**Parents in Britain use more than a quarter of their salaries on childcare**

The Family and Childcare Trust published their annual childcare costs survey last week with the key findings that:

* Childcare costs remain the single largest financial burden facing families with young children across the UK. Part-time childcare for a family with two children aged two and five costs 4.7% more than the average UK mortgage bill.
* The cost of full time childcare to the same family is nearly £12,000 every year.
* Since 2009, costs have risen by 27% and continue to rise higher than inflation – this year by 3.3%.
* Nearly half of local authorities (49%) do not have enough childcare places for working parents. The gaps are particularly acute for children under three and for children aged 5-11, and for disabled children and children in rural areas.

As a full-time working parent with two small children (almost the exact family model detailed in the childcare costs survey), it comes as no surprise to me ­– or the family bank balance – that childcare costs are outstripping the average mortgage. Understandably this huge financial outlay tends to dictate whether or not the overwhelming majority of women return to work in a full or a part-time capacity after having children – or even if they return at all.

That’s why so many working parents turn to family members – particularly grandparents, for help. Nearly seven million grandmas and grandads provide regular childcare for their grandchildren under the age of 16. This informal care is saving working families thousands of pounds a year on nursery and childminding fees, as well as helping parents to stay in work and continue their careers.

We’re always told quality over quantity, but in the case of childcare, we need both. Good quality childcare provision needs to be readily available and more importantly, accessible. It stands to reason that by its nature, good, safe childcare – operated at the correct ratio of staff to children, will always be labour intensive and therefore drive its cost up. I am also a staunch advocate for fair pay and a living wage and I don’t think anyone would deny that childcare workers have a very important role to play in society and their pay should reflect that.

But this doesn’t mean that women should be resigned to a choice between astronomical bills if they return to work, or having to take themselves – and their skills – out of the (increasingly competitive) jobs market for the best part of a decade.  Employers and the government can play a crucial part. The former with family-friendly policies around flexible working (for parents and grandparents) and the implementation of a voucher or childcare contribution system, and the latter by ensuring there is enough public and private supply to meet demand to help regulate the cost of provision.

The Family and Childcare Trust believe that all political parties should commit to a long-term childcare strategy that delivers for parents, providers and children. And I think I can speak for the majority of working parents when I say, so do we!

Beth Farhat, Northern TUC Regional Secretary