



**YOUNG  
WOMEN'S  
TRUST**

**CHILDCARE:  
WHAT YOUNG WOMEN WANT**



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# INTRODUCTION

**An hour's childcare is, for many, more than an hours wages. Childcare that too often costs more than rent is preventing women entering and progressing in the workplace.**

Younger mums can find it even harder to return to work. Young women are disproportionately on low pay. Combined with a lack of savings, this leaves many struggling to cover childcare fees, and bridge

the gap between the end of maternity leave and the start of free childcare – which can be up to two years.

Many young women have to manage these costs alone. Around a quarter of households with children in the UK are lone parent families and 90 per cent of these parents are women.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast, recent changes to childcare policy have disproportionately benefited families that are already relatively financially comfortable or stable. The introduction of tax-free childcare and the 30 hours of free childcare both target working parents whilst other parents continue to face significant challenges.<sup>2,3</sup>

The childcare system has been chronically underfunded and undervalued. Investment in the national infrastructure has consistently overlooked the role young women have in the economy and side-stepped the need for commitments to the broader social infrastructure, including childcare.

This report seeks to understand how current policy impacts on younger mums who are out of work or in low-paid work. We asked them what they want from the childcare system and we hope that the recommendations in this report will help meet their needs. In doing so we hope to give voice to a significant group of women whose voices often go unheard in wider discussions about childcare.

## Background

Our *Young, Female and Forgotten* report showed that new mothers and young women who live with a dependent child are six times more likely to become economically inactive than other young women.

We followed this up with research into the challenges young mums face. *What Young Mums Want* exposed the extent to which employers discriminate against young mums. Our 2018 report *Worrying Times* showed that 43 per cent of young women with children had experienced maternity discrimination at work.

1 <https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/what-we-do/media-centre/single-parents-facts-figures/>

2 Stewart and Waldfogel (2017), *Closing Gaps Early*, Sutton Trust: [https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Closing-Gaps-Early\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Closing-Gaps-Early_FINAL.pdf)

3 Akhal (2019), *The impact of recent government policies on early years provision* (Education Policy Institute): [https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Early-years-take-up\\_-EPI.pdf](https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Early-years-take-up_-EPI.pdf)





This discrimination has even been acknowledged by employers. One in five employers we surveyed acknowledged that pregnancy or having children impacts on decisions about recruitment and promotion. One in eight employers also admitted that women were not taken as seriously in the workplace when they returned to work after having children.

Furthermore, young mothers said they felt judged by members of the public, unable to win no matter what they do. They were criticised if they left their pre-school children to return to work and criticised if they claimed benefits to delay their return until their child older.

We found that a key factor holding back women from returning to work was the lack of flexibility and high cost of formal childcare. These costs were so high that many young mums were worse off financially if they chose to return to work.

Despite welcome efforts by successive governments to respond to parents' needs over recent years, the current childcare system continues to fail young mothers, particularly those out of work or on low pay. Free childcare is not available to those with younger children and is often implemented in a way that is too inflexible for parents to make use of. Parents who work irregular shifts or work outside of the usual 9 to 5 office hours are unable to find childcare that meets their needs. Where flexibility does exist, funding shortfalls mean that either costs rise, quality falls or, in many cases, both.

The current system also provides limited support to those in education, thereby limiting options for young parents to train and gain valuable skills. Extending free childcare to those in education would provide certainty and stability for parents as well as easing the transition from education into work.

Underlying all of this is the question of why young mums are disproportionately burdened with this struggle to access childcare in the first place. The current unbalanced system of shared parental leave and a lack of flexible working makes it harder for mothers to enter, remain and progress in the workplace. This is compounded by the gender discrimination that young women trying to enter work already face.

The system needs deep and lasting change as well as the investment to make this possible. Childcare is not an optional extra but a vital part of our infrastructure. It has the potential to unleash the contributions of young women. A childcare system that works for young women is one that serves the country as a whole and we urge the Government to take urgent action to make this happen.

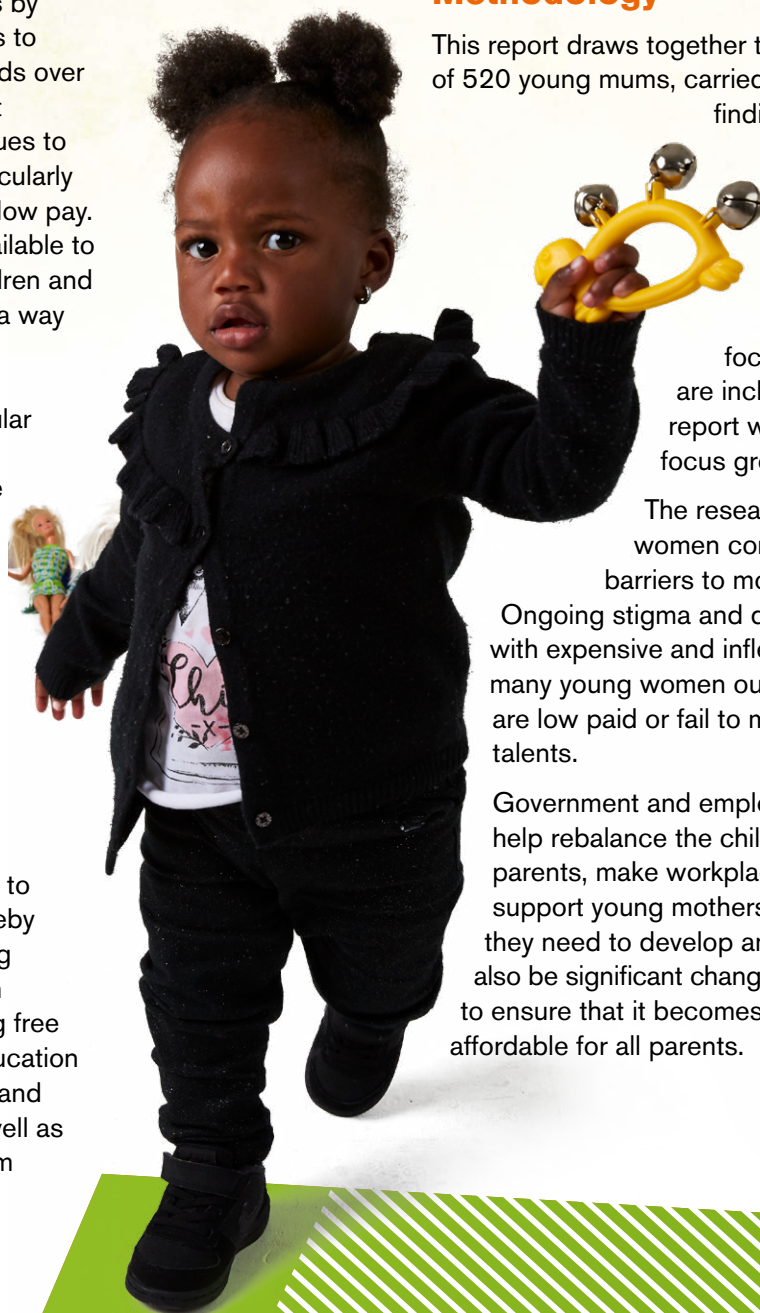
## Methodology

This report draws together the results of a survey of 520 young mums, carried out by Survation, with findings of five focus groups conducted with mums of pre-school children held in London, Newcastle, Hull and Leicester. Insightful quotes from focus group participants are included throughout this report with the location of the focus group they attended.

