DERRY WELL WOMAN

Childcare On The Borderline:

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

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CHILDCARE ON THE BORDERLINE:

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Executive Summary

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.

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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

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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.

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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:

- T**rust**, **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.

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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**

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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**.

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- 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 meet 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.

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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.

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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.

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Issue	Recommendation
1. Need for a childcare strategy	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	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	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.

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Issue	Recommendation
4. Increasing and improving provision	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	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.

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Issue	Recommendation
6. Tackling social exclusion	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.
7. Tackling gender inequality	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	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.

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Issue	Recommendation
9. Area-based Concerns	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: 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.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Understanding how the issue of childcare impacts on the lives of women and children, families and communities involves recognition of a complex interplay between key factors of poverty, health inequalities, human rights and social exclusion. The centrality of childcare in promoting women's mental health and well being was echoed prominently in the findings of a previous cross border consultation project undertaken in collaboration with Derry Well Women (McColgan et al, 2002). In the consultation study involving 2,000 women, it was clear that the lack of accessible, affordable, quality childcare was a major issue affecting parents' lives and furthermore, that this absence posed a major stress factor in women's lives. The project itself had been identified to define the priorities for a cross border health strategy to address key determinants affecting women's mental health and emotional well-being. Subsequent research findings formed the basis of an implementation strategy, *Other Borders* which was the first co-ordinated, cross border health strategy to address women's health needs in the North West of Ireland.

Problems associated with childcare have also been perceived as a major barrier to accessing or returning to education, training and employment. In a study by Kinnear (2003) 50% of the 888 respondents stated that securing adequate childcare was the greatest barrier to taking up employment, whilst 17% underlined the crippling cost of childcare as a major problem. Findings also highlighted that there was a greater number of childcare problems in families where all or most children were under 3 years. Within the workplace, there is also a myriad of problems, which occur as a result of a lack of family friendly policies and the recognition of worker childcare responsibilities. A Northern Ireland research project, which investigated

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the relationship between childcare responsibility and absenteeism in the workplace (McKavanagh, 1999) highlighted lack of childcare as a variable that predisposed high levels of absence from work.

Previous research on cross border rural childcare emphasised low levels of childcare provision compared to urban area and levels of provision within the European community. Associated difficulties with poor transport infrastructure, low population density and rural poverty exacerbated the problems experienced by parents in selecting appropriate childcare (Walmsley and Fitzpatrick, 2004). Perhaps the most disconcerting research findings relate to links between poverty and childcare (Howard et al, 2001).

Howard et al (2001) in an analysis of the direct and indirect costs of caring for children highlighted the fact that childcare was more expensive for working lone parents than two parent working families, the cost of childcare was high for all families and the indirect costs to women in giving up work to care for children resulted in a "gap in lifetime earnings" *with "those least skilled losing most"* (pg 131).

A more recent social policy analysis and comparison of child support including childcare in 22 industrialised countries reiterated the fact that for one parent families the lack of directly subsidised childcare provision leaves parents with little choice in remaining on social welfare, thereby compounding the poverty trap (CPAG, 2005).

The National Childcare Strategy (2000) in the United Kingdom has sought to address the implications of poverty experienced by families by introducing an expansion programme to

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increase the provision of affordable, good quality and accessible childcare to facilitate parents' return to work.

Pugh (2005) in reviewing the effectiveness of this strategy pinpoints inherent dilemmas in the policy as follows;

(1) high targets for childcare places set against prohibitive capital and revenue costs,

(2) high costs involved in childcare which are not met by tax credits and more fundamentally,

(3) targeted initiatives in disadvantaged areas failing to address the needs of wider groups of children who live in poverty (pg 36).

The present study commissioned by Derry Well Women is a community based health initiative, designing and targeting health information and services to meet the needs of women in local communities. For the last fifteen years, the organisation has taken the lead on women's health and the *Other Borders* initiative has emerged as a response to cross border concerns about a range of issues affecting women's lives. Accessibility to childcare and availability of community resources are areas which needed further exploration.

1.1 Primary aim of current study

To determine the nature and extent of childcare services available in the North West of Ireland and to investigate possible improvements in existing childcare provision. The study area comprised the eight council areas of Derry, Limavady, Strabane, Omagh, Enniskillen, Leitrim, Sligo and Donegal.

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1.2 Objectives

1. To explore the usage of childcare for the 0-14 age group across the eight council districts.
2. To examine the suitability and affordability of existing childcare provision.
3. To compare the success of existing childcare structures within the community
4. To complete a detailed literature review, examining childcare provision at national and international level and highlight indicators of quality childcare and models of good practice.

1.3 Structure of the Report

The following chapters contain a literature review of the key influences on childcare, an examination of best practice models and a contextual analysis of social policy factors that impinge on service delivery. This is followed by an outline of the methodological framework adopted for the study, and the findings of the quantitative study are combined with results from the focus groups. The final chapter provides a summative overview of key themes emerging from the study with recommendation for cross border implementation.

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CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The focus on accessibility and availability of childcare in recent years has accompanied societal and economic changes such as the expansion of female participation in the labour force, which in turn, has been linked to a growth in demand for childcare places. Childcare is also very much linked to promoting social inclusion as *"it is viewed in part as a means of ensuring equality of access to work and education for males and females, supporting low income households in their return or entry to employment or training and aiding children's 'whole' development"* (Riordan, 2001: 56).

This literature review will examine the childcare resources and services in the border regions of Northern Ireland by embedding the debate within the relevant policy contexts of Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, the United Kingdom and more broadly within the European Union. Key findings in this area will be examined and emerging themes from literature will incorporate a context to this current study. Furthermore, examples and models of good childcare practice from across the European Union will be analysed as a way of informing the debate on this important subject.

2.1 Background and context

The value of high quality childcare is consistently recognised as being important to children and society as a whole in both Irish and international research. Some studies suggest that it is not only linked to improved performance throughout the school years (Sylvia and Wiltshire, 1993) but also to later social benefits that endure through to adulthood (Kellaghan and Greany, 1993; Schweinhart and Weikart, 1997).

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In addition, access to good quality childcare is also seen as being important in combating stress and the effects of social exclusion brought about by factors such as poverty and educational disadvantage (Dept of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 1999). Hermanns contests that "supporting parents in care taking and child rearing is a key factor in fostering and promoting child development and buffering the adversities of risks" (1997: 57).

Central to the debate on childcare is the need to locate childcare services within the broader parameters of family policy that flow directly from the respective policy and legislative contexts of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. In the discussion that follows, reference will therefore be made to the models of family support that have subsequently influenced the nature of childcare services in the border region of Northern and Southern Ireland and this will include reference to comparative models of family support operating within the wider context of the European Union.

Furthermore, the area of children's rights also plays an important part of this discourse given that the governments of the United Kingdom and the Republic are both signatories of the United Nations Convention on The Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). The emerging importance of citizenship will also contribute to the debate as a pragmatic way of promoting the social inclusion, rights and democratic participation of children in a key area that directly affects their lives. The Draft Strategy for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland (OFMDFM ,2004) specifically recommends that policies and services affecting children need to be developed in a way that respects and promotes the principles of the UNCRC.

Having set the context, the next section of the literature review will examine childcare as part of family policy and family support broadly. The meaning of 'family policy' will be

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explored as well as the classifications used to define the family policy that a particular country may pursue and the factors that may drive the latter. This will act as a precursor to the examination of the childcare policies and measures that actually prevail in the specific countries that this particular study refers to, in addition to including a European perspective.

2.2 Family policy

Zimmerman (1995) argues that family policy is *"a perspective for understanding and thinking about policy in relation to families"* (p.3). Other authors see family policy as being everything governments do that affect families (Kamerman and Kahn, 1978). The ultimate aim is about addressing problems that families experience in relation to society to promote family well-being (Zimmerman, 1995).

It is therefore important to acknowledge the influence of factors such as demographic trends (e.g. increase in non-marital births, expansion of women's involvement in the labour force) on the development of family policy and how these in turn may require some form of state intervention or regulation (Riordan, 2001).

Whilst family policy is also driven by the ideologies and assumptions of the State and the majority as to how people should behave, problems arise when the State's assumptions are out of touch with the general societal perceptions of family relationships and obligations (Harding, 1996). Fahey (1998) suggests that the concept of a 'policy paradigm' can usefully explain the assumptions, ideals and images about the family that underpin the State's approach to family policy. Such a paradigm will therefore contain explicit ideas about policy and also the often unspoken assumptions and values that shape how issues are perceived and discussed by policy makers.

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Additionally, thoughts and assumptions about how family members should support each other can also impact on levels of State activity in this area (Millar and Warman, 1996). Zimmerman points out however that family policies can only be *"necessarily temporarily agreed courses of action"* (1995: p.4) as societal values in this area are subject to constant change.

Kamerman and Kahn (1978) suggest the possibility of singling out three principal categories that characterise a country's approach to family policy:

1. Explicit family policy with specific programmes and policies designed to achieve specified family goals.
2. Explicit policy with family programmes which deliberately do things to, and for, families but which have no overall agreed goals.
3. Implicit policies that are not specifically or primarily addressed to the family but have indirect consequences for them. (Riordan, 2001: 18)

These authors contend that explicit family objectives might include enabling families to remain together or enabling parents to care for their children while working outside the home. Zimmerman (1995) additionally suggests that a country's approach to family policies may be also manifest or latent. A *manifest* approach will include policies which have clear and obvious reference to family matters, whereas in *latent* policies the emphasis on the family will be obscured by other emphases or objectives.

Riordan (2001) argues that the majority of family policies can fit the classification of categories as proposed by Zimmerman(1995) and Kamerman and Kahn (1978).

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2.3 The European context

It is important to gain a European perspective/context with regards to government initiatives and trends. Mc Keown (2001) points to a number of significant factors and concerns which are compelling Western governments to reflect on the state of the family in today's world:

- Demographic trends such as birth rate decline increase in childless households.
- Employment concerns (e.g. increase in numbers of working parents, family friendly working policies).
- Redefining of gender roles.
- Human rights concerns, for both children and parents.
- Low income, especially child poverty.
- Health (links between morbidity and socio-economic status).
- Education (low educational attainment and life outcomes).
- Crime
- Social Capital (e.g. benefits of strengthening family support networks).

(Mc Keown 2001 pp. 8-16)

Mc Keown also states that family policy in the European Union is either passive or active. A *passive* approach will recognise the growth in diversity of families and the accompanying need for public policies and services to respond accordingly. The *active* approach will justify intervention on the basis that the well being of families has serious consequences for society, which in turn legitimises the State taking an active interest in what's happening in the family.

In tandem, turning more closely to examining what's happening in the European Union, Millar and Warman (1996) divide countries into three broad groups which have commonality in terms of defining the extent and range of family obligations.

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2.3.1 *Individual autonomy*

In this approach the State provides support for families and the emphasis is on promoting citizenship rights by acknowledging the individual's entitlement to services. This approach is common in Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden), where the emphasis is on promoting autonomy, and one consequence is the achievement of high levels of gender equality.

2.3.2 *Nuclear Families*

The second group includes eight countries (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and the UK) where the emphasis is on *Nuclear Families* and the belief that family obligations are mainly defined in respect of the nuclear family of spouses and parents and children. In these countries the emphasis on individualism is relatively underdeveloped with the consequence that acknowledging the diversity of family life occurs on a somewhat ad hoc basis. Furthermore, benefits and taxes in these countries tend to recognise these family relationships and services are intended mainly to support family care.

Riordan (2001) identifies the differences that exist also in these countries in terms of their approach to the care of children. In Ireland, there is a presumption of family care for children whereas in Belgium or France, childcare is seen as the responsibility of the state and not just the family.

Millar and Warman (1998) however add that a *gender fault line* can be seen, particularly in Ireland, where there is a gender role assumption of male breadwinner/female carer still very much in existence.

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2.3.3 *Extended Families*

This third group includes the southern European countries of Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain. In these countries the emphasis is on Extended Families whereby families are expected to support one another. The underlying assumption associated with this is families should be left alone and furthermore that the state should not intervene in any policy way.

It is important to add however, that in any changing and dynamic society, countries may fluctuate and move between the classifications presented here, and indeed take on the expectations of a particular group in its development of policy for families (e.g. lone-parent families).

2.4 Family support

The concept of *family support* itself deserves closer scrutiny as a way of understanding the nature of service delivery in relation to childcare.

Family support may be seen as incorporating a variety of services and activities:

> *Designed to enable and empower by enhancing and promoting individual and family capabilities that support and strengthen family functioning in general and parenting capabilities specifically* (Dunst, 1994, p.5).

Gilligan (2000) adds to this by stating that family support also plays an important role in reducing possible stressors in the child and family's life through connecting parents to appropriate support systems. Riordan (2001) argues that these supports include activities that range from childcare right through to parenting programmes. Provision of childcare is seen as a pragmatic manifestation of family support in the context of the key legislation concerning children in both the Republic and Northern Ireland, albeit the emphasis on both

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parts of the country is on the provision of services to children seen to be in particular need. Manktelow (2003) agrees in noting that theoretical definitions of family support have become translated into statutory guidance and legislation and specifically cites the *Children First* document to exemplify this:

> *Family support services may be offered at three different levels. These are: services specifically directed at children; services to support the family and services to enhance the friendship and support networks of the child and his/her family* (Department of Health and Children, 1999, p.60).

Partnership Care West (PCW), a voluntary organisation established in 1994 in collaboration with Bryson House (a Belfast-based charity) and the Churches Trust in Derry (Bogues and Lindsey, 1998), use the following definition:

> *Family support is about the creation and enhancement with and for families of locally based or accessible activities, facilities and networks, the use of which will have outcomes such as alleviated stress, increased self-esteem, promoted parental/carer/family competence and behaviour and increased parental/carer capacity to nurture and protect children* (Hearn, 1995 p.29).

The common theme in these definitions of family support is around the stress alleviating consequences of the availability of such support for families, and interestingly many parents have concurred that the unavailability of childcare is a source of significant stress in their lives when trying to access employment/training (Spence, 2005).

2.4.1 *Values in family support*

As already alluded to earlier in this work, approaches to family policy are often influenced by the ideologies of the State and assumptions held about the family. It is therefore recognised that regardless of the form of support required, all programmes aimed at assisting and

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supporting parents should be underpinned by core principles whose incorporation into family support services will significantly impact on gaining parents' respect (Riordan, 2001; Cutting, 1999; Schorr, 1997; Jaeckel, 1997; Johnson and Molloy, 1995):

- Responsiveness and appropriateness: services need to respect and value parents' individual needs as well as acknowledging and respecting diverse family patterns and cultural diversity (Sheridan et al, 1997);
- Community empowerment and action: services to families must deal with families as part of their neighbourhood and community (Schorr, 1997). Studies have found that parents become more empowered when their involvement in the design of programmes is sought and encouraged and their choice about services respected (Cutting, 1998; Sheridan et al, 1997);
- Children's Rights: acknowledges that children have a right to be consulted on issues concerning family support matters that impact upon their lives and childhood (Pugh and Smith, 1994);
- Recognition of 'permitting life circumstances': In order to fulfil their obligations, parents require adequate social and economic support, and this has to be recognised in any support programme (Pugh and Smith, 1994).

Values and principles therefore play an important part in influencing the success and effectiveness of family support services, of which childcare is central, and these values must be appropriate in order to fully facilitate the development of services.

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2.4.2 *Gender Issues in Family Support*

Approaches to family support in Ireland and in other parts of Europe are not unaffected by stereotypical attitudes around the roles and responsibilities of men and women in relation to family life. Millar and Warman (1998), for example, caricature this in terms of a *gender fault line* which they feel predominates thinking and values around family life particularly in Ireland. Such discriminatory and oppressive ideologies do little to create the sense of equity that is needed in family life and can therefore alienate both women and men. The effects of such alienation can be seen in terms of how both sexes are in essence suffering the effects of social exclusion. For example, difficulties in engaging men in the discourse on issues concerning the family have been well documented (Spence, 2005; O'Connor, 1999; Johnson et al. 1995) although very little empirical research has been conducted on fathers' perceptions and experiences of state services and supports in both parts of Ireland. Women also are not unaffected by biased and stereotyped views on gender. The latter is particularly evident in the sometimes positive imagery that society propagates in relation to motherhood. This view has however been challenged with studies emerging in recent years to illustrate the psychological costs that some mothers experience (O'Connor, 1993; Richardson, 1993; Oakley, 1984). This positive view of parenting can of itself contribute to society ignoring the needs of women after a child is born (O'Connor, 1999).

Some authors would also argue that policy and service development in Ireland has been affected by the gender inequities emanating from the Irish Constitution and furthermore that research studies in the area of parenting have been disproportionately focused on mothers' perceptions and views (Riordan, 2005; O'Connor, 1999; Johnson et al, 1995; Hyde, 1996).

This apparent exclusion of men has therefore considerable consequences for the debate on questions such as the extent of and appropriateness of state intervention in supporting parents and families acknowledging the role and rights of mothers and fathers equally.

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The policy and legislative measures currently in place in the North and South of Ireland however do little to encourage a perception that there is a sense of gender equity in family life. For example, the Irish Constitution currently grants all mothers (regardless of marital status) constitutionally protected rights to their children and makes no reference to fathers. Similarly in Northern Ireland, the Children (NI) Order 1995 grants automatic rights to mothers in the language of *parental responsibility*, which fathers can only acquire through a voluntary agreement with the mother, going to court, or by marriage.

The Republic's chosen position of minimalist intervention has been challenged by the discovery that mothering is associated with psychological costs for some mothers but its response has been to assume that such costs were to be more acutely felt by lone-parents who therefore automatically required additional state support.

Whilst the difficulties facing lone-parents cannot be over-emphasized, it is also worth noting research findings that challenge this perspective. For example, McCashin's (1996) study of lone parents in Ireland reported that the majority of mothers in the study coped well and enjoyed the experience of childcare. These findings therefore challenge the assumptions around the state's belief that lone motherhood is seen as being more problematic and that two-parent families cope better and have lesser support needs.

2.5 Important messages from research

Availability and accessibility to high quality childcare is a serious problem particularly in the border areas of Northern Ireland, which itself has suffered heavily from under-investment as a result of the conflict in Northern Ireland (Heenan and Birrell, 2005). Mc Colgan et al

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(2002), in a study examining the economic and social determinants of women's mental health and emotional well-being in a cross-border area, found that the absence of adequate, accessible and affordable childcare was a major contributor to stress.

Recent research by Spence (2005) carried out among lone parents in five District Council areas of the Western Health and Social Services Board (WHSSB) of Northern Ireland, close to the border with the Republic of Ireland, also concluded that respondents were for the most part dissatisfied with the unavailability of childcare and this was a key issue especially for people living in rural areas.

> *For both working and non-working lone parents, childcare was a burning issue, whether to support employment, a social life or give parents some necessary time to themselves* (p.28)

Similarly in the Republic of Ireland, "*working parents, parents seeking to return to employment and parents choosing to remain at home with their children have all identified high quality, efficient childcare as a vital need*" (Riordan, 2001: 57)

A significant number of lone-parents in Spence's study indicated that childcare arrangements represented a significant stress in their lives and concerns were particularly voiced about the lack of accessible registered childminders in the WHSSB area. Cost was also a seriously inhibiting factor in accessing suitable childcare. This is a common problem for many parents where their multiple role demands often emerge as a major source of stress when attempting to juggle work, family and domestic responsibilities (Ventura, 1987). Added to this stress is the fact that employment demands for parents are very often at a maximum when childcare duties are at their most demanding (Commission on the Family, 1998; Katz, 1994).

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Kinnear (2003) also found that half of the 888 respondents surveyed in Northern Ireland indicated that the need to secure adequate childcare was the greatest barrier to their employment and additionally 17% stressed the high costs of childcare as a deterring factor. Additionally, this study indicated a greater incidence of problems where all or most children were under the age of three.

The absence of family friendly policies in the workplace and associated lack of childcare has also been found to significantly impact on high levels of employee absenteeism in Northern Ireland (Mc Kavanagh, 1995). However, it has been found in the Republic, that even when such policies are in place, disproportionate numbers of females apply for more family friendly working arrangements, cementing a view that participation in flexible working arrangements in Ireland is highly gendered and significantly associated with females (Riordan, 2001).

One of the direct consequences of this has been the fact that many parents turn to the informal sector, i.e. family and friends, to help out with childcare arrangements (One Parent Families, 2003; Spence, 2005). This finding is consistent with similar information from the N.I Continuous Household Survey, and is mirrored by research findings carried out among parents in the Republic of Ireland (Riordan, 2001). Whilst some parents benefit from crèche facilities offered by voluntary organisations such as Gingerbread in Northern Ireland, many lone parents particularly in the WHSSB area of Northern Ireland are over-reliant on the good-will of relatives and friends. The role that grandparents particularly play here is also significant especially in providing care for older children, but the acute demand is mostly felt by parents in the inadequacy of childcare provision for younger children and this need is most apparent in the summer months (Riordan 2001).

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The literature uses the term "mixed economy of help" to describe the wide number of sources of advice and help that parents have to approach in their attempts to resource their childcare needs (Strengthening Families for Life, 1998). The prospects for permanent employment however are affected by the mother's choice of childcare, with a tendency to leave a job earlier when dependent on informal rather than formal childcare (Kinnear, 2003 cited in Spence, 2005). The latter is not helped by the fact that a considerable number of people endorse the view that a woman should stay at home and look after the children (Life and Times Survey, 2002).

Spence's study clearly articulates the emphasis that respondents associate with having high quality, accessible and affordable childcare as a vehicle for enabling them to work, access training or simply have respite (2005). McCashin (1996) referring to the Republic of Ireland, endorses this view and comments that supporting parents with childcare is very often linked to the achievement of specific outcomes, such as access to employment and training. Bond et al (1991) however, in earlier work, reported the existence of many inequities in accessibility to childcare in the Republic particularly among low-income parents who had to choose between affordability, availability and appropriateness and/or their career.

Additionally, the Commission on the Family (1998) discovered significant gaps between state policy and actual provision of childcare for the parents of pre-school children in particular. Riordan (2001) also notes that state-funded childcare in the Republic prioritises disadvantaged and 'at-risk' families and no financial provision is available to support parents in their purchase of services for children in day-care facilities such as crèches, nurseries or childminders. Other studies in the Republic have concluded that for some parents, the need

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to work very often was secondary to the support needs of their children in the absence of adequate childcare (O'Connor et al, 1991).

2.6 Childcare and socio-economic factors

Northern Ireland is regarded as being one of the poorest regions of the United Kingdom (UK) with poverty affecting some thirty eight per cent of families with dependent children and the associated deprivation is particularly evidenced in areas affected by years of civil disturbance (Spence, 2005; McLaughlin and Dignam, 2002; Hillyard et al, 2003; Horgan, 2005; McWhirter, 2002).

Lone-parent families in the North and South of Ireland are particularly affected with higher proportions of such families living in poverty due to their weak economic position (McKeown, Pratschke and Haase, 2003; Spence, 2005). Economic disadvantage among parents has been linked with depression, restricted access to employment opportunities, childcare and social participation (Cutting, 1997; Ferri & Smith, 1996; Fitzgerald, 1995; O'Connor et al, 1991).

Poverty in Ireland is also more prevalent amongst households with two adults and three or four children and amongst lone-parent households (Combat Poverty Agency, 1999). The Combat Poverty Agency (CPA) in the Republic would also assert that, generally, children from low-income families;

> *"have been shown to do less well educationally, are more likely to suffer ill health, are vulnerable to homelessness and have fewer opportunities in life"* (Riordan, 2001:54)

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Recent research in Northern Ireland also indicates that families with one or more disabled members are more likely to be living in poverty (Horgan, 2005). The latter is significant as some research indicates that the proportion of children with a disability (mental or physical) is significantly higher in one-parent families (Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities, 1996:288).

