



Research Update

Childcare Matters

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Introduction

Childcare policy has had a much higher profile in Great Britain and in the Republic of Ireland than in Northern Ireland. In England, the UK government is investing £4 billion over three years in funding for Sure Start projects, and to support early years and childcare provision (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007). The Irish government is spending €575 million on its current five-year National Childcare Investment Programme which is designed to create up to 50,000 new childcare places (Department of Health and Children, 2007).

In Northern Ireland, there has been no comparable level of public investment in childcare. Indeed, while the UK government is committed to the delivery of affordable, high quality childcare places for all families who require such provision (HM Treasury, 2004), there has been no similar commitment to date by the Northern Ireland Executive.

In 2003, the Department of Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland joined with other bodies to commission a comprehensive survey of demand for and provision of childcare in Northern Ireland. The study concluded that there was a significant shortfall in childcare places (Gray and Bruegal). The survey found that the level of childcare provision in Northern Ireland was “much lower” than in England, and recommended a significant expansion in the number of registered childminders to meet demand.

Four years later, in 2007, NICMA – the Childminding Association wished to find out whether or not there was still a gap between the supply and demand for childcare in Northern Ireland. It also wished to gauge the level of interest among the general public with regard to



childcare, and to ascertain the public's views towards the quality of care offered by childminders.

NICMA therefore commissioned a survey, conducted by Ipsos MORI, which questioned a representative sample of 1,024 adults aged 16 or over in Northern Ireland¹. The survey involved the inclusion of a series of special questions in Ipsos MORI's monthly Northern Ireland Omnibus Survey. The face-to-face interviews took place in November and December 2007. The survey was the first to examine public attitudes towards childcare in Northern Ireland.

Views on childcare policy

The results of the survey suggested greater concern about the issue of childcare among the general public in Northern Ireland than one might have anticipated. When asked for their view on the following statement: “*The provision of good quality, affordable childcare for all who need it should be a priority for the Northern Ireland Executive*”, more than four-fifths of respondents (83%) said they agreed with it (see Figure 1). Nearly two-fifths of respondents strongly agreed with this statement. Moreover, the strength of support for this view was almost as great

among men as women; 80% of men agreed with the statement, compared to 86% of women. Not surprisingly, parents were especially supportive of this statement; 91% of those with dependent children aged 14 or under agreed with it.

Respondents were then asked more specifically whether addressing the shortage of childminders should be a priority for the Executive. Once again, more than four-fifths of respondents were supportive of this view. 81% supported the statement “*Tackling the shortage of childminders should be a priority for the Northern Ireland Executive.*” 33% strongly agreed with it.

The public image of childcare

The two major forms of full-time childcare in Northern Ireland, as in the rest of the UK, are childminding and day nurseries. As nurseries tend to be more expensive than childminders, it might be assumed that the public would regard childminders as offering an inferior service. The survey therefore sought to ascertain the public's perception of the quality of both forms of childcare.

The results indicate that nurseries are, indeed, more highly regarded by the

Figure 1: “Good quality, affordable childcare should be priority for NI Executive”
Base: all respondents (1,024)

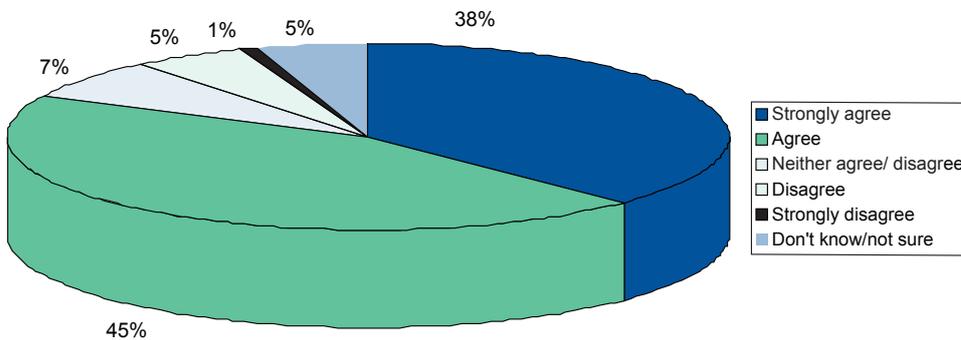


Figure 2: Perceptions of quality of nurseries and childminding
Base: all respondents (1,024)

