



Childcare On The Borderline:

A Cross Border Community Audit of the Usage and Experience of Formal and Informal Childcare Services

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Introduction

Childcare impacts on the lives of children, families and communities. The issue of child care needs to be viewed both in the context of family life and wider society in order to understand how childcare provision can and does contribute to “healthy communities” and to positive social change. The absence of accessible, affordable, quality childcare poses a major stress factor, particularly in women’s lives, and is a major barrier to accessing or returning to education, training and employment. In addition, the lack of family-friendly workplace policies and the recognition of workers’ childcare responsibilities have an impact on absenteeism rates. Research on cross border rural childcare emphasises low levels of childcare provision compared to urban areas and levels of provision within the European community. Often the lack of directly subsidised childcare provision compounds the poverty trap experienced by parents. As the centrality of childcare in affecting women’s psychological well being had emerged from a previous study, this study was commissioned by Derry Well Woman to investigate the range and availability of childcare in the North West region.

Research outline



1. The case study

The first element of the project was to examine the use and experience of childcare services available in the North West of Ireland and to recommend improvements in existing childcare provision.

To achieve this, research was conducted in an area comprising the eight council areas of Derry, Limavady, Strabane, Omagh, Enniskillen, Leitrim, Sligo and Donegal. The research was based on a participatory action research approach which combined a community-based survey of parents and focus groups.

The survey was conducted by women from community network organisations who were trained to administer questionnaires within their local areas. A total of 966 questionnaires were returned (a 63.5% return rate), providing the perspectives of a very diverse range of parents and producing data in relation to 1909 children.

In the survey, parents were asked about the nature and frequency of childcare used, the type and level of formal and informal childcare used, the expenditure on childcare, financial assistance, unmet need, satisfaction with childcare arrangements, factors influencing choice of childcare, use of registered and unregistered childminders and recommendations for improvements.

Seven focus groups with 56 parents and providers of formal and informal care were also held across the region. Participants were invited to discuss a range of issues which related to informal and formal childcare provision within local areas. Views were sought about barriers to securing suitable childcare, affordability, accessibility and coordination of public childcare and familial childcare networks.

2. The wider context

The second element of the study was to place the case study in its wider context through a detailed literature review. This report also provides this review, examining childcare provision at national and international level, highlighting indicators of quality childcare and models of good practice.

Summary of research findings

1. Patterns of childcare usage, choice and expenditure

a. In relation to types and timing of childcare used:

- Care by parents' friends, followed closely by grandparental care were the most frequently used informal childcare arrangements. This care was particularly important for the under fives.
- The crèche facility was the most frequently used formal childcare arrangement.
- The use of unregistered care was found to be most prevalent in Strabane and the Southern regions.
- Childcare was most frequently arranged to suit parents' working hours.

b. In relation to choice of childcare:

- Trust, reliability, the availability of vetted staff and the good reputation of the provider were the key factors influencing parents' choice of childcare. These factors were rated more highly than issues of cost and location (which were still, however, important considerations). This indicated, perhaps unsurprisingly, that the safety of children was the prime concern.

- Choice and patterns of formal usage might vary if parents had better access to information about local availability. Many parents said they lacked such information.

c. In relation to expenditure on childcare:

- There was a great variation in spending on childcare reflecting a complex set of associated factors from the lack of affordable care and the lack of availability to parents' working patterns and so on.
- In our survey, some parents spent as little as £1.50 on childcare per week (for a community-based play session), some hired relatively low-cost informal babysitting for a few hours a week whilst others used several days' or full-time formal care (which can amount to £100 per week for one child cared for within a crèche setting in this region). The maximum weekly childcare spending by parents found in our survey was £215.

2. Unmet need

a. In terms of affordable care:

- There was a lack of affordable care, particularly for parents of children under eighteen months.
- There was lack of assistance with child care for parents in hardship (such as through tax credit help) in the Republic of Ireland.

b. In terms of the availability of care

- One third of all questionnaire respondents had experienced times over the past year when they were unable to find appropriate childcare. Of these parents, unmet need was experienced at least once a month by a third.

- Childcare was not always available when required during the day. Childcare was often available too late for parents who need to drop children off before work or for parents working late/weekend shifts. Childcare in some areas was discontinuous over the course of the day e.g. care might be available for 2 hours in the morning and 2 hours in the afternoon. This was not helpful for parents working full-time and presented difficulties for parents in terms of coordinating their childcare arrangements.
- There was unmet need for childcare for children of certain age ranges. This varied according to area.
- There was also unmet need for children with particular needs. This included specialised or integrated specialised care for children with special needs and special care for children with particular cultural needs such as those from the Travelling community experiencing social exclusion.
- Services available in rural areas tended to be fewer.

3. The consequences of unmet need

- Unmet need, whether due to availability or cost, is a key influence on whether parents take up work and educational opportunities. Parents experienced problems in relation to keeping up employment and the difficulty of maintaining good relationships with employers when childcare problems were experienced.
- Unmet need also has impacts on other aspects of parents' daily lives, such as whether parents can take up their own medical appointments and participate in community life. The latter can be extremely significant in terms of helping parents maintain mental and emotional health and reducing feelings of isolation, particularly for non-employed and lone parents.

