

MUMS HUB CLG

Needs Assessment & Evidence Report: Mothers Returning to Work in the NEIC

Rooted in the NEIC, designed for mums across Ireland

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Location:

North East Inner City (NEIC), Dublin

A model designed to scale nationally

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1. Introduction and Purpose

This document presents a needs assessment and evidence base to better understand the barriers faced by mothers returning to work in the North East Inner City (NEIC), Dublin.

While national data clearly demonstrates that women's participation in the labour market is shaped by caregiving responsibilities, childcare costs, and a higher prevalence of part-time work, there is limited localised and targeted data capturing the specific experiences of mothers seeking to return to employment in a way that aligns with school hours and family life.

Mums Hub has identified a growing demand for more flexible, accessible pathways back into employment for mothers, particularly those who have been out of the workforce for extended periods or are unable to engage in standard full-time roles due to caregiving responsibilities.

The purpose of this report is to:

- Consolidate existing national evidence on women's labour market participation and caregiving
- Identify gaps in current data, particularly in relation to school-hours employment
- Gather direct input from mothers and local organisations within the NEIC
- Provide a clear, evidence-based foundation for the development of targeted supports and programmes

This report aims to contribute to a better understanding of how employment structures can better reflect the realities of caregiving, and to inform the design of practical, community-based solutions.

2. National Context: Women, Care and Employment in Ireland

Women's participation in the labour market in Ireland has increased significantly over the past two decades. However, this progress remains closely shaped by caregiving responsibilities, childcare availability, and the structure of available employment¹.

Data from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) shows that while the number of women in employment has grown steadily, a substantial cohort of women remain outside the workforce due to home and family responsibilities. Census 2022 identified approximately **245,000 women** whose principal economic status was "looking after home/family", highlighting the continued scale of unpaid caregiving roles².

¹ CSO – *Women in the Labour Market*
<https://www.cso.ie/en/statistics/labourmarket/womeninthelabourmarket/>

² CSO Census 2022 – Principal Economic Status
<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpsr/censusofpopulation2022-summaryresults/employmentoccupationindustryandcommuting/>

Among those in employment, women are significantly more likely than men to work part-time. National data indicates that over **30% of women in employment work part-time**, compared to just over **11% of men**³. This reflects the extent to which women's participation in the labour market is shaped by the need to balance paid work with caregiving responsibilities.

Childcare affordability in Ireland represents one of the most significant structural barriers to maternal employment, both in absolute terms and in comparison with other European countries.

Recent data shows that childcare costs vary widely across the country, with the highest fees concentrated in Dublin and surrounding areas. A national survey of childcare providers found that monthly full-time crèche fees can reach **up to €1,578 per child in South Dublin**, with many services in Dublin city charging **€1,200–€1,300 or more per month** for full-time care⁴.

Official figures indicate lower median costs, with weekly fees in Dublin ranging between approximately **€220 and €258 per week** depending on location⁵. However, these figures do not fully reflect current market pressures, including fee increases following provider closures and rising operational costs.

As a result, the actual cost experienced by many families—particularly in urban areas—can exceed **€14,000–€18,000 annually per child**, representing a substantial financial burden. For families with more than one child, these costs increase significantly.

In addition to affordability, access to childcare remains a critical issue. In Dublin alone, there are an estimated **18,000 children on waiting lists for childcare places**, with national estimates suggesting that **40,000 to 50,000 children are without access to a place**⁶.

At a European level, Ireland consistently ranks among the most expensive countries for childcare. OECD data shows that Irish parents spend **almost double the average share of household income on childcare** compared to other developed countries (4)⁷.