The last census in 2001 records Northern Ireland as having approximately 50,641 lone parent households with dependent children (www.nisra.gov.uk/census). Comparative data from the Republic of Ireland indicates that twenty one per cent of families are lone-parent and sixty six per cent are described as two-parent married (McKeown et al, 2003). Comparative data at European Union (EU) level suggests that the rate of lone-parenthood in Ireland is just below the EU average (Fahey and Russell, 2002).

The situation facing lone parents requires careful consideration in the context of childcare provision as the availability of this is closely linked to addressing inequalities on many fronts, especially in relation to employment and capacity building.

> *"Good quality, affordable childcare is a crucial element in easing the passage to employment, particularly for lone parents"* (Spence, 2005:26)

Childcare is a very pressing issue for lone parents and parents facing social exclusion, as its availability considerably determines access to other life opportunities (O'Connor et al, 1991). Closely linked to accessing employment is the need to have qualifications. The educational attainment of one-parent families in the Republic of Ireland however is significantly lower than two parent families, with most parents only having qualifications not beyond the Junior Certificate (Mc Keown et al, 2003). Spence (2005) also noted that 25% of respondents in her

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study in NI lacked the qualifications and skills to help the return to work. A similar finding is noted in France where, whilst the level of qualification of lone parents, particularly lone mothers is low, the percentage of lone parents without any qualification or with the minimum level of schooling is decreasing (Baldock et al, 2002).

Mc Keown's study also found that parents in two parent families in the Republic, both married and co-habiting, were twice as likely to have a third level education as parents in lone parent families. These findings are also borne out by the Republic's 1997 Labour Force Survey (Fahy and Russell, 2002:47-49) and by research in the UK (McRae, 1999:7) and the United States (Rosenzweig, 1999). Interestingly however, it is also reported that single and separated mothers are more likely to be economically active than their married or co-habiting peers in the Republic (Quarterly National Household Survey, 1998-2002). In NI, in 2003, fifty eight per cent of partnered mothers of a pre-school child were in employment compared with thirty three per cent of lone mothers (ONS, 2004).

In Northern Ireland fifty eight per cent of lone parents are not in employment whilst nationally from a UK perspective fifty four per cent of lone parents are in employment (Verwaayen, 2003). As being a lone-parent increases the likelihood of not working outside the home (Spence, 2005), the availability of good quality childcare plays an important part in addressing this deficit that mostly women face. The UK government is therefore committed to securing employment for seventy per cent of lone-parents by 2010 and to the eradication of poverty by 2020 (OFMDFM, 2004). On a policy level in Northern Ireland, the current administration is committed to tackling poverty and social exclusion through the priority directed specifically at lone parents in New Targeting Social Need (TSN) in areas such as health, education and employment/training. The aim is to enhance the capacity of lone

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parents to participate in economic and social life as a way of mitigating and insulating against the effects of poverty (in Spence, 2005). New TSN was therefore renamed as the Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Strategy in 2004 and its central focus is on the improvement of income and living conditions for the most disadvantaged. Whilst this re-focus does seem visionary and imaginative and has the potential to considerably benefit lone parents in Northern Ireland, the government will fall short of its aspiration to eradicate poverty if such initiatives are not adequately resourced. Such concerns are expressed openly by key organisations such as Gingerbread, the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) and the Children's Commissioner (Spence, 2005).

In Northern Ireland and the Republic, traditional patterns of labour division still characterise family life. In NI in 2002, sixty five per cent of women and eighty per cent of men of working age were economically active (Spence, 2005). In the Republic, according to McKeown (2003), seventy per cent of fathers in married families are in full-time employment and in two parent families the majority of mothers are engaged in home duties, both those who are married (sixty per cent and those co-habiting (fifty five per cent).

Riordan (2001) comments that childcare services are particularly important for women in the Republic as "*traditionally responsibility for childcare falls predominantly to women even where both parents are present and this has implications for women's choices in terms of balancing employment or education and family life*" (p.57).

Spence (2005) also reports that 18% of Northern Ireland's one-parent families live in the WHSSB area with Derry District Council having the highest proportion of families (38%) headed by a lone parent and Fermanagh with the lowest. Comparatively, in the Republic, the greatest concentration of lone parents tends to also be in urban areas (McKeown, 2003). The

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scale of demand for childcare is therefore evident and will increase in the coming years given the demographic trends that are predicted. Northern Ireland will have an increased need for childminding, day nursery and after school places (Gray and Bruegel, 2002) and has the fastest growing population in the UK. Between 2000-2015, the NI population is set to increase by five per cent with the WHSSB area projected to increase its population by nine per cent (McWhirter, 2002). The WHSSB is also projected to have the greatest increase of working age population among all of the Health and Social Services Board areas in NI (ibid).

It is therefore imperative that careful consideration is devoted to addressing the needs of children and families in the area of childcare given that significant numbers of children in both parts of the island of Ireland experience a range of social and economic disadvantage and consequently the impact of such deprivation can be expected to impact disproportionately on the health and well-being of future generations of adults. The policy and legislative landscapes of the Republic and Northern Ireland will now be examined further to investigate the broader contexts within which childcare services are currently delivered in both jurisdictions.

2.7 Childcare policy in the Republic of Ireland

Ireland has traditionally held to a position of non-involvement in family life preferring to occupy instead a position of subsidiarity in its approach to social services and implementation of family policy (Kiely and Richardson, 1995). Fahey (1998) argues that family policy in Ireland has been shaped by the contrast between two particular paradigms: *patriarchal familism* (where the family is the primary social institution, with in-built hierarchical structures by gender and generation) and *egalitarian individualism* (which places emphasis on the individual, with associated needs, rights and obligations).

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It is interesting to note that patriarchal familism was very much influenced by the principle of subsidiarity and the teachings of the Catholic Church and prevailed as a dominant force in Ireland until the late 1960s. The subsequent emerging influence of egalitarian individualism cannot be isolated from the influence of wider international social movements whose emphasis was on individual as opposed to collective rights and obligations and where, in particular, a greater awareness of gender issues in policy was increasingly highlighted. In Riordan's analysis (2001), the position of the family is given prominence in the Irish Constitution with the State guaranteeing to "*protect the Family in its constitution and authority, as the necessary basis of social order and as indispensable to the welfare of the Nation and the State*" (1937, Article 41). It wasn't however until the rapid employment expansion of the 1990s and the associated increase of women entering the workforce that the underdeveloped state of childcare and family friendly policies became evident. The 1990s therefore represented a significant period of development and debate in the area of family policy in the Republic of Ireland.

Significantly, The Child Care Act (1991) stipulated that Health Boards, as statutory authorities, had a duty to provide childcare and family support services. Ironically, however, this legislation failed to specify exactly what was meant by family support and consequently, much debate has ensued as to how such support would be characterised (Gilligan, 1995).

The Irish Government signed the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* in 1992, manifesting its awareness of the state's role in supporting parents. The level of support required from state parties is outlined in Article 18 of the UNCRC:

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> "*State parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children.*" (Article 18)

This clearly calls for greater state involvement in the development of appropriate childcare services to assist parents in their childcare roles (Riordan, 2001).

The next major policy event in the discourse on the family and state-family relations in the Republic of Ireland was the *Report of the Commission on the Family* (1998). This called for increased clarity of objectives by the state in relation to its approach to family policy so as its effectiveness in supporting families and promoting family well-being would be maximised. The Report recommended a number of principles to accompany the pursuit of a forward thinking and effective family policy:

1. Recognition that the family unit is a fundamental unit providing stability and well-being in our society.
2. The unique and essential family function is that of caring for and nurturing all its members.
3. Continuity and stability are major requirements in family relationships.
4. An equality of well-being is recognised between individual family members.
5. Family membership confers rights, duties and responsibilities.
6. A diversity of family forms and relationships should be recognised.

(pp.4-5)

The Commission also recommended that responsibilities for policy formulation on the family should be multi-agency with communication between state and community organisations and argued for more customised services for individual families with a greater concentration on outcomes. The issue of family support services was also raised through the *National Anti-*

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Poverty Strategy (1997). Whilst this Report did address the need for family support services for parents in tackling social exclusion and inequality of access to employment, training and education, it failed to explicitly specify how parents could be supported.

Furthermore, the Government publication, *A Plan for Women's Health* (1997), highlighted the importance of supporting women in their role as parents in regard to advancing the well-being of mothers and children. The *Parental Leave Act* (1998) then acknowledged the importance of both genders in parenting by creating a statutory entitlement to paternity leave for all fathers, and represented a significant shift forward in the promotion of fathers' rights, which of themselves are quite negligible under the Child Care Act (1991).

Riordan (2001) also observes that the *National Economic and Social Council* (1999) report, whilst perceiving childcare and parental leave in the context of increasing labour force supply, also saw its role as contributing to other factors such as "*child development…..supporting family life, increasing options for women….(and)..providing opportunities for men to play a more active child-caring role*" (p.228 in Riordan, 2001:25).

The publication of the National Children's Strategy (NCS, 2000) represented another significant policy milestone in family support by detailing specific objectives to guide children's policy in Ireland over a ten-year period. The 'Family' principle is the most relevant to family support in stating that:

> "*the family generally affords the best environment for raising children and external intervention should be to support and empower families within the community*" (NCS 2000 p.10).

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The latter principle commits the state to providing services for parents, which will assist in aiding the development of the 'whole child'. The Strategy also commits the government to tackling poverty in Objective G, which states, "*Children will be provided with the financial supports necessary to eliminate child poverty*" (NCS 2000 p.63), which, of itself, is quite significant as research has shown *'access to services whether educational, medical, social or financial is identified as a major support need by parents'* (Riordan, 2001:27).

The Planning and Development Act (2000) seeks to respond to the deficiencies that have been found in relation to the provision of adequate play provision for children in the South of Ireland. This inadequacy is well documented (Ballymun Regeneration Ltd, 1998; O'Connor, 1998; Children's Rights Alliance, 1997) and so this legislation will require local authorities to pay special attention to the development, improvement and extension of recreational facilities with a particular focus on schools, crèches and other forms of childcare.

Also, the introduction of the *Programme for Prosperity and Fairness (2000-2003)* signalled a commitment by the Irish government *"to support family life, to offer choices for families and to offer equal opportunities for both men and women to play an active caring role in families"* (p.66), and included family support services among a number of other practical measures such as tax and social welfare that impact on the family.

The *National Development Plan (NDP)* 2000-2006 was also quite a pragmatic policy initiative in that it perceived its function as being about developing support services for families with appropriate investment being particularly channelled to fund childcare provision. It was quite innovative in its vision in proposing the creation of County Childcare Committees to monitor the implementation of County Childcare Plans, which focused on the

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supply of parenting support initiatives through local and community organisations and funding of £250 million was allocated to develop childcare facilities.

2.7.1 *Analysis*

Whilst the range of policy initiatives discussed seem to reflect a commitment by the Irish Government to supporting families, some critics would argue that the main motivator for development in this area is economics. Mc Keown (2001), for example, suggests that Ireland currently doesn't have a well-defined and explicit family policy and furthermore is out of touch with the broader implications of the trends that currently affect the family in Ireland. It is also contended that the policy initiatives developed are more about viewing parenting support as being primarily a tool for economic progress, labour force adaptability and supply rather than promoting social progress through promoting the emotional and social-well being of parents and children (Riordan, 2001). Riordan also asserts that Ireland's policies on the family have developed in a very graduated fashion reflecting both the unwillingness of a State to interfere in family life and the disparate number of agencies with responsibilities for families. It is also felt that Ireland's family policies are largely disconnected, understated and associated with unclear objectives (ibid).

The Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Ireland (2004) also detected problems associated with the apparent absence of coordination in the country's childcare policy and called for the integration of all early education and care policy under one government department. This important Review also identified the need for targets, clear objectives and goals to be formulated in the guise of a National Plan for Early Childhood Services Development in Ireland which would clearly delineate responsibilities and accountability from co-operating Departments. This Report also stressed the need for special targets to be set and funding made available for particular groups such as disadvantaged

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children, Traveller children and children with special needs. Having said this however, it could be argued that the Irish government is trying to live up to the importance attached to the family in its Constitution of 1937. For example, a number of fairly recent new developments in the setting up of The Family Affairs Unit and Family Support Agency in 1998 and 2001 respectively signal the onset of a more coherent and structured family policy in Ireland, which critics argue is long overdue. The Family Affairs Unit is part of the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs and its remit is to coordinate family policy and generally promote awareness of family issues as well as undertaking research into the area. The setting up of this Unit is seen as being a central plank in the Government's Families First approach whose aim is to have families at the centre of all its policies.

For its part, The Family Support Agency is seen as being part of the development of a coordinated interagency approach to family policy and of the government's broader social inclusion policies. It is responsible to the Government's Minister for Social, Community and Family Affairs and will have an important remit in promoting a multi-agency approach with government departments, state agencies and voluntary and community groups that share responsibility for the provision of services to families. It will also importantly act as a resource for voluntary and community groups and others involved in promoting family well-being.

2.8 Childcare policy in Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom

Provision of childcare in Northern Ireland is influenced by a range of legislative and policy measures, some of which are contextually specific to Northern Ireland and others which have formed part of broader United Kingdom (UK) social policy.

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However, Hinds (1991) argues that childcare provision in Northern Ireland is poor in comparison to other European Union countries and indeed the rest of the United Kingdom (UK) but more recently, according to Spence (2005), there has been some signs of improvement. For example, in 2002, there were 42,652 day care places in NI, representing a thirty nine per cent increase since 1992, but still considerably less than in England. In the UK, it is argued that since 1997, the Labour Government has significantly contributed more than any preceding administration in outlining a national childcare policy which fully recognised not only the need for childcare for working parents but also the importance of extending nursery education entitlement. In reality however, it is also argued that what has actually been achieved is quite limited (Penn and Randall, 2005).

2.9 Childcare Policy in the UK

The Labour Government's approach to childcare policy is primarily concerned with three key areas:

1. Welfare to work
2. Combating child poverty
3. Gender and the family

(Penn and Randall, 2005)

2.9.1 *Welfare to Work*

Driver and Martell (2002) suggest that the government's concern with getting different groups of people from welfare to work has been at the core of New Labour's approach to welfare reform. These authors also argue that welfare-to-work is ideologically emblematic of New Labour's *Third Way* approach to such reform in that "*on the one hand, it promises to save public money by getting people off benefit, and, on the other, it aims to combat the*

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harmful effects of 'social exclusion' through the moral, but also social, benefits of hard work" (Penn and Randall, 2005: 83) Furthermore, this *Third Way* separates New Labour from the traditions of perceived Left or Right political thinking.

Significantly, *New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP)* is at the heart of the government's strategy for getting lone parents into work by providing accessible and affordable childcare and it has stated its target of achieving a 70% employment rate among lone parents by 2010 (Cabinet Office, 2002).

2.9.2 *Combating child poverty*

Levels of poverty in the UK have been described as being among the highest in the industrialised world (Bradbury and Jantii, 1999). Much of New Labour's endeavours in the area of tackling poverty have been associated with their Chancellor, Gordon Brown's approach to *redistribution by stealth*. Additionally, commentators have also remarked that child poverty has come to represent an acceptable symbol for the government's overall social policy (Dobrowolsky, 2002).

The outcomes associated with the government's concern at tackling poverty have resulted in initiatives such as *Sure Start* and a growing interest in the integration of child day care and nursery education, thereby promoting '*educare*' as a way of increasing the educational quality of childcare (Penn and Randall, 2005). It is argued however that nursery education has received the most funding, whilst, at the same time, expectations in terms of quality from child day-care have increased (Penn, 1999).

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2.9.3 *Gender and the family*

The relationship between childcare, gender and the family was given impetus by the fact that the Labour Party was made up of a substantial contingent of women MPs in 1997. Furthermore, the appointment of Harriet Harman as the first Minister for Women, ensured that the issue of childcare was a priority for the government (Penn and Randall, 2005). Subsequent Ministers for Women have since endorsed the importance of perceiving childcare policy in the context of helping working parents to balance work and family more satisfactorily.

In May 1998, the Labour government went on to launch its Green Paper, *Meeting the Childcare Challenge*, in which it declared that childcare was a policy area that had been neglected for too long. 'Partnership' is a word that has become central to much of New Labour's policy activities and in the latter initiative it proposed that local authorities should convene partnerships to assess childcare supply and demand and produce local *childcare plans* to meet required need.

The first such childcare plans were submitted in Feb 1999, and in 1998, the government launched *Sure Start* and the *Neighbourhood Nurseries* initiative in 2001, both of which were aimed at responding to childcare need in socially disadvantaged areas. Responsibility for childcare was located in the Childcare Unit, which subsequently came to be merged with the *Early Years Unit*, which was responsible for the delivery of nursery education. The introduction in the UK of the *National Childcare Strategy (2000)* was designed to specifically help lone parents into work and thereby indirectly tackle poverty (Bradshaw, 2002: Marsh and Vegeris, 2004). The Government set about prioritising its focus on:

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Increasing childcare/school standards

Increasing child benefits

Assisting parents back to the workforce (New Deal)

Providing families with tax credit

Furthermore, this Strategy was perceived as giving children the best possible start in life and its aim was about allowing the families of children to have a choice. These choices would allow the family:

To stay in the home and provide care for their children

To combine work with parenting

To combine training with parenting

To combine further education with parenting

These choices were created in order to provide families with a balanced approach to parenting and would only materialise with having good quality childcare in place.

Other policies such as the *Working Tax Credit*, *Child Tax Credit* and *New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP)* have similar objectives and offer financial assistance with childcare to encourage families into employment.

In June 2001, the Labour Government announced that it had already created an additional 300,000 childcare places out of a target of 1.6 million by 2004. The number of publicly funded day nursery places has, however, continued to fall since the 1990s, currently at six per cent, whilst there has been a corresponding growth in the provision of private day care nurseries .At the same time, the numbers of childminders has also been in decline since 1996,

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and from 1997-2001, there was a drop of 60,400 such places and a loss of 54,000 playgroup places (Penn and Randall, 2005).

Whilst the government however can claim success in expanding finance for childcare through the introduction of a childcare component in the *Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC)*, Lottery funded support has also been utilised for out-of-school schemes through *New Opportunity Funding*.

The government also aimed to set about addressing the need for the childcare workforce to be appropriately qualified and remunerated by launching a framework of Nationally Accredited Qualifications in Early Years Education, Childcare and Play work, and through the establishment of a minimum wage.

2.9.4 *Analysis*

Whilst the United Kingdom government will claim success that it is responding to the need for childcare, it is argued that such provision remains mostly unfairly distributed. The Inter-Departmental Childcare Review (Cabinet Office, 2002) found that there was much notable geographical variance in the level of available childcare not only between local authorities but that the most deprived areas were the least well provided for. It has also been found that there is a particular shortage of good-quality and affordable childcare for very young children (La Valle et al., 2000).

Critics would also suggest that, whilst New Labour professes to emphasise a commitment to supporting the family, its understanding of the 'family' is essentially flawed and characterised by traditional views of family life which excludes issues facing mothers in

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general and particularly, low income/lone-parent mothers (Driver and Martell, 2002: 203-212; Bullen et al., 2000; Levitas, 1998).

Giddens (1998), who is attributed with the *Third Way* ideology, is also accused of being weak on gender issues in his vague typology of 'shared-parenting' as a future option for the reconciliation of work and family life (Penn and Randall, 2005).

To conclude, the childcare policies of the Labour government have come to be defined mostly in terms of the educational needs of children, with a priority on disadvantaged children, and the employment needs of groups such as lone mothers who alternatively would be in receipt of state benefits. The childcare needs of working parents however have appeared to feature only marginally (Penn and Randall, 2005), although policy in Northern Ireland seems to be edging incrementally in this direction.

2.10 The Northern Ireland context

The legislative context for childcare provision in Northern Ireland is directly influenced by Article 18 of the *Children (NI) Order 1995* where a specific duty is placed on local authorities in the Health and Social Services Trusts to provide a range of services and support to families where there are 'children in need'. This is similar to the Republic where the emphasis is on providing family support to families considered to be in at-risk situations.

Whilst the introduction of New Targeting Social Need (New TSN) has come to symbolise a policy commitment to addressing poverty in NI, especially for lone parents by ensuring:

"*the relevance of a wide range of programmes such as health, education, employment and training to enhancing an individual's capacity to participate in economic and social life*"

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(www.research.ofmdfmni.gov.uk), Some commentators express concern that Northern Ireland's *Welfare to work Strategy*, will not pragmatically yield positive outcomes, especially in socially deprived areas such as the west of Northern Ireland (Horgan, 2005).

The introduction of the Children First policy document was a significant policy development in the childcare landscape of Northern Ireland. The backcloth to this was related to the belief that childcare in Northern Ireland essentially faced 3 challenges requiring rectification:

1. Variable quality
2. Unaffordability
3. Inadequacy of provision in some areas and problems with access.

The Children First policy statement was then published in September 1999 and set out the childcare strategy for Northern Ireland. It was published jointly by the Training and Employment Agency (T&EA), the Department of Health, Social Services and Public safety, and the Department of Education.

The Strategy had three key aims:

1. raise the quality of childcare,
2. make childcare more affordable and
3. improve access to childcare.

For children up to the age of 14 in every local community in Northern Ireland, The Strategy outlines a series of practical steps being taken to increase childcare places, raise standards, improve access and provide better information for parents on relevant childcare matters. A Childcare Partnership was established in each Health and Social Services Board in Northern Ireland comprising voluntary, statutory agencies and parents with responsibility for the

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implementation of the government's Childcare Strategy at local level. The key tasks of these Partnerships were focused on

- Assessing Need
- Setting achievable targets for provision
- Producing Childcare Plans
- Ensuring that childcare information services are easily available to all.
- Improving quality

The Partnerships were to therefore have a key role in determining how childcare needs would be met at a local level in full consultation with parents. The emphasis was also to be placed on ensuring that the needs of **all** children from **all** communities would be addressed. In this regard, it is worth noting that this Strategy is grounded on principles of inclusion, social justice, quality, affordability, flexibility, accessibility and partnership and also reflects the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC,1989).

The following is a summary of the key provisions being put forward through this policy:

1. The development of common inspection standards in early education and childcare settings with the Education Training Inspectorate (ETI) and the Social Services Inspectorate (SSI) working closely together.
2. The development of common standards around accreditation for relevant childcare organisations.
3. The development of a childcare training strategy for Northern Ireland in consultation with other relevant departments and stakeholders.
4. The expansion of training opportunities for childcare through the New Deal programme by 2002.

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5. Funding of £9.9m until March 2002 to support the implementation of Sure Start.
6. An increase in accessibility to good quality pre-school education for every four year old child to be delivered through the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme, with a promise to make an extra 4,700 such places available by 2002 covering 85% of such children.
7. £9.9m of National Lottery funding to be made available through the New Opportunities Fund from 1999-2003 on after school childcare.
8. Establishment of a Childcare Information Project Board tasked with disseminating childcare information needs.

The government envisaged that the Working Families Tax Credit would help support working families in Northern Ireland with childcare costs. (www.dhsspsni.gov.uk).

Another significant policy document is The *Draft Strategy for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland (OFMDFM Nov, 2004) which also introduces* a children's rights perspective into the discourse on childcare services, and calls for policy makers to promote the principles of the UNCRC in the development of policies and services affecting children. It specifically calls for the "*provision of quality, affordable and accessible childcare, after school care and play care*" (p.52). This Strategy also includes a supplementary procedure known as 'rural proofing', which is not only part of New TSN, but emanates from the equality imperatives and requirements of the *Northern Ireland Act (1998).* Rural Proofing is designed to ensure that all relevant government policies and procedures are examined carefully to determine whether or not they have a different impact in rural areas from that elsewhere and are accessible on a fair basis to the rural community. The latter has tangible implications for the border region of Northern Ireland.