The research shows that young women continue to face tremendous barriers to moving into employment.

Ongoing stigma and discrimination combine with expensive and inflexible childcare to keep many young women out of work or in jobs that are low paid or fail to make the most of their talents.

Government and employers must do more to help rebalance the childcare burden between parents, make workplaces more flexible and to support young mothers to access the training they need to develop and progress. There must also be significant changes to the childcare system to ensure that it becomes more flexible and affordable for all parents.





# EXISTING CHILDCARE POLICY



**The current childcare policy in England is incredibly complex and hard to navigate. Discussions in the focus groups held for this report have emphasised how young women feel overwhelmed by the variety of schemes, each with different eligibility criteria. Individuals can find it incredibly difficult to know what support, if any, they are eligible to receive.**

There was a clear message that this made it difficult for young women to access the support that was available. Many had simply given up and either struggled to cover the full costs themselves or felt obliged to delay their return to work because finding the right childcare was seen as too difficult. However, we also heard that, even with the existing support, many young mums were still unable to find childcare that met their needs at an affordable rate.

To put this into context, it is worth summarising the range of existing policies that are currently on offer to support parents with childcare costs.<sup>4</sup>

## Free childcare

- 1. Tax-Free Childcare:** Parents receive a top up of £2 for every £8 they pay into an online account. The maximum level of support is £500 every 3 months for each child. Parents and their partner (if they have one) must both be working for at least 16 hours a week or be on parental leave, sick leave or annual leave.
- 2. 30-hours free childcare:** Parents of three to four-year-olds who are both working at least 16 hours a week and each earning less than £100,000 per year can receive up to 1,140 hours of free childcare a year. This is usually divided over 38 weeks of the year but some providers have chosen to annualise the offer, limiting the offer to about 22 hours a week. There have been other reports that many providers do not offer completely free places, charging very high costs for (sometimes compulsory) extras such as lunch or top-up hours.<sup>5</sup> The Education Select Committee has additionally criticised the policy for supporting better-off parents to the detriment of

children who could benefit most from early-years provision. It has called for the earnings cap of £100,000 to be reduced and the funds redirected to support the most disadvantaged children.<sup>6</sup>

- 3. 15-hours free childcare:** All three to four-year-olds are able to receive 570 hours of free childcare, equivalent to 15 hours a week for 38 weeks of the year. Parents of two-year-olds can also claim the 15 free hours if they are in receipt of a number of benefits including Income Support, Employment and Support Allowance or Universal Credit. Under Universal Credit parents must have a combined income of less than £15,400 a year. Parents claiming tax credits are also eligible if they have an income of less than £16,190.

## Childcare and the welfare system

- 4. Universal Credit:** Parents who are working and claiming Universal Credit can claim up to 85 per cent of childcare costs, up to a maximum of £175 per week for one child or £300 per week for two or more. This must be paid in full and reclaimed in arrears which can create difficulty for young parents. Furthermore, evidence from Resolution Foundation shows that younger parents do not benefit to the same extent from this support. Additionally, in a change from the previous benefits system, single parents under 25 have a lower overall entitlement to older parents which can significantly hamper their ability to afford childcare and other costs.
- 5. Flexible Support Fund:** Work coaches at jobcentres can access discretionary funding to support claimants to overcome barriers to work including childcare. Payments made via the fund do not have to be paid back. Evidence from the Work and Pensions Select Committee suggests that very little of the flexible support fund is being used to cover childcare costs.<sup>7</sup> Both the polling and focus groups for this report also highlight the lack of awareness about the fund amongst the vast majority of parents.

<sup>4</sup> Adapted from, Treasury Committee (2018), Ninth report of Session 2017-2019: Childcare. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmtreasy/757/757.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Early Year's Alliance, 2018, <https://www.eyalliance.org.uk/parents-pay-price-30-hour-offer-childcare-providers-are-forced-limit-fully-free-e2%80%99-places-new-survey>

<sup>6</sup> House of Commons Education Committee (2019), Tackling disadvantage in the early years, ninth Report of Session 2017-19. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmeduc/1006/1006.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Work and Pensions Select Committee (2018), Twenty-Second Report of Session 2017-19. Universal Credit: Childcare <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmworpen/1771/177105.htm>



**6. Budgeting Advances:** For people who have been claiming Universal Credit for at least six months and can demonstrate low income (below £3,600 for a couple, or £2,600 for single parents) budgeting advances are available to help them cover immediate costs, including childcare. Claimants are required to pay them back. The Work and Pensions Select Committee has criticised this approach, which effectively increases the level of debt and does little to resolve long-term difficulties.<sup>8</sup> It has also been highlighted that both budgeting advances and the Flexible Support Fund are designed for one-off payments to overcome temporary changes and therefore do little to support parents struggling to meet ongoing childcare costs.

**7. Child Tax Credits:** Although this has largely been replaced by Universal Credit for most parents, the support is still available for those on existing claims or those who claim the severe disability premium. The maximum amount is divided between a family element of £545 a year, with a further £2,780 for each child. Further premiums £3,555 and £4,715 for parents of disabled and severely disabled children. The full amount that can be claimed is dependent on income.

**8. Working Tax Credits:** Similarly, these have been replaced by Universal Credit for many people. Parents still in receipt Working Tax Credits can claim additional support up to 70 per cent of childcare costs up to the same thresholds as for Universal Credit. The amount that parents are able to receive depends on their income and other circumstances.