³ Government of Ireland (2024/2025) – *The State of the Nation's Women and Girls*
<https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-children-disability-and-equality/publications/statistical-spotlight-15-the-state-of-the-nations-women-and-girls/>

⁴ Irish Independent (2024) – *Counties with most expensive and cheapest crèches in Ireland*
<https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/revealed-counties-with-most-expensive-and-cheapest-crèches-with-1200-difference-depending-on-where-you-live/a276813731.html>

⁵ Pobal (2023/2024) – *Early Years Sector Profile Report*
ESRI – *Growing Up in Ireland: Mothers' Return to Work and Childcare Choices*
<https://www.pobal.ie/early-years-sector-profile-report-2017-2018-launched/>
Additional supporting parliamentary data:
Oireachtas (2025) – Childcare costs (Parliamentary Question)
<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2025-05-27/555/>

⁶ Dublin Gazette (2024) – *Childcare shortages and waiting lists in Dublin*
<https://dublinalgazette.com/dublinlocalmatters/news/chilicare-dublincity-council/>

⁷ OECD / ESRI – Childcare affordability comparisons
OECD Family Database – Childcare costs
<https://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm>

In addition to financial barriers, the distribution of unpaid care remains highly gendered. Women in Ireland undertake significantly more unpaid care work than men, including childcare, household labour, and care for other family members⁸. This ongoing imbalance continues to influence women's ability to engage in full-time or inflexible employment.

Research on maternal return to work further highlights that not all mothers re-enter the workforce at the same rate. Women with lower incomes, multiple children, or fewer supports are less likely to return to employment, and are more likely to experience longer periods outside the labour market⁹.

European research further reinforces these findings. The *State of Motherhood in Europe 2024* report highlights that **67% of mothers report feeling overloaded**, while **only 46% report access to adapted working hours**. The report also indicates that many mothers adjust or reduce their employment following childbirth due to caregiving responsibilities.

This reflects a broader structural gap between employment systems and the realities of caregiving, which is also evident in the Irish context¹⁰.

European findings align with the Irish context, where mothers continue to face structural barriers to workforce participation, particularly in accessing flexible, school-hours employment.

While Ireland has introduced a range of supports, including parental leave and childcare subsidies, there remains a gap in structured, accessible pathways supporting mothers to return to work in a way that aligns with caregiving responsibilities.

In addition to childcare and labour market barriers, access to employment supports is also unevenly distributed. Current activation and return-to-work supports in Ireland are largely linked to eligibility for social welfare payments. As a result, many mothers who are not in receipt of welfare, particularly those who are economically inactive but living in a household where a partner is in employment, may have limited access to structured return-to-work programmes, training supports, or schemes such as Community Employment (CE).

This creates a gap whereby mothers who are not classified as unemployed within the social protection system may not receive targeted support to re-enter the workforce, despite being out of paid employment. For many women, this results in limited access to independent income, training, and employment pathways in their own right.

Research on gender equality and domestic abuse has also highlighted the importance of independent income and access to employment as protective factors against financial control and economic vulnerability. Women's Aid reports that 1 in 3 women in Ireland have experienced domestic abuse, with financial dependency often limiting autonomy and the

⁸ ESRI / IHREC – *Caring and Unpaid Work in Ireland*
<https://www.esri.ie/publications/caring-and-unpaid-work-in-ireland>

⁹ ESRI – *Growing Up in Ireland: Mothers' Return to Work and Childcare Choices*
<https://www.esri.ie/publications/mothers-return-to-work-and-childcare-choices-for-infants-in-ireland>

¹⁰ Make Mothers Matter (2024) – *State of Motherhood in Europe 2024*
<https://makemothersmatter.org/mmm-state-of-motherhood-in-europe-2024>

ability to leave unsafe situations. In this context, ensuring that mothers can access pathways back into work is not only an economic issue, but also one of autonomy and long-term security.

3. Identified Gap in Current Data

While existing national data provides a strong overview of women's participation in the labour market, childcare costs, and the distribution of unpaid care, it does not fully capture the specific realities faced by mothers seeking to return to work at a local level.

Current datasets primarily measure employment status, income, and childcare usage. However, they do not adequately reflect the conditions under which mothers are able—or unable—to participate in the workforce, nor do they capture the types of employment that would enable mothers to return to work in a way that aligns with caregiving responsibilities.

In particular, there is a lack of targeted data on:

- The demand for **school-hours or term-time employment** among mothers
- The extent to which mothers are unable to take up employment due to **misalignment between working hours and school or childcare schedules**
- The number of mothers who are **actively seeking to return to work but are constrained by childcare availability, cost, or confidence barriers**
- The lived experiences of mothers navigating return to work at a **local, community level**, particularly within areas such as the North East Inner City

Additionally, existing national data does not adequately capture the **intersection of barriers** faced by many mothers. Childcare costs, limited availability of services, lack of flexible employment, and reduced confidence following extended time out of the workforce often combine to create prolonged periods of economic inactivity.