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Northern Ireland is also now evidently showing more awareness of the importance of family friendly policies in the workplace for working parents. The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) published proposals in March 2005 for new work and family rights which included:

- An extension of the period for Statutory Maternity Pay, Maternity Allowance and Statutory Adoption Pay from 26 to 39 weeks from April 2007. This is seen as a step towards the Labour government's longer term aim of extending maternity leave to 12 months.
- In December 1999 fathers were given the right to have unpaid parental leave of 13 weeks for each child which could be taken up until the child's 5th birthday. This was followed in April 2003 by the allowance of 2 weeks paid paternity leave and a new right to request flexible working arrangements. DEL is now proposing that a mother can transfer a proportion of her maternity leave and associated paid entitlement to the father which will give both parents greater choice in balancing work and caring responsibilities in the first year of a child's life.

It would seem however that whilst Northern Ireland is moving in the right direction in terms of family friendly working policies, it still falls short of other European countries in this area as will become evident in this report.

The announcement by the Northern Ireland Secretary of State, Peter Hain, at the Labour Party Conference on 28 September 2005 to invest more government funding in childcare in Northern Ireland will be welcome, especially in areas like the border region which has been so under resourced in the area of childcare. Mr Hain has pledged to redirect tens of millions of pounds towards Northern Ireland's disadvantaged children and young people particularly

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targeted at pre and after school clubs and at expanding the Sure Start Programme for young children (www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/story.jsp?story).

2.11 The border region of Northern Ireland

The origins of the Irish border can be traced back historically to 1921 when the six counties of Antrim, Armagh, Down, Derry, Tyrone and Fermanagh were to become known as Northern Ireland and an integral part of the United Kingdom. The other 26 counties of Ireland were to be known as the Republic of Ireland (Heenan and Birrell, 2005).

The social and economic infrastructure of this border region has been significantly affected by the 30-year period of civil disturbance known as the 'Troubles' since 1968. Throughout this period, more of an emphasis was placed by the Northern Ireland government on security and containment of the conflict as opposed to more socio-economic considerations. Consequently border communities have experienced considerable isolation on a number of social, cultural and economic fronts (Quinlivan, 1999).

The Irish border, like other peripheral European Union borders suffers from a shortage of employment opportunities, poverty and high levels of deprivation (Cook et al., 2000). The North West region in particular contains the highest levels of deprivation in the Republic, with reported high dependency ratios, the highest elderly population and elderly living alone, and the highest levels of early school leavers .The legacy of government under-funding in the region is also felt to be a contributory factor to this inequality (Manktelow, 2003).

Correspondingly, the Western Health and Social Services Board has three city wards in Derry District Council with the highest rates of child poverty in Northern Ireland (Horgan,

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2005). The latter has prompted the WHSSB to commit itself to promoting good quality services in areas of greatest need to reduce such inequalities (Health and Well-being Investment Plan 2004/2005). Heenan and Birrell (2005) also comment that the respective political administrations in Northern Ireland and the Republic have pursued separate agendas in terms of policy and legislation. Tannan (1999) endorses this view in commenting that the conflict in Northern Ireland had a negative impact on cross-border cooperation.

However, the advent of more peaceful times in Northern Ireland, symbolised by the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, presented major opportunities for North-South cooperation. This also marked the beginning of significant additional funding from the European Union in the promotion of programmes designed at supporting peace, normality and dealing with the *legacy of the conflict*. This Programme, which will last until 2006, has become known locally as 'peace money' and has played a valuable part in supporting cross-border partnerships and projects involving voluntary and community groups in the area of social care particularly. One of the most significantly EU funded cross-border schemes is Cooperation and Working Together (CAWT) whose main aim, since its formation in 1992, is to improve the health and well being of the resident population through supporting services aimed at reducing the isolation that is felt by the border counties. Projects on child protection for children with disabilities, parenting initiatives in communities are some examples of funded activities. This project involves a high level of cooperation between two statutory health boards in the Republic and health and social services boards in Northern Ireland.

On a more localised basis along the borderline, there are other examples of initiatives which demonstrate impressive levels of cooperation within the voluntary sector in the North and

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South. The Cross-Border Childminding Alliance brings together the Northern Ireland Childminding Alliance and the Childminding Association of Ireland and initiatives are developed in the areas of training and improving childcare facilities in the border region with the main focus being on improvement in standards of childcare (Heenan and Birrell, 2005). Partnership Care West (PCW) is another example of a charitable organisation operating on a cross-border basis to respond to the family support needs of families in the Derry and Donegal areas, focusing on childcare and household management issues.

Another exciting cross-border initiative has been developed by Derry Well Woman (DWW), a community based health initiative for women in the city of Derry. This voluntary organisation was founded in 1988 and is described by its coordinator as " *a health centre for women whose business is to develop health programmes relevant to women living in the North West of Ireland."* (Karen Meehan, 2000). ***Other Borders*** came into being in October 2000, as a co-ordinated, cross-border approach to addressing women's health needs in the North West region of Ireland. Since 1996, Derry Well Woman had been at the forefront in undertaking detailed consultations on priorities on women's health to inform the City Health Plan that was being developed by the Derry Health City Project. When the City Health Plan was launched in 1998, Derry Well Woman was to have a lead role in implementing the recommendations emanating from its research findings that were part of the Plan. As similar work was occurring across the border in the North Western Health Board with similar consultation processes, in 1998 DWW became involved in the development of a health plan for women on a cross-border basis. Again this work was occurring against a political backcloth which encouraged cross-border collaboration and a cocktail of funding was secured from the statutory, voluntary and private sectors for its implementation.

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The facilitation of cross-border projects is indeed quite dependent on a fragmented amalgam of funding from a diversity of sources such as those described above. This in turn has affected the nature and scope of cross-border collaboration. The situation is further complicated by the challenges and difficulties involved in the process of applying for EU funding, which in itself would be quite daunting for many smaller organisations.

The case for continuing cooperation however is compelling given the socio-economic profile of the region. The eventual demise of EU funding however in 2006 may have serious implications for the development of future initiatives to address the needs of this area.

2.12 European models of childcare

This section of the literature review will present a closer examination of some childcare models that operate in four European countries across the three approaches presented by Millar and Warman previously in this report.

Although there is no real convergence towards a common European model of childcare with differences remaining between many national contexts, the need to secure social care for all citizens and under all conditions is inherent in the social objectives and cultural values specific to Europe (Baldock et al., 2002).

2.12.1 *Childcare provision in Finland*

Since 1996, all children in Finland under school age, i.e. 7 years old, are legally guaranteed a municipal day care place if their parents wish to apply for it. After such an application, local authorities have 4 months to fulfil their legal obligation to organise a day care place. If the

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need for day care is urgent, i.e., having to start work at short notice, a place has to be found within two weeks.

Municipal day care is operated under social welfare administration and takes the form of day-care centres and municipal childminding. The day-care centres mostly focus on early education for 3-6 year olds but will also take younger children. Municipal childminding is a service whereby the local authority employs a childminder who works in the home caring for 4-5 children under school age. Interestingly, privately organised day care is still fairly limited in Finland.

Since 2000, all 6-year-old children are also offered half-day preschool education either in a day care centre or in a school. Families are obliged to pay a monthly fee related to their income, but poorer families are exempted from this. Nevertheless, half of all under school-aged children in Finland are cared for informally, mainly by their mothers. This extent of parental care is partly explained by Finland's state benefit system. Parental care leave and parental care benefit cover the first 10 months of a child's life and this is followed by a flat-rate childcare benefit along with a statutory parental leave period from work until the child is 3 years old. The main precondition for getting this benefit is to abstain from using local authority day care services. The level of this benefit, *Child Home Care Allowance*, is however very low, meaning that lone parents in particular can very seldom stay at home for all the first three years of their children. In 1998, only about one third of all under-3-year-old children were in day-care. At the same time, two thirds of 3-6 year olds were using day care services (Kroger and Antonnen, 2002, Sepila and Korpinen 1998).

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Additionally in Finland, family allowance is paid on a universal basis to all children under the age of 17. Private child care allowances are paid to a private day care provider designated by the parents. Municipalities, parishes and voluntary organisations organise afternoon care for school children and this service is targeted more towards younger children.

2.12.1.1 Analysis

It would seem that Finland has moved away from an *egalitarian* approach to childcare, and the main characteristics of its policy approach is in providing support for those parents who choose to stay at home and those who choose to enter fulltime employment. Another main focus of this model is its childcare allowances, which allow the parent to stay at home for duration up to three years after the birth of their child. Disappointingly however, the Finnish model has disadvantaged lone parents, as the benefits available have been inadequate to sustain these parents financially in caring for their children at home. In the meantime, Sweden, one of Finland's neighbouring Scandinavian countries, is regarded as being more progressive in its approach to childcare.

2.12.2 *Childcare provision in Sweden*

Sweden has a combination of publicly subsidised childcare which gives each child a right to care in tandem with paid maternal and paternal leave from the workforce. These arrangements and incentives are designed to encourage parents to share their childcare, and to promote the inclusion of children and parents in the organisation of municipally run services. This approach to childcare is viewed as being qualitatively different as a model for reconciling childcare and work within society. For its part, the Swedish government is also committed to the concept of life long learning from birth and requires all public pre-school

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systems to combine the care, supervision, and education of children (Broberg, 1988; Ochiltree, 1991).

With most childcare centres all within walking distance or just a short distance away from the parent's own home, Sweden's approach to childcare enables parents of young children to combine work with family and other societal activities (Ochiltree, 1991). Childcare is available for all children and is split into two forms, firstly preschool care (preschools, open preschools and family day care centres) and secondly school age care (leisure-time centres, open leisure-time centres, and family day care centres). The six main provisions of childcare types are listed and described in the following points:

- Pre-school: this offers full-time care and education for children from 1-5 yrs old whose parents study or work, or if the child is judged to be in need of special support. All pre-schools follow the curriculum guidelines of the Swedish State and are staffed by school teachers and trained child minders. In 2003 the number of children using pre-schools was 352,000, some 75% of children between the ages of one and five.
- Family day care homes/centres: these day care homes provide municipal childcare in the minders own home for both preschool and school age children. Childcare is provided during each working day, and occasionally in the evenings and at weekends. In 2003 the number of children using family day care was 40,000, some 7% of children between the ages of one and five and 1% of those children between the ages of six to nine.
- Open pre-schools: these schools provide childcare to any child that is not registered with any form of public childcare. There are approximate 550 open pre-schools in Sweden.

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- Pre-school: this offers full-time care and education for children from 1 to 5 years old.
- Leisure-time centres: these centres provide care for those children whose parents are in academic study or working outside the hours of normal schooling. Mostly children from the ages of six to nine years use these centres, and they have flexible opening hours and all year to accommodate parents' work or study needs. Leisure-time centres are also educationally orientated and aim to provide learning through recreational activities. In 2003 the number of children using leisure-time centres was 342,000, some 74% of children between the ages of six and nine and 10% of children ten to twelve.
- Open leisure-time activities: these facilities are aimed at children from ten to twelve years, and are limited to only a quarter of all municipal areas within Sweden. In 2003, some 5% of children aged ten to twelve took part in open leisure-time activities. *(Pedwell, 2003)*

2.12.2.1 Parental leave

Parents are enabled to spend considerable time caring for young children due to substantial parental leave benefits, where usually after the birth of a child, the parents have the right to take a parental leave of absence from their work for up to thirteen months. Moreover, parents retain 80% of their salaries for this thirteen-month period (though a maximum of eighteen months can be taken). A pre-school place can be secured within a three to four month time period after the application is made as Sweden guarantees a pre-school place for all children.

2.12.2.2 Funding childcare in Sweden

The costs for such an excellent childcare system are covered by the Swedish State, local authorities, and by the parents themselves. Both the state and the local authorities provide the

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largest proportion of funding, while parents pay between 10% and 13% of the costs (this is means tested in respect to their income though some centres have standard rates of pay). In addition there are other means of funding such as:

- Employers pay 'general social insurance' that indirectly funds childcare as well as other services.
- Local authorities receive grants from the National Board of Health and Welfare to fund childcare services.
- The state in Sweden provides financial funding for non-profit childcare centres and parent co-operative centres (as long they are connected to the state).

It should be noted that those childcare centres that are privately run or those children cared for privately by nannies or relative receive no funding from the state or local authorities.

2.12.2.3. Quality of childcare in Sweden

The standard of childcare in Sweden is regulated by both state funders and the National Board of Health and Welfare that has particular focus on:

- The design of childcare centres
- Furnishing of childcare centres
- Staff training (teachers and minders)
- The ratio of children to staff

In more recent times the Swedish government has also used childcare facilities for promoting social inclusion in respect to minority ethnic group members as it has been attracting an increasing number of immigrants due to its wealth and growth in the labour market. The government have put in place childcare facilities with emphasis on social inclusion and social

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integration. This an area that has relevance to the Republic of Ireland particularly given its recent increase in given the steady increase it is also experiencing in immigration.

2.12.2.4 Analysis

The approach to childcare in Sweden presents as being progressive and responsive to meeting the diverse needs of children and families. The emphasis on egalitarianism and individual autonomy appears to commit to the promotion of equality and a shared sense of responsibility in regard to childcare. Regrettably however there are still problems with this approach in respect to inequalities in the workforce. The division of labour in the workforce is still a problematic situation with many females employed only on part-time positions and there are still those who are resisting the shifting gender role within the home that such policy initiatives can lead to (Mahon, 2001).

2.12.3 Childcare provision in France

France enjoys high employment rates particularly for lone parents and this is attributed to the public services it devotes to young children (Baldock et al, 2002). Lone mothers have access to the quasi-free of charge pre-elementary school for children as young as two, and fees are linked to household income. Such parents are also given priority in local authority day-care provision.

In 1998, one hundred per cent of the 3- to 5-year old children and as many as thirty five per cent of the two-year olds were in a pre-elementary school. The French situation is seen as particularly good compared to other European countries and has led the European Observatory on National Family Policies to state:

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> "*the most important factor in explaining the very high rates of labour force participation amongst lone mothers in France seems to be the availability and quality of free pre-school child care and the priority of access to it given to lone parents*" (Bradshaw et al., 1996:78).

Pre-elementary schools, day care centres and childminders' homes in France offered almost 500,000 places in 1999 for the 2.2 million children under three and thus covered almost twenty per cent of the needs (DREES, 2000).

2.12.3.1 Types of childcare in France

Crèches

This is a diversified delivery system of childcare in various types of day centres that include:

- Crèches collectives most commonly used for children under 3 with high quality facilities and well-trained staff. Opening times are from 7am to 7pm and they can cater for an average of 44 children. The staff ratio is 3.6 children to a staff member. In 1999, 138,400 children were being cared for in these facilities (Baldock et al, 2002).
- Crèches parentales are organised by parents' associations and have been around since 1968. They cater for smaller groups of children and they bring together parents and employees, parents spend between 6 and 8 hours per week in these facilities. In 1999, there were about 740 of such crèches catering for 8,500 children (ibid).
- Crèches familiales is a publicly funded service that organises and supervises childcare in a registered childminder's home. The contract is between the parents and the local authority that employs the childminder and care cannot go beyond 10 hours per day. In 1999, there were 1,103 such facilities providing care for 60,900 children (ibid).

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- Haltegarderies provide care for children from 0-6 years for some hours during the day. These are now mostly used for part-day care for children whose mothers work part-time, or as a supplementary childcare arrangement. Many of these facilities are linked in with before and after school childcare for children between 2 and 6.

2.12.3.2 Funding

Crèches are highly subsidised and parents pay an average of twenty eight per cent (in 1990) depending on their resources, the type of crèche and its location. In some areas such as the Paris suburbs, the price for poorer families may be very low. Kamerman and Kahn (1994) studied several child-care places and cited the case of a crèche collective where the payment was as low as 4 francs per day.

By the end of 1999, there were about 138,400 places in crèches collectives representing 5.6 places for 100 children on average. Whilst, there were very unequal regional disparities, the number of crèches has steadily increased in France over the past decade (Baldock, 2002).

2.12.3.3 Assistantes maternelles (childminders)

In 1999 there were 300,700 registered childminders corresponding to a capacity of 724,000 children. Parents wishing to use a childminder can also apply for a special benefit known as "aide pour l'emploi d'une assistante maternelle agreee" (AFEAMA) which is a non means-tested scheme composed of payment of social contributions for the employment of a registered childminder (about 40% of the total costs) plus additional financial benefits per month if the child is under 3 or under 6. Consequently, the use of registered childminders has increased sharply after the amount of AFEAMA was increased in 1994. It is reported that about 380,000 families benefited from this in 1996 and 500,600 in 1999.

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2.12.3.4 Analysis

A fundamental facet of France's childcare policy is the idea that responsibility in this area should be shared between the state and the family. Additionally, this policy is underpinned by a commitment to affording parents choices according to their preferences for either working or caring. France's childcare policies since the 1970's have however developed in an alternate fashion in support of either working or caring. Consequently its changing policies on childcare reflect the ideological shifts of left and right wing political thinking of respective governments in the 80's and 90's. For example, while the *left* encourages women into work and the support of public collective childcare, *right wing* thinking is more supportive of maternity and caring, availability of cash benefits and tax deductions to allow parents to purchase services. Where there is consensus however is on the need for the state in France to support childcare and increase the supply of its facilities to meet the growing demand from parents. Since the advent of a more right wing government in France since 2003, the emphasis which had been placed by the previous socialist administration on gender equality in family policies is now much less explicit in the government's objectives. The government in France is now developing aims around family policy associated with raising its birth rate with financial incentives made available to encourage parents to have children.

The most powerful endorsement of France's childcare policy however is echoed by these parents from the United Kingdom who live outside Paris.

"The cost of childcare in the UK is a powerful argument for you to stay away until the children are able to go to state school." (The price of Parenthood, 2002, www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe).

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2.12.4 *Childcare in Norway*

Kamerman and Kahn (1998) describe family policy in Norway as being the most generous in Europe and especially beneficial to lone parents. With a population of 4,593,041 (www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook), and similar in size to Ireland, Norway is regarded as a latecomer with regard to making the combination of paid work and childcare easier for Norwegian mothers, particularly in relation to developing public child care provision (Leira, 1992).

Norwegian social policy has been oriented towards a mix of the '*Care-giving model'* and the *'Parent-worker Model'* (Lewis and Hobson, 1997), and thus has supported women as both carers and workers. The benefits system has also made it possible for lone mothers to set up their own households and has provided opportunities for education and part-time work when the children are small, as well as supporting lone mothers in full-time paid work.

Since the late 1990s, welfare policy has gradually moved more strongly in the direction of supporting women in combining employment and motherhood. The policy towards lone mothers changed in a way that would limit the period they could stay at home full or part time with their children, or take part education while living on the transitional allowance. Additionally, rates of financial support were increased and more childcare expenses were covered by the state.

The *National Allowance Scheme*, introduced in 1964, entitles lone parents to a minimum non-means-tested income if they preferred to care for their children at home until the youngest child reaches the age of 10. This allowance also made it possible to combine being at home part-time with paid employment or with education for the same period. For employed lone mothers with low wages and children under 10, the allowance represented a

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top-up to wages. Additionally, this Scheme also includes child-care benefits for lone parents who take up education or paid work, and an educational allowance to cover costs incurred. Extra child allowances are paid to lone parents until the youngest child reaches 18, in addition to paying lower levels of taxation. Social transfers play a significant part of the income of Norwegian lone parents in comparison to married or co-habiting parents (Kirkeland et al., 2003).

The availability of this *transitional allowance*, which is widely used, is what separates Norway from its Scandinavian neighbours because this gives a minimum income regardless of what choices a lone parent might make with regard to work. The allowance has mainly been used by lone mothers and few have used it for long periods, the average time period being three years in the early 1990s (Terum, 1993). Unfortunately however, it was not without its problems.

2.13 The case for reform

Imaginative and progressive as this policy undoubtedly was, concern was expressed in the 1990s about increasing dependency on the transitional allowance particularly among lone parents and growing evidence that such parents were among the worst-off in the Norwegian population in terms of living standards (Kjeldstad, 1998). Increasing numbers of lone parents were also receiving the transitional allowance alongside social assistance, a means-tested benefit based on poor relief principles issued by municipalities. Nonetheless, in comparison to other Scandinavian countries with more work-oriented policies and no allowance, fewer lone mothers in Norway were receiving the more stigmatised social benefits (Syltevik, 1996).

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On 1 January 1998, Norway's Labour government introduced changes to its welfare system amidst concerns that welfare dependency hampered employment motivation. It was however fundamentally committed to the principle of gender equality and wished to facilitate women's participation in the labour market. The period of eligibility for the transitional allowance would however be reduced to three years and additionally support would be restricted to families where the youngest child was under 8 years of age. Additionally, if the youngest child is 3 years of age or older, the recipient has to be active in the labour market, either by actively seeking employment, or by having a job or studying in order to receive financial support.

Since its introduction, the transitional allowance is associated with giving Norwegian lone mothers the possibility of different combinations of paid work, study and care. Although this is still the case, lone mothers now have less choice than before since its reform. The reforms made employment necessary and a duty for lone parents through the curtailment of their benefits. Correspondingly, the rates of support were increased to cover a larger proportion of childcare expenses (up to 70% of the cost). The three main goals of the reforms were concerned with:

1. improving the economic situation for lone parents.
2. increasing their capacity to make their own living through paid work.
3. improving the quality of public service towards this group.

By creating a new policy regime in Norway, it created a division at a child's third birthday, after which it was no longer seen as appropriate that parents should stay at home to look after their children on a full-time basis with support from the welfare state (Millar and Evans, 2003).

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2.13.1 *Analysis*

The reforms in Norway can be seen as a sort of compromise between the desire to facilitate women's employment on the one hand, and the general debate about the need for more time with children on the other (ibid). In the first year of a child's life all working parents are entitled to parental leave of either 52 weeks with 80% of earnings replaced or 42 weeks with 100% per cent of earnings.

Following on from this, a cash-for-care benefit called *kontantstotten* is offered to all parents with children in the age group 1-3 years who do not use state sponsored child-care services. It is found that the majority of parents with children in these age groups receive this benefit as evidenced by findings showing that for this age group, the usage of nursery schools was 31% for one year olds in 2000 and 49% for two year olds (Gulbrandsen and Hellevik, 2000). Parents can use this benefit to access private help for childcare or remain at home themselves on a part or full-time basis. As this benefit is universal for all families, mothers have the option of staying at home with the under threes (Millar and Evans, 2003).

Critics however are constantly attacking this 'cash for care' benefit arguing that it will lead to a *"re-domestication of young mothers and a wish to use the money for public childcare instead"* (Millar and Evans, 2003: 70). With the advent of any change of government in Norway, this policy may yet again be subjected to further change.

2.14 Conclusion

The evidence presented and supported by relevant research findings in both parts of Ireland in this literature review shows a pronounced gap between demand and supply of adequate

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high quality childcare in the border region of Northern Ireland and the Republic. The need for childcare is most acutely experienced amongst lone parents but this cannot mask the needs and rights of all parents to expect services in this area.

With the advent of more government funding being announced in Northern Ireland and policy seemingly being nudged in a more coordinated direction in the Republic of Ireland, perhaps now is the time for providers in both parts of Ireland to take an imaginative look at developing responsive initiatives to childcare in the border region. This may need to involve an eclectic approach to examining aspects of delivery from other European partners which have proven effective in meeting the needs of families and children.

