BIG PARENTING SURVEY FINDINGS

2021
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ABOUT PARENTING NI

Parenting NI is the leading charitable organisation for supporting parents in Northern Ireland. Parenting NI has supported parents for over 40 years in a range of ways, including parenting programmes, family support services, parental participation, employee wellbeing services and online support.

Parenting NI has a vision of the future where parenting is highly valued and it is the charity’s mission to provide a range of accessible services and support to meet the needs of those in a parenting role.

DEFINITIONS

Parent
A person or persons with parental authority or responsibility. Refers to not only biological parents, but also those who are involved in caring for and raising children.

Parental Responsibility
The legal rights, duties, powers, responsibilities and authority a parent has for a child and the child’s property. A person who has the right to make decisions about their care and upbringing. Important decisions in a child’s life must be agreed with anyone else who has parental responsibility.

Kinship Carer
A situation where a child or young person lives full-time or most of the time with a relative or family friend rather than with their parents.

Foster Carer
A person providing care for children looked after by social services because they cannot live with their own families. This can be short or long term.
Parenting NI is a regional charity, recognised for delivering high quality parenting and family support in Northern Ireland, providing a wide range of information, support and resources for parents and families. A significant part of Parenting NI’s work is to seek and authentically represent the voice of Northern Ireland’s parents and give parents an opportunity to use their voice to shape policies and services.

This is the third year of Parenting NI conducting “The Big Parenting Survey” which runs every other year. The “Big Parenting Survey” gives parents from every part of society an opportunity to tell us about their current experiences of parenting in Northern Ireland, what levels of support they have and what gaps there are and what they need to support them on their parenting journey.

This year, we wanted to focus in on one of the major issues that has arisen because of the tough public health restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is an issue that will be familiar to service providers and policy makers across all departments and organisations; the mental health and wellbeing of parents. Parents expressed a level of concern that must be met with action, and exposed a need that has affected families from all backgrounds.

Some of the results are startling. We are particularly concerned that 87% of parents feel they do not get enough support; this is a 5% increase from 2019. Parents are clearly desperate for action to improve their lives and the lives of their children.

Policy makers, service providers, the voluntary, community and private sectors all share a responsibility to respond to the issues raised in this research report. The results of this year’s survey show that after almost two years of public health restrictions where parents have had to navigate closed support services and home-schooling, they are now left feeling worried, lacking support and unsure of how best to proceed.

While this is positive, parents will continue to need support to make this happen.

Rather than being discouraged by the results of this survey, Parenting NI view it as a call to action. Everyone with the power to help improve the lives of parents – educators, policy makers, businesses and political representatives to name a few – should carefully consider the findings and use them as a blueprint to make Northern Ireland a better place to parent your children. We, at Parenting NI, remain confident that Northern Ireland can be the best place to raise a family, provided we get the policy and support right.

Finally, we want to thank the incredible number of parents and carers who responded to this survey. The information you have provided will ensure we can lobby for a range of accessible services and support to meet the needs of those in a parenting role and we will continue to work with policy makers to create a future where parenting is highly valued.

As with all things relating to parenting, there were some positives. Parents felt that their hopes for their children were more achievable in Northern Ireland now compared to 2019.

Charlene Brooks, CEO Parenting NI
This is the third time we have conducted the “Big Parenting Survey”. As with 2019, Parenting NI sought out the experiences and thoughts of parents from across Northern Ireland. We were delighted that we received responses from a diverse cross section of society.

This year, we received 732 responses from parents that had 1639 children. This is a significant response rate. This significant level of engagement allows us to collate and share a robust picture of the experiences, concerns and hopes of parents in Northern Ireland in 2021.

As the leading provider of direct parenting support and advocacy for parents for over 40 years, Parenting NI is keen to ensure that we have a full, up-to-date picture of the realities of parenting in NI. It is a key objective of the organisation to engage parents across NI from all sections of the community to ensure they have a voice at a strategic level. It is also important to Parenting NI to enable parents to have a say and shape the services they need and wish to engage with.

The results of the survey show a range of parents who felt that they were coping very well to those who felt they were in urgent need of support.