While broader statistics demonstrate that women are more likely to work part-time and undertake unpaid care, they do not distinguish between:

- Women who **choose reduced working hours**
- And those who are **structurally constrained by the absence of suitable employment opportunities**

This distinction is critical in understanding the true level of unmet demand for flexible, school-hours employment pathways.

Furthermore, there is limited place-based data reflecting the specific needs of communities such as the NEIC, where socioeconomic factors, access to services, and employment opportunities may differ from national averages.

As a result, current data risks underestimating both the scale and the nature of the barriers faced by mothers returning to work.

There is therefore a clear need for **targeted, community-level data collection** that captures both quantitative trends and lived experience. This will enable a more accurate

understanding of the barriers faced by mothers and inform the development of practical, responsive supports.

This report seeks to address this gap by combining national evidence with direct input from mothers and local organisations, creating a more complete and grounded picture of the need for school-hours employment pathways.

4. Target Group Definition

This report focuses on mothers living in the North East Inner City (NEIC), Dublin, who are currently outside the workforce or not fully engaged in employment due to caregiving responsibilities and structural barriers.

The target group includes mothers at different stages of their return-to-work journey, including:

- Mothers who have been out of the workforce for a number of years following childbirth or extended caregiving
- Mothers who are seeking to return to work but are unable to find roles that align with school hours or caregiving responsibilities
- Mothers currently in part-time or irregular employment that does not provide sufficient income, stability, or progression
- Mothers who are not eligible for social welfare supports but are also not actively participating in the labour market
- Mothers who are currently working full time and struggle to navigate work and caregiving responsibilities

This includes mothers who are currently employed but experiencing significant strain in balancing full-time work with caregiving responsibilities, highlighting the need for more flexible and sustainable employment pathways. This reflects a broader structural reality: care work remains essential to the functioning of society, yet is largely unpaid and insufficiently recognised within labour market systems.

Within the NEIC context, these challenges are often compounded by additional factors, including access to affordable childcare, availability of local employment opportunities, and varying levels of confidence and access to training or support services.

Many mothers within this group express a willingness and motivation to return to work but face multiple overlapping barriers. These may include:

- High childcare costs and limited availability of places
- Lack of employment opportunities aligned with school hours
- Limited access to return-to-work supports or training programmes
- Reduced confidence following extended time out of the workforce
- Practical constraints related to school schedules, transport, and family responsibilities

Importantly, this group is not homogenous. It includes mothers from a range of backgrounds, including those with previous professional experience, those seeking to enter the workforce for the first time, and those who have experienced long-term economic inactivity.

Despite these differences, there is a shared need for accessible, flexible pathways back into employment that reflect the realities of caregiving.

This report seeks to better understand the needs of this group within the NEIC, with the aim of informing the development of targeted, community-based supports that enable mothers to re-engage with the workforce in a sustainable and meaningful way.

5. Local Context (NEIC)

To address the identified gap in place-based data, Mums Hub conducted a local survey with 48 mothers, including a majority living in the North East Inner City (NEIC), Dublin.

The findings provide a clear and consistent picture of the realities faced by mothers seeking to return to work, and reflect a strong alignment with both national and European evidence.

The survey indicates that over half of respondents (54.2%) are currently not in paid employment, with a further proportion engaged in part-time or reduced hours work. Despite this, there is a strong willingness to participate in the labour market, with approximately 85% of mothers expressing a desire to work or increase their working hours.

This demonstrates a critical distinction: mothers are not disengaged from employment, but are constrained by structural barriers that limit their ability to participate.

The most significant barrier identified is the misalignment between working hours and school or childcare schedules, with a majority of respondents reporting that standard working hours do not fit with their caregiving responsibilities. This is closely followed by the cost of childcare and the lack of available childcare places, both of which continue to limit access to employment opportunities.