The four countries examined in this work clearly highlight the absence of a 'one size fits all' model of childcare, but what is evident is that parents and children for the most part in these countries have benefited from choice and variety in childcare services. Whilst there is no convergence towards a European model of childcare, there are features from all four countries which could usefully inform development and improvement in availability in Northern Ireland and the Republic. For example, the imaginative way in which childcare is flexibly provided in Sweden for younger and older children to accommodate the sometimes irregular working times of their parents seems quite appealing. Equally what is common to all four countries is a generous scheme for parental leave, which clearly supports and forms a central plank in family policy. The imaginative, participative and flexible way that France uses its crèche facilities is also impressive and really does create the impression of a close alliance between the state and the family in the approach to childcare.

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There is no reason why Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland cannot learn from the diversity of such provision at a time when policy does seem to be advancing in the right direction, albeit at a much slower pace than in other parts of Europe.

Although the political paralysis currently typifying the state of government in Northern Ireland does little to stimulate confidence in the successful implementation of initiatives, one can only take encouragement from the announcement of more funding for childcare. Maybe this will mark the beginning of serious investment in a much-needed service for all families in the border regions of Northern Ireland.

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CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research strategy and design

A mixed methodological approach was employed to ensure a holistic and comprehensive assessment of the range and level of existing services and gaps in childcare provision. This approach enabled the research team to tease out various perspectives on the issues through the use of both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis methods.

In the past the majority of researchers employed either a qualitative or quantitative approach and opposed the marriage of these research strategies. However, more recently, a growing number of researchers have used a mixed methodological design. There is increasing recognition that using a solely qualitative or quantitative research strategy is restrictive and that data collection, analysis and findings are enhanced by the mixed approach (Thomas, 2003; Tashakorri and Teddlie, 1998 & 2001).

> *"Most research does not fit clearly into one category – quantitative or qualitative. The best often combines features of each. In the same research project, some data may be collected that is amenable to statistical analysis; while other equally significant information is not…Neither quantitative nor qualitative research is superior to the other … .we do not regard quantitative research to be any more scientific than qualitative research."* (King, Keohane & Verba, 1994:5)

The research design comprised qualitative focus groups in seven of the eight designated areas alongside a quantitative action research survey within the same seven council districts. Whilst it was originally intended to work within the eight council areas of Derry, Strabane, Omagh, Enniskillen, Leitrim, Limavady, Sligo and Donegal it was agreed that it would not be

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appropriate to include Donegal as it had recently been included in a large scale childcare research study (Gallo 2004). The main aims of the Donegal study were the collation of the views and opinions of parents, children and stakeholders with experiences of childcare provision across the County. The research also aimed to generate a synthesis of parents' and stakeholders' views on childcare in order to strengthen lobbying efforts, funding proposals and contribute to a future county childcare strategy. In addition it aimed to engender an awareness of the importance of parents and children to the development of childcare provision (Gallo, 2004).

3.2 Quantitative action research survey

Action research has been defined in many ways by a range of researchers (Kemmis et al, 1988; Wadsworth, 1998; Whyte, 1991). The majority of participatory action research attempts to study a problem or research question in order to change and improve the situation for the research participants and influence those who seek to make changes in policy and practice. It is imperative that the researcher works with the participants in order to involve and empower them in effecting the change desired by the original research objectives.

In action research, there is always the danger that the concept of empowerment may be employed in a tokenistic fashion. It may be difficult to engage the participants in a meaningful manner, involving them at all stages. However, it is possible to engage with participants in an honest way when limits to full collaboration are openly discussed. Participation can be achieved through enabling the participants to be involved in focus groups, discussion groups and training individuals to administer questionnaires. It can also be achieved by inviting and incorporating participants' comment on preliminary analysis. Empowerment may be further enhanced when

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> *"The participants are confident about the researchers' ability to write up the research in such a way that it could influence policy-makers."* (Rose, 2001 p10).

Dick (1997) suggests how each key player may be involved in the action research process and how their subsequent roles may be incorporated into each of the research phases. Table 1 builds on Dick, outlining the current research project.

Table 1. The research process

Research Process	Key Players	Attitudes and Tasks
Design overall study and data collection and interpretation	Researchers *(University of Ulster Research Team)*	Motivated and trained to undertake research project
Data collection and provision	Facilitators *(Research trainees)* and Local Informants *(Questionnaire respondents and focus group participants)*	Motivated and can be trained in skills needed to manage part of the process
Being kept informed about the study and its implications	Researchers, research trainees, stakeholders, focus group participants and questionnaire respondents	Motivated to find out effects of action research
Planning for action	Planners, policy -makers	Motivated to envision and plan change

A participatory action research approach was adopted for the purpose of the survey, in order to be inclusive and empowering. The community-based survey was conducted with the assistance of women from local communities who were trained to administer the questionnaires within their respective local areas. They were also invited to participate in contributing to the analysis at a later stage. It was hoped that this involvement would empower the research participants to become integral catalysts in the campaign to change childcare policy and practice.

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The action research also enabled the project to build on local knowledge in order to improve the reliability and validity of the data. It was anticipated that participants were in a prime position to engage with members of their local community and gauge the level of opinion on childcare at a grass-roots level, as those selected included women who were in receipt of formal and informal childcare as well as women who were involved in the provision of childcare.

3.2.1 *Recruitment of trainee interviewers, interview training workshops and the pilot interviews*

Recruitment of trainees was achieved through a number of contacts. A recent major study by the research team (Mc Colgan et al, 2002), which examined the determinants of women's health and well being, established renewable contacts with a number of women's networks. The same networks were used for the purpose of the current research project alongside other contacts from SureStart, Lifestart and a number of private and statutory community playgroups, nursery schools and after school groups.

Research staff conducted a number of research skills workshops, which were held in seven of the eight designated areas; Derry, Limavady, Strabane, Omagh, Leitrim, Sligo and Enniskillen. As stated above, Donegal was not included in the revised sample design as a recent report was conducted on behalf of the Donegal County Childcare Committee (Gallo, 2004). The potential research trainees were invited to participate in training workshops and were equipped with the necessary skills to negotiate the fieldwork stage and troubleshoot any problems which might arise. They were then asked to pilot a number of questionnaires before

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returning to a debriefing session. Finally, as trained interviewers, the participants carried out the data collection for the quantitative survey.

In the workshops, the trainees were also assured of the value of their contribution and how they would play an essential part in the gathering of information at a local level. It was also acknowledged that they would have direct knowledge of their respective community areas, would be familiar with the needs of the local people and would be known and respected within the community.

There was trepidation amongst participations at the beginning of the research process. This disappeared at the initial pilot training sessions when real enthusiasm developed for undertaking the work and ultimately influencing policy. Interest was re-ignited when the trainees returned to a de-briefing session after pilot administration of the questionnaires. During de-briefing, trainees reported that it had been a rewarding experience and that they felt that they had truly been part of an important process. The participants said they believed they had obtained representative views from their local area and had been able to explore issues that may have been overlooked in a postal questionnaire. In addition, the trainees reflected on how the questionnaires could be modified, avoiding some repetition and exploring further issues. Thus research trainees were not only involved in data collection but also played an integral part in transforming the research design.

3.2.2 *Sample selection*

Using the established agency and new community childcare contacts, a non-probability snowball sampling technique was employed, whereby 4 – 15 community representatives from each area administered approximately 40 questionnaires. The use of a non-probability

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snowball sampling method permitted the selection of a number of community members who subsequently invited a number of other individuals to complete the questionnaire. Thus, as intended, the information gathered ascertained the view of the local populations in the council areas.

A total of 1,520 questionnaires were distributed to the interviewees, who in turn administered them to respondents in the local areas. The overall response rate was 63.5%. Table 2 gives a breakdown of numbers of participants trained, questionnaires administered and response rates according to area.

Table 2. Questionnaire response rates by area

Council area	No. of trainees from each area	No. of questionnaires administered	No. of questionnaires returned	% of local sample	% of total returns
Derry	15	600	379	63.1%	39.2%
Limavady	5	200	147	73.5	15.2%
Omagh	4	160	114	71.3%	11.9%
Sligo	5	200	107	53.5%	11.1%
Leitrim	3	120	75	62.5%	7.8%
Strabane	4	160	102	63.6%	10.5%
Enniskillen	2	80	42	52.5%	4.3%
Total		**1520**	**966**		**100.0%**

3.2.3 *Questionnaire Data analysis*

Data were examined using the SPSS computer package. The computer-aided analysis provided a detailed examination of the social, familial and geographical factors, which have had an impact on informal and formal childcare provision across the northwest of Ireland. In addition, it enabled a comparison of the extent and composition of childcare provision throughout the seven council areas.

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Data were coded from the questionnaire using both a pre-coding technique for closed questions (i.e. list answer questions) and a post-coding scheme for responses to open questions, where respondents were asked to elaborate on specific points. Frequency tables were then generated. Subsequently, a number of statistical cross-tabulations were performed, which facilitated the examination of relationships between a numbers of variables. The findings are presented in tabular and graph formats later in this report.

3.3 Focus Groups

Alongside the quantitative survey, a focus group was convened in the each of the seven designated areas. Focus groups are a valuable tool in the attempt to collect data on a number of issues, which are of interest to the researcher and to the group members. They can be used to seek opinions, thoughts and perspectives on a range of topics. Moreover, the unique dynamic of group interaction enhances the discussion and engenders a 'brainstorming' approach to an analysis of the issues and formulation of possible solutions. The group format also persuades individuals to elaborate upon ideas and topics which other group members may initiate and which the researcher may not have included in the original focus group schedule. In consequence it is a fluid evolutionary process, which moves away from the rather staid dynamic of the one –to one interview setting (Bryman 2004; May, 2001; Punch 1998). The focus group research tool was deemed appropriate for the purposes of the current project as it was hoped that it might encourage the participants to relax and talk about childcare issues in an open, encouraging and confidential environment where appropriate participant recruitment is conducted.

One focus group was conducted in each of the seven council areas and participants were invited to give their views and discuss a range of issues, which are related to informal and

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formal childcare provision within the local areas. The issues discussed included barriers to securing suitable childcare, affordability, accessibility, and regulation of public childcare and familial childcare networks.

3.3.1 *Sample selection and composition*

Potential members of the focus group were contacted via the contacts described above in relation to the survey. The research goal of a focus group usually dictates that members of the sample must be selected on the basis of pre-determined characteristics. In relation to the current research programme, a non-probability purposive method of sampling was employed, as members were selected according to residency in a specific area and experience of the issues.

A total of 56 participants participated in the focus groups, which ranged in size from 5-15. The groups were comprised of service providers and parents who availed of the childcare services in the seven designated areas. They were conducted at sites within the local areas, usually in community group or childcare settings.

3.3.2 Focus Group Data analysis

Focus groups were tape-recorded and a university research student transcribed the data from each session. Data were analysed using the NVivo computer package enabling efficient coding and analysis.

3.4 Ethical issues

Each participant in the community questionnaire was fully informed of the nature and purpose of the research process. Project fliers were sent to potential participant organisations

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and were also given to each individual at training sessions and focus groups. The research trainees and focus group participants were also notified about the voluntary nature of involvement and were given the option to withdraw from the research process at any stage of the study.

Furthermore, the trainee interviewees were advised about the strict confidentiality criteria, which govern any professional research undertaking. At the training workshops the participants were told about the importance of ensuring confidentiality both to the respondents and in relation to the security of confidential information. Focus group participants were assured that any taped information would be stored, analysed and presented within the report in a confidential manner ensuring the anonymity of participants.

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CHAPTER FOUR

CHARACTERISTICS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

4.1 Survey respondent characteristics

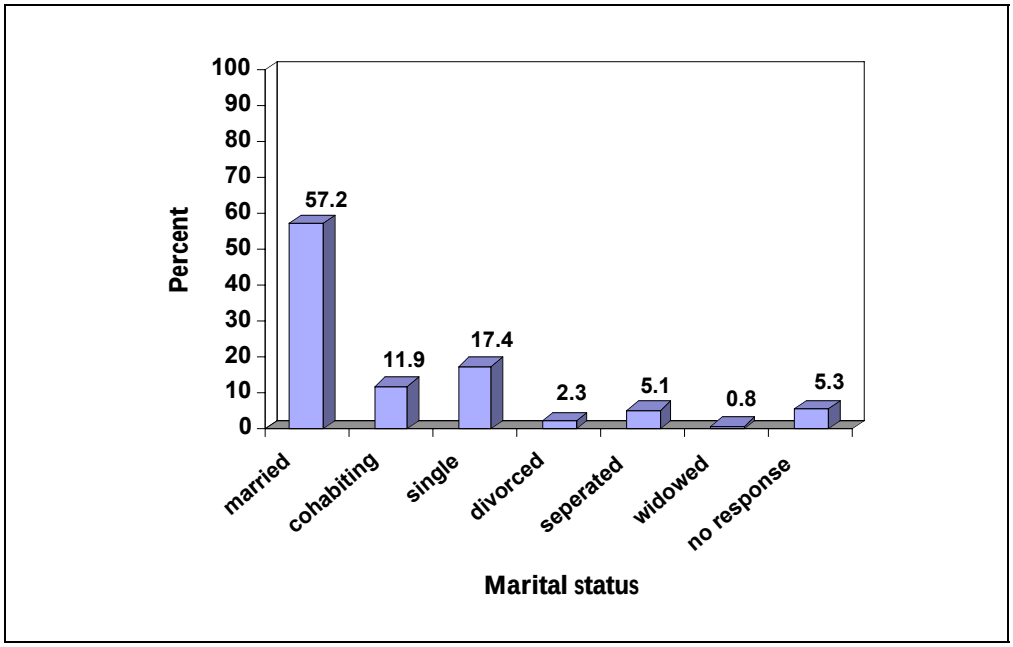
4.1.1 *Age and gender*

A total of 966 childcare users completed questionnaires. The sample comprised 46 (4.8%) male and 847 (87.7%) female respondents. The remaining 7.6% (73 respondents) declined to disclose this information. Ages ranged from 15 to 53 years (the mean was 33 years).

4.1.2 *Marital status*

Respondents' marital status varied with the majority (553) being married, 168 single, and 115 cohabiting. Smaller numbers reported being divorced, separated or widowed and 51 gave no response. Percentages are given in Figure1.

Figure 1. Marital status of respondents



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4.1.3 *Employment Status*

Only 13.6% (n=131) did not respond to this question. Of those respondents who gave their employment status, 30.3% (n=253) were in part-time employment and 37.1% (n=310) were working full-time, making a total of 67.4% (n=563) in employment. A further 12.9% (n=108) had been unemployed for more than six months, 3.6% (n=29) stated that they were in receipt of sickness benefit, 1.4% (n=12) in full-time education, 4.8% (n=40) described themselves as housewives/husbands and 1.2% (n=10) were in receipt of income support. [1]

Figure 2 gives a detailed breakdown of employment status by gender in percentage terms. Over half of male respondents (n=23) were in full-time employment and about a fifth (n=9) were employed on a part-time basis. On the other hand, just over a third of women were employed full-time (n=276) and just under a third part-time (n=237).

[1] In should be noted that respondents' perceptions of their role and the discrete nature of the response options on this section of the questionnaire may have lead to an ambiguity in the results. For example, an individual who has been unemployed for any length of time may also be in receipt of sickness benefit or income support. Whether they consider themselves to be housewives/husbands will be dictated by individual domestic arrangements and not necessarily viewed as 'employment status'.

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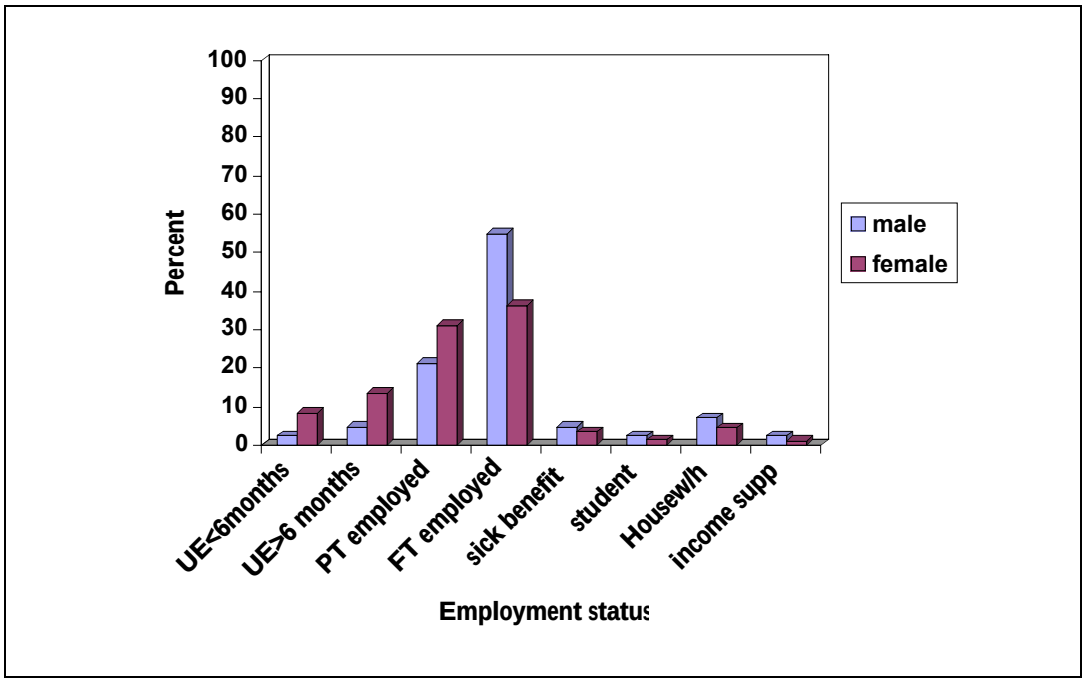
Figure 2. Employment status by gender



4.1.4 *Accommodation*

Respondents were asked to provide details of their accommodation status. It emerged that 59.2% (n=572) lived in owner-occupied accommodation, 21.5% (n=208) in Housing Executive or housing association properties and 10.8% (n=104) in privately rented accommodation. 2.5% (n=24) were younger respondents who lived with their parents whilst a further 0.2% (n=2) classified themselves as homeless. 5.8% (n=56) gave no indication of the nature of their accommodation.

4.1.5 *'Ethnic' and Religious Background*

Of the 908 respondents who indicated their 'ethnic' origin, 32.8% (n=298) were British, 63.7% (n=578) were Irish and 1.9% (n=17) were from the Irish travelling community. A combined 1.6% (n=15) stated that they were of *'other'* origins including Indian, Pakistani and African.

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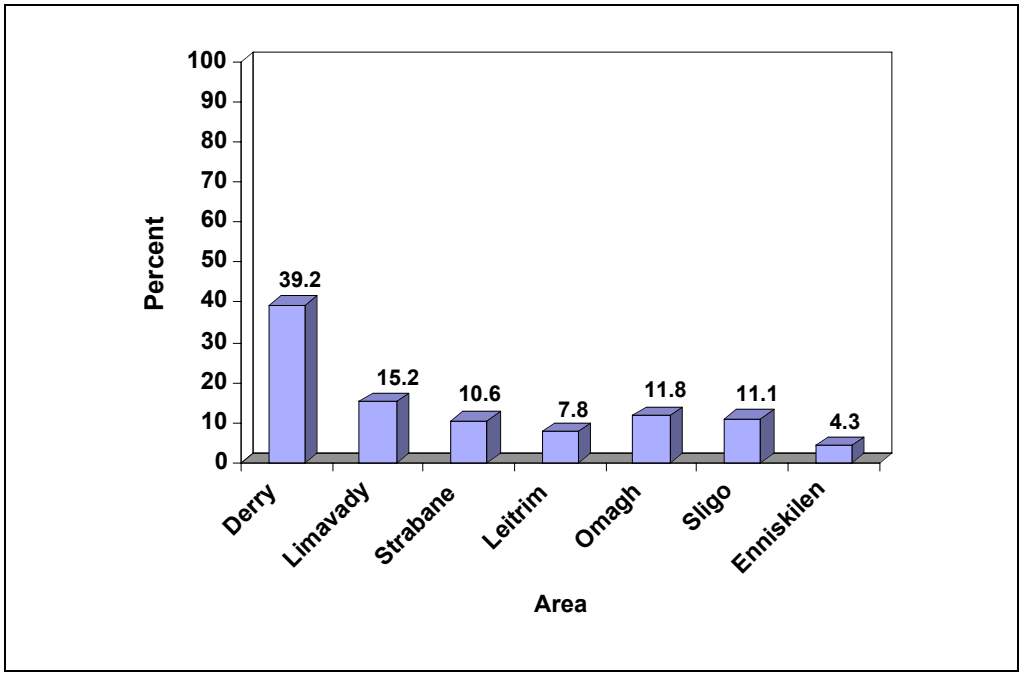
Of those who stated their religious and community backgrounds (n=812), three-quarters described themselves as Catholic (74.8%; n=607) and a fifth Protestant (20.9%; n=170) with 1.1% (n=9) describing their background as *'other'* and (3.2% (n=26) as *'none'*.

4.1.6 *Area of Residence*

Figure 3 indicates the proportions of respondents resident in each area. 39.2% of respondents (n=379) lived in Derry/Londonderry, the most populous settlement in the survey area.

Figure 3. Area of residence



4.1.7 *Number of Children*

Respondents were asked to report how many children there were in their family. In total, 1909 children were indirectly represented in the total sample. The number of children under the age of 14 years in each household ranged from one to six. 387 had one child, just slightly higher than the numbers of households with two children (339). A further 170 households had three children and frequencies continued to fall as the number of children increased, 56

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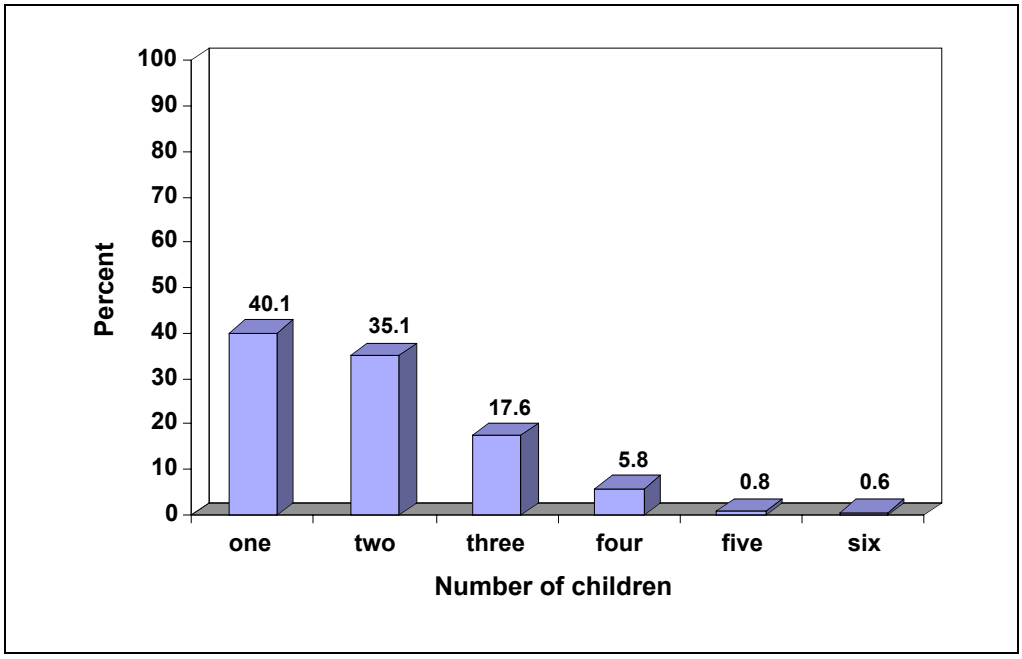
families had four children whilst 8 households had five children and 6 families had six children. Figure 4 gives the breakdown in percentage terms.