However, there were some signs of improvement. 30% of parents felt that their hopes for their children could not be achieved in NI in 2019, only 27% felt this way in 2021. When considered with the other figures this suggests that parenting remains a complicated part of life, but that parents in NI believe that things can improve.

Many of the overall figures are as challenging for providers and policy makers as they were in 2019.

- 87% of parents do not feel that they get enough support, up 5% from 2019
- 57% of parents are more worried than hopeful about the future, down 13% from 2019
We found a number of interesting results from the questions on emotional and mental health, for example:

1 in 5 parents reported a low level of emotional and mental health at the moment

50% of parents felt children’s education was the top area that has caused concern or affected their emotional health and wellbeing over the past six months

32% of parents indicated the COVID pandemic has had a lot of negative impact on their emotional and mental health.

This report will examine the findings on emotional and mental health in more detail, but it is evident that many parents feel overwhelmed. The impact of poor emotional and mental health on parenting in Northern Ireland is significant, and should have meaningful consequences in terms of policy making and support provision.

Additionally, parents identified a number of other concerns and challenges. The most commonly identified of these were:

- Changes in Society
- Technology
- Peer Pressure

While these issues are in need of policy and service response (in some cases, immediately) it is also important to highlight the positives that parents noted. They told us that:

- Parents are more hopeful regarding parenting in the future
- Many parents believed their hopes for their child are achievable in Northern Ireland at the moment.

The diversity of responses to the survey reflect accurately the increasing diversity in families. It is correct to note that families often highlight similar issues, but it is also important to note that not every family will experience these in the same way. An event or circumstance that constitutes a crisis or triumph for one parent or child is not the same for another, even within the same family. Policy makers and service providers should make use of these findings as a starting point, rather than a final destination. Further study and research into areas highlighted by these results could lead to better and more effective policy and interventions. Parenting NI will continue to advocate for parents, and to champion the views expressed by parents in this survey and indeed all parents.
Parenting is one of the most challenging and rewarding endeavours that anyone can undertake. Even if you are not a parent, almost everyone has experience of being parented. The experience we have of parents if they are biological or foster, or if they are kinship carers or corporate parents are part of who we are. Each person’s experience of being a parent or being parented is unique, and helps to frame our understanding of the world.

Northern Ireland remains a singular place to parent. Our political, historical and geographical context means that being a parent here is not like being a parent anywhere else. Changes on the horizon – climate change, Brexit and new technologies – promise to revolutionise the realities of parenting.

Between 2004 and 2019 there have been 384,080 births registered in Northern Ireland.

The family, centred on the parent-child relationship is one of the most fundamental building blocks of society. Every family will have their challenges and their triumphs. These might be fairly regular and simple – instilling discipline in a toddler or getting a teenager to study. But many families struggle with issues that are more serious or severe, like a mental health crisis or bereavement.

All parents will have a time when they could use some support. This report will look at what parents are telling us they need help with, and what kind of help they most want.

Northern Ireland remains a close, community-minded society. Our slightly larger than average families and small cities, towns and villages mean that many families have robust support from friends and families. We are good at helping each other when we know that someone needs help. However, there are families who lack that support, who may be isolated, or new to Northern Ireland. The challenges faced by families may be common across regions, ages and other characteristics, but the ability to access support remains patchy. What causes great difficulty for one family on one street, may be a minor issue for another in the next town.

The Northern Ireland government recognised this, and has taken a number of actions in order to provide a statutory scaffolding around parents in Northern Ireland. This takes a wide range of formats, from general advice and information to highly specialised initiatives to tackle emergent problems. The format of this support had been driven by a number of important governmental strategy documents, and has evolved over time.

The Department of Health in 2006 published “Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge" which was a 10-year strategy for children and young people. This was NI’s first major government-led strategy looking at support for children and young people specifically. The Department of Education subsequently launched its 2019-2029 strategy in December of 2019. The new strategy is structured to progress eight specific outcomes for children and young people’s wellbeing. These are:

- Children and young people are physically and mentally healthy;
- Children and young people enjoy play and leisure;
- Children and young people learn and achieve;
The original children and young people strategy was followed up in 2009 by the Regional Family and Parenting Strategy, “Families Matter”.

