

Childcare Matters:

what the public thinks about
childcare in Northern Ireland

**Should the NI Executive
make childcare a priority?**

**What's your perception of
different forms of childcare?**

**Should the Executive introduce mandatory
basic training for childminders?**

**What are your experiences
and views as a parent?**

**How difficult is it to find affordable,
good quality childcare?**



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 **Foreword**

The Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive has had a plethora of pressing policy issues to deal with during its first year. We have been greatly heartened by the active interest in childcare issues shown by Ministers and politicians. There is no doubt that the provision of good access to high quality, affordable childcare represents a challenge for the Executive, given the resource constraints it faces. However, we have high hopes that the Executive will rise to this challenge.

Much of the policy debate on childcare issues takes place among professionals. However, it is the public – and specifically parents – who are directly affected by these issues. We wanted to find out how the Northern Ireland public views childcare. Does the public think childcare deserves priority as a policy issue? What is its perception of different forms of childcare? And what are the experiences and views of parents?

That's why NICMA initiated this survey. We did not know what to expect when we commissioned this research – in the event, some of the results were much as we would have expected, but others surprised us. We believe this report represents a valuable contribution to the debate on childcare in Northern Ireland, and that it will help inform decision-makers and all those with an interest in this vital policy area.

Bridget Nodder,

Director, NICMA
May 2008

1 Executive Summary

Childcare policy has had a much higher profile in Great Britain and in the Republic of Ireland than in Northern Ireland. The UK government has committed itself to a target of universal childcare provision right across the UK. It is investing £4 billion over the next three years (2008 - 11) in funding for Sure Start projects, and to support early years and childcare provision. The Irish government is spending €575 million (approximately £433 million) on its five-year National Childcare Investment Programme which is designed to create up to 50,000 new childcare places.

In Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Executive is developing policies which should help to improve access to childcare here. However, Northern Ireland has, to date, missed out on a number of government-funded childcare initiatives which have been introduced in England, and the region has no equivalent of the Republic's Childcare Investment Programme.

Yet the available evidence suggests a serious shortage of childcare places in Northern Ireland, and the supply of places with registered childminders has been falling. This is of particular concern, given that registered childminding is by far the most popular and affordable form of daycare, accounting for 63% of full-time daycare places and 37% of all childcare places in Northern Ireland.

NICMA – the Childminding Association wanted to find out what the Northern Ireland public thinks about childcare. It commissioned Ipsos MORI to carry out a comprehensive survey of 1,024 adults in Northern Ireland to gauge their views.

The survey's key findings were as follows:

- more than four-fifths of respondents (83%) thought the Northern Ireland Executive should give priority to the provision of good quality, affordable childcare for all that need it
- 91% supported the introduction of mandatory basic training as part of the registration process for childminders
- 83% supported the introduction of a special package of support for all new childminders
- nearly one third (30%) of parents who had recently looked for childcare said they had found their search 'fairly' or 'very' difficult – parents in rural areas were more likely to find their search difficult
- more than half of all parents (52%) said the quality of care was an important consideration in seeking childcare
- day nurseries were viewed more favourably than childminders in terms of the quality of care they were perceived as providing, but there appeared to be less awareness of what childminders can offer
- there was a strong preference among many parents for care provided by someone who knows the child
- word of mouth recommendation was by far the most favoured method of finding childcare

2 Introduction

Childcare policy has had a much higher profile in Great Britain and in the Republic of Ireland than in Northern Ireland. The UK government is investing £4 billion over the next three years (2008 -11) in funding for Sure Start projects, and to support early years and childcare provision. The Irish government is spending €575 million (approximately £433 million) on its five-year National Childcare Investment Programme which is designed to create up to 50,000 new childcare places.

In 2004, the UK government published a ten-year childcare strategy for the whole of the UK, *Choice for parents, the best start for children*.¹ One of the key objectives contained within this strategy was the delivery of an “affordable, flexible, high quality childcare place that meets their circumstances” for “all families with children aged up to 14 who need it”.² In this document, the government stated that, in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, responsibility for the implementation of this strategy would be shared between the UK government and the devolved administrations.³

Although the Northern Ireland Executive has not formally committed itself to this objective, the Department of Education is drawing up an Early Years and Childcare Strategy which will encompass the provision of early years childcare, while the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

has established a rural childcare stakeholder group to examine how access to childcare in rural areas can be improved.