## Childcare and Education

**9. Care to Learn:** For parents under the age of 20 starting a publicly funded course at school, sixth form or sixth form college, Care to Learn offers weekly payments to cover childcare costs, including deposits and registration fees. The maximum amount of support a parent can receive is £175 a week per child in London and £160 a week per child elsewhere. Young Women's Trust has previously called for this support to be extended to older mothers and those undertaking apprenticeships.<sup>9</sup>

**10. Discretionary Learner Support:** For parents over 20 in education, support is available from their education provider on a discretionary basis. Young mums tell us that, because the support is not guaranteed and they can only apply once they have been accepted on a course, this approach does not give the certainty they need to make decisions about their future.

**11. Childcare Grant:** Parents in full-time higher education courses with children under the age of 15 (17 if they have special educational needs) can receive additional support for childcare costs if they are claiming student finance. The amount they will be able to receive is based on their income and circumstances.

The complexity of these childcare policies has arisen because they have been developed in a piecemeal fashion to meet different policy objectives. Two of the principal objectives have been to:

- a. Improve the educational outcomes for children in the early years. This has focused on directing funding to support low-income parents who have frequently not accessed formal childcare to the same degree as other parents. Various reports have established the benefits of high-quality early years education on children's later outcomes and social mobility.<sup>10,11</sup> Governments have therefore sought to drive up quality and standards in early years settings.
- b. Remove barriers to employment for parents and increase maternal employment. The high cost of formal childcare means that parents often make the decision that they will be better off financially by not returning to work. Societal expectations, as well as significant and entrenched gender pay gaps and disparities between maternity and paternity leave and pay, mean that women are more likely to be the ones delaying their return to work. Lowering the cost of childcare is therefore seen as essential to supporting more women into employment.

<sup>8</sup> Work and Pensions Select Committee (2018), Twenty-Second Report of Session 2017-19. Universal Credit: Childcare <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmworpen/1771/177105.htm>

<sup>9</sup> Young Women's Trust (2017), Young Women and Apprenticeships: still not working [https://www.youngwomentrust.org/assets/0000/8200/Young\\_Women\\_and\\_apprenticeships.pdf](https://www.youngwomentrust.org/assets/0000/8200/Young_Women_and_apprenticeships.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Melhuish and Gardiner (2018), Study of Early Education and Development, Department for Education [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/738725/SEED\\_Impact\\_Age\\_4\\_Report\\_September\\_2018.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/738725/SEED_Impact_Age_4_Report_September_2018.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I., & Taggart, B. (2010). Early childhood matters: Evidence from the effective pre-school and primary education project. Oxon: Routledge.



These are both important roles for childcare. However, as noted in the recent Treasury Committee report, the way policies have been developed frequently bring the two objectives into conflict.<sup>12</sup> Without significant Government investment, a focus on quality for example risks driving up costs for parents, detracting from the second objective. Similarly, as support is increased for working parents, funding is diverted away from children who stand to benefit most from improved early years provision. In this latter case, there is also a risk that quality falls, and the (predominately female) childcare workforce suffers from poor wages and lack of progression opportunities.

Young Women's Trust believes the current childcare offer is overly complex and designed in a way that falls short of its policy objectives. This report has set out to understand what changes are needed to create a childcare offer that meets the needs of young women and other parents.

The policies we are calling for in this report would ensure that young mothers can access high quality, flexible childcare that both supports them into work and offers excellent outcomes for their children.



<sup>12</sup> Treasury Committee (2018), Ninth report of Session 2017-2019: Childcare. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmtreasy/757/757.pdf>



# SURVEY FINDINGS



**We commissioned Survation to poll 520 mothers aged 18-30. We also drew on the findings from our survey of 802 HR decision makers carried out by YouGov to understand more about employers' attitudes towards childcare.<sup>13</sup>**

We found that while young mums were aware of some of the most prominent policies, including the free hours, there were still sources of support that they did not know about. This means they miss out on vital support such as the flexible support fund administered by jobcentres. Furthermore, even those mums who were aware of a number of policies were often still unable to access support. For example, a lack of funded places and a lack of flexibility mean that many young mums do not take up the free childcare places. The policies therefore, however well-intentioned, are failing to have the cut-through required with many of the mums who could benefit the most from them.

A key factor in mums not accessing childcare was the high cost and lack of flexibility. Three quarters (78%) of mums we surveyed said that cheaper childcare would be important in helping them find employment. Similar numbers called for more to be done to ensure the full amount of free childcare is available all year round. The challenge of paying high deposits and registration fees also locked many women out, with half of those surveyed saying they not being able to afford these fees had left them without being able to find appropriate childcare.

In addition, we found that employers continued to both directly discriminate against mothers and pursue policies that make it more difficult for them to fit work around available childcare.

## **Current childcare policies don't meet young mums' needs**

- 84% had heard of the 30 hours policy, but one in three did not make use of the hours to which they are entitled
- The main reasons for not taking up the 30 hours were a lack of funded places at the local nursery (27%), or the hours on offer not meeting mums' needs (13%)
- 82% were aware of the 15 hours policy, but two in five (40%) did not take up their hours
- The main reasons for not taking up the 15 hours were the hours on offer not meeting mums' needs (20%) or a lack of funded places at the local nursery (10%)

## **Young mums struggle financially with childcare making things worse**

- Two thirds (67%) of young mums said they were struggling or just about managing to cope financially, rising to 82% for those who are not working
- Half skipped meals at least once a week (50%) to provide for their children with this rising to two thirds (64%) of those on Universal Credit
- One in four skipped meals every day (28%) to provide for their children with 37% of those on Universal Credit doing the same
- Six in ten (61%) skipped meals regularly

<sup>13</sup> The survey of mothers was carried out by Survation between 13th and 20th March 2019. The survey of HR decision makers was carried out by YouGov in February 2019.

