



# Shaping public policy on childcare to maximise economic independence

Presentation for EQUINET

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**Equality Commission for Northern Ireland**

# CHILD CARE:

## NIALL: EQUINET Perspective

- Reconciliation of Work & Family life
  - Importance of equality in wider societal issues as a precursor to work / life balance
  - Considering & Shifting societal values
    - (e.g. stereotypes of caring)

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# Equality Commission for Northern Ireland

- Independent Equality Body
- Statutory remit:
  - promote **equality of opportunity** and **affirmative action**
  - work towards the **elimination of unlawful discrimination** and harassment
  - keep relevant **legislation under review**
  - promote **good race relations** and **good disability practice**
  - oversee the **effectiveness of statutory equality duties** on public authorities

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## Case Study Example:

- Context in Northern Ireland (Employment / Childcare)
- Opportunities to Mainstream Equality
- Lessons from Literature & Research

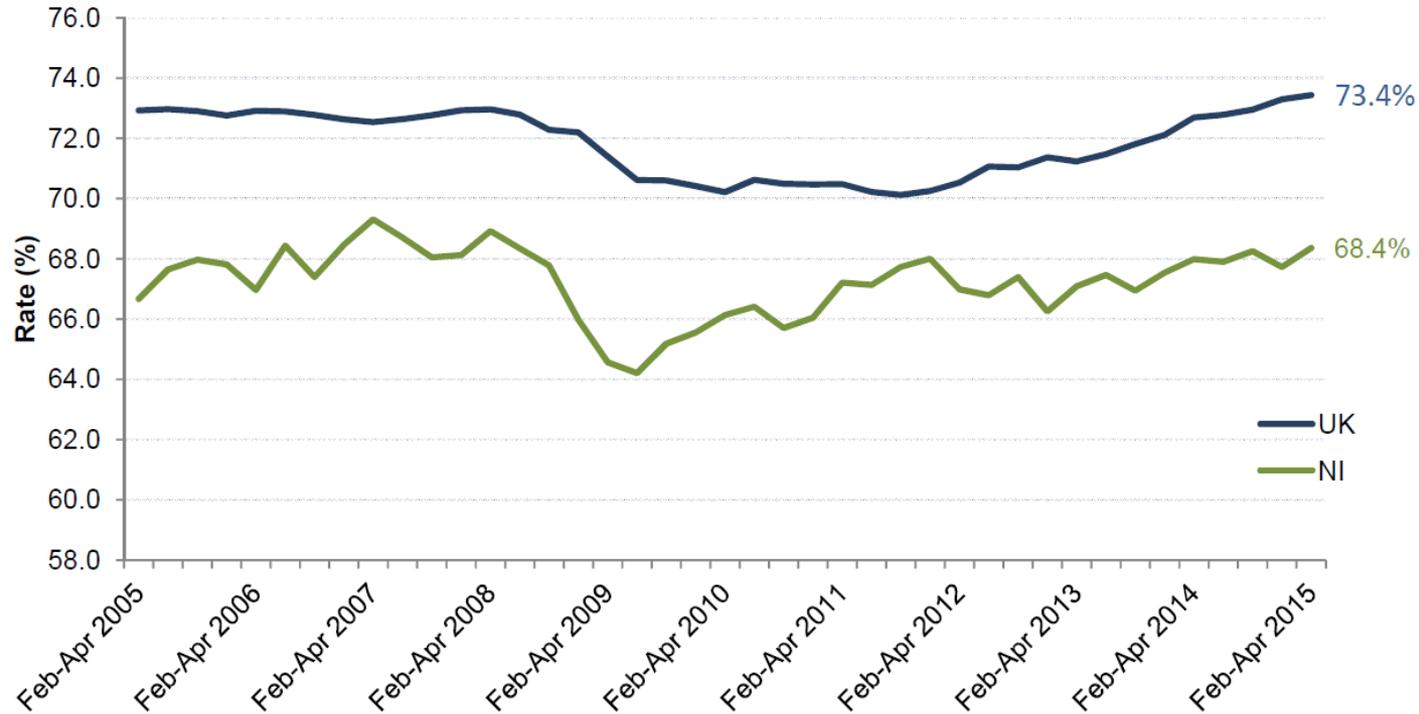
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# Context

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## UK Policy: Maximise Employment