The evidence currently available suggests that finding childcare is a problem for many families here. The most recent comprehensive survey of demand for and provision of childcare in Northern Ireland concluded that there was a significant shortfall in childcare places. The survey, which was commissioned in part by the Department of Employment and Learning in 2003, found that the level of childcare provision was “much lower” than in England.⁴

In particular, it recommended that there should be a further 20% expansion in the number of registered childminders to meet the demand for childcare. However, far from any increase in numbers, in the four years to March 2007, there was actually a 20% drop in the supply of places with registered childminders, and a 19% reduction in the number of registered childminders.⁵

The supply of registered childminding places is of crucial importance in shaping the overall supply and accessibility of childcare provision in Northern Ireland. Registered childminding is by far the most popular and affordable form of childcare, accounting for 63% of full-time daycare places and 37% of all childcare places here.

But what do ordinary people in Northern Ireland think about childcare? Do they believe it is an issue to which the Northern Ireland Executive should be giving priority? What sort of steps, if any, would they like the Executive to take on childcare? NICMA – the Childminding Association wanted to find out. It commissioned a survey of a representative sample of 1,024 adults aged 16 and over in Northern Ireland. This report presents the survey’s key findings. The primary focus of the survey was childminding provision, but many of the questions encompassed issues relating to childcare more generally.

The survey involved the inclusion of a series of special questions in the monthly Northern Ireland Omnibus Survey, covering a variety of issues, conducted by Ipsos MORI. This survey is carried out through face-to-face interviews and involves a representative sample of the population in Northern Ireland aged 16 and over. The fact that the questions were included in a regular wider survey meant there was less likelihood of obtaining a self-selecting sample which was more interested than average in childcare issues. The survey is thus a particularly robust record of current views on childcare in Northern Ireland.⁶

¹HM Treasury (2004) *Choice for parents: the best start for children: a ten year strategy for childcare*. Available at: http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/B/E/pbr04childcare_480upd050105.pdf

²*Ibid.*, p. 1.

³*Ibid.*, p.4.

⁴Gray, A and Bruegal, I. The availability, use of and demand for childcare services among the

parents of children aged 0-14 in Northern Ireland. Commissioned by the Equality Commission, DEL and the four Childcare Partnerships in 2003.

⁵These figures are based on a comparative analysis of statistics in two publications by NI Statistics and Research Agency and Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety – the Children Order Statistical Bulletin 2003 and the Children Order Statistical Bulletin 2007.

The former is available at: <http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/children-order-statistical-bulletin-2003.pdf> and the latter is available at: http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/stats_cib_children_order_statistical_bulletin_2007.pdf

⁶Further details of the research design are available in the Technical Note at the end of this report.

- More than four-fifths (83%) of respondents felt good quality, affordable childcare should be a priority for the Northern Ireland Executive
- 91% supported the introduction of mandatory basic training for childminders

3 The public's view on childcare policy

There was a widespread belief that the Executive should give priority to childcare. More than four-fifths of respondents (83%) agreed with the statement "The provision of good quality, affordable childcare for all who need it should be a priority for the Northern Ireland Executive." (see **Chart 1**). Nearly two-fifths of respondents strongly agreed with this statement. Moreover, the strength of support for this view was almost as great among men as women; 80% of men agreed with the statement, compared to 86% of women. There was little variation across social class categories, and virtually none between those describing themselves as Protestant, on the one hand, and Catholic, on the other.⁷ Not surprisingly, parents were especially supportive of this statement; 91% of those with dependent children aged 14 or under agreed with it.⁸

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

Respondents were also asked for their view on three policy measures which could help to increase the number of childminders and enhance the quality of such provision. These were:

- a requirement that childminders should undergo basic training in order to be registered in all parts of Northern Ireland (currently, this is only a requirement in some areas)
- a requirement that childminders should have insurance in order to be registered in Northern Ireland
- the introduction of a special package of support, including individual advice and financial help, for all new childminders

There was widespread support for each of these measures. The proposal which received the strongest support was the introduction of mandatory basic training for childminders (see **Chart 2**). This proposal was supported by 91% of respondents. More than half (52%) said they strongly agreed with the idea. 87% supported the introduction of a requirement that childminders should have insurance in order to be registered. 83% supported the introduction of start-up assistance for new childminders, with 29% strongly agreeing with the idea.