# 61%

## REGULARLY SKIPPED MEALS







# ONE IN THREE YOUNG MUMS HAD TO LEAVE A JOB BECAUSE THEY COULD NOT AFFORD CHILDCARE

## Many have to leave work because childcare costs are so high

- One in three young mums (33%) had to leave a job because they could not afford childcare
- More than half (57%) were unable to take a job because of a lack of suitable childcare options
- This was higher for those currently out of work with two thirds saying they had been unable to take up work due to childcare costs
- More than half (52%) said they would work more hours if they could get the childcare they needed at an affordable price

## Upfront childcare costs are a particular challenge

- 50% said that the upfront cost of nursery care (deposit and advance payment) meant they had been unable to find appropriate care
- 64% of those claiming Universal Credit had been unable to take up childcare places due to upfront costs

82% | 67%  
NON-WORKING | WORKING

# MUMS WERE STRUGGLING TO COPE FINANCIALLY

## Discrimination and inflexibility by employers make things worse

- One in four young mums (28%) had been discriminated against by an employer after disclosing that they were pregnant
- 40% said they had been asked about how being a mum affects their ability to work
- One in three (36%) have had a request to work flexibly turned down

## There is a lack of information about support

- 68% of mums on universal credit had not been told about JCP's Flexible Support Fund which can provide additional support for childcare
- 86% of mums out of work did not know about the fund
- 75% of all young mums had never heard of the flexible support fund



# AFFORDABLE CHILDCARE



**Both focus groups and survey work revealed the biggest barrier to young women being able to access the childcare they need is the high cost.**

Paying for childcare put many young women under significant financial pressure, and in some cases meant they had been forced to delay going back to work because they were worse off financially when in employment. Many said that they would choose to go back to work earlier but are forced to spend longer than desired out of employment as they seek a balance that will allow them to support their families. This was especially true if their children were too young to qualify for free childcare.

Upfront childcare costs are particularly challenging as they prevent young women from taking the first steps back to employment or education and support to cover them is often difficult to find.

The impact on work is a huge concern. Huge numbers of women are locked out of employment as a result, limiting their earning power. It also means they are forced to rely on benefits instead of paying taxes. The longer young women take out of the labour market the harder it is to return.

Furthermore, existing childcare support – while much improved – is not sufficient. The lack of flexibility of the free hours is discussed in the next section, however, parents often find it a struggle to pay for additional hours over and above the free allowance. This means that young women are often unable to make use of the free hours.





Our focus groups found that:

## **Childcare costs were a significant proportion of women's earnings**

Many young mums raised the issue that the cost of childcare was often equal to or higher than their earnings or potential earnings:

**“Even just the idea that when you're working or you're with someone who is working they're literally just working to pay the childcare. It doesn't make sense, I don't get that, so all of your income just goes on the nursery fees and you put your child in nursery so you can work, what kind of a loop is that, it just doesn't seem right.”**

*(London focus group participant)*

**“When I calculated it, if he [my son] goes Monday to Friday, it costs £1,050 a month and to be fair I don't know how much you need to earn to be able to pay that and still live. They do half day or full day? From 7.45 till 6, the times are quite good, it's just the money.”**

*(Leicester)*

**“Day care, I found out that it was between £45 to £50 [per day]. That's about roughly what I'd be paid to work.”**

*(Hull)*

Although young women who were single parents particularly struggled to cover costs alone, there was also a sense that childcare was a barrier, no matter what the family make-up:

**“I think childcare is expensive generally. But I think if you're a single parent with only one income, that's all of your income. And then there's parents who are much older, married, with two incomes and they still can't afford childcare.”**

*(London)*

For some young women, childcare was the biggest single cost they faced, costing more than their rent and other household expenses:

**“If mine was to go to nursery, part time, it costs me more than my rent. A single parent, one income. It doesn't matter whether it's one income or [you're earning] just above the threshold, it doesn't work, no matter what.”**

*(London)*

Many young women felt frustrated that childcare costs prevented them from moving forwards and improving their prospects at work:

**“Even though I'm getting paid more, I was actually better off part-time financially because I'm spending more money on childcare, more money on travel. In my head I was moving forward, getting a proper job, going to get a better salary, but the reality of it is, you know, I'm struggling with money all the time. This shouldn't be the case.”**

*(London)*



## **In fact, many had been forced to give up work or change jobs**

It was incredibly common to hear that young mums had been forced to give up work because of childcare costs:

**“We moved like six months ago from London to Leicester. Before I was working full-time, I was giving my child to the childminder, but he was all the time sick. Every single month he was sick and I had to take time off all the time. And it was so hard because I can't all the time say I can't come to work, or my husband and I was trying to find [childcare] here but it's too expensive.”**  
(Leicester)

**“You're [sometimes] not able to work the job you would like to ... The childcare is very expensive. If you can't afford the childcare, you can only work weekends or nights, this is really difficult for mothers to be with their child all day then go to work for the night shift in a factory. There's nothing to choose, there's no good jobs we can do really [as mothers].”**  
(Leicester)

Many also changed jobs or worked night shifts to be able to balance childcare, which frequently had an impact on their physical or mental health and relationships:

**“I have to work at night and my husband is a student so he can look after him. I found out that the cost of childcare per week was roughly what I would be paid to work.”**  
(Hull)

**“The thing about shifts as well, most times your partner does the day shift and then you go at night, means you're not seeing each other as well.”**  
(Leicester)

**“When you go at night and come back and you have the little one, and you can't sleep actually because you if you sleep don't know what will happen to them. So you don't sleep, and without sleep you can't really look after a child, it's not healthy it tells on your skin it tells in everything.”**  
(Leicester)

## **Upfront costs were a particular challenge**

Young mums told us that deposits and registration fees were frequently required to secure places in childcare. This made the transition to work harder as many women struggled to meet the costs before having an income:

**“With the nursery I have to pay £150 deposit to secure the place otherwise they can't guarantee that they will secure the place. It was [a struggle] because I was not working and I wasn't having any money at this point so I was lucky because when [my son] was born people gave me money for him, so I took from his money basically.”**  
(Leicester)





**“I borrowed the money. I had to pay the same cost as the monthly fee as a deposit. At the time [my son] was part time so I think it was £600 and something pounds. I had to borrow it from whoever I could borrow it from. It was just brutal. I just don’t see how that could ever be appropriate. Especially when you pay a deposit and not even be guaranteed a place, I don’t even know how that is legal. It was so expensive to start with I felt like I never quite got back on my feet after that.”**

(London)

Covering these costs frequently left young mums short of money for other essentials:

**“With [my son’s] nursery they mentioned a registration fee when I did the tour, it was only £20, and I was doing all the paperwork so I didn’t have to come in another day and then she was like oh its £20 then a week upfront costs which was like £170 and I was like ‘oh my god’ then on that day I’d got my Universal Credit in so I thought I’ll just have to pay it with that. I had £200 on Universal Credit so all of that went on the nursery. Another thing as well, is that I was told that I’d get the deposit back in September and I didn’t and they say ‘oh no we’ll keep it in case of illness and stuff’, I don’t know. It was a bit dodgy.”**

(London)



For women claiming Universal Credit childcare costs were particularly challenging as they had to pay upfront and claim the money back. This frequently left women in arrears and struggling to keep up with ongoing costs.

