

**Choosing
Childcare in
Northern Ireland
Experiences of
Local Parents**

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Foreword

As a discussion topic and an area for debate, childcare is frequently mentioned in the media and political realm at a much higher frequency now than when Employers For Childcare began in 1998.

It is good news that childcare has reached the political agenda in Northern Ireland, although notably many years after our neighbours in the rest of the UK. It is also good to see that to some extent political will has encouraged developments in childcare provision, for example through the Bright Start Framework. However, there is still much progress to be made.

At Employers For Childcare we have tirelessly addressed childcare as a social and economic issue, calling for more affordable, high quality childcare for local parents. We understand that the lack of suitable childcare has negative impacts for society as a whole, not least for children and families.

Our case is simple: without suitable childcare parents cannot access work, and, in turn, children cannot access the benefits of childcare. The negative social and economic outcomes of not investing in childcare are many.

However, while many of the discussions about childcare focus on the mechanical aspects of provision, such as regulation and policy, there is a risk that in the drive for more childcare places we lose sight of what is really important – that is – the needs of local families.

This report offers an opportunity to step back and narrow the focus. It explores parents' experiences of sourcing and choosing childcare. It offers an insight into how parents actually go about choosing childcare and the factors which are most important in making this decision.

One finding which stands out is the stress and pressure parents describe in their first experience of sourcing a suitable childcare provider. Furthermore, it is evident the lack of available and useful information to help parents at this time heavily contributes to this experience.

Collectively, the findings allow us to make a number of recommendations to each of the key stakeholders, childcare providers, policy makers and organisations, on how they can best support parents.

Employers For Childcare has acted on the findings by producing a guide for parents to take them through the whole process of sourcing and choosing childcare. We hope that this report also incentivises others to do more to support parents, in real and meaningful ways, when they come to choose childcare for their little ones.

Marie Marin
CEO

1. Introduction

Discussions on the topic of childcare take many different forms. From the demand for increased provision to calls for quality and affordability, many parties are involved in the debates which centre on ensuring that all families have access to childcare provision and are not hindered by barriers, such as inflexibility or high cost.

However, whilst many of the conversations on childcare provision focus on enhancing the skills of the sector or ensuring that standards are maintained, very few explore the perspective of the service users themselves – that is, local families.

This report explores the decisions parents in Northern Ireland make when choosing formal childcare¹ for the first time - from the initial search to settling on a provider.

It seeks to understand the factors which are important to families when it comes to choosing childcare.

Context – Childcare in Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland there is much debate about the provision of childcare. Official statistics show that there are 44,029 registered childcare places², catering for 354,703 children (aged 14 and under), a ratio of 1 place to 8 children.

Indeed the draft Childcare Strategy which launched in mid-2015 revealed that Economists' estimations show a high degree of under provision of childcare services in Northern Ireland³.

Although not every child will need or want a childcare place, our research shows that for those that do attaining one which suits a family's needs can be very difficult.

In our Childcare Cost Survey 2015 over half of our 5,000 respondents (57%) stated that there was insufficient childcare provision in their area⁴. In addition to problems with the availability of places, childcare provision can also be unaffordable and inflexible.

Last year's Childcare Cost Survey showed that the average cost of a full-time childcare place in Northern Ireland was £164 per week, equating to a yearly bill of £8,424⁵. This is a huge cost for families to manage and unsurprisingly 61% of our 5,000 respondents struggled with the cost of childcare either throughout the year or at some point during it.

Worryingly 24% regularly used credit cards, loans from family or friends, or payday loans to meet the cost⁶.

Accessing flexible childcare can also be challenging, 47% of parents in the Childcare Cost Survey stated that it was difficult or very difficult to find flexible childcare in their local area⁷.

Policy background

Traditionally policy support for childcare has been lacking in Northern Ireland when compared to the other regions of the UK. In 1999 a Childcare Strategy was published but little work was done to make it a success. Without policy focus or strategic direction the problems associated with childcare provision grew and became increasingly prominent.