Families Matter went deeper in outlining the responsibilities of the government in providing particular support to parents. The then Health Minister, Michael McGimpsey noted in the strategy that:

"Parents are the people best placed to raise their children. Parents can give their children the emotional and physical care and support necessary for healthy development and well-being”

The aim of Families Matter was to move parents into a more vital policy position. As well as outlining the role of government, Families Matter also recognised the centrality of the community and voluntary sector. It embraced the need for integrated planning of services at local, regional and governmental level. This clarified the responsibilities of various bodies clearly, and the rights of children, young people and families.

It laid out the model that the Executive would use going forward to design and deliver services for children and parents, called the “whole child” model. This was combined with the Northern Ireland Family Support model. The strategy was a blueprint designed to help inform the public and civil servants on how parents would be supported.

The primary aims of the model were to allow children and young people to:

- Be healthy, both in terms of physical and mental health
- Keep safe, being protected from harm and neglect
- Enjoy learning and achievement and reach their potential
- Have economic wellbeing
- Enjoy their rights
The strategy had a number of key policy objectives, including supporting family mediation during separation and the establishment of “a fully responsive regional helpline”.

The new “Family and Parenting Strategy” is currently in development (2021). It is being designed to build on the strengths of Families Matter and reflect lessons learned from more recent developments such as the CYPSP (Children and Young People’s Strategic Partnership) family support hubs and the EITP (Early Intervention Transformation Programme). The Government has been keen to build upon lessons learnt from the experiences of the previous strategy.

The new strategy will also draw on the Programme for Government, including the important outcome that relates directly to such support:

**Outcome 12: We give our children and young people the best start in life.**

In addition to these more wide-scope approaches looking at the issues of supporting children and young people via parental support, the government has produced more specific and targeted strategies.

Specifically, due to the advocacy of the “Childcare for All” coalition, of which Parenting NI is a member, political parties have identified the need for urgent action on childcare and progress on this strategy is slowly occurring.

While progress on a governmental level has been slow due to the unique constraints and the COVID pandemic, the work of statutory bodies like the Children and Young People’s Commissioner (NICCY), schools and medical institutions has continued. NICCY produced an extensive report to provide an assessment of the impact of government’s response to the pandemic on the lives of children and young people across Northern Ireland called “A New and Better Normal: Children & Young People’s Experiences of the Covid 19 Pandemic”. This report contained a number of important recommendations, especially around maintaining contact between children and family members and provision of respite services.

Statutory support is not the only source of parental support in the region. Northern Ireland has a uniquely vibrant and proactive community and voluntary sector. There are a range of charitable, faith and community based organisations that provide a patchwork of support aimed at children and young people.

Parenting NI is unique amongst these in focusing primarily on support for parents. While other organisations provide services for children and families directly, Parenting NI provides a range of support services that includes programmes, advice and other provisions for those specifically in a parenting role. Since its establishment in 1979 as the Parents Advice Centre, Parenting NI has worked tirelessly not only to help parents directly, but also to highlight the central nature of the role of the parent. This survey is the latest in a significant line of advocacy for parents, and was designed to gather the views and experiences of not only those parents who have sought or received help, but from those who have not.

The future of parenting in Northern Ireland remains uncertain. While many parents feel that the potential for their children to thrive and succeed is there, they remain unconvinced that the political will to enact it exists. The work of the statutory and community/voluntary sector to ensure that parents are increasingly empowered and supported provides a basis for parents to be hopeful. Parents are increasingly able to express their views both via a major survey such as this, but also via social media technology. These views often directly reach those in a position to make a difference in their lives, and parents are aware of this.

Since the “Big Parenting Survey” last took place in 2020 the Northern Ireland Assembly began sitting again in January 2020, after not sitting for three years, following the New Decade New Approach Agreement (NDNA). Then in March 2020, the COVID pandemic arrived and Northern Ireland went into severe lockdown to help curb the spread of the virus. As a result of this, parents have had a lot of pressure to deal with such as home-schooling and support services being withdrawn extremely quickly or being moved online.

Being a parent in modern Northern Ireland remains an unusual and complicated experience. However, when compared to the realities of parenting in other parts of the world, what sticks out is the remarkable similarity. Parents in Northern Ireland want the same as parents anywhere – for their children to be happy, healthy and fulfilled. While there are issues that must be addressed to help parents to achieve this, Northern Ireland remains a place where there are many opportunities and benefits to raising a child.
WHAT PARENTS TOLD US

We understand that parents want the best for their children. However, what is "best" will be different for every individual family. We sought to ascertain what parents wanted for their children, and what was most important to them.