In addition to these structural barriers, many mothers also identified a loss of confidence following extended time out of the workforce, alongside uncertainty in navigating available supports and pathways back to employment.

When asked about the type of work that would best support their return, respondents consistently identified a preference for:

- School-hours employment
- Flexible or part-time roles
- Remote or hybrid working options

This demonstrates a clear demand for employment pathways that align with the realities of caregiving, rather than traditional full-time, inflexible roles.

Wider NEIC Parent Wellbeing Context

*NEIC Parenting Programme – Parent Needs Assessment Questionnaire (2022 & 2025)*¹¹

Findings from the NEIC Parenting Programme provide further local context on the pressures experienced by parents in the NEIC.

The findings highlight ongoing concerns around:

- child wellbeing and development
- lack of support systems
- time pressures and childcare barriers
- parent wellbeing and mental health

These findings align with the Mums Hub survey, showing that parents are navigating overlapping pressures that affect their capacity to access employment, education, and support.

Importantly, these results reflect broader trends identified at both national and European levels, where caregiving responsibilities, childcare availability, and limited access to flexible work continue to shape women's participation in the labour market.

At a local level, the findings reinforce the need for targeted, community-based supports that address not only practical barriers such as childcare and job availability, but also confidence, readiness, and access to information.

Overall, the data highlights a significant unmet demand for flexible, accessible pathways back into employment for mothers in the NEIC.

6. Lived Experience & Emerging Insights

Findings from both quantitative and qualitative data provide a clear and consistent picture of the barriers faced by mothers seeking to return to work.

Structural Barriers to Employment

Survey results indicate that the most significant barriers are structural in nature, rather than related to willingness to work.

The strongest support needs identified by respondents were:

- **71.7%** – Help finding flexible jobs
- **52.2%** – Childcare support
- **43.5%** – Confidence building
- **39.1%** – Training or upskilling
- **32.6%** – 1:1 career guidance

¹¹ NEIC Parenting Programme – Parent Needs Assessment Questionnaire (2022 & 2025), Early Learning Initiative (ELI), National College of Ireland.

These findings are reinforced by responses to barrier-related questions, where a majority of mothers identified the **misalignment between standard working hours and school or childcare schedules** as a key constraint, alongside the **cost and limited availability of childcare**.

Together this demonstrates that access to employment is primarily constrained by the structure of available work and childcare systems, rather than a lack of interest in participating in the labour market.

Lived Experience of Returning to Work

Qualitative responses provide further insight into how these structural barriers are experienced in practice.

Many mothers described the difficulty of aligning employment with caregiving responsibilities, particularly where working hours extend beyond school or childcare availability:

“My son is in afterschool... but employers might want you till after 6pm. There’s very little flexible or part-time jobs.”

“When you have multiple children at different ages it’s extremely difficult... school hours are never the same.”

Childcare was consistently identified as both a financial and practical barrier, with some respondents noting that the cost of care can exceed what is financially viable:

“Lack of crèches and cost of it, most of it is more expensive than rent.”

In some cases, a lack of flexibility within employment led directly to job loss:

“I lost my last job because I had to take time off for my son’s therapies... even though I gave plenty of notice.”

These experiences highlight the extent to which employment opportunities are often incompatible with the realities of caregiving.

Confidence and Readiness to Return to Work

While structural barriers remain the primary constraint, the data also indicates that **confidence is a significant factor influencing mothers’ ability to return to work**.

A total of **43.5% of respondents identified confidence-building as a key support need**, supported by qualitative responses highlighting reduced self-belief, fear, and anxiety following time out of the workforce:

“Lack of confidence and lack of belief that employers will want to hire me because of my caring responsibilities.”

“Fear and anxiety.”

Some respondents also expressed concern about employer perceptions, including the impact of age and career gaps:

“I feel as a woman between 45–50 years of age... employers might overlook the skills I have.”

This suggests that even where employment opportunities exist, confidence and perceived employability can influence whether mothers are able to engage with them.

Key Insight

Overall, the findings demonstrate that mothers are not disengaged from employment, but are constrained by a combination of **structural barriers and readiness factors**.

Childcare, work structure, and access to flexible employment limit the availability of suitable opportunities, while confidence, perceived employability, and time out of the workforce influence the ability to act on those opportunities.

