



Careers & our Children

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Ciara Kane

*A Study of the Childcare Needs of
Working Parents in County Mayo*

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MAYO
County Childcare Committee
Coiste Chúram Leanaí
Chontae Mhaigh Eo

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The views expressed are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect those of the aforementioned organisations and individuals. Every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the content of this report.

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Section I:

Introduction

The Mayo County Childcare Committee identified the need for research to be conducted on the 'Childcare Needs of Working Parents' within the context of County Mayo. As a result, working parents were surveyed in order to ascertain their concerns and needs regarding childcare, which is discussed throughout this report. The discussions and recommendations are based on the opinions and experiences of the parents themselves and to a lesser degree on the professionals that work in the area of childcare.

The main report reviews the current literature pertaining to this area. It covers the policies and recommendations available at the time of the research. The current provision of childcare in Ireland and how this relates to women and work; equal opportunities; and the rural/urban divide is also discussed. Moving on from this, literature regarding the actual childcare needs of parents is analysed and more specifically quality childcare as a need. Quality childcare is defined using a number of sources both academic and industry based as well as from the perspective of the parents surveyed. The economic and social benefits of a quality childcare framework are also discussed.

As a result of the literature review it was possible to pose a series of questions that would provide the information necessary to outline and analyse the childcare needs of working parents, from the perspective of the parents. By looking at type and status of employment in conjunction with why parents do and do not avail of different types of childcare and working arrangements a picture was generated. This picture portrays the average life of a working parent and more specifically a working mother. This picture looks grim.

Childcare is still viewed as a female responsibility. As a result women are still dominating the part-time work sector in order to achieve a work/life balance. This, as outlined in the report, is not a long-term solution to equal opportunities in the workplace and the current childcare crisis. More specific to childcare, the report establishes that the availability and affordability of childcare impacts upon parents' working arrangements and their careers.

Where there was access to adequate childcare facilities or family support parents stated that they did not need to avail of the different types of working arrangements or that childcare did not have an impact on their career. This brings access to quality affordable childcare into the employers' domain. It is therefore important that employers are made aware of the importance of a functioning childcare sector and that their involvement is essential in achieving this.

The Government has a key role in the provision of affordable quality childcare. Parents articulated the need for the reduction of cost and the improvement of access through:

- tax credits;
- extending paid maternity leave;
- providing pay for parental leave;
- sensible locating of facilities (especially in rural areas);
- support for stay at home parents;
- professionalisation of the childcare sector through regulation and quality childcare training;
- access to information on childcare services in Co. Mayo;
- ensuring family friendly working arrangements are the norm rather than the exception; and
- standardising the quality of childcare

It is not enough to merely advocate the provision of increased childcare places, as parents need and want their children to attend quality childcare facilities that are safe, regulated and allows their children to be cared for in the best way they deem appropriate.

Access to affordable quality childcare should not only be the right of the parent but the right of the child. Quality childcare has the ability to tackle the problems that children are facing in today's society from obesity to racism. All children must have the right to develop and learn through play, and this right should not be just available to the privileged few.

It is therefore necessary for Irish adults to make an important decision. Is childcare worth it? Are we willing to advocate for the redistribution of existing resources to meet the costs of a quality childcare system or are we willing to pay greater taxes? It would be naive to suggest that a quality childcare framework could be established without making these decisions.

The next section briefly outlines the difficulties that working parents face in Co. Mayo and offers suggestions and recommendations on how to alleviate these problems. It is hoped that this analysis will provide a basis for an accessible, affordable quality childcare framework that will, in the long-term, benefit Irish society as a whole.

Section II:

Recommendations and Conclusions

For the purpose of the executive summary, we have simply provided the recommendations and conclusions of the main report.

In this section, a number of practical recommendations have been formulated, based on the findings of the research. These recommendations are limited within the context of the childcare needs of working parents. Hence, they are not all encompassing of the whole issue of childcare in Ireland but rather relate specifically to the needs of working parents.

