.gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk/childcare-vouchers)

## 5.5 Child Benefit

Parents/guardians are eligible for Child Benefit if they are responsible for a child who is:

- Under 16.
- Under 20 if they stay in approved education or training.

Child Benefit is paid every 4 weeks and there is no limit to the number of children that can be claimed for. You may have to pay back some Child Benefit in tax if your (or your partner's) individual income is over £50,000.

Website: [Claim Child Benefit | www.gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk/claim-child-benefit)





# 6

## THE IMPORTANCE OF REGISTERED CHILDCARE

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### 6.1 Registered Childcare Providers

Employees entitled to financial support towards childcare costs can only claim these benefits by using providers that are registered or approved with Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland. To be registered, childcare providers undergo inspections to ensure they meet the required safeguarding standards.

There are different types of registered childcare available to parents. The type chosen will depend on the needs of the child and their parents. Some of the main ones are:

- **Registered childminder** - self-employed providers who work in their own home providing childcare within a family setting.
- **Day nursery** - provides daycare on a part-time or full-time basis in a dedicated setting.
- **Out of school care** - care provided in sessions before or after the school day (breakfast club or after school club), for primary school aged children (4-12 years). Full daycare may also be provided during school closures and holidays.
- **Approved home child carer** - childcare provided in own home of child/parent.



Family Support NI provides a list of all childcare providers registered and approved with Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland. The website also provides a comprehensive database of family support services across Northern Ireland. In addition, it provides details on training courses for childcare providers.

Website: [www.familysupportni.gov.uk/](http://www.familysupportni.gov.uk/)

Telephone: **0845 600 6483**

Twitter: [@familysupportNI](https://twitter.com/familysupportNI)





# 7

## KEY OPPORTUNITIES TO SUPPORT EMPLOYEES

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- 7.1** There are opportune moments where you can offer support to your employees and potential employees concerning childcare.
- 7.2** Providing the right advice and support at the right time can aid employees' decision making and planning. It can help with the transition to paying for registered childcare making it less onerous and costly.
- 7.3** You will find some useful tips on when and how to engage with your employees on page 17.







# CHILD CARE GUIDANCE FOR EMPLOYERS

## Key points for communication



### Recruitment - When promoting job opportunities

- ▶ Promote family-friendly policies for example, as recommended by [Equality Commission NI](#).
- ▶ Outline best practice supports offered beyond statutory duties e.g. flexible working.
- ▶ Signpost to financial support options for registered childcare.



### Welcome, induction, return to work from parental leave

- ▶ Schedule welcome, return to work and inductions meetings.
- ▶ Signpost new staff/returning staff who are parents to financial support options for registered childcare.
- ▶ Highlight relevant company policies that support caring responsibilities.



### Regular 1-2-1 meetings

- ▶ Discuss and review required or desired adjustments.
- ▶ Regularly review workstyle agreements.
- ▶ Discuss parental leave requirements if appropriate.
- ▶ Signpost to financial support options for registered childcare.



### Routine dissemination of information

- ▶ Signpost to financial support options for childcare.
- ▶ Signpost through email, internal company intranet, information sessions - information on family friendly policies such as flexible working/maternity/adoption/parental leave.



### Notification of maternity/paternity/adoption parental Leave - [nibusinessinfo.co.uk](#)

- ▶ Signpost: "We know that being able to access and afford childcare may be an important consideration when you are planning your return to work. We can discuss this prior to your period of leave or during an optional keeping in touch discussion. I will be able to signpost you to organisations that can provide advice on financial support as well as accessing registered childcare. We can also discuss your rights to request flexible working and parental leave".
- ▶ Discuss and agree arrangements for keeping in touch.



### Agree keeping in touch days during maternity, adoption, paternity parental leave

- ▶ Discuss any requirements for alternative working requirements.
- ▶ Reassure employee that ongoing support is available when they return to work.
- ▶ Signpost to financial support options for registered childcare.



### Review and refine

- ▶ Keep up to date with regulatory changes and best practice.
- ▶ Review working practices with a focus on employee health and well-being.



# 8

## WHERE EMPLOYERS AND EMPLOYEES CAN ACCESS FURTHER ADVICE AND SUPPORT

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### 8.1 Advice NI Tax & Benefits Helpline

Provision of confidential advice on tax and benefits issues.

Website: [www.adviceni.net](http://www.adviceni.net)

Telephone: **0800 915 4604 (Freephone helpline)**

Email: [advice@adviceni.net](mailto:advice@adviceni.net)

Twitter: [@AdviceNI](https://twitter.com/AdviceNI)

### 8.2 Employers For Childcare

Employers For Childcare is a social enterprise and charity working with parents/guardians, employers, and childcare providers across the UK.