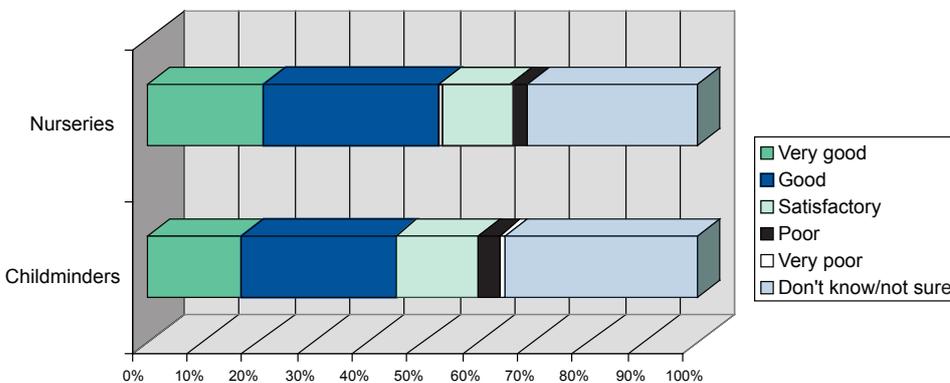


Table 1: Perceptions of quality of nurseries and childminding

	All parents (n=318)		Parents using childcare (n=118)		Parents who had sought childcare in previous 3 years (n=95)	
	Nurseries %	Childminding %	Nurseries %	Childminding %	Nurseries %	Childminding %
Very good	28	24	31	31	31	29
Good	34	27	35	35	37	38
Satisfactory	13	14	14	13	17	17
Poor	5	6	5	4	7	7
Very poor	0	1	0	2	0	1
Don't know/ Not sure	20	26	15	15	9	9

Northern Ireland public than childminders in terms of the perceived quality of care (see Figure 2). However, the difference in the way respondents perceived each type of provider was not as large as one might have assumed. 45% of all respondents felt the quality of care provided by childminders was ‘good’ or ‘very good’, compared to 53% who perceived the quality of care provided by nurseries as ‘good’ or ‘very good’. Only a very small proportion felt that the quality of care of either type of provider was poor.

Not surprisingly, parents were less likely than the survey sample as a whole to say they didn’t know in response to the questions on the quality of nurseries and childminding, and more likely to be positive in their view of both forms of childcare (see Table 1). However, they were more likely to say they didn’t know with regard to the quality of care provided by childminders (26%) than the quality of care provided by nurseries (20%).

Although the numbers involved are small,

it is instructive to look at the comparative pattern of responses for the total sample of parents, parents who were using childcare and those who had recently sought childcare (see Table 1)¹¹. The latter two groups would have direct experience of at least one type of childcare provider (formal or informal), and may well have accessed information on more than one form of childcare.

It is perhaps not surprising then that both these groups were more positive than parents as a whole about both childminders and nurseries, and less likely to say they didn’t know. But there was a more marked difference, in this regard, in attitudes towards childminders than nurseries. This suggests that parents may well be more likely to view nurseries in a positive light, whether or not they have direct experience of them or have specifically accessed information about childcare.

Searching for and using childcare

One third of the respondents (318) said they had children aged 14 or under living with them. They were asked about their current use of childcare and any experience they had had of looking for childcare in the three years prior to the survey. Nearly two-fifths (37%) said they made use of some form of either formal or informal childcare on either a full-time or part-time basis. While 41% of working parents said they made use of childcare, 31% of non-working parents also accessed formal or informal childcare. Those in the higher ABC1 social category were more likely to make use of childcare than those in the C2DE group; 44% of ABC1 parents made use of childcare, compared to 32% of C2DE parents¹¹.