The Executive committed to developing an up-to-date Childcare Strategy in the 2011-15 Programme for Government and dedicated £12 million for its development.

In 2013 the Bright Start Framework was launched to address the main problems associated with childcare in Northern Ireland. It contained 15 Key First Actions, including the development of the School Age Childcare grant scheme, funding for childcare for children with a disability and enhanced information for parents.

The Bright Start Framework acts as a precursor to the full Childcare Strategy, which closed for consultation in November 2015 and is expected to launch in 2017.

At Employers For Childcare we understand that childcare is both a social and economic issue.

The inability to arrange suitable and affordable childcare provision impacts negatively on families, affecting parents' ability to access and stay in work.

Childcare also positively impacts children's social, emotional and intellectual development.

A parent's perspective

This report explores a parent's perspective of sourcing suitable childcare.

More often than not an exploratory look at childcare in Northern Ireland is taken from an objective and mechanical viewpoint, exploring for example the number of places, quality measures defined by official standards or the location of childcare settings.

This report takes the service user's view; **how do parents go about finding childcare?**

What factors are most important to them when sourcing a setting?

It seeks to understand the parent's experience of looking for childcare for the first time and demonstrates what policy makers, organisations and childcare providers can learn from this insight.

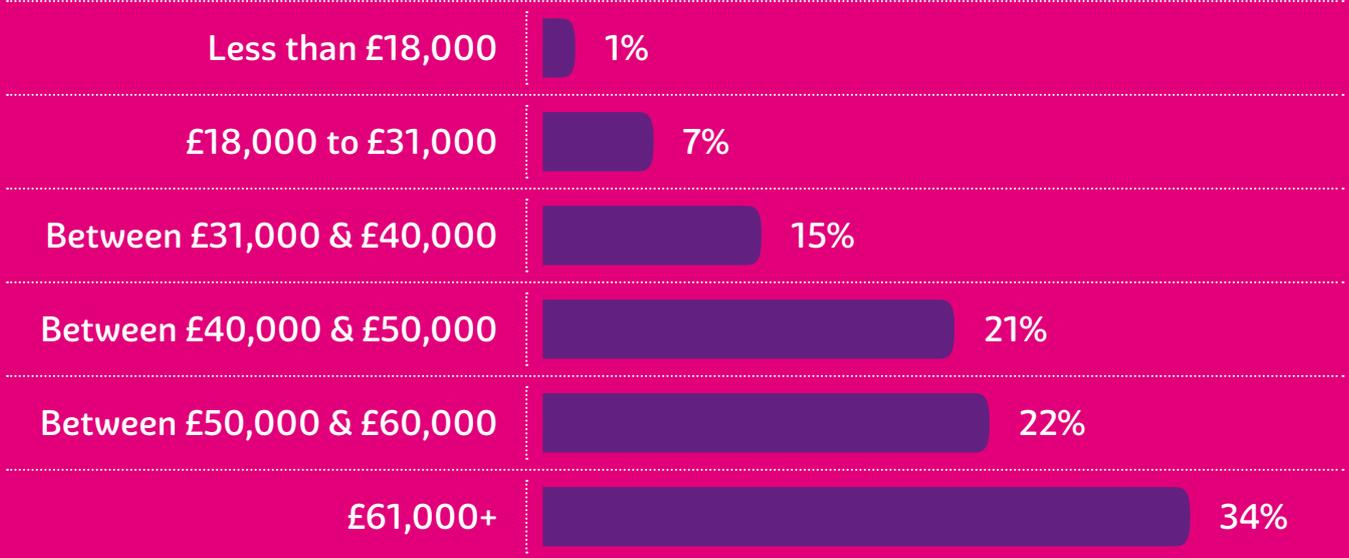
¹The definition of registered formal childcare provision as stated in the Children (NI) Order 1995 is as follows: People running day care services, used by children aged under twelve and open for more than two hours a day. Day care services include facilities such as day nurseries, playgroups, out of school clubs, holiday schemes and crèches. People who run these schemes are required to register whether or not they receive payment. Childminders who look after children aged under twelve for more than two hours a day in a private house for reward. ²In Day Nursery, Childminding and Out of School Club settings. See DHSSPS (2015) Children's Social Care Statistics for Northern Ireland 2014/15, available at www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dhssps/child-social-care-14-15.pdf (accessed 11/04/2015). ³OFMDFM (2015) Delivering Social Change Through Childcare: A Ten Year Strategy for Affordable and Integrated Childcare 2015-2025, page 22. ⁴Dennison, R (2015) Northern Ireland Childcare Cost Survey 2015, Lisburn: Employers For Childcare, page 39. ⁵Dennison, R (2015) Northern Ireland Childcare Cost Survey 2015, Lisburn: Employers For Childcare, page 4. ⁶As above, page 26. ⁷As above, page 40. Numbers have been rounded.