Do you think society's hopes for your children are the same as your own?

720 parents provided a response to this question. Just over 50% (362) of parents believed that society's hopes for their children is the same as their own. However, just under 50% (358) disagreed with this. We also provided a space for parents to elaborate on their response.

We asked parents to rank a range of seven “hopes”. 728 responses were received and the "hopes" were ranked them in the following order:

- BE HAPPY
- BE HEALTHY
- ACHIEVE A GOOD EDUCATION
- GET A FULFILLING JOB
- HAVE A FAMILY
- EARN A GOOD SALARY
- GO TO UNIVERSITY
Finally in this section, we asked parents if they think their hopes for their child are achievable in Northern Ireland at the moment. 725 parents responded to this question. 47% (339) believed their hopes for their child were achievable in Northern Ireland compared to 27% (193) who did not think their hopes were achievable at the moment. 28% (193) responded with 'Don't know.'
CLIMATE CHANGE CONCERN

A new theme that has emerged in 2021 is parent's concern about climate change:

"Society doesn’t seem to tackle climate change."

"There is a lot more pressure on today's children about climate changes and are made more aware of what the future is going to be like"

CHILDREN WITH A DISABILITY

A small but growing theme that has emerged this year is parents who have a child with a disability:

"My children have disabilities and society anticipate that people with disabilities will not lead a full and independent life"

"I want the same opportunities for all my kids but one of my kids has a disability"

"My son is disabled and nobody cares"

"My son has disabilities and society is not an easy place to navigate for him"
"I WOULD LIKE MY CHILDREN TO GROW UP IN A SHARED SOCIETY WHERE ALL PEOPLE ARE SEEN AND TREATED AS EQUAL. I DO NOT WANT MY CHILDREN OR THEIR CHILDREN TO SUFFER AS A RESULT OF OUR SOCIETY BEING UNABLE TO MOVE FORWARD. OUR ECONOMY, JOB OPPORTUNITIES AND EVEN ACADEMIC OPPORTUNITIES ARE LIMITED WITHIN THIS REGION AS WE ARE NOT CONSIDERED A PROGRESSIVE SOCIETY. I FEAR THAT MY CHILDREN WILL NOT WANT TO LIVE HERE WHEN THEY ARE OLDER."

"MY IDEA OF SUCCESS IS DIFFERENT TO MOST I WANT MY CHILD TO BE HAPPY AND HEALTHY FEEL GOOD ENOUGH NOT BE CAUGHT IN THE CYCLE OF SUCCESS AND COMPARISON"

"I HOPE THAT MY CHILDREN ARE ABLE TO AFFORD TO OWN THEIR OWN HOME SO THEY FEEL SAFE AND SECURE, HAVE ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE WHEN THEY NEED IT, AND WORK IN A JOB THAT PAYS THEM A FAIR WAGE."

PARENT'S COMMENTS
We asked parents to rate their own emotional and mental health at the moment using a scale between one and 10, where one means very poor emotional and mental health and 10 means very good emotional and mental health.

Ratings were grouped as follows: scores 8-10 indicate high levels of emotional and mental health, scores 5-7 medium levels of emotional and mental health and 1-4 low levels of emotional and mental health.

730 parents responded to this question. Just over a third of parents (37%) reported high levels of emotional and mental health at the moment. While 44% reported a medium level of emotional and mental health and just under a fifth (19%) of parents reported a low level of emotional and mental health at the moment.
We asked parents to rate how much the COVID pandemic has negatively affected their emotional and mental health using a scale between one and 10, where one means not at all and 10 means a lot.

Ratings were grouped as follows: scores 8-10 indicates a lot of negative impact on their emotional and mental health, scores 5-7 indicate some negative impact on their emotional and mental health and 1-4 indicate not a lot of impact on their emotional and mental health.

729 parents responded to this question. Just over one in four parents (28%) responded that the pandemic had not had a lot of negative impact on their emotional and mental health. While almost two in five (39%) indicated that the COVID pandemic has some negative impact on their emotional and mental health while just under a third (32%) of parents indicated the COVID pandemic has had a lot of negative impact on their emotional and mental health.