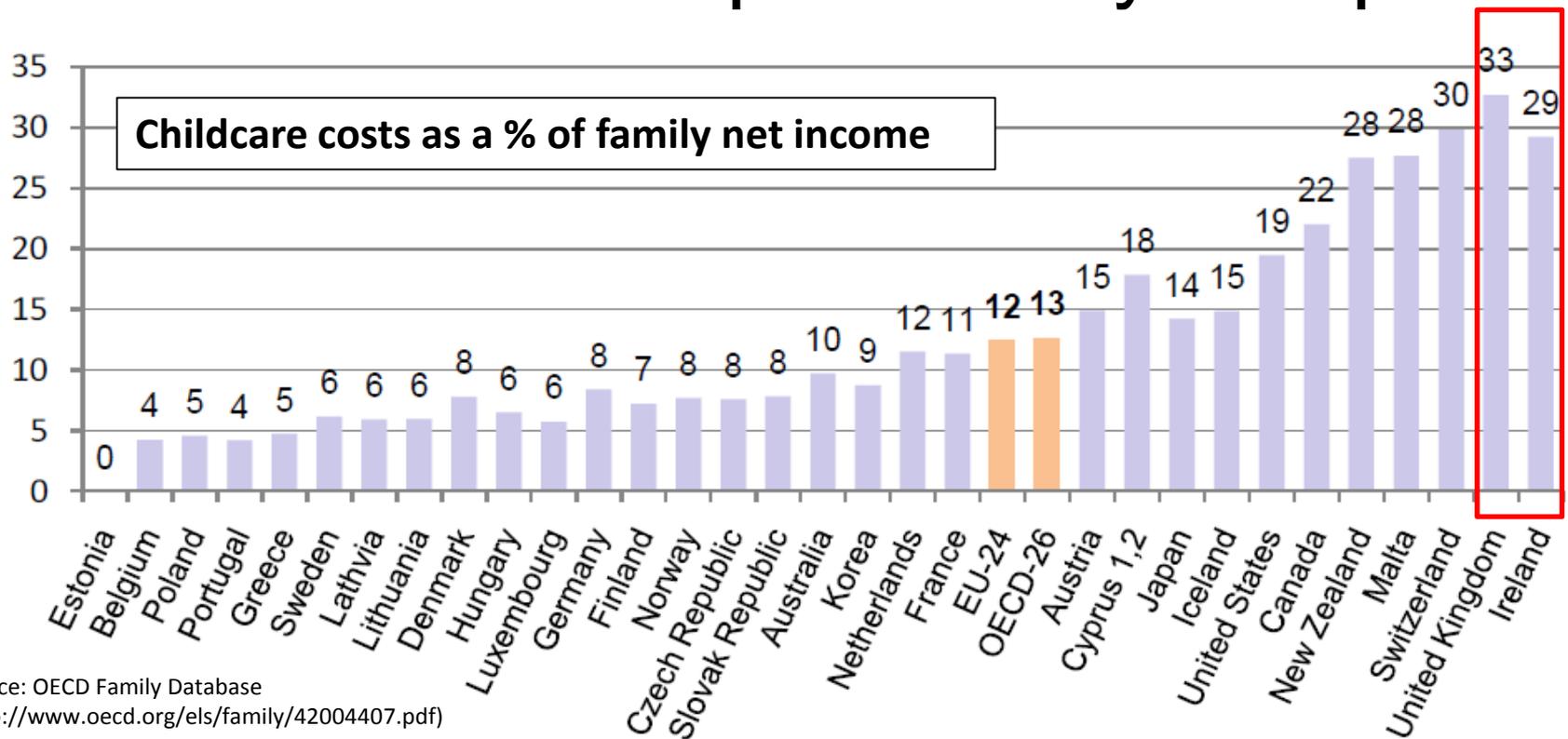
Figure 7: Seasonally adjusted employment rate, Feb-Apr 2005 to Feb - Apr 2015



Northern Ireland Labour Market Report – Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (17<sup>th</sup> June 2015)

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## UK childcare is expensive by comparison



Source: OECD Family Database  
(<http://www.oecd.org/els/family/42004407.pdf>)

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## Childcare in Northern Ireland

- Limited Childcare places; No statutory obligation to provide
- <3 yrs: Limited provision, concentrated on poorest families
- 3 yrs: nursery - state funded, but part time only
  - Working families reliant on private sector care
- Right to request flexible working
- Shared Parental Leave (recent)

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# Public Policy Opportunities?

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## Mainstreaming Equality across Public Policy

- EU 2020 Strategy (country specific recs)
  - *“the availability of affordable, high quality, full-time childcare remains a key issue.”*
- Gender Equality Strategy 2006-2016
  - *“promote equitable participation in the paid and unpaid labour force – including the equitable sharing of work and family and caring responsibilities, promoting work life balance...”*

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## Mainstreaming Equality across Public Policy

- Programme for Government 2012-15
  - “Publish and implement a childcare strategy”
  - (but only makes links to child poverty, not economic participation)
- NI Economic Strategy
  - Cross Departmental working highlighted...
  - but childcare not included in considerations

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## Childcare Strategy.

- Dec 2012 “Towards a Childcare strategy” published by Government
  - Focus on **“accessible, affordable childcare”**
  - BUT... Little / no consideration of
    - potential for childcare to improve **economic participation / independence of parents or women**; and/or
    - need to tackle gender stereotypes

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An issue of focus?