2. Methodology

The data collection took place in January 2016 via electronic questionnaire, 1,271 local parents responded. The following is the respondent profiles:

- 62% of respondents were mothers, 38% were fathers
- The majority lived in an urban area (66%), 34% lived in a rural area
- 96% were from two parent families, only 4% were from one parent families
- 80% of respondents worked full-time, 19% worked part-time, 0.3% were not working and the remainder were studying or working on a voluntary basis

- Household income:**



The results are detailed in the next section.

3. Results

Choosing childcare can be one of the most difficult tasks for parents, especially for the first child in the family. Knowing how to begin the search, what you need to look for and finding a provider that you trust to care for your little one is a tricky task.

The next few sections explore the process parents go through to find a suitable provider and examine the factors which are important in making a decision.

3.1 Beginning the childcare search

We asked parents how they began looking for childcare. Interestingly, the majority of respondents, 43%, began their search by simply looking around their local area.

A further 31% began their search through word of mouth. Given the emphasis on providing information online to parents, it is surprising that only 16% used the internet to source a provider, 8% through a

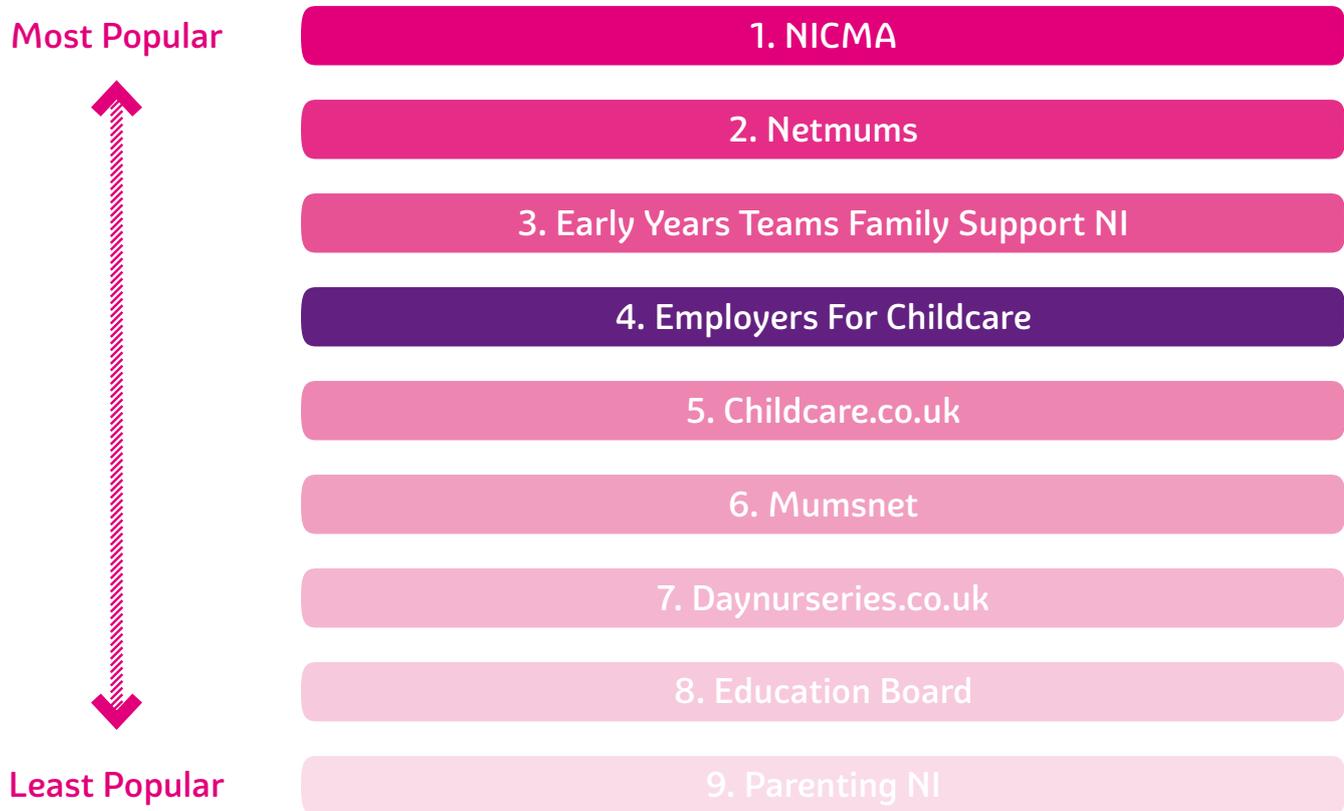
general search and a further 8% who knew of a specific website which could help them.