“Post pandemic parenting is a big unknown and social isolation and broken support networks need to be addressed”. 
We asked parents to rank the top three areas that have caused them concern or negatively affected their emotional health and wellbeing over the past six months.

Children's education was the top area that parents felt has caused concern or affected their emotional health and wellbeing over the past six months with 50% choosing this option. This was closely followed by concerns relating to your child's mental health (47%) and fear/anxiety relating to potential illness/infection from COVID (44%).

14% (101) parents answered with 'Other' and were given space to elaborate this response. The most common reasons in this section were death in the family and work/life balance.
DO YOU THINK PARENTS GET ENOUGH SUPPORT?

There is a plethora of anecdotal evidence which suggests there is not enough support for parents. We wanted to know however, just how widespread is this belief? We also wanted to ask parents where they wanted to access support when they needed it.

IN 2019, WE FOUND THAT MORE THAN FOUR IN FIVE (83%) RESPONDENTS FELT PARENTS DID NOT GET ENOUGH SUPPORT. IN 2021 THAT NUMBER INCREASED - 87% OF PARENTS TOLD US THAT THEY DID NOT BELIEVE THERE WAS ENOUGH SUPPORT.

WHAT PARENTS TOLD US

The patterns of what sort of support parents want is more nuanced. Overall 728 responses were received for this question. Online support, including an app and web chat accounted for just over 30% (221) of responses. This is a 10% decrease from 2019. The next most popular form of support was face-to-face appointments, with just over a fifth (155) of all parents indicating they would like this form best. A support group with other parents received 112 responses at 15%. Parenting programmes and counselling both came in with 8% (60) and 9% (66) respectively, followed by home visiting and finally a Freephone helpline with 4% (31). A small but significant number of parents 6% answered ‘Other’ and the comments in this answer were mainly asking for financial help and help with childcare.

TYPE OF SUPPORT PARENTS WOULD LIKE TO RECEIVE

- Online support
- Face-to-face support in a venue
- Parenting programmes
- Parent counselling
- Freephone helpline
- Home visit
- Support group with other parents
- Other
Concerning the biggest challenges for parents, the most common answers are similar to 2019. We asked parents to pick their top three challenges for parenting today. The top three challenges for parenting today are mental health followed by technology and changes in society. Mental health and technology were chosen by 53% (389) and 52% (379) of parents respectively followed by changes in society at 33% (242).

61 parents chose the “other” option – the most common of these were time/work related and COVID restrictions. A number of other parents mentioned concerns around crime or drug use and some specifically worried about the impact of social media.

"My child's mental health hasn't been great"

"Parents struggling financially brings enormous pressures on their on mental health, resilience & ability to provide positive environment for a child to thrive"

"Parents are not in a regulated state to be able to support themselves let alone their children"

“More funding for support services can support more parenting communities"
Just over half of parents suggested that they were more worried than hopeful about parenting in the future. 57% (413) of parents told us they were more worried about parenting than hopeful, with 43% (317) saying they were more hopeful. These figures are better than 2019 - around 12% more parents are hopeful in this survey compared to the 2019 figures.
Unsurprisingly, parents highlighted social media issues when asked about whether they are more hopeful or worried about the future:

"As things change at such a fast pace, I am concerned about how social media increasingly influences my children and affects them. It’s very difficult to get away from technology and the pressure children face because of it rises continually."

"Social media is a huge negative influence but technology is also an important part of the future so I worry about getting the balance right."

"Worried because of the gap being created between parents tech knowledge and the tech kids are using and the social / mental impact of this on our kids."
ANALYSIS & CONCLUSIONS

Over the period that the 2021 “Big Parenting Survey” was open, we received 732 responses in total.

89% of respondents indicated they did not have a disability while 11% indicated they did.

90% of respondents that provided their sex was female and around 10% indicated that their sex was male.

97% of respondents identified as heterosexual, 0.41% identified as gay or lesbian, 1% identifying as other & 2% choosing prefer not to say.