This highlights the need for responses that address both:

- **Structural barriers**, including access to flexible and school-hours employment, and
- **Personal and readiness factors**, including confidence and support in navigating a return to work

in order to create meaningful and sustainable pathways back into employment.

7. Gaps Identified

The combined analysis of national data, local survey findings, and lived experience highlights a number of clear gaps in existing employment pathways and supports for mothers returning to work.

Lack of Flexible and School-Hours Employment Pathways

A key gap identified is the **limited availability of employment opportunities that align with school hours and caregiving responsibilities**.

While a significant proportion of mothers express a willingness to work, the structure of available roles remains largely incompatible with family life. Survey findings indicate a strong demand for flexible, part-time, and school-hours employment, yet access to such roles is limited.

This results in a situation where mothers are willing and able to work, but unable to engage in available opportunities due to structural misalignment.

Childcare as a Barrier to Workforce Participation

Although childcare is widely recognised as a national issue, the findings highlight a continued gap in **accessible, affordable, and suitable childcare options**, particularly in relation to working hours.

The interaction between childcare availability and employment structures creates a compounded barrier. Even where childcare is available, it often does not align with working hours, particularly for roles requiring early starts, late finishes, or shift work.

This reinforces the need for employment pathways that reflect the realities of caregiving, rather than relying solely on childcare solutions.

Limited Access to Targeted Return-to-Work Supports

Existing employment supports are not consistently accessible to all mothers, particularly those who are not engaged with social welfare systems.

As identified in the national context, many mothers who are economically inactive but not classified as unemployed have **limited access to structured supports**, including training programmes, employment schemes, and guidance services.

At a local level, this is reflected in:

- Uncertainty about where to begin
- Limited awareness of available supports
- Difficulty navigating fragmented services

This indicates a gap in **accessible, localised entry points** for mothers seeking to re-engage with employment.

Lack of Integrated Support Addressing Both Practical and Personal Barriers

While structural barriers such as childcare and job availability are well documented, the findings highlight a gap in supports that also address **confidence, readiness, and perceived employability**.

A significant proportion of respondents identified confidence-building as a key support need, supported by qualitative evidence of fear, anxiety, and reduced self-belief.

However, existing employment supports tend to focus primarily on job placement or training, with less emphasis on:

- Confidence-building
- Re-entry preparation
- Gradual transition back into employment

This creates a gap where mothers may have access to opportunities in theory, but remain unable to engage with them in practice.

Lack of Recognition of Part-Time and Flexible Jobseekers

A further gap identified is the limited recognition of mothers seeking part-time or flexible employment within existing employment and activation systems.

Current structures are largely designed around full-time availability, which does not reflect the realities of caregiving. As a result, mothers who are actively seeking employment that aligns with school hours or part-time availability may not be recognised as jobseekers or may have limited access to supports.

This contributes to a form of **hidden economic inactivity**, where mothers are willing to work but remain outside formal support structures.

Summary

Overall, the findings indicate that existing systems do not adequately reflect the realities of caregiving or the types of employment that would enable mothers to return to work.

The gaps identified are not isolated, but interconnected:

- Employment structures do not align with family life
- Childcare does not align with employment
- Supports are not fully accessible or tailored
- Confidence and readiness are not consistently addressed

Together, these gaps contribute to prolonged periods outside the workforce and limit pathways to financial independence.

8. Alignment with Proposed Programme

The findings presented in this report provide a clear and consistent evidence base supporting the proposed Mums Hub programme for mothers returning to work in the North East Inner City (NEIC).

The programme, initially developed prior to data collection, has been further refined to reflect the needs identified through both quantitative and qualitative research. The results confirm a strong alignment between the barriers experienced by mothers and the proposed structure of support.

Survey findings highlight that access to flexible employment opportunities (71.7%) and childcare support (52.2%) represent the most significant constraints on participation in the labour market. In addition, a substantial proportion of respondents (43.5%) identified confidence-building as a key support need, supported by qualitative evidence of reduced self-belief, fear, and uncertainty following time out of the workforce.