Nearly a third (30%) of parents said that they or their partner had looked for childcare in the previous three years. Of those who had looked for childcare, 30% said their search had been ‘fairly’ or ‘very’ difficult, with 17% describing it as ‘very difficult’ (see Figure 3). On the other hand, 41% described their search as ‘fairly easy’ and 26% as ‘very easy’. Those respondents in rural areas who had sought childcare tended to find the search harder than those in urban areas; 43% of rural respondents who had looked for childcare described the search as difficult or unsuccessful, compared to 28% in urban areas. Given that the overall group of parents who had

searched for childcare was fairly small and not necessarily representative of all parents in this situation, caution must be exercised in interpreting these results. However, they do suggest that access to childcare remains a significant problem for many parents, and that access to childcare may well be a more acute problem in rural areas.

All parents with children aged 14 or under were asked what factors were important to them in looking for childcare (see Figure 4). They were asked to select as many criteria as they wished from a list containing four options – quality, cost, convenience, and that the person providing the care should be known to the parent. The latter choice was included to gauge the extent of a preference for informal care provided by family and friends although, in some instances, a formal care provider could fit the description; for example, a registered childminder who was also a neighbour or friend. Respondents were also able to mention any other factors they considered significant.

The two factors cited by far the most frequently were quality, and ‘that [care] is provided by someone who knows the child’; 52% of parents selected each of these options. Convenience was cited by 27% and cost by 26%. The figures suggest a strong general preference among many parents for informal care, with somewhat more importance being placed on whether the carer is known to the child among parents in the C2DE category (55%), compared to parents in the ABC1 group (47%). However, although those in the ABC1 category were more likely to place a high premium on quality than those in the C2DE group, they were also slightly more likely to be concerned about the cost; cost was cited by 28% of ABC1 parents compared to 25% of C2DE parents.

Although all parents with children aged 14 or under responded to this question, the same broad pattern is evident if one looks at the answers given by those currently using childcare and those who had sought it previously. At the same time, both the latter groups were more likely to cite quality and also slightly more likely to cite cost. These statistics do show the importance that parents place on quality when it comes to childcare. However, previous UK-based research has demonstrated how parents are – by necessity – limited by what they can afford in seeking childcare, and that there does tend to be a trade-off between affordability and quality in practice (Duncan, Paull and Taylor, 2001).

Figure 3: Ease of search for childcare
Base: parents who looked for childcare in previous 3 years (95)

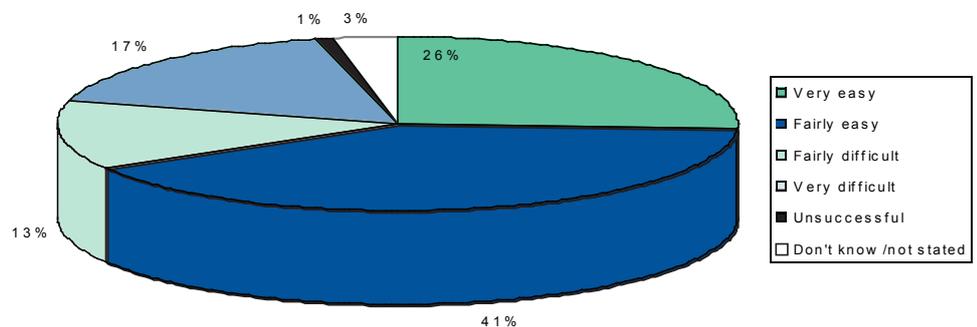
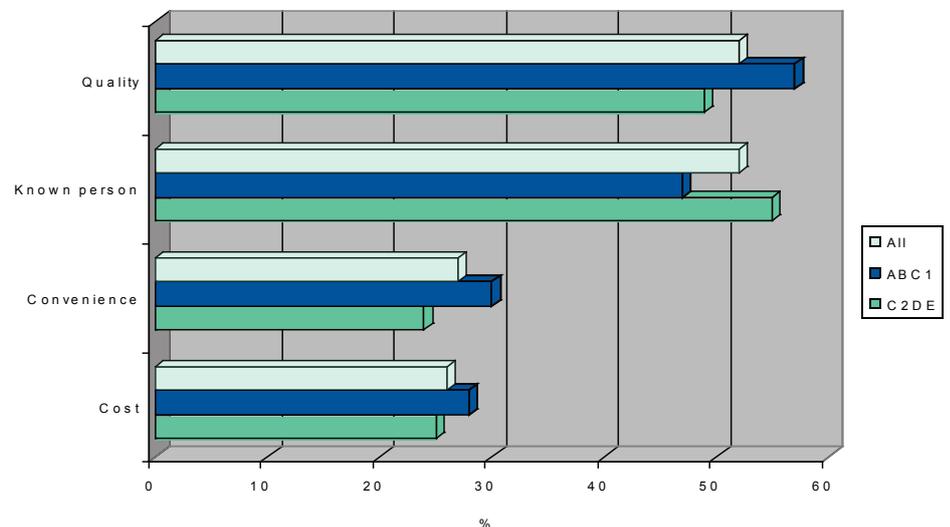