Notably, there was no significant difference in the level of support for mandatory training between different categories of respondent. Parents with children aged 14 and under were more likely than the sample as a whole to support the other two measures, with 92% supporting mandatory insurance and 91% supporting start-up assistance for childminders.

⁷83% of Protestants agreed with this statement, compared to 82% of Catholics.

⁸Throughout this report, the term 'parents' refers to parents with dependent children aged 14 or under who are living with them.

Chart 1

Good quality, affordable childcare should be priority for NI Executive.

Base: all respondents (1,024)

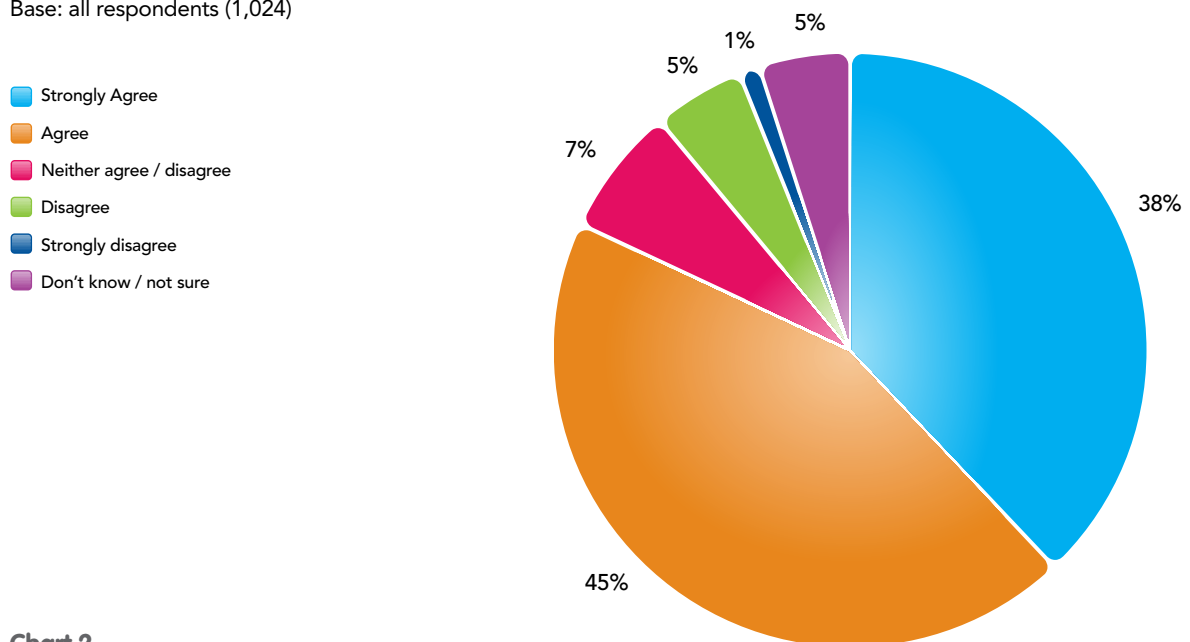
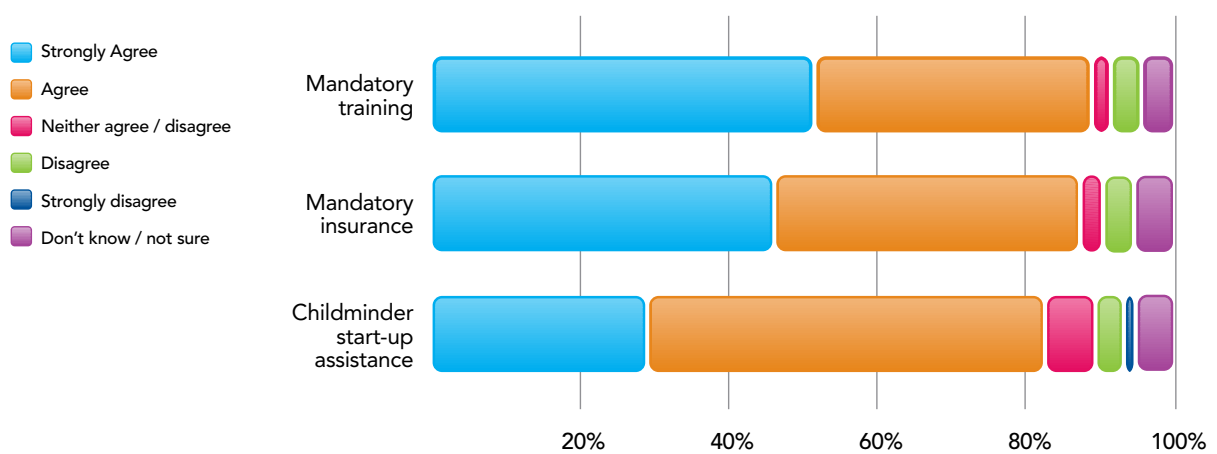