They help parents to find out what financial support is available with their childcare costs through a Freephone helpline. They also provide free bespoke advice sessions for employers and their staff. Their online guide 'Help towards registered childcare costs' sets out details of the main forms of financial support available to parents with their childcare costs.

Website: [Employers For Childcare](http://Employers For Childcare)

Telephone: **0800 028 3008**

Email: [hello@employersforchildcare.org](mailto:hello@employersforchildcare.org)

Twitter: [@EFCCG](https://twitter.com/EFCCG)



### 8.3 Equality Commission for Northern Ireland

Practical advice on how employers can manage the equality implications of employing and managing staff. Free and confidential advice and information to those who believe they may have been discriminated against.

Website: [ECNI - Equality Commission for Northern Ireland \(equalityni.org\)](http://equalityni.org)  
Email: [information@equalityni.org](mailto:information@equalityni.org)  
Telephone: **028 90 500 600**  
Useful Publications: [The Right to Request Flexible Working: A Guide for Employers](#)

### 8.4 Labour Relations Agency

Workplace Information Service – a confidential information and advice line for employers, individuals, and their representatives with an employment-related query. Available Monday – Friday between 9am-5pm.

Website: [www.lra.org.uk](http://www.lra.org.uk)  
Email: [info@lra.org.uk](mailto:info@lra.org.uk)  
Telephone: **03300 555 300 (Workplace Information Service)**  
**03300 552 220 (Switchboard)**

### 8.5 Make The Call NI Helpline

Make the Call is an entitlement check helpline operated by the Department for Communities. They will check if there are unclaimed benefits that you may be entitled to.

Website: [make-call-service - nidirect](http://make-call-service-nidirect)  
Telephone: **0800 232 1271**  
Email: [makethecall@dfcni.gov.uk](mailto:makethecall@dfcni.gov.uk)



## 8.6 Maternity Action Helpline

Online information and telephone advice on maternity and parental rights at work, maternity pay, benefits, and breastfeeding rights.

Website: [maternityaction.org.uk advice line](https://maternityaction.org.uk)  
Telephone: **0808 802 0029**  
Twitter: [@MaternityAction](https://twitter.com/MaternityAction)

## 8.7 NI Business Info

NI Business Info provides a comprehensive guide for employers on the legislation and statutory rights for employees who have childcare responsibilities. This includes information on entitlement to Maternity/Paternity/Adoption and Parental Leave. It also provides detail on the right to request flexible working which is not restricted to parents or carers.

Website: [NI Business Info website](https://nibusinessinfo.co.uk)  
Useful Publications: [Maternity, paternity, adoption and parental leave | nibusinessinfo.co.uk](https://nibusinessinfo.co.uk)  
[The right to request flexible working: eligibility criteria | nibusinessinfo.co.uk](https://nibusinessinfo.co.uk)

## 8.8 Parenting NI Information and Support Line

Provides information, support and guidance to parents/guardians on parenting issues, as well as access on to parenting programmes and workshops. Parenting NI also offers training for practitioners and professionals who work with parents and families, and Employee Wellbeing seminars for working parents which can be accessed by emailing [info@parentingni.org](mailto:info@parentingni.org)

Website: [www.parentingni.org](https://www.parentingni.org)  
Telephone: **0808 8010 722 (Freephone helpline)**  
Email: [help@parentingni.org](mailto:help@parentingni.org)  
Twitter: [@ParentingNI](https://twitter.com/ParentingNI)



### 8.9 Parentline

A free confidential helpline for parents and carers throughout Northern Ireland.

Website: [Parentline | www.ci-ni.org.uk](http://www.ci-ni.org.uk)

Telephone: **0808 8020 400**

Email: [info@ci-ni.org.uk](mailto:info@ci-ni.org.uk)

Twitter: [@childreninNI](https://twitter.com/childreninNI)

### 8.10 Working Families

Working Families lead the way in helping organisations and employees build enabling and flexible environments that enhance productivity, creativity, and well-being so that work works for everyone.

Website: [Working Families | Employers - Working Families](http://WorkingFamilies.org.uk)

Telephone: **0300 012 0312 (Helpline)**

**020 3833 2050 (Office)**

Email: [office@workingfamilies.org.uk](mailto:office@workingfamilies.org.uk)

**There may be other organisations that can provide advice to employers in Northern Ireland.**