- Unmet need is also of key significance for children who can benefit from the opportunities for education, to socialise and in the case of some children from specialised provision.
- Some of the patterns of unmet need highlighted in our research indicate the lack of joined-up thinking in relation to planning for childcare provision.
- Unmet need in terms of access to affordable care also indicates a need for subsidy of care and more financial assistance for parents who cannot afford childcare.

4. Satisfaction with available provision

- Satisfaction with formal childcare arrangements was generally high. Opening hours needed to be extended and quality of buildings needed improvement.
- Satisfaction with informal childcare arrangements was quite high but dissatisfaction was expressed with care provided by ex-partners in many areas.
- Specialised provision that was available was regarded as very good.

5. The service providers' perspective

- Lack of funding and the interminable cycle of funding applications hampered long-term planning, investment and had a negative impact on staff morale.
- Low pay and job insecurity have hindered recruitment and retention of staff or good quality staff in some areas. This has knock-on effects for the availability of childcare places.

- The lack of co-ordination at local level about the range of services meant that they were in competition with each other so sustainability was an issue.
- The impact on children and families of all of these problems should be a key concern.

6. Gender issues in childcare

- The issue of gender inequalities in childcare provision is highly significant in this region.
- Childcare providers suggested there was a neglect of the sector (as described above) because of the association with what is traditionally regarded as “women’s work” and therefore undervalued. The lack of employment of men in the sector was highlighted
- Our findings also show that, in relation to gender and childcare in the family, the traditional view that mothers should take responsibility for childcare or childcare arrangements was prevalent.

Principles behind our recommendations

Recommendations have been developed from the findings of this research and the input from the research advisory group. These are based on a set of principles as follows:

- Children and parents should be at the centre of planning for childcare services.
- All children should have the right to equality of opportunity to develop to their full potential from birth (as stated by the UN Commission on the Rights of the Child).
- A strong childcare infrastructure should support parents and families and has the potential to promote child health, well-being and development.
- Children should have a right to a quality, funded pre-school service.
- Childcare services should have state investment in order to be affordable and sustainable.
- The childcare sector needs should have highly skilled staff with access to appropriate training, support, pay and conditions.

Recommendations

The recommendations in relation to the key issues arising from our research are given in the table below.



Issue	Recommendation
1. Need for a childcare strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. A childcare strategy with children and families at its centre should be drawn up by government. b. This strategy should be the responsibility of one Government Department and Minister; the role and responsibilities of this lead Department and the Minister should be clearly identified. c. The role and responsibilities of the various national, regional and local players in the sector should be recognised, and the strategy should be developed in conjunction with these. d. The strategy should contain a plan of action with targets and timeframes. Appropriate review and evaluation provisions should be incorporated into the strategy, taking into account the plan and targets.
2. Coordination of the sector locally	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. A holistic, better coordinated approach to localized childcare provision is required which offers more flexible opening and closing hours, including synchronisation with school holiday periods. b. A local 'one stop' approach to childcare provision should be developed which offers services outside traditional working hours, drop in 'respite' care, before school and after school facilities and a 'stop gap' service when normal childcare arrangements cannot be maintained.
3. Local partnerships and local participation in decision-making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. The role of childcare partnerships in determining and co-coordinating local provision of services should be enhanced. b. Appropriate mechanisms should be put in place or improved for ongoing consultation with parents, children and the sector.
4. Increasing and improving provision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Free, quality pre-school services for all children should be provided at least one year before attending primary school. b. The availability and range of provision of services after school hours and during holidays should be improved. c. Investment is required to improve and extend provision for children with special needs. d. Investment is required to improve and extend provision for children facing social exclusion (particularly those from the Traveller community in the Republic of Ireland)
5. Funding and investment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Childcare services, including childminding and out of school provision, should be subsidised to ensure they are affordable to all parents. b. The lack of permanent funding for non-profit making ventures should be ended to enhance long-term sustainability of locally-based provision. c. The status of the childcare workforce should be improved through financial investment in pay structures and training. d. The range of incentives to promote registered or notified child minding services should be increased.
6. Tackling social exclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Childcare should be designed so that it does not have the (unintended) effect of marginalisation. b. In particular, provision of children with disabilities should be made available in general childcare facilities, if possible. c. Culturally-sensitive provision in suitable locations for children from Traveller backgrounds should be made open to all children to prevent marginalisation of the children of Traveller backgrounds.

Issue	Recommendation
7. Tackling gender inequality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Gender inequalities in relation to childcare should be tackled. b. A strategy should be developed to raise awareness of gender inequalities in childcare provision. c. New initiatives to enhance male participation in childcare services should be piloted. d. Investment in pay, training and conditions (as advocated above) is also required.
8. Information for parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Lists of providers, description of services and eligibility criteria should be published annually through range of local sources i.e. newspapers, District Council websites, local community networks, maternity and health visiting services. b. Checklists of key indicators should be developed to enable parents to make an informed choice about childcare.
9. Area-based Concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. In Derry/Londonderry and Strabane the staff-child ratio in childcare should be improved. b. In Limavady, special needs' provision requires improvement. c. In Strabane and Enniskillen more flexible opening hours for childcare should be offered. d. In Leitrim and Omagh the quality of buildings should be enhanced. e. In Donegal, Leitrim and Sligo: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Government incentives and financial support for childcare provision should be reviewed. ii. A strategic development plan for registered child minding should be developed. iii. Access to a pre-school place for all children aged 3 to 6 years should be facilitated, subsidised by the State.