Chart 2

Support for measures to improve childminding provision.

Base: all respondents (1,024)



- **30% of parents who'd recently sought childcare found their search 'fairly' or 'very' difficult – with 17% finding it 'very difficult'**
- **43% of rural parents who'd recently looked for childcare faced difficulties**

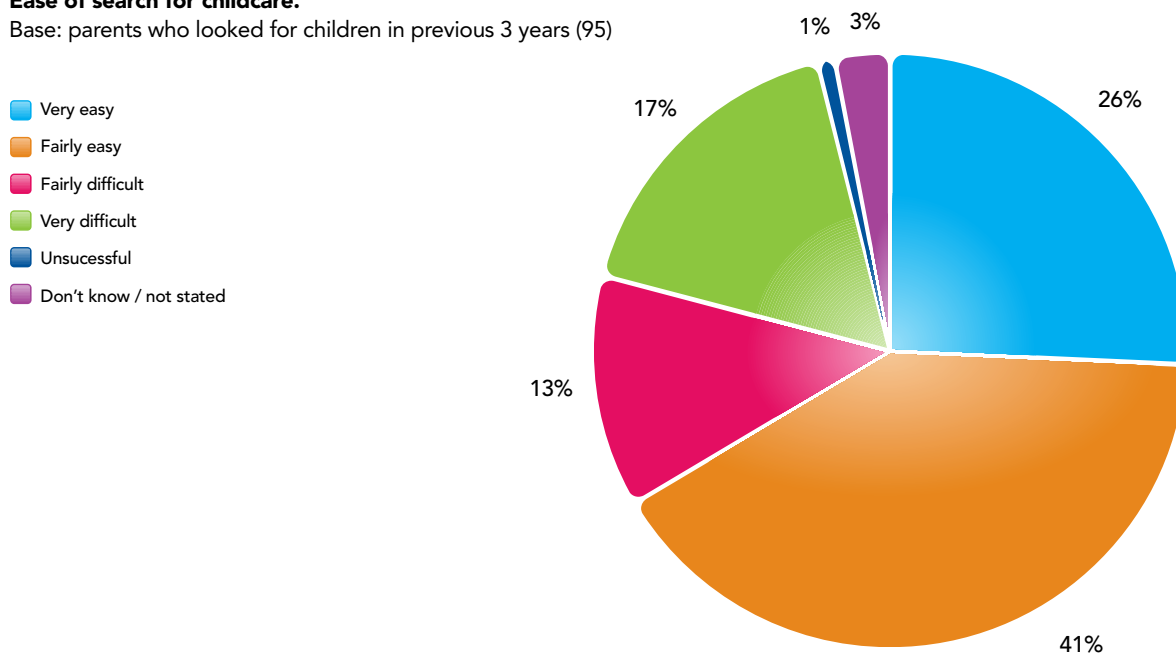
4 Searching for and using childcare

One third of the respondents (318) said they had children aged 14 or under living with them. They were asked about their current use of childcare and any experience they had had of looking for childcare in the three years prior to the survey. Nearly two-fifths (37%) said they made use of some form of either formal or informal childcare on either a full-time or part-time basis. While 41% of working parents said they made use of childcare, 31% of non-working parents also accessed formal or informal childcare. Those in the higher ABC1 social category were more likely to make use of childcare than those in the C2DE group; 44% of ABC1 parents made use of childcare, compared to 32% of C2DE parents.⁹

Nearly a third (30%) of parents said that they or their partner had looked for childcare in the previous three years. Of those who had looked for childcare, 30% said their search had been 'fairly' or 'very' difficult, with 17% describing it as 'very difficult' (see **Chart 3**). On the other hand, 41% described their search as 'fairly easy' and 26% as 'very easy'. Those respondents in rural areas who had sought childcare found the search harder than those in urban areas; 43% of rural respondents who had looked for childcare described the search as difficult or unsuccessful, compared to 28% in urban areas. Given that the overall group of parents who had searched for childcare was fairly small and not necessarily representative of all parents in this situation, caution must be exercised in interpreting these results. However, they do suggest that access to childcare remains a significant problem for many parents, and that access to childcare may well be a more acute problem in rural areas.