Figure 4. Number of children in household



4.1.8 *Age of Children*

The age distribution of children peaks at the 2/3 years old age group, 23.2% fell into this age group with 12.8% being one year old or younger. The age group with the smallest representation was 14 years (3.2%). Figure 5 gives the age ranges of children.

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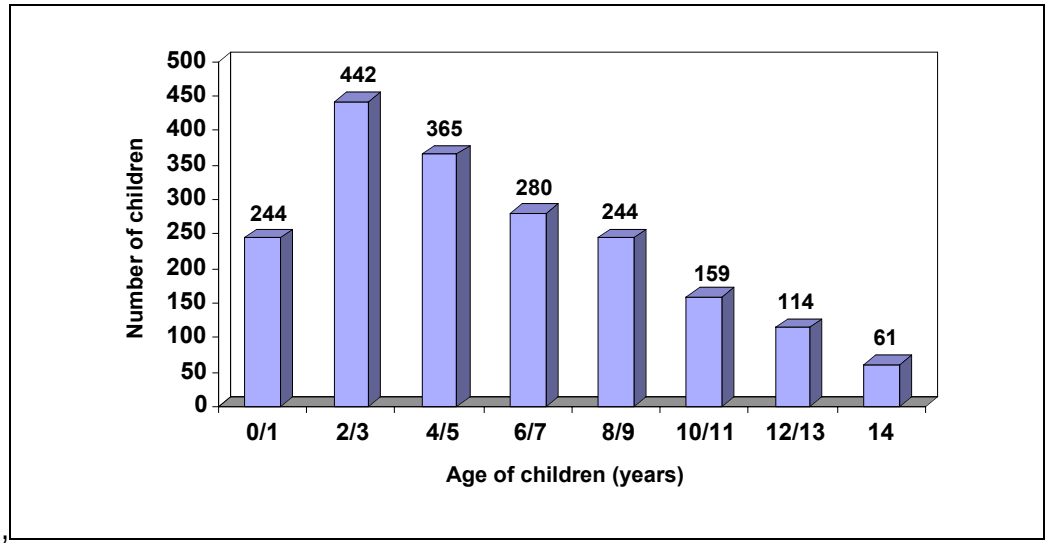
Figure 5. Age of children



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4.2 Characteristics of focus group participants

The focus groups were comprised of statutory and voluntary service providers in each of the seven designated areas. Focus groups also included mothers who had recently or currently availed of the childcare services in the seven designated areas. Views were elicited from single mothers, mothers from the travelling community, working and non-working mothers and those who used both formal and informal childcare.

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CHAPTER FIVE

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

5.1 Introduction

The quantitative element of the study investigated a range of factors, which parents considered to be important, on an individual and collective basis. These included nature and frequency of childcare used, the type and level of formal and informal childcare used, childcare utilised in the last week, past month and past year, the cost of childcare on a regional basis, financial assistance availed of, unmet need, satisfaction with childcare arrangements, factors influencing choice of childcare, registered and unregistered childcare arrangements and recommendation for improvements.

The focus group study complemented this by examining parents' and providers' experiences of and views on childcare. It considered the wider picture, looking at childcare in the context of wider family life and wider society. The qualitative study also looked at childcare provision more narrowly, looking at best practice in the North West and the problems faced by both parents and providers. Participants' discussion of gender issues in childcare was also considered.

This chapter presents a synthesis of the findings from the qualitative focus group and quantitative community questionnaire studies. Findings are presented via a number of themes, including nature and frequency of childcare, timing of childcare and unmet need, cost of childcare and levels of registered and unregistered childcare, satisfaction and suggested improvements, factors in the choice of childcare, special needs, gender issues, service provider issues and the wider impacts of the non-availability of adequate childcare. Summary points are provided at the end of each of the sections.

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5.2 Nature and frequency of childcare used

For the purpose of this study, the term 'childcare' refers to any arrangement under which the child is left in the care of individuals other than its parent(s). It can be regular or 'as and when needed', formal or informal, take place in the child's home or outside and be paid for or free of charge in cash terms.

5.2.1 *Formal Childcare*

The community questionnaire distinguished between 'formal' and 'informal' childcare. Options provided in the 'formal' childcare section included: childminder in the child's or minder's home, nursery, crèche, playgroup, out of school club, family centre and reception class contained within a primary school. Respondents were asked to indicate which of these services they had used in a) the seven-day period before this survey and, b) in the previous twelve months. Results are presented in figure 6 as percentages of the entire sample population (n=966).

As figure 6 illustrates, the crèche facility emerged as the most frequently used formal childcare arrangement in the 'past week' (8%; n=77), the 'past year' (4.2%; n=41) and in *'both'* (15.8%; n=153). This result tallies with the previous finding that the largest cohort of children was in the 2/3-year age group. The second most frequently used form of childcare, in the week previous to the survey, was the playgroup (4.2%; n=41).

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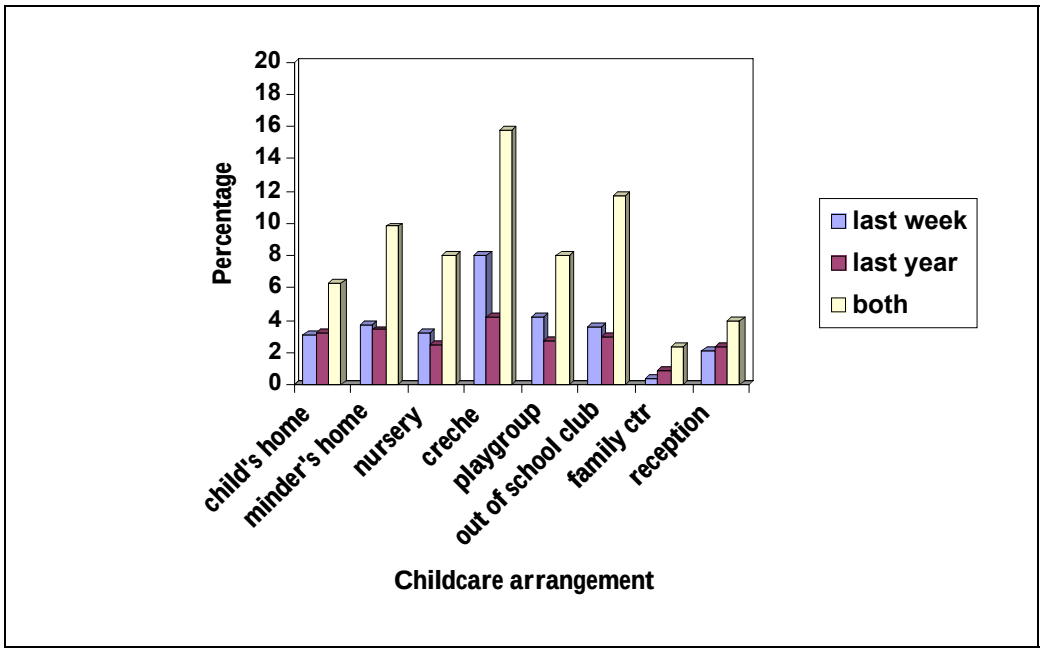
Figure 6. Nature and prevalence of formal childcare use (n=966)



An important issue highlighted by the focus group participants centred on the lack of available information in relation to the nature and level of formal childcare provision in their local area. A number of focus group participants felt that, although lists might be available from official sources, easily accessible information about formal childcare provision was lacking. One childcare worker described her own case as an example,

> *"You know […] the Sure start programme [well] I'm expecting my second child now and I would never knew that was there until the midwife would have told me about it. And like I would work in playgroup, you know and I still wouldn't have knew that was available to me as a parent and that I can go in and avail of it."*

One suggestion was that complete lists of providers (with a description of their service's eligibility criteria) could be published in the local newspaper each summer, for public information.

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Some providers felt that a further, related problem is that parents are not equipped to make informed choices about which childcare provider to use. For example, one participant said,

> *[…] a few parents would ask […] was the staff qualified. They just look, they come in, they approach us and they look for happy children and if they see the children are happy then they leave that way in general, you know?*

5.2.2 *Movement between formal and informal childcare provision*

According to findings from the focus group participants, it was apparent that there was no all-day formal care provider for pre-school children in parts of Co. Leitrim and Limavady. Provision in some areas consisted of a restricted session offered by one provider and then a restricted session offered by another, requiring parents to take children between one and the next or to organise for others to do this. Often children have to be taken home or to an informal provider when there is a gap between sessions offered. One participant described the situation in her town:

> *"[…] normally a grandparent or a parent could maybe dropping the child off to a morning session and then you've got another member of family picking them up to drop them to the next session. You just won't link in the childcare, trying to make a whole childcare."*

It was particularly a problem in rural areas of Leitrim and Limavady where carers had to travel considerable distances to bring and fetch children. In one focus group a participant summed up the effect of this challenge on parents;

> *"They really are stressed balancing it all out."*

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5.2.3. *Informal Childcare*

With regards to informal childcare arrangements (fig.7), respondents were asked to indicate which, if any, of the following they had used in the past week or year: partner; ex-partner, siblings, grandparents, friends, other relatives and babysitters. Again, results are given as percentages of the entire sample (n=966). They show that friends were most frequently used as informal childcare providers in the past week (9.8%; n=95), the past year (8.2%; n=79) and in 'both' (22.2%; n=214), closely followed by grandparents over 'both' periods. Results from the focus groups and dissemination seminar stressed the importance of grandparents' responsibility for informal care (but not of friends').

Figure 7. Nature and prevalence of informal childcare use (n=966)

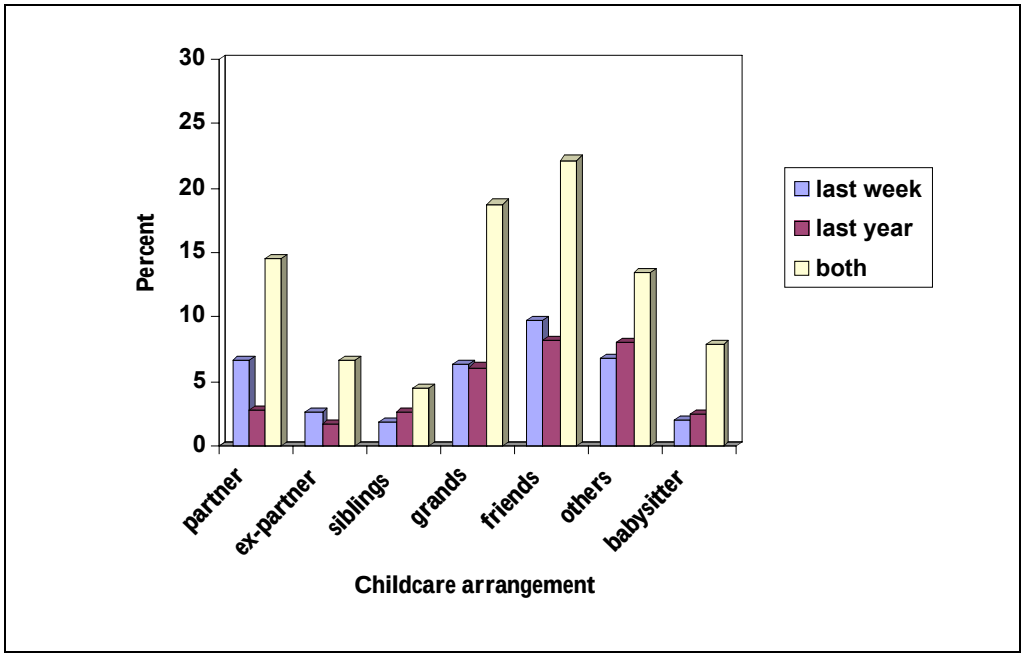

Table 3 presents a summary of the nature and frequency of *all* childcare used, giving the overall picture and enabling a comparison of informal and formal arrangements. Findings are reported as percentages of those who used each arrangement. The table shows that the least

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used childcare arrangements were family centres (n=36), reception classes (n=82) and siblings (n=85).

Table 3. Summary of all childcare arrangements (valid percentage)

Arrangement	Last week (%)	Last year (%)	Both (%)
Child's home (n=122)	**24.6**	**25.4**	**50.0**
Childminder's home (n=164)	**22.0**	**20.1**	**57.9**
Nursery (n=132)	**23.5**	**18.2**	**58.3**
Creche (n=271)	**28.4**	**15.1**	**56.5**
Playgroup (n=144)	**28.5**	**18.1**	**53.5**
Out of school club (n=177)	**19.8**	**16.4**	**63.8**
Family centre (n=36)	**11.1**	**25.0**	**63.9**
Reception class (n=82)	**24.4**	**28.8**	**47.6**
Partner (n=232)	**27.6**	**11.6**	**60.8**
Ex-partner (n=105)	**23.8**	**15.2**	**61.0**
Siblings (n=85)	**20.0**	**29.4**	**50.6**
Grandparents (n=303)	**20.5**	**19.5**	**60.1**
Friends (n=388)	**24.5**	**20.4**	**55.2**
General babysitters (n=125)	**20.0**	**19.2**	**60.8**
Other relatives (n=273)	**24.2**	**20.4**	**55.2**

Table 4 presents a detailed analysis of childcare arrangements for the week previous to the survey and highlights the highest count, as a percentage within area, for each category.

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Table 4. Percentage of respondents in each area using various forms of childcare over the past week[1]

	Derry (n=369)	**Limav.** (n=139)	**Strabane** (n=95)	**Leitrim** (n=73)	**Omagh** (n=114)	**Sligo** (n=106)	**Ennisk.** (n=42)
Formal							
Minder's home	4.1%	5.0%	3.2%	5.5%	2.6%	2.8%	2.4%
Child's home	4.1%	2.9%	1.1%	5.5%	2.0%	4.0%	4.0%
Nursery	3.3%	0.7%	2.1%	2.7%	8.8%	0	9.5%
Crèche	10%	2.1%	3.2%	4.1%	5.3%	22.6%	2.4%
Playgroup	2.7%	1.4%	4.2%	15.1%	1.8%	11.3%	0
Out of school club	3.0%	4.3%	1.1%	11.0%	4.4%	3.8%	0
Family centre	0.3%	0	1.1%	1.4%	0	0.9%	0
Reception class	2.7%	2.1%	1.1%	1.4%	3.5%	0.9%	0
Informal							
Partner	N/A	9.2%	13.2%	14.9%	11.4%	7.6%	16.7%
Ex-partner	1.9%	9.2%	1.1%	1.4%	1.8%	1.0%	0
Siblings	1.9%	0.7%	3.3%	6.8%	0	0	2.4%
Grandparents	2.2%	3.5%	9.9%	8.1%	10.6%	15.2%	14.3%
Friends	15.7%	9.9%	5.5%	8.1%	4.4%	6.7%	0
Other Relatives	9.2%	3.5%	6.6%	6.8%	9.7%	3.8%	2.4%
Babysitters	N/A	2.1%	1.1%	6.8%	6.2%	6.7%	4.8%

[1] Some respondents used more no childcare, others more than 1 form of childcare, therefore the columns will not add up to 100%.

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Leitrim represented the area with the highest proportion of parents to use childminders, playgroups, out of school clubs and family centres whereas the Sligo cohort was the most frequent user of crèches. The area with the greatest percentage of nursery customers was Enniskillen. These results reflect that use of services may be dictated as much by availability as personal choice. In the case of the Enniskillen cohort, the majority of returned questionnaires were received from the users of a private nursery/day care centre. The small sample size within Enniskillen should also be taken into consideration.

With respect to informal arrangements, the Limavady area showed the highest proportion to utilise the help of ex-partners, whilst Derry participants were most likely to engage friends, Sligo represented the highest regional proportion which enlisted grandparents, with Enniskillen being the most likely to involve partners as informal childminders.

In contrast, with regards to other areas of the United Kingdom, a study commissioned by the Scottish Executive (2005) found that, in Scotland, '*childcare provision was more likely to be informal than formal.'* Furthermore, '… *the most commonly used providers of childcare were grandparents'.* The same report found this to be the case in England and Wales with the exception of the three to four age group for whom childminders and nannies were the most frequently used childcare arrangements.

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5.2.4 ***Summary points: Nature and frequency of childcare used***

1.The crèche facility emerged as the most frequently used formal childcare arrangement.

2. With reference to informal childcare, quantitative survey respondents highlighted that friends were most frequently employed as childcare providers, followed by grandparents, whereas focus group respondents underlined that grandparents were relied on most heavily for childcare provision.

3. Findings from the focus group study highlighted that information about formal childcare was not easily accessible and widely available for service users.

4. It was suggested that this information might be published in local newspapers on an annual basis.

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5.3 Timing of childcare used and unmet need

5.3.1 *Timing*

The questionnaire asked participants to indicate the one time of the day/week they most often used childcare. Of the 849 responses to this question, the greatest proportion, 57% (n=484), stated that their children were cared for 'during working hours'. A survey of childcare needs in County Meath (2000) elicited comparable results with respect to childcare during working hours. 51.7% of the Meath sample reported that they avail of 'morning care' and a further 35.5% using 'whole day care'.

However, results from the current focus group study indicated that where there is suitable childcare, a key problem for childcare users in some areas is the availability over the course of the day. Provision may be open too late for parents who need to drop children off before work or for other reasons. According to participants, much of the provision is not available until 9am. Childcare provision may close too early for parents who need to collect children after work. A typical closing time of 6pm was too early.

On a more positive note, a number of service users commented favourably on the availability of a one –stop shop approach provided within the local area.

> *"[…] it has a breakfast and after school club […] there's a real demand to get them up there because they know that they will be able to leave them there before eight o clock in the morning and collect them whatever time they finish work at.[…]"*

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Likewise, several service providers described a holistic approach to flexible provision over the seasonal and weekly changes that were likely to affect the level of childcare required by service users across the annual cycle.

One provider described her approach,

> *"[…] the parents would only use, the working parents would use it full day and holiday time full day care but the parents that aren't working would use maybe the granny on a Monday, an aunt on a Tuesday and then they'd send them here to us Wednesday and Thursday, maybe one day a week. You know it varies but we are very flexible for them as long as they're in training courses and trying to get back into work, through education you know and different schemes and Enterprise Ulster and New Deal and so we're as flexible as they are for us".*

In addition, 26.6% (n=226) of the quantitative survey sample found that 'after school' care was most important and almost equal proportions required some form of childcare before school and during school holidays (2.6%; n=22 and 2.7%; n=23 respectively). In relation to holiday provision, a number of focus group participants emphasised that they would prefer to send their children to holiday provision on offer, but where this was not all-day this was an opportunity that could not be taken up.

> *"It's an all or nothing situation with a lot of parents".*

Less than 10% of quantitative survey respondents used childcare mostly at weekends (5.8%; n=49) and late at night (4.5%; n=38). Only 7 respondents (0.8%) used overnight care most often. Problems faced by shift workers were a key finding from the focus group study,

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particularly in cases where parents were working shifts at different time periods and on opposing day / night shift cycles.

A number of service providers discussed their experiences of working with parents who work shifts:

> *"[…] we have a lot of nurses, a lot of nurses' children would come to us and they'd be ready to pull their hair out you know because it is hard for us to have a definite time for their children to come because she could have two days one week and five days the next week and we can't always accommodate them, you know, and they're not willing to pay to keep the place you know so it is hard for them to get [...] […]You also have jobs where they're called in just in*, as and when *they're needed which is very difficult […]"*

The mode weekly childcare usage, among the 794 individuals who provided this information, was five days per week (53.4%; n=424). A total of 338 respondents (42.6%) reported using childcare less frequently, with a small proportion (1.7%; n=13) requiring childcare for six or seven days each week. Findings from a crosstabulation of employment status by number of days of childcare (Table 5) suggest that full- and part-time employees were most likely to avail of childcare facilities five days per week. Housewives/husbands and those on income support were the least likely respondent groups to use any type of childcare.

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Table 5. Number of days of childcare by employment status

	Days per week for childcare (frequency)						
Employment status	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**
Unemployed < 6mths	6	5	6	2	21	1	0
Unemployed > 6mths	21	19	7	7	23	1	1
P/T Employed	17	21	42	22	97	1	1
F/T Employed	7	9	27	22	197	4	1
Sickness benefit	4	5	1	1	10	1	0
Student	0	0	2	6	4	0	0
Housewife/husband	5	7	8	3	13	2	0
Income support	2	1	0	1	6	0	0

Total number of hours per week for all childcare ranged from 1 to 120 hours. The mean per household was 22 hours per week.

5.3.2 *Unmet need*

One third (33.7%; n=326) of all respondents stated that, at some point in the past year, there had been times when they were unable to find appropriate childcare. This proportion is significantly higher than that recorded in a recent study of the demand for childcare among parents of children aged 14 years and under in England (Woodland S et al 2002) which indicated that 24% of families had experienced some form of unmet need in the past year.

Of the 326 respondents who stated unmet need in the current study, 32.2% (n=105) experienced problems infrequently (less frequent than every two months). However, 17.5% (n=57) found themselves to be without childcare at least once a week and a further 21.5% (n=70) experienced the same problem at least once a month, suggesting that unmet need is a frequent occurrence.

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Survey respondents were invited to describe the circumstances or reasons surrounding periods of unmet need and were encouraged to give up to four examples. Among the 326 who had identified times of unmet need, the most frequently cited circumstance was related to working hours such as overtime, weekend shifts and starting work before children are due at school (24.8%; n=81). Other noteworthy reasons given included: 'sick child' (1.5%; n=70), 'wishing to attend a social occasion' (21.2%; n=69), and 'child minder sick' (11%; n=36).

A total of 362 respondents reported the time of day when unmet need was most apparent. It emerged that 'weekday mornings' was the most problematic time of day (for 22.1%; n=80), followed by weekends (for 16.8%; n=61), 'weekday evenings' (for 13.3%; n=48) and 'weekday afternoons' (for 13%; n=47).

Our finding in relation to unmet need at the weekend may suggest that some parents require care to cover their atypical working hours. Research from the Daycare Trust (2001) highlighted the growing need for childcare services outside traditional working hours. The study identified public sector employees, low paid workers, students and lone parents as being among those who now work 'atypical hours'. Despite this expressed need, more recent research (Stratham & Mooney, 2003) found that less than one third of Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships (EYDCP) in England were making positive steps to develop their services to suit atypical working hours.

Data from the focus groups emphasized that unmet need was also expressed in terms of inconsistencies in care opportunities across the age range. Availability also seemed to vary by area. One provider noted that what they could provide did not match demand from parents of under fours. Waiting lists existed. Another said that the problem was most acute for the

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age range 0 -18 months. The fact that it was more costly to provide this care was part of the problem (see below). Also, it was explained that, whilst there might be a need for childcare for older children, family members were often prepared to provide this but they were increasingly unwilling to provide the all-day care required by younger children. As one participant described it:

> *"If you have your after-school children […] grandparents and aunts and uncles are more prepared to take children after school for those couple of hours […] whereas they're not as willing to take them from half eight to half five. I know that would be our largest age group, the nought to four year olds."*

In Enniskillen, unmet demand was for childcare for children above 16 months. It was explained that this was related to the new extended maternity leave rights (DEL 2003). One provider described the situation:

> *"I get phone calls everyday looking for places and at the minute we have no room. So we don't. And the real demand at the minute is for sixteen month olds, two years olds, and two and a half years olds. There's a real demand for that age group at the minute. Not newborns. I think it's with the new maternity leave."*

It was reported that place shortage was particularly acute at the University crèche. Clearly, this may have consequences for parents of young children wishing to access Higher Education opportunities as well as for University employees.

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5.3.3 ***Summary points: Timing of childcare used and unmet needs***

1. For quantitative study participants, the timing of childcare use was most frequently arranged to suit working hours however, since many parents worked shift patterns, before and after school care was utilised by many respondents.

2. A key problem for childcare users in some areas is the availability over the course of the day. Childcare may open too late for parents who need to drop children off before work, as much of the provision is not available until 9am.