Figure 1 provides a breakdown of the results.

Figure 1: How did you begin looking for childcare?



Figure 2: Websites used to find childcare facilities.



Interestingly 65% of parents began their childcare search at NICMA's (Northern Ireland Childminding Association) website. The NI Direct website (the official Government website connecting citizens to services and information) links directly to the NICMA website on its 'Choosing Childcare' page. This is the only website listed for parents to access, this could explain why the majority of parents began their search at the NICMA website.

9% of parents used Netmums, an online community and forum for local parents.

Fewer parents relied on government provided support through the Early Years Teams (6%) or Family Support NI.

Surprisingly, only 6% of parents used the Family Support NI website which was set up with the specific aim of helping parents find services. The website has a dedicated childcare search which was funded through Bright Start.

Family Support NI is not widely advertised and perhaps this is reflected in the low number of parents who used the site to start their childcare search.

Furthermore, Family Support NI, despite being the central government funded resource to help parents find childcare, is not linked on NI Direct's guidance on choosing childcare.

5% of parents used Employers For Childcare's Childcare Search Facility and a combined result of 8% of respondents used other websites, including Mumsnet and Parenting NI⁸.

⁸Numbers have been rounded.

3.2 Policies and Paperwork

We asked parents which policies and paperwork they enquired about before choosing their childcare provider.

Parents could choose more than one answer from the following list:

- **The service contract**
- **References from other parents**
- **Insurance certificates**
- **Registration certificates**
- **Inspection reports**
- **Staff qualifications**

Figure 3 below details the results.

Figure 3: "Did you enquire about (or ask to see) any of the following before choosing a childcare provider?"



45% of parents asked for references from other parents before choosing a provider.

This result matched with the 31% of respondents who began their childcare search through word of mouth, showing the importance parents place upon other parents' experiences of a childcare setting.

44% of parents asked to see the service contract, which sets out the terms, conditions and responsibilities of the provider.

It is surprising that more parents did not choose this option. Fewer parents asked for registration certificates (38%), proof of staff qualifications (34%), inspection reports (31%) or insurance certificates (25%).

A number of parents commented that in some childcare facilities many of the policies and paperwork were provided to parents enquiring about the service.

This gave peace of mind to parents about the setting. A large number of respondents commented that after talking to other parents or viewing comments and reviews online and on social media they were content that the setting was of good quality and did not feel the need to enquire any further.

3.3 Making the decision

Deciding factors

Before choosing a childcare provider parents must consider the factors which are most important in the decision making process.

