

## **Evidence Submission to the Education Committee Inquiry:**

### **Support for childcare and the early years**

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#### **Background to the evidence**

Anna Tarrant, Linzi Ladlow and Laura Way comprise a team of academic social science researchers at the University of Lincoln, all of whom have young children and are affected by the restrictive costs characterising the current childcare system. We predominantly present research evidence from three studies; *Fathering and Poverty* (Tarrant, 2014-2018), the UKRI funded 'Following Young Fathers Further' (hereafter FYFF, 2020-24) and *Housing Young Parents* (Ladlow, 2015-2021). *Fathering and Poverty* explored the fathering of men in low-income families and *Young Parents and Housing* explored the housing trajectories of young parents aged 25 and under. FYFF is a qualitative longitudinal research study about the parenting journeys and support needs of young parents (aged 25 and under), with a specific focus on disadvantaged young fathers. They have collective expertise about young parenthood and marginalised fatherhoods and are working directly with young parents and voluntary, community and statutory services that engage with young people across their parenting journeys, to co-create more effective, evidence informed interventions.

#### **Summary**

- Parents in our research unanimously describe the current childcare system as inflexible, expensive and in some cases unavailable, such that it is not an option for them. For disadvantaged parents/carers, in particular (e.g., young parents, kinship carers) the disadvantage they and their children experience is being compounded longer term as childcare fees rise, locking them into intergenerational cycles of poverty that are structurally driven and created.
- For young parents, the high costs of childcare combined with low wages, insecure work, limited family support and lack of entitlements associated with the age of their child/children and their own young age, affect fertility decisions and operate to limit the choices parents can make about how they manage work and family responsibilities.
- Unaffordable and inflexible childcare often requires one or both parents to withdraw from the labour market, reducing their financial stability in the present and affecting future employment prospects. Where wages are outstripped by the cost of childcare, employment is no longer a viable option.
- The lack of affordable and flexible childcare also has broader implications for the citizenship of parents (both mothers and fathers, but predominantly mothers), impacting negatively on national economic productivity.
- There are also broader social and psychological implications for the mental health of parents, especially those who are forced into deciding between employment and care responsibilities.

- Current Tax-Free Childcare incentives do not adequately reduce costs for parents, especially for those on a low income. The online system is also complicated to navigate and does not account for those experiencing digital poverty associated with a low wage economy.
- Current childcare costs are locking young people out of education opportunities that have potential to support them longer term into secure employment.
- The recent lack of funding for locally embedded services like Sure Start, especially in areas of deprivation, means that these families and their children miss out on holistic support for the whole family. Children in low-income families are especially disadvantaged by reduced opportunities to prepare and socialise for primary school.

## 1. Childcare entitlements as a barrier to employment for disadvantaged families

1.1 The expense of childcare is rarely considered a problem for fathers because of the historical association of childcare with women and mothers. Yet fathers and other male caregivers are also disadvantaged by expensive and inaccessible childcare in a dual-earner welfare context and/or where they are the primary caregiver.

1.2 For young parents, lack of access to affordable and flexible childcare is directly associated with opportunities and barriers in accessing the labour market. Insecure work, labour market precarity and reduced welfare entitlements for those aged under 25, combined to further disadvantage young people and parents from disadvantaged backgrounds.

1.3 Young parents may be challenged in entering the labour market by any combination of lengthy gaps between their education and employment, inflexible and unaffordable local childcare, punitive welfare systems, low minimum wage and poor employment prospects and opportunities in localities. Young parents aged 23 and under are additionally disadvantaged by lower rates of minimum wage.

1.4 For young parents aged 18 and under, the minimum wage of £4.81 makes it impossible to afford childcare to support work and gain necessary skills to advance in the labour market following education. Under 18s are more likely to have children aged 0-2 when there are no subsidies for childcare. This is especially problematic for young parents without a wider family support system who can provide free and flexible childcare because they themselves may be in employment.

1.5 In a youth labour market context that is predominantly low-pay and/or reliant on zero-hour contracts, young parents who reside together as couples are often forced to make decisions about who will work and who will provide childcare. This affects the mental health of the couple and the individuals within it and often results in young mothers and fathers being locked out of employment opportunities. Craig, aged 29, is a stay-at-home father. He would prefer to be at work, but his partner has a higher wage and local childcare is unaffordable. This has impacted on his mental health and identity as a man and a father:

I've enjoyed being at home with the kids but I'm, I'm a working man, I prefer to go out and work. And to be honest it has played a little bit of, it has put a little bit of strain on my mental health. I don't feel like I've been doing my part for the family (Tarrant et al. 2021)

1.6 Single parents are more likely to be disadvantaged by expensive childcare. Costs of childcare often outweigh low and inadequate wages and welfare support.