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Research

Lessons

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## Maximising Economic Participation.

Professor Ron McQuaid  
Dr Helen Graham  
Dr Marina Shapira

Employment Research Institute, Edinburgh, Scotland.

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## Lit: Drivers of maternal employment

- Affordable childcare
  - Necessary... but not sufficient on its own....
- Long and well-compensated maternity and parental leaves
- Strong norms of mothers' labour market participation and shared responsibility

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## Policy Options & Recommendations

1. The supply of childcare
2. Equality of access to childcare
3. Addressing barriers to employment
4. Attitudes to childcare and mothers' employment
5. The need for a childcare strategy

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## The supply of childcare

- Increasing the supply of childcare
- Better aligning childcare provision with the needs of working parents
- Improving information on the supply of, and demand for, childcare
- Reconsidering the distribution of the costs of childcare

**The vision:** Childcare demand is met for all working parents who want it for their children.

**The imperative for immediate action:** The Government should address gaps in the areas of little or no supply – particularly for the 0-2 age group, in some rural areas and for out of school care – and review the revenue streams and costs of childcare provision, and explore innovative ways of funding childcare.

**Strategic action to deliver vision:** The supply of childcare provision should be expanded for all age groups, with attention and resources focused on the high cost of care for young children (under 2s) and the limited pre- and after-school facilities.

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## Equality of access to childcare

- Childcare for families in rural areas
- Supporting the employment of parents with disabled children
- Childcare for Travellers, migrant and ethnic minority families
- Childcare for families with more than two children
- Childcare for low-income and single parent families

**The vision:** Suitable childcare available for all children whose parents want to work, regardless of the child's disability.

**The imperative for immediate action:** Better co-ordination between the facilities that are available and the parents that need them. Ensure a more inclusive service provision for children with mental and physical disabilities.

**Strategic action to deliver vision:** The Improve and upgrade facilities and ensure that staff undertake additional training where appropriate.

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## Addressing barriers to employment

- Promoting family- and child-friendly employers practices and policies
- Focusing on employability as well as childcare
- Improving holistic support to find, maintain and progress in employment

**The vision:** A combination of childcare, tailored employability services and family-friendly workplace practices means that motherhood does not represent a barrier to training or employment.

**The imperative for immediate action:** Reward and share examples of family-friendly workplaces. Support and expand existing initiatives that aim to offer the kind of holistic support that is required.

**Strategic action to deliver vision:** There are differences between childcare support while in training or education and while in employment; the transition into employment would be smoother if mothers could expect some continuity in their childcare arrangement, at least for a temporary period.

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## Attitudes to childcare

- Challenging gender stereotyping in parenting and parental leave
- Increasing quality and diversity in the childcare workforce

**The vision:** A highly qualified, diverse and productive childcare workforce.

**The imperative for immediate action:** Encourage more diversity, especially of men, in childcare employment. Monitor age and gender of staff. Encourage greater productivity in childcare and better paid childcare workers while raising standard of childcare. Move towards a virtuous circle of well trained staff who are productive and well paid (possibly with higher staff/child ratios which might help fund such an approach) and provide excellent childcare; rather than moving to a low paid, low productive staff.

**Strategic action to deliver vision:** Great professionalization of the childcare workforce, through investment and qualifications. Analysis of how to raise the productivity (including raising the quality of childcare provision).

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## The need for a childcare strategy

- Agreeing and implementing the proposed childcare strategy
- Making childcare a higher priority for government
- Considering wider potential impacts of childcare
- Developing a realistic and sustainable funding model
- Raising minimum standards of childcare provision

**The vision:** A strategy that is based on a rights-based model of provision, committing the necessary co-ordination and resources to supply sufficient childcare to all working (or potentially working) parents.

**The imperative for immediate action:** A childcare strategy that addresses the full range of childcare needs, explicitly links childcare and employment, and assigns responsibilities across government and other relevant actors.

**Strategic action to deliver vision:** A statutory duty upon a nominated governmental body to promote, and seek to ensure that there is, adequate childcare.

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# Challenges

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## Childcare in Northern Ireland.

- Dec 2012 “Towards a Childcare strategy” published by Gov.
  - Little / no consideration of potential for childcare to improve **economic participation / independence of parents or women** and/or need to tackle gender stereotypes

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## ‘Baby Steps’?

- 2013 – Speech by Junior Ministers (Office of the First and Deputy First Minister)
  - “**For women in particular**, affordable, reliable, quality **childcare is essential** if they wish to **join the workforce**, or to **train or study** for work...
  - The availability of affordable, quality childcare is vital and **will enable women to participate in re-growing the economy** as employees or business owners... It will enable them to **take their place within the workforce...** and to **progress their careers...**”
- 2015 – Still awaiting consultation on a draft childcare strategy for NI..

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