When it comes to making the final decision however, we wanted to understand the factors which were fundamental for parents, that is, the deciding factor which placed one facility ahead of all the others.

Figure 4 shows the top four deciding factors for the parents in our survey.

Figure 4: Top four deciding factors when choosing childcare



Quality of care



Personal instinct upon visiting the setting



Accessibility (locality to home/work)



Cost

The number one deciding factor for parents was the quality of care provided in the childcare facility (35%). When commenting on this option, the majority of parents commented on the contentment of their child in that particular setting.

When visiting a setting parents commented on how the staff treated their child and how their child reacted to the facility.

The responsiveness to the child's need and evidence of a professional and stimulating, yet caring, environment were indicators of good quality for parents.

Many other parents commented on having peace of mind about leaving their child in a childcare setting, trusting the staff to ensure that their children will be safe and well looked after.

Interestingly this definition of quality differs from the Governmental definition for which indicators of quality are based on following regulations: staff:child ratio standards, staff qualifications, accreditation and achieving set standards.

However, the outworking of these regulations leads to a standard of quality which parents should expect alongside the caring nature of the staff, leading to peace of mind and confidence in the provider.

Secondly, parents commented on their personal instinct upon visiting a setting (25%).

Interestingly, personal instinct ranks above more practical factors such as accessibility and cost, indicating that even if a setting is impractically situated or more expensive than others, if a parent feels instinctively happy and positive about it they will compromise on other factors when making their childcare choice.

Accessibility (for example locality to home or work) ranked third amongst respondents (16%), even above the cost of a setting.

This is largely because of the practicalities of arranging childcare around work, for example.

A setting which is too far away, even if it is more affordable, can present a logistical challenge for families.

Although cost was important and makes it into fourth place (7%), it was not the deciding factor for many respondents.

Some parents commented on this saying that they had to pay more to get the quality of care they were happy with or the one which they instinctively preferred. Once these needs are met then cost became an issue.

Other factors, such as flexibility or type of care, did not feature in the top four deciding factors.

“I go to work happy that my child is safe and happy. I do not need to worry about where he is or what he is doing. I have complete peace of mind & can concentrate fully on my work. That for me is priceless!”

“My child is extremely happy there, I feel that she is very well cared for and she gets to engage in a wide variety of enjoyable activities catered for her age and ability”.

3.4 Compromises

The majority of parents felt that they had a good selection of childcare providers to choose from (71%), yet almost 30% said that their selection was limited.

Interestingly 37% of parents living in rural areas, compared to 24% in urban areas, said their choice was limited. This reflects the lack of provision in rural areas.

80% of parents did not have to make any compromises when choosing their childcare provider, however for the 20% that did a number of common compromises occurred in the results, for example choosing a less expensive provider which is further away from home or work, or paying more than expected to achieve a higher level of quality.

Although the majority of parents did not have to make compromises in order to arrange childcare, for almost a quarter of parents some aspects of their care arrangements had to change in order to organise childcare for their child.

Typically these compromises focused on five areas: cost; flexibility; accessibility; quality and staffing issues. Figure 5 provides some parents' explanations as to the compromises made.

Figure 5: Main compromises made by parents when choosing childcare

Cost

"We selected the cheapest in the area, rather than the closest to home".

Flexibility

"We had to choose one slightly further away due to earlier opening hours".
"The opening hours are shorter and the holidays longer than I would have liked but thought the nursery was very good quality, so I chose it anyway".