**“The registration fees, luckily, was just, I’m saying “luckily”, £50 but you know her nursery is the cheapest in my area in terms of the hours she does, and in terms of the upfront fees, again it was probably the cheapest. On top of that you have to pay a deposit. A lot of people don’t have that because on UC, you don’t get paid until after you’ve paid that money. So before that, what are you going to do? You have nothing.”**

(London)

### **Financial insecurity leaves young mums susceptible to changes of circumstances**

Even when young mums were able to afford childcare, their situation was far from comfortable. Many spoke about how they struggled from month to month. In particular, any changes in their circumstance had the potential to impact on their ability to afford childcare.

Additionally, for those claiming 30 hours free childcare, the need to demonstrate eligibility on a quarterly basis meant that support could be lost if their employment status changed. Although the current system includes a grace period, many parents remained ineligible after this time meaning they often had little choice but to withdraw their child from positive childcare settings they could no longer afford.

This instability had the potential for a destabilising effect on children and led to huge levels of anxiety, with young women unable to plan for the future.



**“** I just think every nursery is expensive, I don't know if it's just because I'm poor. At the minute [I'm at] uni [and my son] is full time because I got a childcare grant. But next year, they're saying I'm not eligible because [my partner's] wages have gone up since last year but I'm not eligible for the 30 hours because [although] he's working, I'm not working. [But that's] just because I'm a student.”

(London)

**“** I work Saturday and Sunday and one day a week, but there's just been redundancies, so I've lost my extra day. Now my wages have dropped down so I've had to take him out of nursery because I can't afford it anymore. I'm gutted because I know he really benefits from it but I can't afford it anymore. Next year he qualifies for the free hours, so I'll definitely take them up.”

(Newcastle)

### Existing support doesn't give young women the help they need

The focus groups also found that, despite a number of sources of support being available, this often was insufficient. As a result, many young women still could not afford childcare.

In particular it was felt that the number of free hours fell short of what was required, with many young women unable to pay for additional hours to access the childcare they need:

**“** I feel like that although we're allowed the 15 hours it's still not enough... [for] a job that's more than the 15 hours I would have to pay that for the rest of the hours... and lunches, because that's not provided, you'll have to bring in your own lunch and it's just cost after cost after cost.”

(London)

Other young women felt that the eligibility criteria for accessing support are too rigid or unclear, meaning they miss out on the support that is available.

**“** The 30 [free] hours are based on earnings. I was looking up an apprenticeship, but I wouldn't have been eligible because I would have been earning something like four and a half grand. So, I would have been paying, out an apprenticeship wage, full childcare.”

(London)

**“** I think there should be a cap, if you're earning say £50k per annum you don't need the funding. You know like what they do for uni, I'm not sure if they still do it, but when I went to uni, if your parents earn a certain amount together you didn't qualify for the grants and stuff.”

(London)

**“** With the free childcare there are so many criteria to drop people off and disqualify people. If something is free, it should be free without conditions not whether you are working or not, or whether you are earning a certain amount. They are all kids they don't get to choose.”

(Hull)

**“** It's just a bit depressing that I made 25 grand before when I had no experience and now there's jobs I didn't even bother applying for because I saw 'no possibility of remote working, 35 hours a week,' but I also know that if I'm going to work full time it needs to be something that pays me enough to be OK because Govt assistance.. there's a very low threshold [above which] they're like 'you don't need our help anymore' but it's nowhere near the threshold where you survive.”

(London)



This was especially seen to be true for parents of younger children who could not access free childcare and therefore had to delay their return to work:

**“ [The free hours are] for single mums for two year-olds. But some of those [other] families, they can't afford childcare, they don't have really good jobs so they should have some help as well.”**

(Leicester)

**“ I think [free childcare] should actually be from age one...that's the latest you can go back from your maternity without being out of work or claiming any benefits and things like that. As soon as you go back, that's when you've got to start paying for childcare.”**

(Leicester)



**50%**

**UNABLE TO FIND  
APPROPRIATE CHILDCARE  
DUE TO UP FRONT COSTS**



# FLEXIBLE CHILDCARE



Many young women told us that childcare was inflexible. Work schedules are often already inflexible and young women frequently struggled to find childcare with enough flexibility to fit around those needs. However, the implementation of free childcare was also extremely rigid, limiting the ability of parents to make use of these hours or causing additional costs to parents.

This lack of flexibility limits the opportunities available to young mums and often leads to them making trade-offs between flexibility, price and quality. This frequently means young mums are unable to secure the childcare they need.

This is further highlighted in the inability of some childcare settings to meet the needs of individual parents and children in terms of healthcare, educational support or cultural circumstances.

## Women's choices are limited because work schedules do not fit in with childcare

Childcare was frequently cited as being inflexible. Combined with work that also offered little flexibility, this made it incredibly difficult for women to find suitable childcare at a time they needed it. Young mums said this made it feel like their options were extremely limited:

***You have to make choices around the childcare you can get as opposed to the other way around. Employers and education providers assume they come first and that you'll figure out the childcare that matches it. But you tend to seek out and make decisions based on the childcare. If it was flexible, you'd be able to have options, so it's the lack of options that are there. It limits where your life can go."***

*(London focus group participant)*



***A lot of the [other] parents aren't single parents. I don't have hubby to do the pick-up and mum can do the [nursery] drop off, I don't have that option. Even now I'm thinking about work in a different way – I might not be able to take something that I'm really passionate about but if it's going to give me peace of mind and they're going to say 'alright, you can work flexibly from home one day a week and a lot of employers are promoting parental flexibility, that's going to attract me.'"***

*(London)*

There was a particular emphasis on how this impacted on daily schedules and relationships with their children.



***There's two or three days every other week where me and my partner are both working late so I finish at 7 at the latest, but 7 o'clock to go and pick kids up then take them home to put them to bed it's a bit difficult especially [with] a one year-old."***

*(Leicester)*





**“It’s just really difficult trying to balance everything, it’s not flexible at all and I have asked to work from home, not on a regular basis, if I have a doctor’s appointment bang in the middle of the day and it’s the only time I can go... ‘no, we need you here at all times’, obviously no one there has children. It makes me think that next time I need to find something that’s flexible, that’s part-time.”**

(London)

### Many young women wanted flexible childcare provision

Mothers particularly wanted flexibility, including through being able to change days their child was cared for and the provision of childcare out of the usual hours, particularly in the evenings or at weekends. Some parents chose to work these shifts so partners or other family members could look after the children. However, this option was not possible for many young mums, either because partners had to work similar shift patterns or because they had little or no family support.