The majority of parents indicated that they were married at the time of answering – 72% of responses. Around 16% identified as single parents, 5% were separated and nearly 2% were kinship carers. Just under 5% of parents selected “other”, the majority of parents who selected this option were co-habiting.

The largest single age bracket was 35-44, with around half of all responses (50%) followed by 18-34 (22%) and 45-54 (23%). A small percentage indicated that they were over 55 (5%). These figures are close to the 2019 results.

Most of the responses indicated that they were not a part of an ethnic minority (91%).

The community background of respondents was 41% Catholic, 36% Protestant, 15% neither and 9% prefer not to say.
The most common number of children was 2 (45%). Just under a quarter (22%) had one child, and nearly one in four had 3 (24%). Considerably fewer parents had 4 (6%) with very few indicating 5 (3%) or 6+ (0.5%).

When looking at schools, the results were broadly similar to previous years. The largest single group attended primary schools (34%) followed by Not in school (14%). Once again, the number of children at grammar schools (15%) was higher than in secondary schools (14%). Five percent attend a Surestart/Childminder while 3% attend an SEN school.

The most common age range for children was 4-7 years (22%) followed by 0-3 years (21%). 8-11 years was slightly less at 20%, which was higher than the 12-15 age range at 15%. There were slightly more children aged 19+ (13%) compared to aged 16-19 (9%).
In terms of their children’s disability/additional needs—about 30% of parents suggested at least one child had special educational needs. These ranged in type, but the most common were autism/ASD and dyslexia.

16% of parents said that their children receive free school meals. This number is up around 6% from 2019’s survey.

We asked respondents to tell us what health trust they live in for the first time. Most responses were received from the Northern Trust (29%) followed by the Western Trust (20%). The Belfast Trust and South Eastern Trust had about 17% of responses each followed by the Southern Trust (9%). 7% responded with ‘Don’t know’.

When looking at what type of area responses were received from, we found that 37% were from rural areas, 40% from suburban areas and 22% from urban areas.

Geographically, the most responses were received from the Belfast City Council area (16%). This is expected as it is the largest population base in Northern Ireland. We have benchmarked responses received in the Big Parenting Survey 2021 with NISRA mid-year estimates 2020. We have found that we received more responses compared to population in Antrim and Newtownabbey and Derry City and Strabane Council areas. We received fewer responses compared to population in Newry, Mourne and Down and Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Council areas.

We feel that these results represent a fair and reasonable approximation of parents in Northern Ireland. There is a good level of coverage in terms of parental ages, ages of children/young people, geographical, community and other factors.
The 2021 results of the “Big Parenting Survey” are stark and show that parents are still struggling to receive support. For individuals and organisations seeking to provide help and support for parents, this should be concerning.

Even more parents than last year indicated that they do not think parents get enough support. This may be because as a result of the public health restrictions of the COVID pandemic parents have had to take on more roles and many support services were shut or moved online. Nonetheless, less than 15% of parents feel that enough support is given. The trend is negative on this particular topic, and demonstrates clearly that better support is urgently required.

Parents expressed a desire for a wide range of supports to meet their needs, which reflects the variety of issues they face, as well as their severity. The single most popular method of support chosen by parents was online accounting for about 30% of responses. Face-to-face support in a venue was also a popular method of support that parents chose as their preferred method of support. The third most popular choice for parenting support was a support group for parents accounting for about 15% of responses. These are quite dramatic changes from 2019 and could be attributed to the impact of the COVID pandemic.

This does not necessarily mean that other methods are ineffective, or that there is no place for them. It is evident that online support in particular is often an entry point means for parents seeking help, and individuals who end up taking part in more in-depth interventions often come from having sought information online as a first step. It has been well evidenced that a ‘one size fits all’ approach does not work for families as their needs are so varied and complex. Therefore it is important to have a myriad of support for parents and families if outcomes for children and young people are going to be maximised.

The major sources of concern for parents have changed slightly from 2019 with ‘Your child’s education’ being a parent’s top concern of the last six months followed by ‘Your child’s mental health’. It is clear as well that the COVID pandemic has brought these concerns to the fore as the public health restrictions and lockdowns meant parents had to start home-schooling their children. Other top areas of concerns for parents also link directly to the COVID pandemic with ‘fear/anxiety relating to potential illness/infection from COVID’ and ‘social isolation’ also causing parents concern over the last six months. Therefore, policy makers need to ensure appropriate support is given to parents as we continue to deal with the COVID pandemic.