Figure 4: Factors in looking for childcare
Base: all parents (318)



Parents were also asked about their preferred method of finding childcare. By far the most favoured method was word of mouth recommendation from a friend or relative; 74% of parents said they favoured this method. By contrast, much smaller proportions opted for the two more formal means by which childminders are able to promote themselves; through organisations providing information on childminders, such as NICMA, or through advertisements in local papers or shops. Just 11% of parents said they would prefer to find childcare through telephone contact with an organisation providing information on childminders, while a mere 4% said they would prefer to search for childcare using adverts. The same pattern of responses was evident among parents currently using childcare and those who had previously sought it.

One of the most surprising findings was a reported lack of preference for using the internet to find childcare, despite the fact that most of the parents in the sample

had access to the internet. 77% of parents said they had access to the internet, with 74% able to access the internet at home. However, a mere 1% of parents said they would prefer to use the internet to search for childcare. The wider trend towards making greater use of the internet to access information on services seems set to grow, however. In reality, it seems likely that the internet will begin playing a more significant role in enabling parents to find childcare. It should also be borne in mind that the relevant question concerned respondents' preferred option, rather than the actual means used by those who had sought childcare.

Conclusions

The results of this survey suggest a greater concern about childcare among the general public in Northern Ireland than one might have expected. In particular, it is notable that the proportion of men who agreed

that childcare should be a priority for the Executive was not much lower than the proportion of women.

Although the sample of parents who had recently looked for childcare was relatively

small and not necessarily representative, the fact that 30% of parents found their search 'fairly' or 'very' difficult certainly suggests that childcare is not currently accessible to all who require it in Northern Ireland.

This survey provides some very useful indicative data on the demand for childcare in Northern Ireland, but there is a clear need for much more comprehensive research on the supply and demand for childcare in the region.

Key points

- More than four-fifths of respondents (83%) thought the Northern Ireland Executive should give priority to the provision of good quality, affordable childcare for all that need it.
- Nearly one third (30%) of parents who had recently looked for childcare said they had found their search 'fairly' or 'very' difficult – parents in rural areas were more likely to find their search difficult.
- More than half of all parents (52%) said the quality of care was an important consideration in seeking childcare.
- Day nurseries were viewed more favourably than childminders in terms of the quality of care they were perceived as providing, but there appeared to be less awareness of what childminders can offer.
- There was a strong preference among many parents for care provided by someone who knows the child.
- Word of mouth recommendation was by far the most favoured method of finding childcare.

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Dr Liz Fawcett is Managing Director of Liz Fawcett Consulting. She was commissioned by NICMA – the Childminding Association to write a report on the results of the survey which was carried out by Ipsos MORI.

¹A fuller summary of the results is available in Fawcett, Liz (2008) Childcare Matters Newtownards: NICMA. Available at: <http://www.nicma.org/06/publications/CM%20Matters.pdf>

¹¹ 18 parents were using either formal or informal childcare. 95 parents had sought it in the previous 3 years.

¹¹¹ Social class categories used in analysis

Category	Social class	Occupation of head of household
A	Upper middle class	Higher managerial, administrative or professional
B	Middle class	Intermediate managerial, administrative or professional
C1	Lower middle class	Supervisor or clerical or junior
C2	Skilled working class	Skilled manual workers
D	Working class	Semi- and unskilled manual workers
E	Those at the lowest levels of subsistence	State pensioners etc. with no other earnings

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