It is therefore recommended that other groups with specific needs, such as the unemployed, those with disabilities, parents in education, lone parents, etc., have their needs assessed separately. There would be a required focus on social inclusion; life-long learning; the regeneration of disadvantaged communities; and economic renewal and sustainability when addressing the needs of disadvantaged groups. While there may be overlapping of needs regarding all the aforementioned groups the emphasis is different depending on what group is being targeted.

2.1 Childcare Responsibilities

It has been highlighted in the main report that childcare is still viewed as a female responsibility. This point became evident during the early stages of the research from the simple fact that 81% of the respondents were female. This study also found that 18.4% of women try to manage their work arrangements around their childcare needs while none of the male respondents stated the same. These findings along with others (discussed in the main report) clearly demonstrate that childcare is still firmly in the female domain. The Mayo County Childcare Committee would place great importance on the male role in childcare. This

comes in two forms. Firstly, to encourage men to take more responsibility for childcare and childrearing roles. Secondly and more specifically, to encourage men to participate in the childcare sector. This would result in the normalisation of men in child caring roles and eventually help to erode the perception that childcare and childrearing are female responsibilities.

2.2 Gender and Employment Status

The study highlights the fact that women are still dominating the part-time work sector in order to achieve a work/life balance. Given the problems associated with part-time work, it cannot be deemed a long-term solution to equal opportunities in the work place and the current childcare crisis. It has also been established that the affordability and/or availability of childcare impacts upon parents' working arrangements and their careers. As stated by the parents themselves the lack of access to adequate childcare has forced many parents into seeking working arrangements namely flexi-time and part-time work. In conjunction with this, parents (mostly mothers) have lost out on promotional opportunities and career progression. With the provision of quality childcare, women would have a greater opportunity to advance their careers if they so choose.

During the course of the study it was discovered that a small minority of parents did not need to avail of working arrangements because they had access to family support or adequate childcare. This highlights the fact that if parents are happy with their childcare arrangements they are less likely to seek working arrangements, making access to quality childcare an issue for not just parents but employers also. It is therefore important that employers are made aware of the importance of a functioning childcare sector that supports parents in the work place. This does not suggest that work place childcare facilities are necessarily what is required or what parents actually want, it does however increase the need for employer involvement in attaining a quality childcare framework.

2.3 The Employers Contribution to Childcare

Employers have the capacity to contribute to childcare in a number of ways. They can:

- Provide access to work-based childcare facilities
- Subsidise the cost of childcare
- Contribute to childcare costs
- Establish and support a family friendly work environment
- Lobby the government to support quality childcare programmes
- Engage with local and national childcare agencies to support quality childcare programme

Bright Horizons (2003), found that unscheduled absences due to childcare cost employers between €650 and €1,000 per employee per year. Employees with childcare difficulties miss more than twice as many workdays as those with no children. Also, offering childcare supported programmes is five times more effective in boosting employee productivity. This again highlights the need for employers to recognise the importance of childcare for their employees and their business performance. Essentially it is important for parents to have confidence in their choice of childcare in order to make the transition back to work a less stressful one and to allow for a productive and less distracting working day.

As discussed in the previous section, the largest minority of parents believed that the employers should prioritise increasing the level of family friendly practices in the workplace. A strong minority also stated that employers could subsidise the cost of childcare. The least amount of parents wanted work-based childcare facilities, and those that elaborated mentioned that this would be inappropriate for their place of employment.

2.4 Government's Contribution

2.4.1 Greater Investment

Parents emphasised the need for greater investment in community, private and work-based childcare facilities. These, as the parents saw it, are the responsibilities of the government and it is no longer acceptable or feasible to allow parents to fend for themselves regarding access to quality childcare.

2.4.2 Cost of Childcare

Throughout the study parents emphasised the need for government intervention regarding childcare. Almost 50% of parents stated that the government needs to provide tax credits on childcare expenditure.

Other recommendations to help alleviate the financial burden of childcare costs include extending paid maternity leave to one year and to provide pay for the fourteen weeks of parental leave (these suggestions have also been made by the NCNA, 2004).