**“I think the area is crying out for somewhere that opens late. There’s nowhere I found that is open after 6pm and lots of people don’t finish work until 6pm. Or don’t get in the house until... my hospital hours, I’m going to be doing 8.30-9.30am shifts and from six pm when the nursery closes you still have to make up that gap.”**

(Newcastle)

**“So, a key thing for me was the nursery has to open at 7.30am because I had to get to work by 8.30am. And some nurseries don’t open till eight or nine pm.”**

(London)

### Flexible working was seen as a vital way to help achieve balance

**“It should be legal for a parent [starting a job] to at least work from home one day a week or whatever. If you’re working in an office on a computer you should be able to do that. And I’m told I can’t work from home.”**

(London)

### Many felt there was a trade-off between flexibility, quality and costs

Parents complained that flexibility led to a drop off in quality:

**“A childminder was cheaper. It was a fiver an hour and it was dead flexible. I had to pay five days a week with nursery even if I work three days, I work in the hospital so we do 13 hour shifts. I only work three or four days a week but I have to pay for five because they don’t have flexible days. With a childminder, I could have just paid for the hours I wanted, but I felt that there was more structure in a nursery and they learn.”**

(Newcastle)





**“ I think they had to compromise loads to bring the cost down. His first nursery was really expensive and there were like three massive gardens each age group could access and now there's only one really small garden and it's not a nice a setting, there aren't as a many staff...so we've put him in a new nursery to bring the cost down but the quality has dropped. It always feel like bargaining-what are we going to prioritise?”**

**(London)**

Flexibility also tended to increase costs significantly:

**“ When I was looking at nurseries they had some that you could only do either like a half day in the morning, or afternoon or whole day. If you needed that middle block you had to pay loads. Which is why we had to go with a childminder because it felt easier. Obviously it works for some people if you work all day.”**

**(London)**

**“ You only have two choices: its either cheap and unpredictable or really expensive.”**

**(London)**

**“ There's some kind of regulation [on the amount of money chargeable] that's needed. If they have longer hours all they are going to do is have those hours at a much higher rate and the people like us are not going to be able to afford it.”**

**(London)**

## **Nurseries offering free hours did so in a rigid way**

Despite being eligible to receive free childcare, many parents told us that the rigid structure of many nurseries meant they had to use both the 15 hours and the 30 hours offer in blocks that were not suitable for their working patterns. This left them having to make up the difference to pay for additional hours, which they often could not afford. For some parents this meant that, in practice, they were unable to access the free childcare offer at all.

**“ I'm not accessing the free hours [at all] because that's the only way I can make the time work which then breaks my bank account. It's like a constant experiment. Either I don't take the hours, or I don't take the work.”**

**(London)**

**“ I found that with the 30 hours now he's three, and even the 15 hours I found I couldn't use that because the hours were so specific and rigid I had to pay. It's a shame that the set hours are so rigid and it has to be that way for the nursery. You know they have to do it that way so it works for them.”**

**(London)**

**“ The nursery is 9-12 or 12-3 which is not flexible with the working hours, so if you need extended hours you're going to have to pay more for that.”**

**(London)**

Many mums told us that they wanted to see limits placed on the amount nurseries could charge parents for the additional hours they needed.



## Childcare not accounting for special needs or specific circumstances

The chief focus of this research was to understand how young mothers are locked out of employment because they cannot find the childcare they need at a convenient time or at a price they can afford. However, young women also told us about other ways in which the available childcare did not meet their needs.

Many parents spoke of the lack of understanding their child's nursery had about supporting additional educational needs:

**“I’m at one of the outstanding Ofsted rated nurseries but I think you only see the benefit of it if you have a neurotypical child. So a lot of the activities they can’t participate...the same offerings aren’t going to work for [my daughter] even though it’s outstanding rated. It doesn’t meet her specific needs and you can’t really know that beforehand.”**

(London)

Other parents spoke of a need for more understanding about different cultural needs:

**“We are multicultural, but we have that problem with Halal food. Sometimes I’ll go to parties with the children’s centre or nursery and they’ll have chicken but it’s not halal, so they need to take those things into account.”**

(Hull)

**“For myself is it a religious school. I’m Muslim myself so that’s really important for me.”**

(Newcastle)

Parents of children with medical conditions also lacked confidence in their childcare provider's ability to meet their medical needs:

**“My son has a heart condition. He has medication four times a day so I needed to know that they could keep ion top of that. Do they have registered paediatric first aiders for that?”**

(Newcastle)

While these do not directly impact on young women's ability to find work, they are important considerations for parents in determining the suitability of childcare. Many childcare providers will bear these factors in mind, however it is important that all providers do more to meet parents' expectations in these areas.





# CHILDCARE FOR MUMS IN EDUCATION AND TRAINING



**Many young mums returned to education after having children in order to improve their prospects of future employment. This was particularly true of younger parents who may have had education or vocational training and apprenticeships disrupted due to pregnancy and childcare.**

We found that they faced similar challenges to those balancing work and childcare. College and university courses at the vast majority of institutions were not flexible in the way young mums required. Part-time courses in higher education and further education courses are not eligible for childcare grants and evening courses make it difficult to find childcare while studying.

Although discretionary funding exists young women complained that, because this was not guaranteed, it took away their ability to plan. This could mean that, while they had childcare in one year of a course, it could be removed in subsequent years. The impact of this was often that they could no longer afford the childcare necessary to continue studying. Similarly, support available for the youngest parents under *Care to Learn* was valuable but ignored the needs of those over 20 years old.

This meant that young women are unable to access the education and training they needed to improve their work prospects or are placed under significant financial hardship in order to do so.

## Education is valuable in developing skills, opportunities and relationships

Having a child was often a trigger point for young mums who saw renewed motivation to improve their skills in order to access better-paid work and provide more for their families:



*I became much more ambitious. I was working at a bank and I wasn't happy. But then I had a baby and I want to do something to make a difference and to make a difference in his life as well because I want to be able to afford things for him to give the best for him. I know with the salary I'm on I will never be able to do it, therefore I decided to go back to school, university and have a degree and hopefully get a job later."*

(Leicester)





**“We all had kids quite young, that should have been time I was discovering who I was...My relationship with my child changed when I went back to uni. We're so much closer now, because I can go and do what I need to do. And the time I have with them is much better.”**

(London)

### Balancing education and childcare is difficult

Many education courses were not flexible and did not cater for young women with children.