As with 2019’s survey, issues relating to childcare and financial stress feature prominently in parents' personal stories and concerns. While there has been some progress in developing a Childcare Strategy, it is imperative that this is is approved and implemented as soon as possible.

Some new topics that have arisen in 2021 in the comments of this survey are parents who have a child with a disability and that there is little support for them. Another new topic is climate change. Parents have been commenting that they are also concerned on the impact of climate change on their children.

While there is still a generally negative outlook among parents regarding the future. There is an emerging trend that parents feel that their hopes for their children can be achieved in Northern Ireland, they remain on the whole more worried than hopeful but this margin is tightening and has decreased by 12% since 2019. Furthermore, more parents also believe that their hopes for their child are achievable in Northern Ireland.

Parents face many challenges and it is no surprise that they said their biggest challenges as a parents are mental health, technology and changes in society. This is the same as 2019 and shows that parents still need support with these topics.
CONCLUSION- TRENDS

The focus of this survey was on parental mental health and the impact of the COVID pandemic. Some concerning figures are that about 1 in 5 parents reported a low level of emotional and mental health at the moment and almost 1 in 3 parents reported that the COVID pandemic has had a lot of negative impact on their mental health. This clearly highlights the impact of the COVID pandemic and the public health restrictions on parent mental health and that support needs to be enhanced for parents in this area.

The best answer therefore to providing the support parents want in the settings they say they feel are most appropriate is a co-design process. By drawing together funding (from the statutory sector), delivery (from the Voluntary/Community sector), location/facilitation (educational settings) and service users (parents) a model can be developed to begin to address the issues expressed by parents on technology.

The responses to the “Big Parenting Survey” showed more than anything that parenting in Northern Ireland is challenging. While most parents did suggest that they were able to provide adequate support to their children, they did not feel society as a whole is a positive environment for parents. Policy makers should be conscious of the results of this survey, and keep in mind the feelings of parents when seeking to improve the situation and standing of parents.

DATA LIMITATIONS

There are of course limitations to this data. As noted in the demographics, there is still under-representation of men in the respondents which is regrettable. Parenting NI will continue to attempt to increase levels of male participation in future surveys. Furthermore, this is the first time we have measured the geographic spread of responses received by council area. While in some areas, the number of responses received compared to population is different, it gives us an understanding of where we need to target for next time.

The levels of participation by both LGBT+ and ethnic minority parents were lower than desired. There are a range of issues that causes levels of participation of these particular groups to be more challenging, but efforts will be made in future to drive higher levels of inclusion. If possible, future provision in alternative languages would make this task easier, but would require support from a funding body.

In addition, parents were allowed to drop out of the survey at any question. As such, while the majority of parents who answered the first question did complete the survey, not all chose to do so. Therefore, demographical information is not necessarily 100% reflective of earlier answers. We were aware of this potential problem in the formation of the questions, but consciously chose not to make it necessary to answer the full survey for results to be included, due to the number of individuals this approach would disregard. As such, in future surveys efforts will be made to encourage fuller participation, but no significant changes will be made in terms of “mandatory” questions.
RECOMMENDATIONS

As in previous years, parents have expressed serious concerns about their own mental health and well-being in this survey. Parent mental health has worsened as a result of the COVID pandemic public health restrictions. In addition to asking policy makers to continue to invest in mental well-being initiatives, Parenting NI recommends that parent-specific mental health interventions and programmes be developed. The stigma associated with experiencing mental ill health as a parent makes this an issue in need of targeted support.

MENTAL HEALTH

Parents have indicated that online is where they would like to receive support with their parenting concerns. Strategies and governmental policy needs to consider this factor. Parents have also expressed their desire for increased face-to-face services as well. Following the COVID pandemic and the public health restrictions where everything has been online, hybrid models need to be considered as well.

COVID PANDEMIC

The COVID pandemic has impacted every part of our lives. Our findings show that the COVID pandemic has impacted many parents in an extremely negative way. Policy-makers need to ensure that all COVID recovery policies consider how it can help parents (or those in a parenting role) whenever it is being designed and implemented.