The NCNA (2004) also recommend a sliding fee system with the state paying the balance at an agreed annual rate irrespective of whether the service is private, community or workplace based. This in principle is an excellent way to improve access to childcare for those who are disadvantaged. In line with this suggestion ADM Ltd. (Area Development Management) has instructed childcare providers to implement a sliding fee system in their facilities and have provided guidelines on how to develop this system.

It is important that the major stakeholders (especially the Government) recognise that childcare is not simply another business or company providing a service. Childcare is part of the social economy sector, where both community and private

childcare services are meeting a social need. As a result, childcare providers are not exposed to the same profit margins or pay scales that other businesses and employees enjoy. Therefore, childcare facilities should not be subject to the same conditions as main stream businesses. An example of this is where legislation has allowed local authorities to impose rate charges on childcare facilities. These rates can make up one third of the weekly childcare costs of the parent. A contradiction arises here specific to community childcare facilities as the government is giving the community facilities funding with one hand and taking it away with another by charging rates. It would benefit parents, children, and childcare providers if these rates were abolished, hence, reducing operational costs for childcare providers, and in turn, the cost of childcare for parents.

In reality, childcare providers are also suffering financially. The NCNA, in their pre-budget submission, point to the value of providing additional revenue to the capital strand of the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme to allow for the further development of childcare facilities, especially areas that have a low level of provision. They also convey the need to introduce a capitation grant of €2,500 per annum and childcare providers' should have approximately €6,000 tax exemption (NCNA, Pre-budget Submission, 2004).

2.4.3 Family Friendly Working Arrangements

Working parents also highlighted the need for the government to legislate for family friendly working arrangements so access to these arrangements are the norm rather than the exception. This study discovered that access to family friendly working arrangements is essential to achieving a work/life balance.

2.4.4 Location of Childcare Facilities

The study found that working parents in Co. Mayo tended to locate their childcare arrangements in rural areas rather than urban areas. While the quantity of childcare provision in both urban and rural areas is weak in Co. Mayo, rural areas tend to be more disadvantaged due to the level of choice, access and availability. Of the parents that stated availability of childcare impacted directly on their choice of childcare, more than half of those parents located their childcare in a rural location, while 34% were based in an urban area. Location is also an influencing factor when parents choose their childcare facility.

This makes the locating of childcare facilities an important aspect of childcare provision. Parents need to be able to have access to childcare facilities close to their home, work or the child's school. However, it is difficult to provide an adequate childcare infrastructure in a rural location, as there are issues around sustainability, isolation, and so on.

Childminding has been suggested in certain literature, as a means of facilitating childcare needs in rural areas. The development of notified home-based childminding services within local communities could have a number of benefits. This strategy provides employment opportunities enabling local individuals (namely women) to develop their own small-scale childcare business. Also, due to small populations dispersed over large areas, childminding can offer a more economically sustainable childcare service compared to other childcare arrangements, the latter requiring major capital investment.

The provision of community based childminding services builds social capital and guarantees that earnings are kept within the community. According to the Northern Ireland Childminding Association (NICMA, 2004) the above policy would have a number of benefits such as facilitating more women into the labour market; providing disadvantaged children with a better academic start; providing training and employment opportunities; and building social capital.

2.4.5 Support for Stay at Home Parents

Support is also deemed necessary for stay at home parents. Some parents articulated the wish and the practical reasoning for a parent to remain in the household to care for their children. However, parents stated that due to financial constraints it would not be possible to do this. They also felt that perhaps greater acknowledgement of the importance of the role of the stay at home parent would help to facilitate this option. Hence, if the government were to invest in the availability, affordability and accessibility of childcare, an argument could also be made for the support of parents who make the choice to stay at home to rear their children.

2.4.6 Professionalisation of the Childcare Sector

Another area, which requires government intervention, is the professionalisation of the childcare sector. A minority of parents felt that childcare providers and childminders should be notified with the HSE before they can go into operation. This would instil confidence in the parents by ensuring physical requirements are met; that background checks have been carried out; and that there are appropriate child/staff ratios (to name but a few). Included in this concept is also the area of childcare training. A minority of parents highlighted the fact that some services lack structure and a set curriculum. Regarding this point it would be possible to establish minimum training requirements before a childcare provider could operate.