Staff

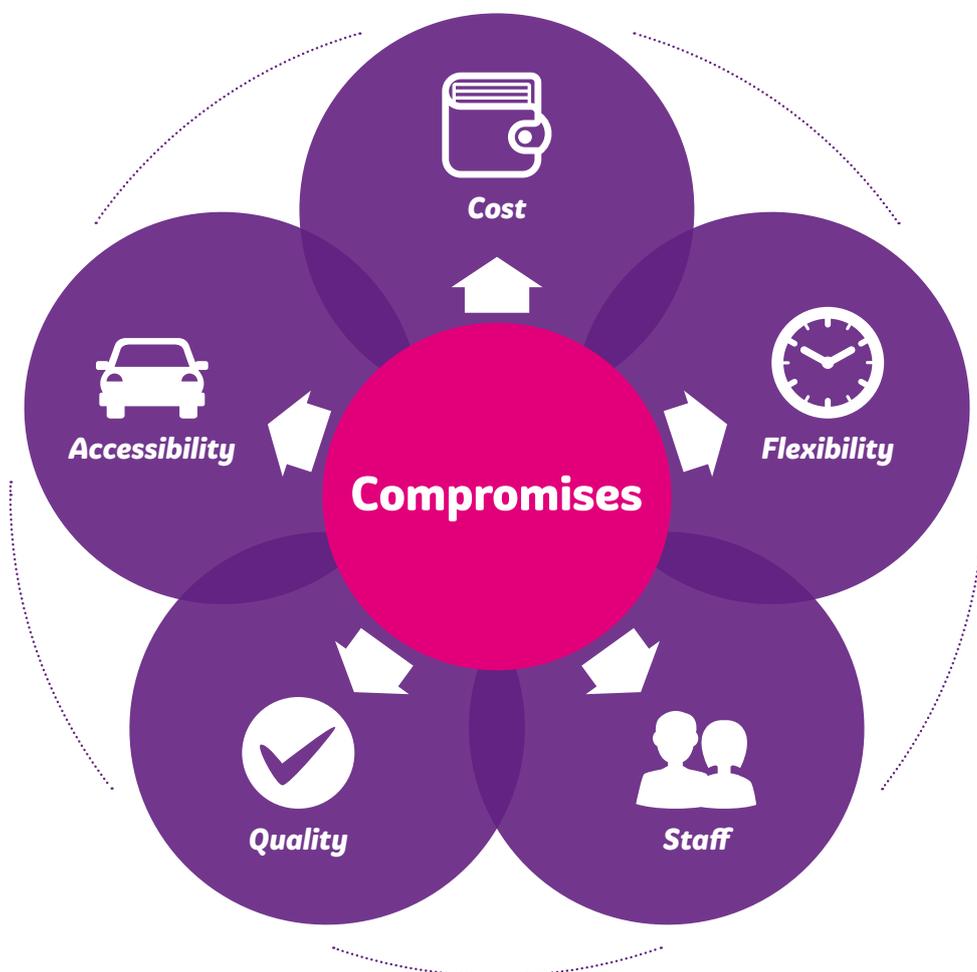
"We had to choose one slightly further away due to earlier opening hours".

Quality

"I have to go a little out of both my wife and myself's way to drop off/collect our children; but it's worth it because of the quality care provided".

Accessibility

"Chose the furthest away nursery due to the policies, activities and home-made food offered".
"I paid extra to choose a facility closer to home and my commuting route".



3.5 First experience of looking for childcare

Two main trends appeared in the qualitative data when parents described their experience of looking for childcare for the first time. Firstly, parents discussed the stress involved in finding a

suitable provider; secondly the lack of knowledge and information available was raised.

These factors are linked and both are underpinned by the importance of the decision to be made.

Many parents commented on how difficult it is to find a provider that they felt happy and content to leave their child with, especially with the first child.

It is a decision not to be taken lightly; **the following are quotes from parents in the survey:**

“It is a very stressful thing. The people that are the most precious to you in the world are to be entrusted to someone else for a large part of the day. You need absolute reassurance and contentment when you are putting all your trust in their hands”.

“Choosing the right childcare provider is a huge decision for parents... we spent considerable time and effort researching the various options available to us and visited several institutions with other family members to see what they were like in order to make the decision”.

“It’s a step into the unknown, glad we have such a good provider, hope I don’t ever have to look again as it is one of the hardest decisions you ever have to make”.

“Choosing a childcare provider is an extremely difficult decision - particularly with a first child. We considered our options very carefully as it is a huge point in all of our lives, for us as parents and more so for our child/children”.