## 2. Childcare as a barrier to education

2.1 Access to the *Care to Learn*<sup>[i]</sup> fund currently ends at age 20 and free Further Education is rarely available beyond age 19. Many young parents may seek to return to education when their child or children are older, at which point they are often no longer eligible.

2.2 The Housing Young Parents (Ladlow, 2021) study revealed that both young mothers and fathers were choosing to delay entry into the workforce because childcare is not affordable and access to education opportunities carry financial costs. This may result in one or both parents delaying their entry into employment up until their child(ren) reach the age of 5 when they start primary school. A young mother explains:

It I go back to college I have to pay for it. We can't really afford two grand. And I ain't really got the time with [partner] being at work, now. You only have three hours a day in nursery for the whole week, so I'm going to wait until they're in school, and try and find summat.

[i] <https://www.gov.uk/care-to-learn/eligibility>

2.3 Students in Higher Education are not eligible for tax free childcare. This is especially problematic for those doing postgraduate study including doctorates. High childcare fees combined with the need for a student loan and/or low stipends are therefore barriers to young people seeking to further their education at university.

## 3. Childcare as a barrier for older caregivers/kinship carers

3.1 Older caregivers including kinship carers face specific challenges in accessing and affording childcare linked to age discrimination in the workplace and low- and short- term funding associated with taking on formal responsibility for a grandchild or other family member (Tarrant, 2021).

3.2 Pearce (aged 58) who participated in the Fathering and Poverty study (Tarrant, 2021), and who unexpectedly became a male kinship carer for his two young grandchildren (aged 2 and 4), explains that childcare (and employment) locally is both inflexible and unaffordable. This disadvantages him in terms of being in employment and the children in terms of being unable to attend childcare.

We struggle. This is why I am going back to see [social services] in September. We get this income support but because I can't claim anything, but they will get me a job; and I can't because I have two kids to look after. Have to get this family credit thing: £300 a month. I know I've got a job if I want it. I'm going to try and get a job at a friend's company: delivering beds. I'm hoping that he will let me have all the holidays off or it is no good to me. I cannot afford to put these in [childcare] full time...if they are off for six weeks in holiday, it will cost me more than I can earn. This will be £70 a day. Childcare is £10 per afternoon each. £7.50 per mornings: a couple of hundred pound a week; and I am going to earn a £100. If they will let me come and work for him five days a week and have weekends off and holidays. If that works, brilliant. If it don't, I don't know what I will do.

## 4. Early years provision

4.1 Support services such as Family Hubs and Sure Start Centres often provide holistic support services that benefit the whole family. Their loss in recent years has resulted in a loss of opportunities for parents to socialize with their children, increasing their isolation. Children also lose out on important socialisation opportunities. One young mother from the Housing and Young Parents (Ladlow, 2021) study said:

'In there is antenatal and parent's group. In there you can get free clothes for the baby and you can get emotional support and material support. And in there you can meet new people, make friends, do not feel lonely. And things start to be a bit better'

4.2. Limited access to nurseries based on cost especially disadvantages children from low-income families. One young mother notes the impact of their child's exclusion from childcare based on cost, and the broader social and developmental impacts this has:

[Child] is seeing other people, it's getting him started and ready for nursery cos he's seeing other kids down there that are his age so it's nice for them. It helps with them to not be as shy. And get them more confident. Not only for myself but for them too. Which is good for them, isn't it.

4.3 The return of Family Hubs is an encouraging policy move but our evidence suggests the need for the embedding of father-inclusive practice and support environments to ensure that early years provision effectively supports all families and their children. This includes for fathers and other male carers who may be primary caregivers and often feel excluded from local services based on their gender. Fathers benefit from tailored and holistic support that champions their identities and investments as fathers and recognises the importance of their involvement in their children's upbringing.

## References

Tarrant, A., Way, L. and Ladlow, L. (2020) *Negotiating 'earning' and 'caring' through the COVID-19 crisis: change and continuities in the parenting and employment trajectories of young fathers*, Following Young Fathers Further, Wave One findings, Briefing Paper One, <https://followingyoungfathersfurther.org/asset/working-paper-one/>

Tarrant, A. (2021) *Fathering and Poverty: Uncovering Men's Participation in Low-Income Family Life*, Bristol: Policy Press.

Ladlow, L. (2021) *Housing Young Parents*, unpublished thesis, University of Leeds