Discussed in the main report was the matter of notification/registration with the HSE. The majority of parents did not see notification as an influencing factor when choosing their childcare. This, however, is not an acceptable trend. It raises the issue of the level of work required to inform parents as to the importance of leaving their children in a regulated, monitored and checked environment that increases the levels of quality and safety of childcare experienced by their child.

Parents who mentioned that they prefer the informal atmosphere of the childminders home also expressed that by regulating the sector this 'home from home' situation would be negatively affected. However, it is important to inform parents that regulating the sector would ensure quality and safety of the preferred childcare service but would not affect or change the type of childcare provided whether it be the informal setting of a childminders home or the formal setting of a large crèche.

2.4.7 Access to Information

Parents also highlighted the need for accessible information of childcare facilities in their area. The Mayo County Childcare Committee identified this as a need of parents and is currently compiling a list of childcare facilities in County Mayo and will be making it available through their website. It should be noted that the providers listed on the site are only the ones that responded to the Committee's questionnaire posted to all facilities across the County. Due to the method of gathering the information, non-notified childcare providers are not on the list.

2.5 Quality Childcare

While the wider problems experienced by working parents are important the study also discovered issues relating more specifically to the provision of childcare. These issues allow for a practical formula to be generated that would contribute to the overall aim of an accessible, affordable, quality childcare infrastructure that all sectors of society can benefit from.

Based on the research, it was possible determine what it is parents want for their children and to define quality childcare from the perspective of the working parent. The choice of childcare really depends on the priorities of the parents. Not one

type of childcare arrangement is better than another so decisions around a homely environment versus a more structured environment is essentially an emotional and personal choice for each parent. However, it is not acceptable that childcare providers vary in their level of quality standards and training while parents have little means of ascertaining what facility provides the best quality. By regulating the whole childcare sector and implementing a quality childcare training infrastructure it would be possible to not only satisfy the needs of working parents but to ensure the provision of quality childcare. If there is a set standard across all types of childcare from the large crèche to the childminder then the parent's choice is based on what type of childcare is best suited to the child's needs rather than issues around adequate facilities and safety.

2.6 Conclusion

There is not one measure that alleviates the burden of childcare for working parents. In order to sustain a healthy work/life balance, to avail of career and training opportunities, and to provide a basic household income, a quality childcare sector must be established. It is not satisfactory to only advocate the provision of increased places as parents need and want their children to attend quality childcare facilities that are safe, regulated and allows their children to be cared for in the best way they deem appropriate. Working parents, both men and women, need access to affordable, reliable, high quality childcare that will allow their children to develop through play. This can be achieved in two ways as discussed above. Firstly by regulating the sector to ensure high quality standards while not impacting on the type of childcare provided and secondly establish a quality-training infrastructure. The latter will not only improve the quality of childcare but will also professionalise the sector raising the social status of providers.

In order to increase access the Government and employers have vital roles to play. The government needs to prioritise funding and target childcare directly. Tax credits for working parents is essential to alleviating the financial burden of

childcare costs. Employers also need to recognise the importance of childcare not only for their employees but also their business. A quality childcare framework would increase productivity and reduce absenteeism. It is therefore in the best interests of the employer and their business to facilitate a childcare framework that benefits all.

Irish society must make a conscious decision that childcare is worth it. Do we as a nation want to redistribute existing resources to meet the costs of an excellent childcare system or are we willing to pay greater taxes. This is our decision. Bel Kaufman (cited in Bright horizons, 2003) expressed what our decision should be based on:

*“Children are the true connoisseurs. What is precious to them has no price
– only value”*

To conclude, the provision of quality childcare would benefit many citizens of the Irish State. Children, as citizens, are therefore entitled to attend quality childcare facilities that will allow them to learn and develop through play. By investing in our future society major problems such as obesity, racism and pollution can be tackled in the early years of childhood through the provision of quality childcare. A happy childhood is essential for children to grow and develop into happy adults and quality childcare can contribute to the well being of the child and give them the better start in life they deserve.

“Our greatest natural resource is the minds of our children” (Walt Disney)

Your Plan - Your Future



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