Choosing a childcare provider is one of a parent's most difficult decisions, as one parent commented they are 'entrusting' the care of their child to someone else.

Parents described the process in a number of ways, such as "stressful", "overwhelming" and "daunting".

The importance of the decision is one factor in creating these

emotions, however as one parent described, the process itself often does not help put a parent's mind at ease:

"I found the whole process truly horrendous. Visiting different venues for 10 minutes at a time to listen to a sales pitch to then hand the most precious thing in your whole world over to a stranger is just awful".

The lack of information available also feeds into parents' experience of choosing a childcare provider.

Many respondents commented on not knowing what to look for or where to find information to help with the decision:

"It's a minefield out there. No-one told me how difficult it would be to find childcare in the first instance".

"I didn't feel that I was given enough information on where to find quality childcare and how to go about getting references".

"It was daunting because you just don't know what you are looking for, especially when it's your first one and you want to do right by your kid".

"I wish I had known then what I know now as it would definitely have changed how I viewed things and the choices I made".

Many parents commented on the lack of information available or the difficulty in finding relevant information to help with the search.

This could be either difficulty in accessing a website to help with the childcare search or on finding information on what defines good quality childcare and points to look out for.

This trend goes some way towards explaining why so few parents relied on online resources to begin looking for childcare, pointing to a need to promote these resources more widely.

4. Key Findings and Conclusions

Choosing childcare is a very difficult task for parents. Entrusting the care of a child into someone else's hands is a decision not to be taken lightly and it is understandable why parents describe the process as stressful and daunting. The results highlight a number of key findings:

1. The importance of personal instinct and social proof

Our findings reveal that parents value and rely heavily on their own instincts and references from other parents when choosing childcare. Due to the nature of the decision it is understandable why instinct is fundamentally important; as the child's primary caregiver, the act of entrusting a childcarer to provide a suitable standard of care is a challenge for parents.

Gaining social proof in the form of references from other parents in the same situation gives the reassurance that most parents need when making this decision.

2. The definition of quality

It is particularly interesting that the quality of care provided is the number one deciding factor for the majority of respondents. It is only to be expected that quality would rank highly in parent responses, however it is interesting that the rhetoric around 'quality' is different for parents and policy makers.

In the discussions surrounding the development of a Childcare Strategy for Northern Ireland 'quality' is a term which frequently used. The draft Childcare Strategy contained an objective to ensure that "childcare services that are of high quality, meeting or bettering the current minimum standards and with all staff and managers trained to the appropriate level" (OFMDFM, 2015:8). Quality childcare is founded in staff qualifications and meeting standards set out by the Department of Health.

The quality of care provided is enhanced by these measures, but interestingly when parents discuss quality of care it is not about staff qualifications and regulations, it is how positively their child reacts to a particular childcare setting, if they are happy and content and the provider engages, interacts and develops a relationship with the child.

Quality in this sense is comparative to the care received within the family home. Quality is about providing a caring, loving environment and having confidence in the provider to offer this in a safe and secure setting.

This is not to say that a policy maker's assumption is incorrect, it is essential that childcarer providers provide childcare within defined standards. However, perhaps the focus on qualifications should be accompanied by the qualities defined by parents, for example.

It could be argued that the minimum standards set out a stringent and overly regulatory approach to childcare, perhaps losing sight of what parents and families value most in a setting.

3. The need for promotion and enhancement of information

It was predominantly clear in the results that the information available to parents is lacking and does little to support those searching for childcare.

It is evident that when it comes to looking for childcare for the first time parents were unsure where to look, what resources were available to them and what pointers they should be checking for.

There are numerous websites set up with the aim of helping parents look for childcare, most predominantly the Family Support NI website which features a government funded and resourced childcare search facility.

This is a great resource for parents but it is clear that much more needs to be undertaken to promote the site to parents.

Perhaps a starting point is to link to it in the childcare information pages on NI Direct. The lack of an existing link points to the failure of government departments to work collaboratively and join up services.