**“That was a struggle because I was like ‘what’s my timetable going to be like’ I told the uni this was my situation ‘please can you give me some flexibility around timetable at first they didn’t so there was one class I had to beg someone from his nursery to meet me at the station.”**

(London)

In particular, the challenges of balancing university, work and childcare were evident. This put strain on family relationships and, without appropriate childcare, left many parents struggling to keep everything in balance:

**“I went back to uni and at one point I had to look for work, doing a night shift. I was doing a 12-hour night shift, cos that way I got childcare, my mum’s in the house, dad’s in the house... it was seasonal job so that worked for me. It was a lot [to take on].”**

(London)

**“I mean other than that it’s really hard. I know some work is too but with Uni especially you have to bring your work home, you can’t really switch off after. It’s 40 hours of reading a week.”**

(London)

### Childcare grants for higher education help but still fall short

Although childcare grants were helpful for those in full-time higher education courses, it was evident from young women in our focus groups that this fell far short of what was required. In addition to leaving out those in further education and part-time courses, the amount many received from the childcare grant did not cover their full costs and the outstanding amounts were still difficult for young women to pay.

**“Because I’m a full-time student I have the childcare grant, which is excellent. But again, they can’t pay the full for Monday to Friday so they are helping me for three days a week. They are looking at your income, so they are making the decision.”**

(Leicester)

**“I was doing an apprenticeship before I had [my son], and I finished it. Then I went back to work part-time in the September when he was 6 months old and I lasted about 2 weeks. I was earning nothing, and I was relying on my mum and dad, and childcare was too expensive. I went to university the year after as I thought I can get a childcare grant.”**

(Newcastle)

This was particularly true when young mums had a partner in work. This left them ineligible for support under childcare grants but without being able to access free childcare because they were not working themselves.

**“I think every nursery is expensive, I don’t know if it’s just because I’m poor. At the minute [I’m at] Uni [and my son] is full time because I got a childcare grant. But next year, they’re saying I’m not eligible because [my partner’s] wages have gone up since last year but I’m not eligible for the 30 hours because [although] he’s working, I’m not working. [But that’s] just because I’m a student.”**

(Newcastle)



# IMPROVING INFORMATION



Young mums also told us that the system of childcare and available support was complex and that they often were unaware of the support that was available to them. Although many parents were aware of the free childcare offer we found there was a lot of confusion about whether they would be eligible, and it is likely they are missing out on support as a result.

Furthermore, existing support was frequently not publicised. Virtually no one had heard of the Flexible Support Fund for example, so even when people were eligible to receive support for paying things like upfront costs they missed out.

Childcare providers also faced criticism for not communicating well, with parents with younger mums saying that they felt they were treated especially poorly.

## Young mums didn't always know what support was available

The system of support for childcare is hugely varied and young mums told us they found it hard to navigate. There was a sense that there was very little information out there and that young women often received conflicting advice and information.

*"I feel like there's not enough information out there about childcare costs."*

(Hull)

*"For me because I wasn't born in England so I didn't know anything about it, so you need to find out. You need to ask people, go onto websites and you're still not sure. I'm still not sure how to apply and everything."*

(Leicester)

*"It just seems like nobody knows."*

(London)

*"Everywhere you live it's different so, London's tiny but across the boroughs it's different so there's a different scheme for Southwark, a different scheme for Hammersmith and Fulham and based on the road you live on it's a different scheme for that too. Everybody is giving you different information because it's different for different people."*

(London)

## Lack of information makes it hard to plan

One of the biggest factors evident in the focus groups was young mums' strong desire to plan ahead and make informed decisions about their child's future. Support was often hard to come by and many young mums had to muddle through. There were strong calls for better information provision through services that young women already used and trusted.


*"I'm studying again at the minute doing an access to nursing course because I've had so much time out of education. I hope to go back to uni. They said they'd help with childcare but they didn't give us any more information than that, so if I did go to uni I wouldn't have a clue. They don't tell you anything."*

(Newcastle)

*"I only knew about anything because my sister was the level above me and she helped me through it, but they don't tell you anything."*

(Newcastle)





**“ You know when you’re pregnant  
I think it would be good, when you  
have your maternity pack to give information  
about nursery and everything so you can  
read it.”**

**(Leicester)**

## **Nurseries don’t always communicate well with parents**

We were also told on a number of occasions that nurseries failed to communicate adequately with parents about the support that was available and about how their children were doing. Younger parents in particular felt that they faced prejudice and discrimination, being treated differently because of their age in relation to other parents.

**“ I agree, communication is bad.  
Something will happen to [my  
son] and they won’t tell me and then the  
way they talked to me because I’m young,  
they talk to me different to what they’d  
talk to other mums who are slightly older.  
They talk to us like I’m a child as well  
which annoys us.”**

**(Newcastle)**

**“ Just from my experience, the  
communication isn’t good but  
overall [my son] is happy going there.  
The standard of play is fine but for me,  
I’m not happy with the communication  
about the costs and all that.”**

**(London)**



# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



**Despite welcome interventions by successive Governments, childcare remains a significant barrier for young mums. Our research has shown that what young mums want is quite straightforward. They want high quality early years education that provides their child with the best start. They also want to ensure that this is available at an affordable price and is flexible so they can access education and employment that will allow them to support their families.**

We found that all too often, these criteria are not being met. Childcare continues to be expensive and the costs often exceed the incomes young women get from work – a particular issue for many younger parents. This means many young mums are delaying returning to work at a personal cost in terms of their future employment prospects. But there are clear impacts too in terms of the increased benefits bill and reduced tax income that working mums would bring. Extending free childcare to the end of paid parental leave (i.e. when a child is nine months old) alongside increased childcare provisions for those young women who are lone parents, would give support to families when they need it. Additionally, capping the charge payable by parents for additional hours they require would enable young mums to return to work without the worry that they will be worse off financially by doing so.