3. Full and part-time employees were most likely to avail of childcare facilities five days per week. Housewives/husbands and those on income support were the least likely respondent groups to use any type of childcare.

4. One third of all questionnaire respondents stated that, at some point in the past year, there had been times when they were unable to find appropriate childcare. This is a relatively high proportion. Moreover, unmet need was experienced at least once a month by over a third of the affected parents.

5. The circumstances surrounding these instances of unmet need were most frequently related to working hours such as overtime and shift patterns as well as child or child minder illnesses.

6. Focus group participants emphasized that unmet need was also expressed in terms of gaps in provision across the age range. The cost of childcare was a factor, which added to the problems experienced in relation to care for the 0-18 months' age group. In addition, whilst family members were prepared to provide care for older children they were not so willing to provide the same level of all day care for the infant age group.

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5.4 Expenditure on childcare and use of registered/ unregistered childcare

5.4.1 *Expenditure on childcare*

Weekly childcare expenditure ranged from £1.50 (0.6%; n=6) to £215 (0.1%; n=1). 11.5% (n=111) of participants availed of free childcare places and a further 25.6% (n=247) did not wish to state the amount paid for childcare. Analysing the available data, the mean spend on childcare per household was £42.27 per week. Due to the cross-border methodology employed in this study, expenses were presented in both sterling and Euro. The figures and calculations presented here employed a conversion rate of €1 = £0.70.

Figure 8 illustrates the range of mean childcare expenditure by area. Enniskillen demonstrated the highest mean weekly expenditure of £82.71. This result may be related to the characteristics of this group since many questionnaires were distributed within a private day care centre. The mean weekly childcare spend in Sligo was £57.52 with Leitrim at £46.00 per week. The mean expenditure in both Limavady and Omagh was £41.64. Derry and Strabane demonstrated the lowest spending of £32.29 and £29.61 respectively.

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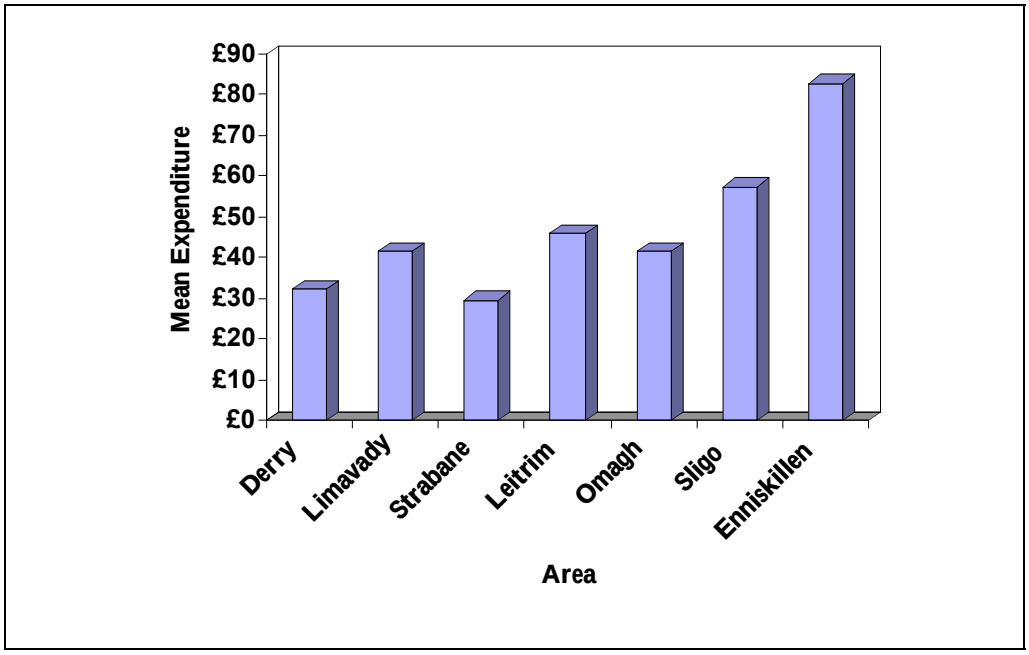
Figure 8. Mean weekly childcare expenditure by area



With regard to free childcare places, more than half (56.8%; n=63) of the 111 respondents using these places were in the Derry area. This figure represents 27.9% of the Derry cohort. A further 18 (16.2%) free places were in Limavady, taken up by 17% of that group. In Strabane, 14.4% (n=16) of the total free childcare was utilized by 22.2% of respondents in that area. The remaining free places were held in Omagh (9.4% of respondents; n=10) and Enniskillen (3.6%; n=4). No respondents reported receiving free childcare in either Sligo or Leitrim.

5.4.2 *Financial assistance*

Just 11.8% of all respondents (n=114) stated that they were in receipt of financial assistance for childcare. The amount received ranged from £1.50 to £150 per week giving an average of £43.60 per household per week. Of those who stated the source of financial assistance, 25.9% (n=27) reported to be receiving help from education and training providers. Others included Social Services (6.7%; n=7) and ex-partners (2.9%; n=3).

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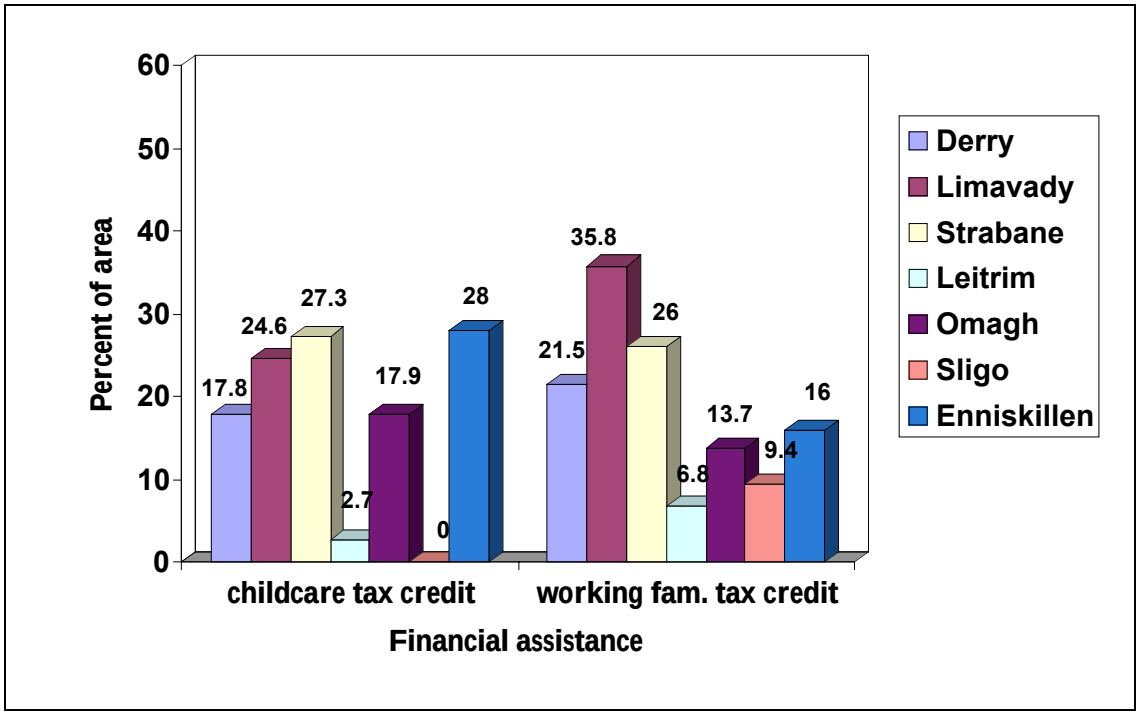
The questionnaire addressed receipt of Family and Childcare Tax Credits specifically. Results showed that levels of receipt of Tax Credits varied across geographical areas (fig. 9).

With regard to childcare tax credits, the greatest proportions of receivers were to be found in Enniskillen (28%; n=7) and Strabane (27.3%; n=21). Limavady had the highest proportion of respondents in receipt of working family tax credits (35.8%; n=48). Leitrim and Sligo had the lowest instances of financial aid receipt on both counts, most notably for working family tax credits with an additional childcare element, which were not granted to any respondents in the Sligo area and only 2 among the Leitrim cohort (2.7%).

Research has criticised the policy of state-funded childcare in the Republic of Ireland in highlighting its tendency to target disadvantaged or 'at-risk' families and provides no financial assistance to working parents in need of day care, crèche and nursery facilities (Riordan, 2001).

Figure 9. Receipt of family/child tax credits by area



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Respondents were asked to comment on whether receipt of these benefits had had an impact on the nature or amount of childcare used, or the number of hours worked. They were also invited to describe that impact.

With regards to the type of childcare used, the majority (90.6%; n=308) of the 340 individuals who replied stated that receipt of tax credits had had no influence on the type of childcare used. Of the 32 whose choice of childcare had been influenced, 31.25% (n=10) explained that they had to use only registered childcare providers. An equal proportion admitted that they *'couldn't afford it otherwise'.*

Among those who commented on whether these benefits affected the amount of childcare used, 94.6% (n=317) replied that they had not. For the 18 respondents who replied *'yes'*, the effect was not always a positive one. Although half noted that they could not afford childcare without this financial aid, 27.8% of this group (n=5) explained that they can *'only claim for hours worked'* and that payment *'only covers part-time hours'* (33.3%; n=6).

In respect of the number of hours worked, 7.3% (n=25) of the 341 respondents stated that receipt of benefits had had an effect in that things were *easier to manage financially'* (28%; n=7). However, 56% (n=14) commented that, as previously explained, benefits cover only part-time hours therefore they were unable to work full-time hours.

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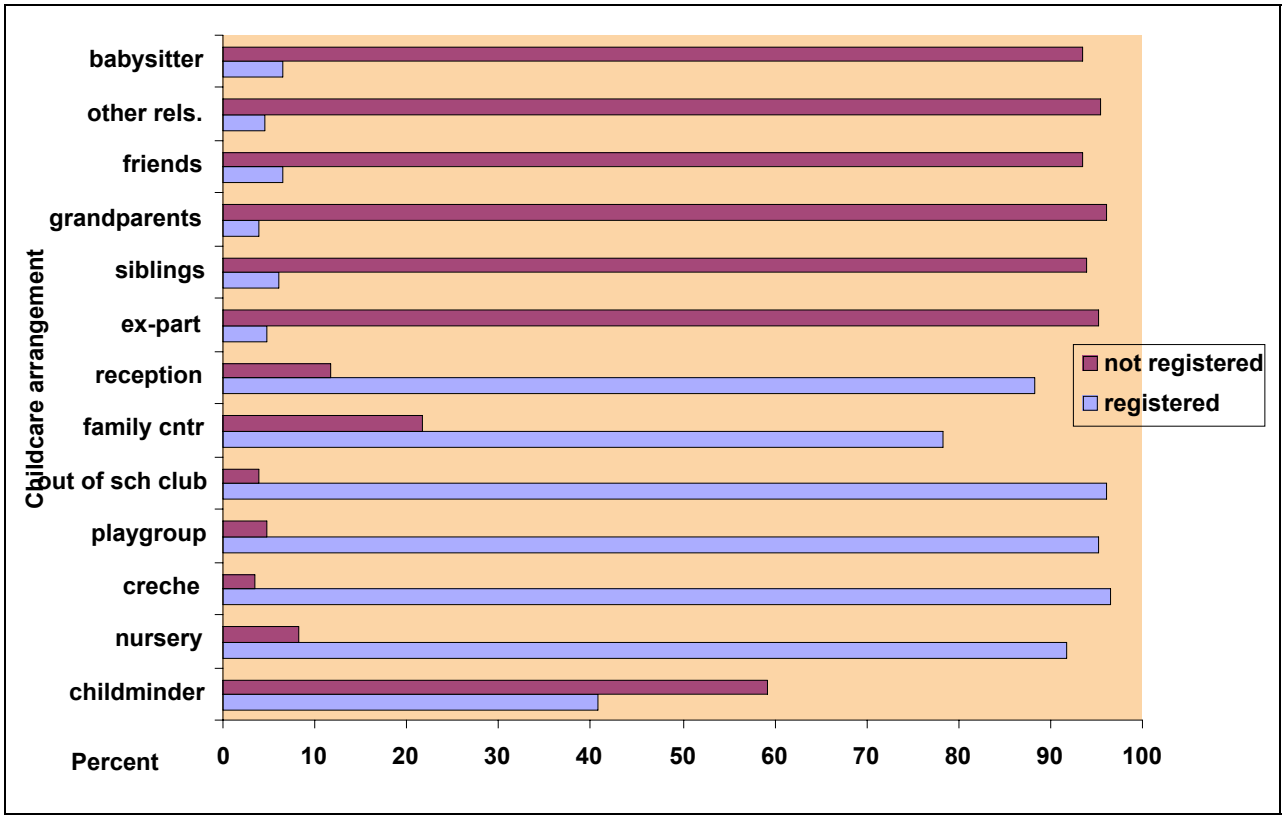
5.4.3 *Registered and non-registered childcare use*

As previously stated, 'properly trained staff' and 'vetted staff' ranked highly in terms of importance in choice of childcare. This pattern was validated when it emerged that an overwhelming majority of formal childcare users were using registered services (fig.10).

Figure 10. Registered and non-registered childcare use



Informal childcare arrangements such as using family and friends were more likely to be unregistered. 196 respondents commented on the registration status of the childminders in their employment. Among this group there was a 60%/40% split with the majority (59.2%; n=116) using unregistered minders. Further analysis showed that this practice is more prevalent in Strabane and the Southern regions.

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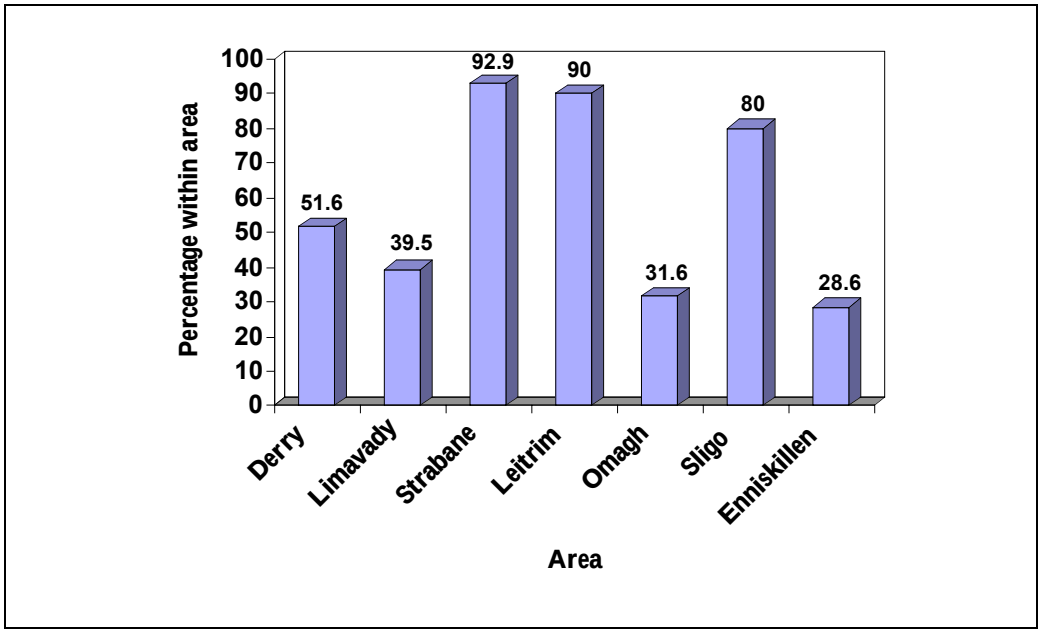
Findings illustrated in figure 11 indicate that the use of unregistered childminders was most frequent in the Strabane area (92.9%; n=26).

Figure 11. Frequency of unregistered childminding by area



Leitrim and Sligo, the two areas previously found to receive the least amount of financial assistance, showed the second and third highest rates of employing unregistered child minders (90% and 80% respectively).

A more detailed analysis of this data, with respect to the number of children in each area who were cared for by unregistered child minders, is presented in Table 6. These figures show paid child-minding arrangements in either the child's or the minder's home and do not include childcare by friends and family.

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Table 6. Number of children cared for by unregistered minders by area

	Area							
Age	**Derry**	**Limav.**	**Strabane**	**Leitrim**	**Omagh**	**Sligo**	**Ennisk.**	**Total**
0-1	9	4	5	4	1	7	-	30
2-3	10	7	16	9	6	10	1	59
4-5	18	4	9	9	1	10	1	52
6-7	16	5	7	6	2	3	2	41
8-9	14	4	6	5	-	1	1	31
10-11	7	1	6	4	1	2	-	21
12-13	7	6	4	1	-	-	-	18
14	4	1	1	2	-	-	-	8
% of all children in area	**11.4%**	**11.1%**	**25%**	**26%**	**5.2%**	**16.8%**	**8.1%**	

It was found that half (54.2% n=141) of those children who were cared for by unregistered child minders were 5 years old or under.

Cross tabulations were performed on the data in order to examine whether there was an association between registered status of child minders and service users' employment status (figure 12) and satisfaction rates.

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Figure 12. Registration status of child minders by respondents' employment

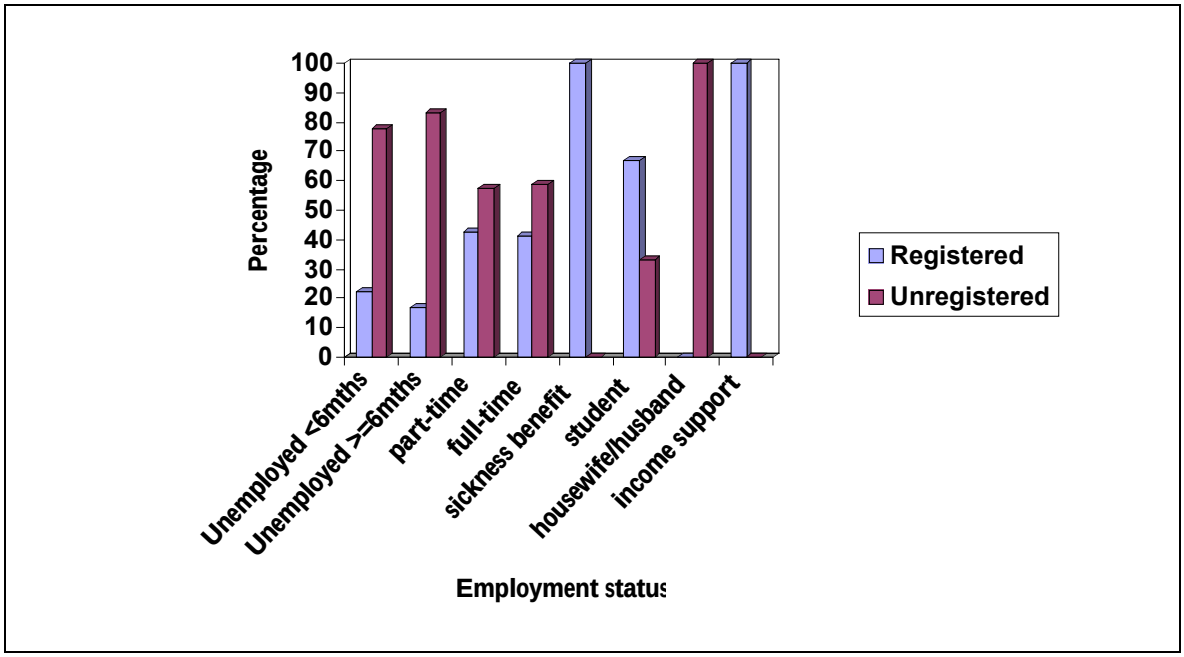

Figure 12 illustrates the comparable percentages of part-time and full-time workers who employed registered child minders (42.9%; n=27 part-time and 41.4%; n=36 of full-time workers). However, both groups appeared more likely to employ unregistered child minders either in their own home or that of the minder. 57% (n=36) of part time workers and 58.6% (n=51) of full time workers regularly availed of this arrangement.

For those in lower income categories, 100% of recipients of sickness benefit and income support were employing registered child minders whereas the majority of the unemployed and all housewives/husbands opted for unregistered minders. This outcome may be influenced by government policy by which childcare allowances as an element of working tax credits are payable only to registered childcare providers.

With regards to satisfaction rates, results itemised in table 7 show that registered child minders elicited a higher percentage of 'fully satisfied' responses. Just 1.4% of registered

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child minder employers stated that they were 'not satisfied'. In contrast more than 10% of non-registered child minder employers underlined that they were either 'not satisfied' (5.3%) or 'unsure' (5.3%).

Table 7. Satisfaction rates of respondents according to the registered status of their childminders

Level of satisfaction of respondent	Childminder's status	
	Registered	Unregistered
Fully satisfied	91.9%	80.9%
Satisfied	5.4%	8.5%
Not satisfied	1.4%	5.3%
Unsure	1.4%	5.3%
Total	100%	100%

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5.4.4 ***Summary points: Cost of childcare and use of registered and unregistered childcare***

1. The mean spending on childcare per household for quantitative respondents was £42.27 per week with just 11.8% of all respondents stating that they were in receipt of financial assistance for childcare.

2. The Limavady cohort of the quantitative study presented the highest proportion of respondents in receipt of working family tax credits. However, over 90% of tax credit recipients across the board stated that tax credits had had no impact on the nature or amount of childcare used, or the number of hours worked.

3. Results from the quantitative study indicated that informal childcare arrangements such as childminding were more likely to be unregistered. The use of unregistered care was found to be most prevalent in Strabane and the Southern regions. Leitrim and Sligo, the two areas previously found to receive the least amount of financial assistance, showed the second and third highest rates of employing unregistered child minders.

4. It was found that half of those children being cared for by unregistered child minders were 5 years old or younger.

5. Registered childcare elicited a very high rate of satisfaction among the quantitative survey respondents.

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5.5. Satisfaction with childcare arrangements and suggested improvements from the quantitative survey respondents

5.5.1 *Satisfaction with current service provision*

When asked to outline how satisfied they were with their specified formal and informal childcare arrangements, respondents indicated overwhelmingly that they were 'very satisfied'. This applied to all geographic areas and all forms of childcare (table 8). However, there was a minority in each group who indicated that they were 'not satisfied', 'not sure', or just 'satisfied' with the childcare arrangements they were employing. The clearest picture is given by describing rates of 'very satisfied' and 'not satisfied' respondents (tables 8 and 9)

Table 8. Frequency of 'very satisfied' responses by area

Arrangement	Valid percentage of area						
	Derry	Limav.	Strabane	Leitrim	Omagh	Sligo	Ennisk.
Childminder	92.2	97.4	83.9	73.3	92.0	81.5	54.5
Nursery	97.8	92.9	80.0	100	93.1	100	96
Crèche	97.5	100	68.4	84.4	94.7	98.1	66.7
Playgroup	95.8	94.7	93.3	90.0	100	93.3	0
Out of school	90.4	100	83.3	71.4	98.2	100	50
Family centre	83.3	100	62.5	100	60.0	100	0
Reception	100	100	91.7	100	85.7	n.a.	50
Ex-partner	81.3	83.3	75.0	100	66.7	50.0	0
Siblings	84.6	90.0	77.8	90.0	66.7	66.7	75
Grandparents	96.7	98.8	94.0	87.1	90.6	84.4	92
Friends	82.9	92.5	76.5	94.7	85.7	77.8	85.7
Relatives	91.7	95.3	96.4	78.3	83.3	87.5	88.9

The lowest recorded percentage of 'very satisfied' responses emerged from the Enniskillen cohort in respect of ex-partners (0%), playgroup (0%), family centre (0%) out of school clubs (50%) and reception classes (50%) and also from the Sligo cohort, where only 50% of the respondents were very satisfied with ex-partner arrangements. Again, the low number of

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respondents in Enniskillen may mean these results are not fully representative for that area. In contrast, findings indicate that the reception class was one of the childcare arrangements that elicited the greatest number of 100% 'very satisfied' responses (in Derry, Limavady and Leitrim). The other was the family centre (in Limavady, Leitrim and Sligo).