These findings reinforce the need for a response that addresses both **structural barriers** and **readiness factors**, rather than focusing solely on job placement or training.

In response to this, the proposed programme adopts a structured, staged approach, designed to support mothers at different points in their return-to-work journey.

The programme combines:

- **Confidence and foundation building**, delivered through group-based sessions focused on rebuilding confidence through knowledge, including financial literacy, understanding employment options, and preparing for a return to work
- **One-to-one career coaching**, providing personalised guidance, CV development, and support in identifying realistic and achievable employment pathways
- **Progression and upskilling opportunities**, including engagement with universities, education providers, and training organisations to present accessible, school-hours compatible options for further development

This approach reflects a key insight from the research: that returning to work is not a single step, but a process requiring both preparation and access to appropriate opportunities.

Importantly, the programme recognises that caregiving is an essential role, and does not seek to replace or reduce this responsibility. Instead, it is designed to support mothers in identifying employment pathways that can coexist with caregiving, enabling both participation in the workforce and greater financial independence.

The proposed model also addresses a gap identified in existing supports, particularly for mothers who are not currently engaged with social welfare systems and may not have access to structured return-to-work programmes.

By providing an accessible, community-based entry point, the programme aims to bridge this gap and create a more inclusive pathway back into employment.

Overall, the programme is positioned as a targeted, evidence-informed response to clearly identified needs at a local level, with potential for wider application in similar contexts.

9. Aims, Objectives, Outcomes & Measurable Impact

Aim

The overall aim of the Mums Hub programme is to support mothers in the North East Inner City (NEIC) to re-engage with employment through accessible, flexible, and confidence-building pathways that reflect the realities of caregiving.

The programme is designed to enable mothers to build confidence, access practical supports, and identify sustainable pathways into employment, while recognising the ongoing importance of their caregiving role.

Objectives

The programme will pursue the following objectives:

- **To increase confidence, self-belief, and readiness for work** among mothers who have been out of the workforce or are not fully engaged in employment
- **To provide practical employment support**, including CV development, career guidance, and access to one-to-one coaching
- **To support mothers in identifying and accessing flexible, part-time, and school-hours employment opportunities**
- **To improve awareness and navigation of available supports**, including training, education, and employment pathways
- **To create clear progression routes**, including access to upskilling opportunities through engagement with education and training providers
- **To provide an accessible, community-based entry point** for mothers who are not currently engaged with formal employment supports

Expected Outcomes

The programme is expected to deliver outcomes across three stages:

Short-term Outcomes (during and immediately after programme)

- Increased confidence and motivation to return to work
- Improved understanding of employment options and pathways
- Increased awareness of available supports and services
- Development of CVs and individual action plans
- Increased engagement with career guidance and coaching

Medium-term Outcomes (1–3 months post programme)

- Increased number of mothers actively seeking employment
- Increased participation in training, education, or upskilling opportunities
- Increased engagement with employment supports and services
- Improved ability to identify suitable and realistic work options

Longer-term Outcomes

- Increased participation of mothers in part-time, flexible, or school-hours employment
- Improved financial independence and stability
- Reduced social isolation and increased community engagement
- Stronger alignment between caregiving responsibilities and employment participation

Measurable Impact

The impact of the programme will be measured using a combination of quantitative and qualitative indicators, including:

Participation and Engagement

- Number of participants enrolled in the programme
- Attendance and completion rates

Confidence and Readiness

- Percentage of participants reporting increased confidence (measured through pre- and post-programme feedback)
- Self-reported readiness to return to work

Practical Outputs

- Number of CVs completed or updated
- Number of individual action plans developed
- Number of participants engaging in one-to-one coaching

Progression

- Number of participants applying for jobs
- Number of participants engaging in training, education, or upskilling opportunities
- Number of participants accessing external supports or services

Employment Outcomes

- Number of participants entering employment (including part-time, flexible, or school-hours roles)
- Number of participants progressing towards employment through further training or experience

Summary

This programme is designed as a structured, evidence-informed pathway that supports mothers not only to prepare for employment, but to access realistic and sustainable opportunities.

By addressing both structural barriers and readiness factors, the programme aims to create meaningful and measurable progress towards employment for mothers in the NEIC.