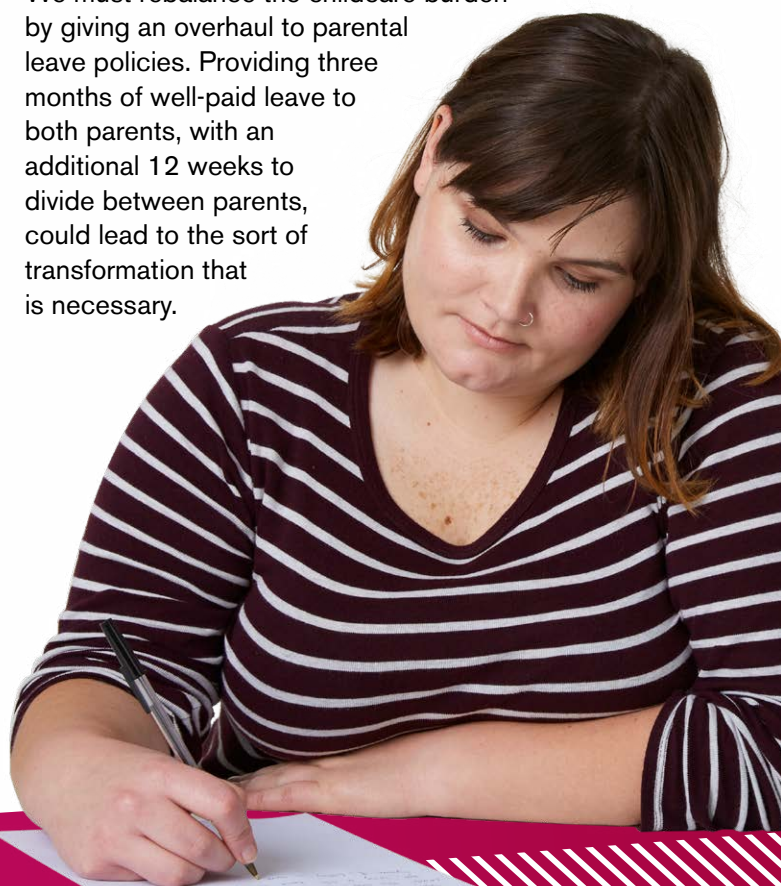
Furthermore, existing support falls short of what is required. Free childcare provision doesn't provide support for children aged under two and is often implemented in a way that is too inflexible for parents to make use of. Where flexibility does exist, either costs rise, quality falls or in many cases both. Funding shortfalls for providers mean they often have little choice but to make these trade-offs and it is essential that the funding for free childcare is increased to enable parents to access high-quality, flexible care. For parents working outside of regular nursery hours, a new system of out-of-hours childcare vouchers could allow them to access alternative provision when they need it.

Many young mums also wanted to access education and training to boost their skills and improve their future employment prospects. The current system

provides limited support to those in education, thereby limiting options for young parents. Existing support can also be patchy and unreliable, taking away the ability of young mums to plan ahead confidently. Extending free childcare to those in education would provide certainty and stability as well as easing the transition from education into work.

We also heard from young mums complaining about a confusing system of support and a lack of information about how to access existing schemes. As well as simplifying the system for support in ways outlined above, it is important to provide additional information to guide young mums in their decisions about childcare. Young mums have told us they want to receive this from services they already know and trust such as their midwife.

Underlying all of this, however, is the need to address why young mums are disproportionately burdened with the impacts of being unable to access childcare. This is caused by the current system of parental leave and lack of flexible working, combined with the discrimination women already face in the workplace. We must rebalance the childcare burden by giving an overhaul to parental leave policies. Providing three months of well-paid leave to both parents, with an additional 12 weeks to divide between parents, could lead to the sort of transformation that is necessary.





# RECOMMENDATIONS



## Make childcare more affordable

- Extend the eligibility for free childcare to start at the end of paid parental leave at 9 months
- Increase the entitlement for free childcare for working parents to 1,560 hours a year so it is equivalent to 30 hours a week for 52 weeks of the year
- Increase the entitlement for free childcare for other parents to 780 hours a year so it is equivalent to 15 hours a week for 52 weeks of the year
- Reduce the earnings cap for the 30 hours childcare and use the extra funding to provide early education for disadvantaged children
- Consult on the introduction of a maximum charge for hours above the free allowance for both 15- and 30-hours free childcare, with funding increased to ensure providers can cover their own costs
- Change the rules under Universal Credit so parents can choose to have childcare costs paid directly to the provider so no parent has to pay upfront costs they can't afford
- Increase payments under Universal Credit to raise the entitlement of out of work single parents under 25 to the same level as over 25s

## Improve flexibility

- Use increased funding and tax breaks to incentivise childcare providers to move away from a model where free childcare can only be used in rigid blocks
- Update the system used by parents to demonstrate eligibility for the 30 hours free childcare to extend the three month grace period when parent's circumstances change in order to provide stability for parents and children
- Allow parents with irregular working hours to access a new out of hours childcare voucher scheme so they can take advantage of free childcare

## Support parents in education and training

- Extend eligibility for 30 hours free childcare to those in education and training. This could be funded by reducing the earnings cap for the 30 hours childcare which would also allow provision to be targeted at disadvantaged children
- Consult on the feasibility of extending eligibility for 30 hours free childcare to jobseekers to provide continuity and stability for children and parents
- Incentivise on-site crèche facilities at educational institutions



## Improve information

- Provide information about childcare support through existing trusted services such as maternity and post-natal health visitor services
- Invest in publicising existing support including free childcare and tax-free childcare. This should include training and renewed guidance for JCP staff to make more effective use of the Flexible Support Fund

## Rebalance childcare

- Extend the current paternity leave allowance to 12 weeks at 90% pay on a “use it or lose it” basis. Maternity entitlements should also be increased. This would make both parents eligible to 12 weeks of paid leave at 90% of pay for families with two parents in the household
- Introduce on top of this a further 12 weeks of leave at 90% of pay for parents to divide as they wish whilst mothers should retain eligibility for a full year of maternity leave
- Allow single parents to nominate an additional person with whom they can share parental leave
- Update adoption leave entitlements to reflect the above extensions to maternity and paternity pay
- Change legislation to give all workers and employees the right to request flexible working from day one in a new job whilst requiring employers to advertise jobs as flexible or justify why they are not able to do so







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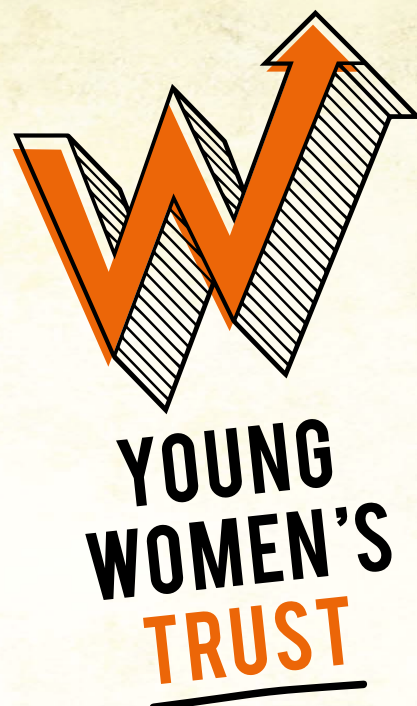
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