Table 9 shows the small proportion of respondents who reported dissatisfaction with their childcare service. Of all the arrangements mentioned, ex-partner care was regarded as unsatisfactory across the largest number of council areas. This opinion was given by large proportions of respondents in five of the seven areas, including 100% of the Enniskillen cohort, 50% of Sligo respondents, 25% of Strabane respondents and 16.7% in Limavady. There was also a lack of satisfaction with grandparental care across five areas but the proportions dissatisfied were very small (the largest being 6.3% in Sligo).

Table 9 Frequency of 'not satisfied' responses by area

Arrangement	Valid percent of area						
	Derry	Limav.	Strabane	Leitrim	Omagh	Sligo	Ennisk.
Childminder	2.6	0	9.7	0	4.0	0	18.2
Nursery	0	0	10.0	0	3.4	0	0
Crèche	1.7	0	21.1	3.0	0	0	0
Playgroup	4.2	0	0	0	0	0	50
Out of school	0	0	0	0	0	0	50
Family centre	0	0	12.5	0	0	0	-
Reception	0	0	8.3	0	0	n.a.	50
Ex0partner	9.4	16.7	25.0	0	0	50.0	100
Siblings	5.8	0	11.1	0	0	16.7	25
Grandparents	0.5	0	2.0	0	1.9	6.3	4
Friends	4.5	0	17.6	0	4.8	0	14.3
Relatives	1.2	0	3.6	0	2.8	0	11.1

There were some area-specific problems, especially in Strabane and Enniskillen. Significant proportions of respondents in Strabane were not satisfied with crèche provision or childcare by friends (21.1% and 17.6% respectively). Significant proportions of respondents in

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Enniskillen were not satisfied with playgroup (50%), out of school (50%) and reception provision (50%), care by siblings (25%) and childminding (18.2%). Again, the proviso about the lower number of respondents in this area should be borne in mind.

5.5.2 *Recommendations for improvements from the quantitative study*

In this section of the quantitative questionnaire, respondents were asked to consider a range of factors related to regularly used childcare facilities and to comment on whether they could be improved upon. Issues included staffing, environment, communication, cost, and quality and range of services provided. As figure 13 demonstrates, the majority of service users indicated that, in all areas, provision was *'already adequate'.* Small percentages however deemed that some factors required either slight improvement or *'should be improved a lot'.*

The most frequently identified issued for slight improvement were opening hours (17%; n=124), quality of equipment (15.9%; n=118) and buildings (14.7%; n=110) and cost (13.7%; n=100).

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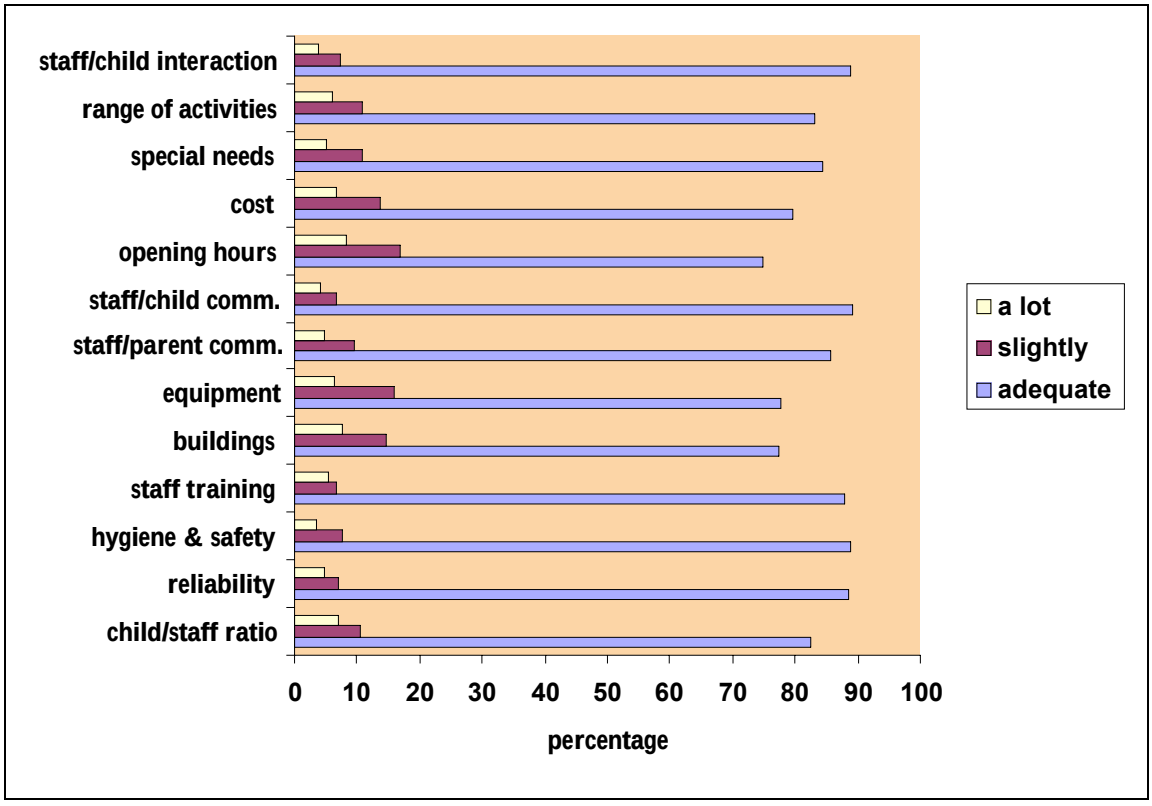
Figure 13. Need for improvements in childcare provision



Opening hours and the quality of buildings also rated highest in the 'should be improved a lot' category among those who answered these questions (17%; n= 60 and 14.7%; n=58 respectively). Additionally, equal percentages (7%; n=50) believed that cost and the staff – child ratio 'should be improved a lot'.

These averages mask greater need for improvements in provision in some localities. A cross-tabulation was performed on perceived need for improvement by area in order to provide a breakdown of expressed need in each area (Table 10). It emerged that significant proportions of respondents in the Leitrim and Omagh areas were concerned about the quality of buildings in which childcare facilities are housed. Also, 29% of the Strabane cohort stated that there should be major improvements to opening hours.

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Table 10. Issues considered to be in need of a lot of improvement by area

Issue	Valid percentage within area						
	Derry	Limav.	Strabane	Leitrim	Omagh	Sligo	Ennisk
Staff/child ratio	10.0	5.3	14.1	6.0	1.8	3.3	2.5
Reliability	9.4	1.7	4.8	1.6	0.9	2.2	2.4
Hygiene & Safety	7.0	1.7	3.7	1.5	0	2.2	0
Staff training	9.2	3.5	5.9	3.0	0.9	4.3	5.1
Buildings	8.6	1.8	15.1	23.9	5.5	1.1	0
Equipment	7.8	3.6	12.2	14.1	1.8	2.3	2.5
Staff/parent communication	9.2	2.7	6.1	1.5	0.9	2.4	0
Staff/child communication	8.1	1.8	6.3	0	0	1.0	2.5
Opening hours	8.0	4.6	29.0	6.1	3.6	5.7	5.3
Cost	10.4	5.5	13.3	1.6	1.8	5.8	0
Special needs	N/A	6.5	12.1	10.4	0.9	2.5	0
Range of activities	9.0	5.6	8.7	6.3	0.9	2.3	2.6
Staff/child interaction	7.1	3.7	2.7	0	0.9	3.4	2.6

Respondents were also asked to comment on the nature of problems associated with childcare issues that have had an impact on work or education commitments and to suggest improvements to relieve those problems.

With respect to the problems experienced, the examples quoted included:

'Had to give up work' / 'reduced number of hours worked'

'Have missed work due to lack of childcare'

'Employers are not understanding' / ' employer not flexible enough'

'Having to make other arrangements when the child is ill'

When asked what improvements could be in respect of childcare that would benefit respondents' local areas, the most frequently suggested improvements included:

'More childcare facilities' / 'More available places'

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'*More after school clubs'*

'*Cheaper childcare'*

'*Open longer hours' / 'more flexible hours'*

'*Twenty four hour drop-in centre'*

'*Facilities that cater for all ages'*

'*More funding for childcare'*

'*Childcare during the summer holidays'*

Area-specific suggestions highlighted the need for:

'*More welcoming' / 'more approachable services* (Derry)

'*More parks' /* '*More outdoor play areas'* (Derry and Sligo)

'*Bus service'* (Leitrim)

'*A drop-in centre'* (Strabane)

'*More mother and toddler groups'* (Leitrim)

'*More childcare in rural areas'* (Leitrim and Enniskillen)

'*Babysitter club' / 'evening arrangements'* (Leitrim and Enniskillen).

Opinions expressed in this study reflect recent research that found that lack of adequate childcare was one of the greatest barriers to education and employment (Kinnear, 2003) and that high rates of employee absenteeism in Northern Ireland are attributable to lack of adequate childcare (Kavanagh, 1999). Riordan (2001) noted that many lone parents, particularly in the WHSSB area, are over-reliant on the goodwill of friends and family as informal, and often unpaid, child minders. The same author also highlighted the acute shortage of childcare facilities during the summer months.

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5.5.3 ***Summary Points: Satisfaction with childcare arrangements and improvements suggested by the quantitative respondents***

1. Parents' satisfaction with formal childcare arrangements was high with regards to reception class and family centre settings.

2. Ex-partners elicited the greatest number of 'not *satisfied'* responses. This opinion was offered by respondents in five of the seven areas.

3. Quantitative survey respondents stated that opening hours and quality of buildings needed most improvement.

4. Survey respondents were also invited to highlight the problems associated with childcare. Responses centred on the problems experienced in relation to keeping up employment and the lack of understanding displayed by employers.

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5.6 Factors influencing choice of childcare

When choosing appropriate childcare, parents may consider a range of criteria such as location, cost, opening hours etc. Depending on availability, families in some areas may have a greater choice than others in relation to which facility or service to use. Some will have no other option than to use the limited services available despite the cost or convenience to the service user.

The questionnaire employed in this study suggested eighteen factors that may have an influence on the choice of childcare. These encompassed aspects such as location, suitability of staff, needs of the child and cost. Childcare users were asked to rate how important each factor was in terms of 'very important', 'quite important', 'not important', or 'not sure'. Respondents were also given the opportunity to suggest 'other' factors not already mentioned and, finally, to identify the one that was most important to them.

The issue of trust emerged as the factor that elicited the highest frequency of 'very important' responses (Table 11).

Table 11. 'Very important' factors in choice of childcare

	N	Frequency	Percent
Trust	906	876	96.7%
Reliability	829	879	92.3%
Vetted staff	835	705	84.4%
Good reputation	886	737	83.2%

In addition, almost equal proportions highlighted that having staff who 'show affection for the child' and 'properly trained staff' as 'very important' (80.1%, 79.6% respectively).

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The last finding was also mirrored in the focus group data, as participants commented on how well trained high quality staff provided a safe and secure foundation for well-run establishments. The availability of care that could be trusted, because of the integrity and skill of the staff involved, was seen to be fundamental. Commenting on the merits of local childcare provision in Strabane, for example, one participant said:

> "…*you know [the staff are] either in training or they have been trained. It's not like somewhere, where somebody's just set it up privately and you're not sure, you don't know anything about them and you're not sure of their background or what their staff have been doing…"*

In contrast to the 'very important' factors that tended to favour the personal and caring aspects of childcare, the most frequently cited 'not important' factors concentrated on more practical and financial matters (Table 12).

Table 12 ***'Not important' factors in*** **choice of childcare**

	N	Frequency	Percent
Religious needs catered	845	396	46.4%
Employer subsidies	717	272	37.9%
No other choice	734	268	36.5%
Can get tax credits	723	249	34.4%

28.9% (n=247) of respondents also felt that catering for 'cultural needs' was unimportant. A further 30.9% (n=227) stated that they were unsure whether the lack of options had any bearing on their choice of childcare and comparable proportions (22%) were unsure whether availability of employer subsidies or childcare tax credits was an influencing factor.

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The focus groups participants discussed education as a choice factor and it was generally felt that the educational element of long-session and after-school childcare provision was valuable. However, participants in one focus group felt the value of play and relaxation for children in after-school care and pre-school care should not be ignored. There was a danger, it was stated, that competitive pressures were leading some parents to select care for younger children where too much stress was laid on study. When commented on, the educational content of provision was said to be good and relevant guidelines on this from statutory agencies (such as the "seven areas of learning") were said to be implemented in a satisfactory manner.

The opportunity of after-school care that can provide for assistance with homework, particularly where parents are unable to assist, was valued by some participants. As one participant stated:

> *"See a lot of parents now find that the homework has changed so much so if they can get the homework done in the home group as well in the after school it helps a little bit. It takes the pressure off you then when you go home so you're not trying cook a dinner and do the homework at the same time […] The homework group seems to be under fierce demand all together!"*

The good opportunities offered to children in terms of developing their social skills were also commented upon. One participant said that childcare provision in her area offered the opportunity for children to …

> *"Mix with other children totally, learn to share and mix with kids of their age and that you know that they're there and they're safe and they feel stimulated."*

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This was felt to be particularly important given demographic change meaning that contemporary family sizes tend to be small. As one provider described it,

> *"If they bring their own toy in they won't share it, and it's just, you can see the difference. But that…that families are smaller and its, a lot of them have one child, two children in the family and they just won't share and they don't socialise as much."*

That care was provided in a happy environment was an aspect of childcare provision, which was also highly valued by focus group participants. Whilst clearly linked to other positive aspects of provision, this was singled out as an issue in itself and as a key criterion used by parents to select childcare. Indeed, it was likely to be used as an indicator for the overall quality of care provided, judging by the description given by one childcare provider of how parents select care for their children:

> *"…a few parents would ask or you know was the staff qualified…[but most] just look, they come in, they approach us and they look for happy children and if they see the children are happy then they leave that way in general, you know?"*

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5.6.1 ***Summary Points: Factors influencing choice of childcare***

1. With respect to factors that may have an influence on the choice of childcare, 'trust' emerged as the factor that elicited the highest frequency of *'very important'* responses.

2. This finding was also mirrored in the focus group data, as trust was perceived as an essential element in the choice of service provider.

3. Almost equal proportions of survey respondents rated having staff who *'show affection for the child'* and *'properly trained staff'* as *'very important'.*

4. Focus group data also highlighted that the educational element of childcare was an important factor influencing the choice of provider, as was the opportunity for children to socialise with peers together with care being offered in a happy environment.

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5.7. Special needs

11.8% (n=114) of respondents indicated that their children had some form of special needs. These included educational and emotional/behavioural such as autism, attention deficit disorders, speech and language difficulties and visual impairments. Special needs' provision was discussed in the groups. There was some availability of places for children with special needs in both the North and South. This provision was regarded as very good. Separate specialist provision was available in Leitrim for children with particular special needs, for example, and there was some availability of places for special needs children in "mainstream" facilities in the North and South. However, there were also significant gaps. For example in Limavady town, 'special room' provision within mainstream facilities was only available for 3-4 year olds.

There is a current debate about the value of "mainstreaming" special needs' provision in schools, an approach which has become the norm (Polly Curtis, *The Guardian* 29/6/05). These focus groups found benefit in both the availability of provision in mainstream facilities and separate provision, depending on the severity of the needs of the child.

In a recent research study carried out on behalf of the Donegal County Childcare Committee, there were strong views on special needs childcare. For example, parents from rural areas highlighted that specialist provision was non-existent and requested a range of services to be implemented locally. These included the provision of in-house assistants, more specialised training for current childcare workers and after school care through a specialised programme. (Gallo, 2004).

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Discussion of provision for children with special needs within the feedback seminar (October 2005), underlined that there was adequate special needs' provision for children in the North-West region of Ireland, most specifically crèche provision for pre-school children.

> *"It depends on the variety of their needs. Most places allocate one place and nearly all can cater for special needs. There is a full day crèche for special needs in the National school system that's very good. Most crèches & playgroups should be able to cater for some level of special care depending on the information you're given."*

On the other hand, providers from the Sligo and Leitrim regions highlighted that parents were not always forthcoming about the precise nature and level of special needs of their children. In some situations, the lack of communication may have adverse consequences for the management and delivery of effective and comprehensive childcare.

> *"You find parents might come to you and only tell you half the story and you take in the child & you find there are medical problems as well as everything else. It also depends on the layout of your building. Ours is a 2-storey building so from 3 months to 2_ if the child is physically disabled but after that they move upstairs and we couldn't accommodate them. The toilet is on the ground floor…. Not that we would ever say no, it just involves health safety... manually handling. There's also the staff and if they can handle it. It's not just the training. Some people are made for it some aren't. …."*

5.7.1 *Other specialised provision*

Aside from the provision in relation to children with special needs, specialised provision for the Travelling community was also discussed. The latter was felt to be particularly important by providers and users because it was argued that parents from the community felt it difficult

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to access "mainstream" provision because of location and also because of other concerns. As one participant said, special provision is needed because:

> *"the travelling community, they're very fearful and they are suspicious of the settled community […] they're very fearful of professionals."*

Furthermore, providers from the Sligo area stated that, whilst there is an attempt to integrate provision, the Travelling community tended to utilise local specialist provision which is fully regulated and where staff are fully trained.

> *"They have their own facilities. We have taken children from the travelling community because as far as we're concerned once they come in through the door they're children but there is a lot of prejudice. They mostly have their own crèche that is fully regulated and staff are fully trained and it's funded."*

Conversely, concern was expressed in one of the groups that there was stigma attached to using childcare that was labelled specifically for a certain group. A provider of care for the Travelling community felt the way forward was integrated provision, which was nonetheless designed to ensure the needs of the Travelling community were met. Indeed, the project in question has places open to children of all backgrounds to try to foster integration, although, they find that *"the settled community isn't using them at all."*

However, findings from the Donegal County Childcare report emphasised that a number of travellers felt that their children were not welcome in the mainstream facilities and there was a call for the employment of a traveller worker within mainstream sites to offset the feelings of marginalisation.

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> *"At other crèches or childcare facilities, parents did not feel they or their children were welcome. A traveller worker in childcare facilitates where there are likely to be traveller families but not enough to sustain a separate traveller provision is an alternative."* (Gallo, 2004 p.44)

In comparison, recent research undertaken by the Women and Equality Unit (2004) examined the attitudes of white and ethnic minority women in Great Britain, in relation to childcare and employment. Results from the study highlighted that there was a need for culturally sensitive childcare services for specific ethnic groupings and that this should include employing staff from various ethnic communities, together with encouraging minority ethnic mothers to provide childminding services (Hall, K et al 2004).

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5.7.2 *Summary points: Special needs*

1. There was some availability of places for children with special needs in both the North and South. This provision was regarded as very good.

2. Participants within the focus group study highlighted the need for a wider range of specialised services for children with special needs. However, there was also concern that specialised provision should be integrated within mainstream childcare provision centres where possible.

3. Concomitantly, concern was expressed in one of the groups that there was stigma attached to using childcare that was labelled specifically for a certain group.

4. A provider of care for the Travelling Community felt the way forward was integrated provision, which was nonetheless designed to ensure the needs of the Travelling community were met.

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5.8 Gender issues

5.8.1 *Gender issues discussed in the focus groups*

Gender inequality in relation to childcare was an issue emphasised in our focus groups. It was felt that social expectations in relation to gender roles meant that women were expected to take on the bulk of childcare and that this was a problem which needed to be explored and challenged. One participant argued:

> *"[…] it's an area that I think we need to be more and more […] looking at. Are men not taking enough responsibility? […] what about responsible fatherhood? All those sort of questions we need to be asking objectively and I suppose we have a culture that has relied on […] a traditional mother or Irish son who's seen as lazy and all that. But we need to sort of be asking ourselves what, is there something more?"*

Other participants testified that fathers seemed to be taking little responsibility in the area of organising for childcare outside the home:

> *"-It's probably still the mother who has to make the phone calls and book the baby sitters and organise the childcare.*
> *-Oh yeah….never […] have I ever had a father inquire [about child care provision here]."*

Furthermore, some participants attributed the "neglect" of the childcare sector generally to this association of women with childcare, within a culture which undervalues work regarded as feminine. One speaker noted that not only were women expected to take on the main domestic childcare responsibilities but that women also dominated employment in the

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childcare sector. She pointed out that much of this employment is part-time and low-paid, a general characteristic of female-dominated employment. This association of childcare with "women's work" accounted for its undervaluation and therefore for the lack of attention paid to improving childcare at all levels, from policy-makers to the grassroots.

> *"Children are supposed to be our most precious resource […] Until men actually get it that it's <u>their</u> youngsters that are being cared for, whether it's by other family members or by registered child minders in the community sector or private sector […] that's why it's low paid, that's why provision is very scarce, that's why it's very poor access, because women are left with the burden"*

These results were corroborated from feedback received during the dissemination seminar, which took place in October 2005 at Magee campus. Two participants from the Sligo region highlighted that, in general, it was the mother who made the initial contact in relation to arranging childcare provision.

> *"We have had a few fathers who made the initial contact but it would still usually be the mother …. We have had, I think, about 5 of 58 children who have come through the father making a phone call or calling in …"*

However, other comments underlined that in the most recent term, it was the father who had been responsible for leaving and collecting the child from day-care.

> *"We would see a good deal of fathers who would be leaving them in and picking them up. That would only be in this current year. Last year it would have been the other way around but this term … very high percentage of fathers."*

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Findings from the dissemination seminar held at Magee in October 2005, highlighted that there would be an enthusiastic response to greater male participation in the childcare workforce and one commentator emphasised that men would be more than welcome on the staff team.

> *"We would love to have a man on our staff. We once had a cv in from a man and we thought it was brilliant. It turned out he was going back to college and didn't come for interview. If he came back to town tomorrow there would be a job for him. It's very hard to get men even to train. Of course we'll get young fellows doing work experience."*

There were suggestions about the way the issue could be addressed. More research needed to be done and ways should be found to facilitate, encourage and support fuller male participation in childcare.

> *"[…] fathers to me is sort of a key issue now, […] there should be more responsibility and onus put on fathers I think to […] play their bit as it were. I think that's, that's one of the things I would want to be highlighting. Because you know if, that immediately can take away a lot of the sort of pressure of money and finance you know because they're you know it just hasn't been focused on enough. I mean traditionally we have set women as the main care givers in the home and so on […]"*

It was suggested that this should include greater male participation in employment in childcare outside the home, as in schemes in the US.

> *"[…] maybe a partner or some significant other who could play a role and […] it's interesting to see whenever you look at centres in America […] where they have sort of actively promoted male*

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involvement within their centres and they ensured that they have both male and female staff you know working with young children families. Whereas here […] it's all female dominated […]"

Whilst this may be a problem of particular significance in this region, as the respondent suggested above, it is also clear that this accords with findings from other research. For example, findings from the 2004 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (NILTS) suggest that the majority (63%) agree that society expects fathers to be less involved than mothers in the upbringing of their children. The ambivalence surrounding the idea that childminding is an appropriate career for men in Northern Ireland is also indicative. NILTS findings also show that only 48% of respondents thought that childminding was an appropriate career for both women and men and that 51% felt that it was only appropriate for women (www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2004/Mens_Life_and_Times).