Chart 3
Ease of search for childcare.

Base: parents who looked for children in previous 3 years (95)



⁹See Technical Note for explanation of social class categories used.

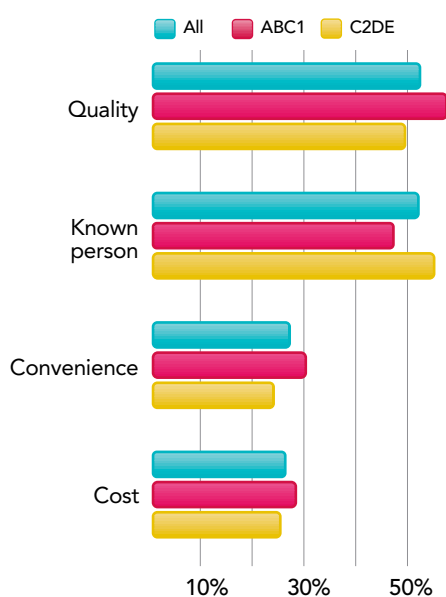
- The proportion of parents who thought quality of care was important when looking for childcare was much higher than the proportion who thought cost was important
- 52% of parents said it was important for them to know the person providing childcare

5 Factors in looking for childcare

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

Chart 4
Factors in looking for childcare.

Base: all parents (318)



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

Although all parents with children aged 14 or under responded to this question, the same broad pattern is evident if one looks at the answers given by those currently using childcare and those who had sought it previously. At the same time, both the latter groups were more likely to cite quality and also slightly more likely to cite cost. These statistics do show the importance that parents place on quality when it comes to childcare. However, previous UK-based research has demonstrated how parents are – by necessity – limited by what they can afford in seeking childcare, and that there does tend to be a trade-off between affordability and quality in practice.¹⁰

Parents were also asked about their preferred method of finding childcare.

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

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

¹⁰ Duncan, Alan, Paull, Gillian, and Taylor, Jane (2001) Price and Quality in the UK Childcare Market (London: Institute of Fiscal Studies). Available at: http://www.ifs.org.uk/publications.php?publication_id=2038