The NI Direct 'Choosing Childcare' page links only to NICMA which, although is beneficial to parents, only features one type of childcare.

A number of organisations, including Employers For Childcare, offer parents help and support when choosing childcare, however these are also resources which need promoted more widely.

The results also prompt a need to simplify and target the information available, for example providing a step-by-step guide to take parents easily through the entire process from starting the search to choosing a provider.

Information should cover all aspects of care, from guidance on what to expect from a quality perspective to expected standards and protocol.

4. Achieving a high level of assurance

Another key finding is that the level of assurance needed as to the safety and trustworthiness of the childcare setting is very high for parents, once again this derives from the nature of the decision being made.

Childcare providers should provide parents with the assurance they need, providing information to put a parent's mind at rest. This includes any of the documents and paperwork listed in Section 3.2, but most importantly testimonials from other parents.

It is the responsibility of providers to ensure that parents and families receive this assurance and policy makers' responsibility to ensure that there is a standard of quality care to be maintained.

Overall, our findings give a better understanding of the decisions parents make when choosing formal childcare for the first time, as well as the factors which are most important to families when settling on a provider.

Based on these findings we can make a number of recommendations to childcare providers, policy makers and organisations on how they can best support parents at this time. Our recommendations are outlined in the following section.

5. Recommendations

For Childcare Providers:

Make use of online resources –

As well as advertising locally, ensure that your childcare setting is listed on relevant websites, such as Family Support NI and Employers For Childcare's Childcare Search. If you have the capacity for a website and/or social media this can also build your reputation. The use of online platforms can give parents an idea of the type of setting you operate, the facilities on offer and the activities children are involved in. Some nurseries include their programme of activities and the meals they provide to children, for example.

However, it is important to ensure when using social media (or images on your website) that you check that parents are happy for their children's photos to appear online.

Provide an information pack –

Give prospective parents an information pack containing material which will offer them assurance that you are best placed to provide quality, safe childcare for their family. For example, this could include the service contract, references from parents, inspection reports and staff information.

This gives parents peace of mind about the setting.

Collect testimonials from parents who have used your service –

Parents value references from other parents, if possible include testimonials in your information pack and online materials.

Offer a settling in period –

If possible offer parents a settling in period, this helps children deal with the transition from home care to day care. It can also give parents peace of mind that their child is happy and content in your setting.

For Policy Makers:

Promote the resources available to families –

The Family Support NI website is a fantastic resource for parents who are looking for childcare, however due to the lack of promotion very few parents are aware of the website and the resources available to them. More investment is needed to promote Family Support NI to parents.

Better integration of services –

Government departments each have their own objectives and

priorities, however there is a notable lack of joined up working between departments in a number of areas, one example raised by this research is the lack of integration between the information available on NI Direct and Family Support NI.

It is shocking that NI Direct does not refer parents to Family Support NI on its Childcare information pages. This is a missed opportunity for promotion.

Publish and implement a childcare strategy for Northern Ireland –

Economists state that there is an extreme under provision of childcare in Northern Ireland. Without a childcare strategy in place the problems associated with childcare will increase to the detriment of children and families. The childcare system must be upgraded in all aspects (promotion of information, availability of places, flexibility etc.) to meet the needs of families and support those who require childcare.

For Organisations:

Review the types of support given to families –

It is more difficult for organisations, particularly small organisations and those in the third and Social Enterprise sectors, to find the resources and funding necessary to create and promote services to the same extent as government departments.

Our findings show that although there is information available to parents it can be difficult to source, this is a challenge which must be addressed. In addition there is a need to re-examine the information provided and evaluate its usefulness to parents. At Employers For Childcare we will develop a guide for parents looking for childcare for the first time, our findings have shown a need for this type of resource.

Work together – it is clear that looking for childcare is a stressful and difficult time for parents; there are a variety of organisations in Northern Ireland who support parents and families in a range of ways. To fully support parents we each must work together, for example signposting parents to other organisations and resources which are best placed to help them.

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