As far as the actual division of labour in terms of time caring for children within the household goes, UK National Statistics shows that the female partner tends to spend the most time on childcare within the home. Despite the rise in employment of women in the workforce, co-habiting or married women spend on average 45 minutes per day on care of own children and play as compared to 20 minutes on the part of male partners (this is besides the greater time women spend on allied tasks such as cooking, cleaning and washing, www.statistics.gov.uk/STATBASE). The task of spending time arranging for care outside the home can be regarded as an extension of this female care-giving role.

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5.8.2 *Summary points: Gender issues*

1. Focus group participants highlighted the need for greater recognition of the gender inequalities in childcare provision.

2. Cultural and structural factors reinforce the view that mothers are traditionally involved in the provision of formal and informal childcare, whereas fathers traditionally absolve themselves from making the arrangements for any form of childcare outside of the home.

3. It was suggested that this could be remedied through exploring new ways of encouraging greater male participation in choice of childcare in respect of their families and also encouraging men to become more involved in formal service provision.

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5.9. Issues for service providers

Service providers were afforded the opportunity to highlight a number of concerns and issues which were prevalent from their perspective. These included funding, competition and the bureaucracy involved in the running of childcare establishments as well as general disappointment at the lack of progress in the sector. Providers at the focus groups described and explained a number of issues they found to be problematic. The biggest of these was the lack of permanent funding for non-profit making ventures.

5.9.1 *Funding*

Problems with the short-term nature of core funding of community childcare initiatives exercised participants greatly. Time was wasted and stress created by a constant round of funding applications, short time frames for funding once it was achieved and the uncertainty of the future of funding. Providers in Derry had experienced this:

> *"My funding actually is up in March and you're starting all over again. It's a whole rollover of applying again and giving […] apply at certain times for certain funding and ah, you know, tender hooks continually and-*

> *"One stage last year we were closing down on the Friday and we got funding on the Wednesday [….] I've been there twenty years and I was nearly in tears myself. My husband was saying to me - when I looked for another job, holding, holding on, hoping this would work out – "Something's going to turn up" and it did, three days before it closed down [….When I] had to ring around and tell them all then [that it was closed] but it was terrible. And coming up now again to March I'm thinking the same thing [will happen] again […]"*

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I can't understand why every year we're fighting for this funding you know."

This view was also substantiated in the data obtained from the feedback seminar (October 2005). Indeed, one commentator highlighted that, in her community group, monetary problems were precipitating a crisis situation:

"It is very hard to meet the wages bill because every penny you get, when you don't get funding, gets put straight back into the building. Currently we get paid less than the staff & we're working more hours than them. "

"We got into serious trouble when we thought we would be closing on the Friday. We were on the verge of selling. We thought this is it we can't keep going. It's a hand to mouth existence. People coming in with their kids say you must be coining it in. They've no idea."

The prevailing uncertainty leads to stress for parents also and precludes long-term investment in facilities and in staff development. Very well trained staff were also being tempted to leave their work in the community sector because of such uncertainties. As one participant explained:

"You're in a job that mightn't be there in three years time and you know you have to get the time to think of yourself. Like I done the early years degrees two years ago now and I am getting to the point now where I think well maybe I should go in to the teaching. Maybe I should go and do my PGCE and go to school and have no hassle about money, about fund-raising, about paper work, about getting the parents in. I just go in the morning, do my job and come home and me cheque is in the bank. You know? It is the life like, compared to sitting

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at home, paper work [thinking] what's going to happen, what's going to happen?"

The problem of low pay in the sector was also leading to problems with recruitment as well as with morale.

In the North, competition between newer nursery care being provided in primary schools and the established community sector meant there was less money available to the latter as children were withdrawn from the community sector. Yet, it was argued, in Derry, Limavady and Omagh, there was a trade-off between school-based provision and quality as the community sector provided better carer to child ratios and a transitional space between home and school. It was also stated that there was a trade off between school-based provision and the social support for parents that community-based provision was able to offer (as noted above). For example, one participant explained:

"[…] because these fancy nursery schools, they've only two staff to twenty six children. Em, they are telling the parents that you know if you don't come to nursery here you won't have even one place, em and you've pulled out that great support that was in each of the community centres and you know, they could, you could add on a parent-toddler group as an adoption, you could add on, but now there's no funding to do that."

Another argued:

"Well it seems that the local community centres and that and the childcare basically grew within the community and grew out of need within that community and now that's been basically hi-jacked and its not helping if the funding is all being directed."

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However, there was no consensus on this point. Some participants talked of the improvements in terms of coordination and reduced duplication in recent years.

> *"[…] certainly in terms of the you know the communication and the links between different providers both you know […] within the western area [of Northern Ireland] I think there's been, its greater come and go now and you know its clear about what each other is providing and what each other is about and so on and less maybe duplication […]"*

One provider of childcare also stressed that better grant aid should be available to provide equipment for children with special needs, especially in situations where mainstream childcare providers are taking on children with special needs. Others noted that assistance was required to help staff avail of basic training. It was particularly difficult for providers in the voluntary sector to release staff for training as funding for cover was required but problems were by no means confined to this sector. One focus group participant explained her circumstance:

> *"[Funding is needed for] staff training and training on days that's not working days. Like I mean there's new training coming on board [...] Monday, Wednesday I think and on a Friday. It's mornings but eighty per cent of your staff should do it to qualify, right? So we worked it out down at the crèche. All of our part-timers would have to run the crèche, if we left the building which isn't enough of staff to run the crèche and you wouldn't be able to bring the children with you […]"*

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Finally, it was also noted that the lack of financial resources meant that many providers could not supply sufficient flexibility as required by parents (such as those of shift workers described above).

> *"I had a drop in service now but it just doesn't work because you, we go so much on ratios right? And if you've a drop in service you don't know how, you could end up one day with ten children right? But you might only have two staff on. Or you could have, day you're standing with five staff, you've only two kids. If you have a drop in service it's very bad to get the balance right*."

5.9.2 *Recruitment and other problems*

In some areas there was difficulty in recruiting workers, undoubtedly related to the issues of uncertainty and low pay discussed above. This could influence the availability of childcare. According to focus group participants, the problem was particularly acute in terms of recruitment of baby-care workers in Sligo.

> *"…the baby room is the hardest to get workers for. It is one of the hardest areas to get people to work in. We would go through at least four baby workers a year when we started off having babies…."*

In some areas, it was not the quantity of workers that were in short supply *per* se but good quality staff. In the North, strong concerns were expressed about a process whereby, in order to fill training quotas, as well as in response to pressures to keep post-16s in education, young women who did not express an ambition to work in childcare were nonetheless channelled into vocational training in the subject. Young women with qualifications but little practical experience, aptitude, commitment or maturity formed the bulk of job applicants. This inevitably created problems for providers at interview stage and sometimes beyond.

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Providers were also expected to provide placements for students. These sometimes required such close supervision that resources were stretched. Service provider participants related these problems to low pay and the undervaluing of the childcare sector generally.

Other problems discussed by some providers included an unreasonable burden of paperwork (in the North) and the lack of courtesy for staff on the part of some parents.

Finally, frustration was expressed at the general lack of progress in the sector despite apparent policy shifts and consultation exercises. In a focus group in the North, participants said that apparent changes in government policy toward childcare had significantly raised expectations amongst parents yet things had hardly improved. As one provider stated:

> *"I've been involved in the early years' sector for 8 years now…I go to so many meetings and strategies and all they end up doing is talking shop and there's never anything real or concrete that ever comes out of them."*

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5.9.3 *Summary points: Issues for service providers*

1. Service providers who participated in the focus groups highlighted two major issues, which were having a major impact on the provision of an efficient, child-centred and well- managed service.

2. Firstly, lack of funding and the interminable cycle of funding applications hampered long-term planning and had a negative impact on staff morale.

3. Secondly, low pay and job insecurity as described above have hindered recruitment of staff in some areas, which, subsequently could result in the non-availability or reduction in childcare places.

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5.10 The wider picture for parents

The focus group discussions also indicated that the issue of child care needed to be viewed in the context of wider family life and wider society in order to understand how child care provision can and does contribute to "healthy communities" and to positive social change. The impacts of the lack of childcare availability were clearly felt in many areas of parents' lives. Areas discussed included mental and emotional health, work, education and the ability to carry out important everyday activities.

5.10.1 *The implications for parents' mental and emotional health*

The negative implications of inadequate access to good quality, affordable childcare for women's mental health and emotional well being were highlighted in previous research on which this present research builds (McColgan et al 2004). In the current study, participants described the implications of poor access to childcare for the mental health of parents of *both* sexes.

Parents used some forms of childcare on a regular basis as much as a form of respite as for the direct benefits for children of the activities offered. As one participant said:

> *"We get an awful lot for play school and an awful lot for the toddler group as well. I think it's just the fact that parents kind of having some time to themselves."*

Another participant made reference to the respite value of childcare, particularly for more isolated non-employed parents, underlining the connection with parental mental health, both for men and women. In her childcare project, workers insist that parents avail of the

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opportunity to beat isolation from other adults by socialising whilst the children are being cared for.

> *"You know at the end of the day sometimes they need to put the kids into care just for their own sanity. They do! I'm being honest. I mean we have the rule that if you, if your child starts with us, the first year you leave the child, you don't come home and do housework, you meet a friend and either you go and get a facial or beauty treatment or shopping or something but you don't go away on your own and you don't go home to do housework because you're only in bits and you don't function right anyway. So if you've a friend meeting you they take your mind off it for the couple of hours that the child is with us and then you bring them in a longer time each day, you know and it gets the parents around it. But it doesn't necessarily have to be the mammy, it could be the daddy that drops them in."*

5.10.2 *The implications for the take-up of special support by parents*

Participants also noted that particular opportunities were offered for parents with childcare needs in particular circumstances. For example, childcare provided by a lone parents' support group offered:

> *"great support to lone parents […] we do have an advice worker there as well and the IT training and we have the crèche facilities."*

Here, a broad package offered parents assistance beyond that of respite.

5.10.3 *The implications for work and education*

The broader constraints imposed by a lack of childcare on the ability of parents to participate in work and education were stressed. The fact that, given changed economic conditions, many parents must work and can no longer rely on the extended family to provide care was remarked on. As one participant commented:

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"The structure of the family's really changed … so much pressure on people now for the two partners to go and work."

Another stated that, in the past the children *"probably would have been at home all day and you would have been going to granny's house, auntie's house and all that there … .but that's not there anymore."*

It was also stated;

"You know …there is parents out there who need to work, you know? Unfortunately I'd say they would be the ones who want to stay at home but they can't afford to stay at home. So they have to get out and work [so parents need to be able to access childcare where] there is an environment that's safe […] that is an environment where they can be stimulated and entertained all day, you know?"

Accessible, affordable and good quality childcare, then, can offer opportunities for parents to participate in work and education.

5.10.4 *The implications for carrying out daily necessities*

Short-term childcare was also necessary to enable parents to undertake day-to-day necessities such as attending a dentist's appointment. One participant described how she had sometimes cancelled important doctors' appointments because childcare was not available to enable her to attend.

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5.10.5 ***Summary points: The wider implications for parents***

1. The issue of child care needs to be viewed in the context of wider family life and wider society in order to understand how childcare provision can and does contribute to "healthy communities" and to positive social change.

2. The availability of care can contribute to mental and emotional health, to the ability of parents to take up work, educational and other opportunities.

3. Child care is also necessary in order for parents to undertake ordinary but vital activities such as attending medical appointments.

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CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this final chapter the key themes emerging from the combined qualitative and quantitative studies and the talk shops are summarized to identify a strategic focus for a cross border childcare policy, which will address the issues raised, by parents and providers. The following series of questions highlight the central aspects emerging from the preceding chapters and combine the experiences articulated by parents who utilize childcare services with the service providers. Where appropriate, reference is made to specific areas to emphasize the impact of research findings.

6.1 What are the constraints and opportunities presented by childcare?

Evidence suggests that the benefits of affordable, accessible, good quality childcare are experienced by both parents and children. Positive aspects for parents include the opportunity to enable access to work and education, to avail of respite and social support and, on occasions, to allow them to attend medical or dental appointments. In the emphasis placed on the provision of a range of adequate services, parents were reinforcing the necessity of childcare to their social and health wellbeing and economic independence. This finding echoes previous research on the impact of childcare on women's emotional health and wellbeing (McColgan et al 2003). It also illustrates the interconnectedness between family life and social inclusion as the impact is felt in different areas of parent's lives, ultimately contributing to participation in the workforce and family support. Gallo's research in Donegal (2005) endorses the range of benefits, which include flexibility of full time, part time or seasonal working, networking and socializing, and time for self. Participants in the study indicated that lack of childcare impacted negatively on both parents mental health,

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reinforced a sense of isolation for non-employed parents and generally acted as a barrier to employment and education.

Overall, benefits for children as identified from a parental perspective included opportunities to develop social skills, to enable younger children to prepare for education as well as offering educational opportunities through preschool, after school services and nursery care.

6.2 What is the range of childcare provision used by parents?

In the study formal and informal sources of childcare were distinguished. Options provided in the formal childcare sector included crèche, playgroup, nursery, child minder, out of school's group, reception class linked to primary school and family centre. The crèche emerged as the most frequently used formal facility in most areas especially in Sligo. Despite the range of services offered parents lacked information about their availability, they were uncertain about the quality and they were often unaware of how to access this formal sector. They also reported that places were not available or choice was limited. Previous studies have emphasized the relationship between access to quality childcare as a factor in the promotion of resilience and combating stress (Hermann, 1997). In the focus groups participants articulated their distress and frustration in locating suitable childcare.

Informal provision was offered through family, friends, grandparents, siblings, baby sitters and ex partners though high rates of unregistered child minding emerged as key finding in Strabane and Leitrim. Predominant usage of childcare occurred during working hours and after school, five days a week with full time and part-time employees most likely to use any form of child care. Research commissioned by the Sligo and Leitrim childcare committees highlights the development in Out of School provision since 1996 and associated differential

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models of delivery ranging from homework clubs to an avowed approach to combating social disadvantage (O'Connor, 2005). In the study of the cross border areas low rates of usage were reported for childcare provided late at night, school holidays and before school.

6.3 What is the range of unmet need for childcare?

Findings reveal that approximately one third of parents (n=326) had encountered unmet need in the previous year with 17.5 % (n=57) experiencing difficulty with childcare on a weekly basis. This relates primarily to provision for working hours, covering overtime, weekend shifts and starting work before the children attend school. In some circumstances, childcare was not available because the childcare provider was sick or the child was unwell. The figure of unmet need is higher than the finding of 24% emerging from Woodland et al (2002) study of need in England. Whilst it is not surprising that gaps exist for working parents, this finding reflects a shortfall in particular types of provision for certain ages of children and suggests that children with special educational or cultural needs experience the greatest lack of provision.

Table 13 Range of Unmet Childcare Need in Donegal

Area	Unmet Childcare Need
South Donegal	• Extended playgroup services. • Flexible childcare to suit parents' non-traditional work schedules. • More after schools groups. • School holiday provision.
South West Donegal	• Provision for stay-at-home parents to network. • Enhance Irish language provision.
Letterkenny	• Flexible drop-on care within family centre. • Childcare during holidays for school age children.
East Donegal	• Expand Lifestart. • Offer themed summer camps.
North Donegal	• Access to early education through playgroup or Mothers and Toddlers.
Inishowen	• Support for parents who want to start up own provision. • Increased approaches similar to Highscope.
Gaeltacht	• Bilingual childcare provision.
Aranmore & Tory Island	• Combined provision for children, young people. • Training and education for parents about child development similar to Lifestart scheme.

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6.4 How satisfied are parents with childcare provision?

The overall picture which emerges from the study indicates high levels of satisfaction with formal childcare provision across all geographic areas. Crèche facilities appear to be the most frequently used formal arrangement with the highest level of satisfaction. Reception classes also elicited very satisfied responses in Derry, Limavady and Leitrim. Similar levels of satisfaction were expressed about playgroups and out of school groups in Enniskillen. However findings from the focus group study and the talk shop suggest that information about formal childcare provision is not widely available or easily accessible for service users. In some circumstances, where there was a waiting list for formal services this reinforced a sense of dissatisfaction.

In terms of informal childcare arrangements, the highest level of satisfaction related to care provided by grandparents with ex partner care (in Derry, Limavady, Strabane, Enniskillen and Sligo) identified as least satisfactory. To a lesser extent, childcare provided by siblings and friends were also cited as arrangements which were least satisfactory in Strabane, Enniskillen and Sligo.

Although the literature purports that availability affects choice, further analysis reveals that such factors as trust, reliability, vetted and trained staff, good reputation and affection shown to children are regarded as important. Similar findings have been found in a consultation study undertaken by Duigan (2005). In her study she sought to establish base line perceptions about quality standards for early childhood care and education from birth to six years. Following a series of seminars with 387 participants she concluded that the indicators of quality ranged from environmental factors such as the provision of a safe, warm space for

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children with appropriate levels of adult-child ratios to a child centered approach where individuality was nurtured and staff was suitably qualified.

In the context of informal childcare, family members and friends are not likely to be registered so issues about quality of provision are less well defined. Unregistered child minders were most likely to be used in Strabane, Sligo and Leitrim. The findings indicate that the highest proportion of under 5's are cared for by unregistered child minders in these areas (54% n = 141). Apart from the geographic variation, it must be noted that these locations are identified areas of social and economic deprivation where the shortage of quality, regulated and affordable childcare impacts on very young children.

6.5 What is the expenditure involved in childcare?

Although the mean cost of childcare per household was £42.27, the range reflected considerable variation. Service users incurred highest mean weekly expenditure in Enniskillen due to private day care provision. Mean spending in Limavady and Omagh was £41.64, in Sligo the average was £57.52, and in Derry and Strabane the weekly costs were £32.29 and £29.61 respectively. These findings have to be set against the differential policies operating in the two jurisdictions. Family and Child care tax credits are available in Northern Ireland but in contrast, in Southern Ireland the lack of financial help for working parents alongside the absence of a policy of childcare subsidization, reinforces barriers to employment for lone parents and contributes to the emergence of a poverty trap (Riordan, 2001; Combat Poverty Agency, 2005). The authors criticize the EOCP strategy to increase childcare provision on the basis that the strategy is unable to provide accessible childcare to families on low incomes particularly in rural areas.

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6.6 What aspects of provision need to be improved?

The majority of service users across all areas felt that existing provision was adequate though some aspects needed to be improved slightly. Four key aspects requiring attention included opening hours, quality of equipment, buildings and cost of child care. Service users in Leitrim and Omagh were most concerned about childcare facilities whereas in Derry, Strabane and Sligo greater flexibility in opening hours was identified. Special needs provision needed to be addressed in Limavady. In addition, area specific suggestions included more welcoming/ more approachable services (Derry), more parks and outdoor play areas (Derry and Sligo), improved bus service, more mother and toddler groups (Leitrim), more childcare in rural areas (Leitrim and Enniskillen) and a drop in centre (Strabane).

6.7 What are the concerns for child care providers?

Although there was a diverse range of providers representing statutory, voluntary and private sectors, it was clear that the majority were most concerned about funding for their services. They outlined the effects of low pay, low status, job insecurity and short term funding on their ability to recruit and retain suitable staff. In addition the ongoing cycle of funding applications hampered long term planning and had a negative impact on staff morale. There was a general consensus that there was limited recognition for the complexity of the role involved in providing quality child care and less awareness from service users about the costs involved such as overheads for salaries, overheads and updating equipment. They also emphasized the effects of competition especially with free school places available through nursery schools. Moreover, the lack of service co-ordination in local areas often meant that providers could not sustain provision or facilities where open competition existed. This sense of competition was a theme reflected in the talk shop. Demographic factors have led to the reduction of populations under 18 years with little concomitant strategic planning about the

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need for services in local areas. Several providers recounted examples of facilities that had closed down because of low numbers and noted that the lack of regulation about overall provision in local areas exacerbated an already difficult situation of sustainability. Providers expressed concerns about the motivation and expectations of staff about the nature of the job and they felt that they were under pressure to collaborate with the training institutions in meeting targets set for child care awards despite their reservations about the competence of the individual worker. Whilst they recognized that training was a crucial element in maintaining and enhancing service quality, the providers indicated that it was difficult to sustain the commitment in the face of staff shortages.

6.8 Are services adequate to meet the needs of children with special needs or children who may experience social exclusion?

The findings suggest contradictory evidence about the extent to which there is adequate service provision for children with special needs and for children from the travelling community. On the one hand there is limited service provision across both jurisdictions through mainstream and specialist facilities but availability is dependant upon the severity of the Childs' needs. Findings reveal that children experience a range of needs from conditions such as autism/ autistic spectrum, Downs syndrome, visual impairment, social/ emotional, educational, speech and language difficulties. Where service provision exists it is rated highly. Ross Watt (2005) advocates that successful provision is related to understanding inclusion from a child's perspective, developing flexible approaches and ensuring active participation by parents. Thus quality is determined as much by process of engagement and partnership as availability. Gray (2005) highlights the segregation which occurs in early year's settings through lack of inclusion and staff awareness about visual impairment. In Donegal, for example Gallo (2004) found that service provision was non-existent in rural

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areas though parents would have welcomed local initiatives including specialized after school care provided by trained care workers or in-house domiciliary care.

The picture for Travellers is equally diffuse and appears to reflect underlying tensions about social inclusion. Specialist provision was available in several areas and efforts to foster integration with the settled community had met with little success. Providers articulated the importance of developing an integrated service but equally recognized the difficulties associated faced in addressing marginalization of Travelers from mainstream provision. In light of the National Strategy introduced in 2002, progress to Traveler proof their interests in all regional and national initiatives seems to fall short of its intended outcome. In the Donegal Childcare report families felt excluded from crèche and playgroup facilities but remedying this sense of marginalization would involve meeting needs through mainstream provision and enhancing culturally sensitive practice through training and employing specialist traveler childcare staff.

Developing a strategy to address these issues needs to be underpinned with a commitment to regarding inclusion as a core principle for service provision though Jennings (2005) argues that the process of inclusion is more about attitudes than systems of provision and as such is reflected in the way in which services are delivered and the values and beliefs of individual workers. Any agenda for change needs to promote such understanding. Equally, the issues can be conceptualized within a Human Rights framework as access to childcare impacts on family life, parental choice and more importantly children's rights to play and development.

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6.9 What are the issues relating to inequalities and gender?

The overarching theme which emerges from the findings reinforces the gender inequality of formal and informal childcare. This was reflected in the low rates of men in community childcare projects, the reservations expressed by ex partner care and the overwhelming views expressed by participants that men tended to take less responsibility in the home and in organizing care outside the home. Providers reflected that very few men were employed in childcare reinforcing the gendered bias of service provision. Furthermore research studies revealed that employment in childcare was often regarded as an inappropriate choice. This lower expectation of male involvement in childcare can be linked to wider social construction of childcare as a female domain. Ultimately gendered social policy perspectives on childcare provision promote inequalities. These findings are both predictable and disconcerting as they emphasize the pervasive nature of gender relations. Developing strategic plans to challenge the underlying assumptions about the childcare workforce and service provision lies at the core of addressing these inequalities.

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Recommendations

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

1. Children and parents should be at the centre of planning for childcare services.
2. 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).
3. A strong childcare infrastructure should support parents and families and has the potential to promote child health, well-being and development.
4. Children should have a right to a quality, funded pre-school service.
5. Childcare services should have state investment in order to be affordable and sustainable.
6. The childcare sector needs should have highly skilled staff with access to appropriate training, support, pay and conditions.

The recommendations in relation to 9 key issues arising from our research are given in the table below.

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Issue	Recommendation
1. Need for a childcare strategy	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	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	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.

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Issue	Recommendation
4. Increasing and improving provision	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	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.

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Issue	Recommendation
6. Tackling social exclusion	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.
7. Tackling gender inequality	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	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.

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Issue	Recommendation
9. Area-based Concerns	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: 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, subsidized by the State.

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