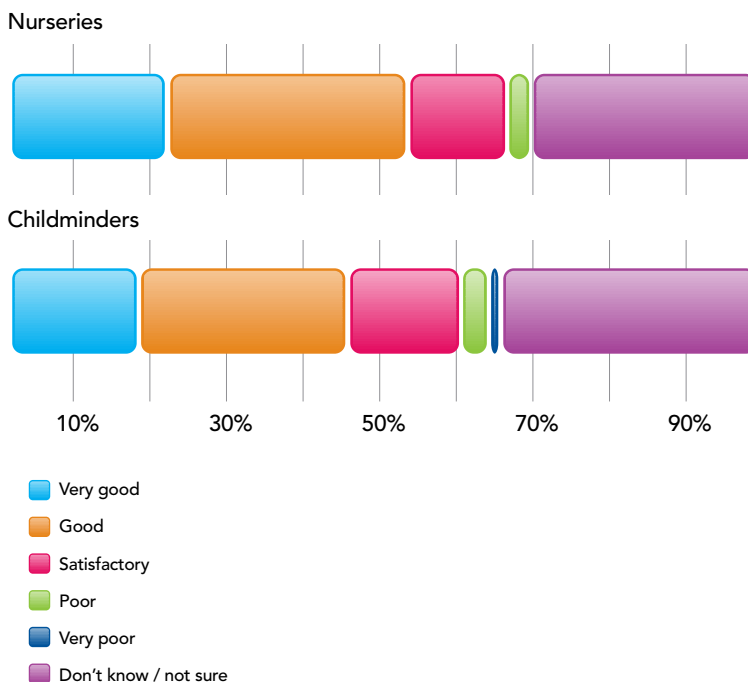
- Respondents were more likely to view positively the quality of care offered by day nurseries as compared to that provided by childminders
- Very few respondents felt that the quality of care offered by either type of childcare provider was poor

6 The public image of childcare

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

The results show that nurseries are, indeed, more highly regarded than childminders in terms of the perceived quality of care (see **Chart 5**). However, the difference in the way the public perceives each type of provider in Northern Ireland is not as large as one might have assumed. 45% of all respondents felt the quality of care provided by childminders was 'good' or 'very good', compared to 53% who perceived the quality of care provided by nurseries as 'good' or 'very good'. Only a very small proportion felt that the quality of care of either type of provider was poor.

Chart 5
Perceptions of quality of nurseries and childminding.
 Base: all respondents (1,024)



While there was relatively little difference between the perceptions of respondents in different social class brackets vis-à-vis childminders, social class was a factor with regard to views on nurseries. Despite the fact that one might have expected a more positive view of nurseries from those in the higher social class groups, the pattern which emerged from this survey was the reverse. The higher a respondent's social class bracket, the less likely they were to have a positive view of nurseries. At the same time, they were also more likely to say they didn't know. The same pattern was evident when respondents were grouped by income level.

Not surprisingly, parents were less likely than the survey sample as a whole to say they didn't know in response to the above questions, and more likely to be positive in their view of both forms of childcare (see **Chart 6**). However, they were also more likely to say they 'didn't know' with regard to the quality of care provided by childminders (26%) than the quality of care provided by nurseries (20%).

Although the numbers involved are small, it is instructive to look at the comparative pattern of responses for the total sample of parents, parents who were using childcare and those who had recently sought childcare (see **Charts 7 and 8**).¹¹ The latter two groups would have direct experience of at least one type of childcare provider (formal or informal), and may well have accessed information on more than one form of childcare.

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



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

6 The public image of childcare (cont'd)

Chart 6
Perceptions of quality of nurseries and childminding.
 Base: all parents (318)

- Very good
- Good
- Satisfactory
- Poor
- Very poor
- Don't know / not sure

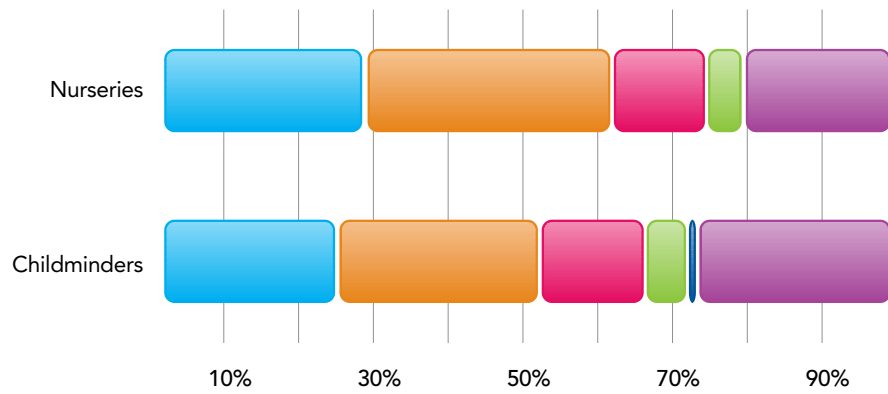


Chart 7
Perceptions of quality of childminding.

- Very good
- Good
- Satisfactory
- Poor
- Very poor
- Don't know / not sure

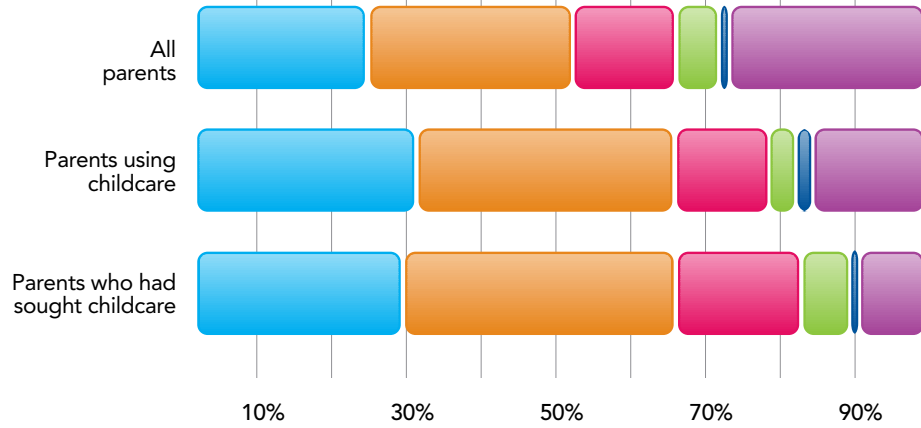
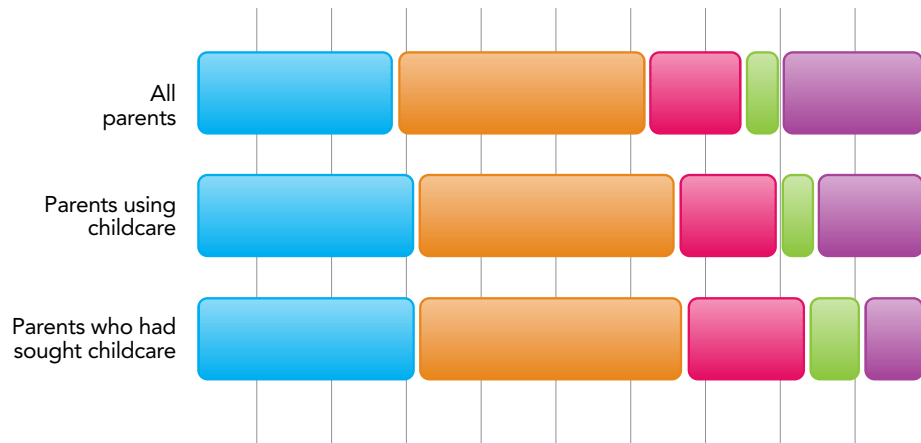


Chart 8
Perceptions of quality of nurseries.

- Very good
- Good
- Satisfactory
- Poor
- Very poor
- Don't know / not sure



- Nearly 3 in 10 of all respondents and 4 in 10 parents had heard of NICMA
- Most of those who'd heard of NICMA had found out about it through one of the following means: word of mouth, a childminder or the media

7 Awareness of NICMA

Just under three in ten (29%) of all respondents and four in ten (40%) parents said they had heard of NICMA. More than half of all parents who had recently sought childcare (53%) were aware of NICMA.

Women (38%) were more likely than men (20%) to have heard of NICMA. There was also a clear pattern in the relative levels of awareness within different social class groupings, with those in the highest AB group (41%) being much more likely to be aware of NICMA than those in the lowest DE category (22%).

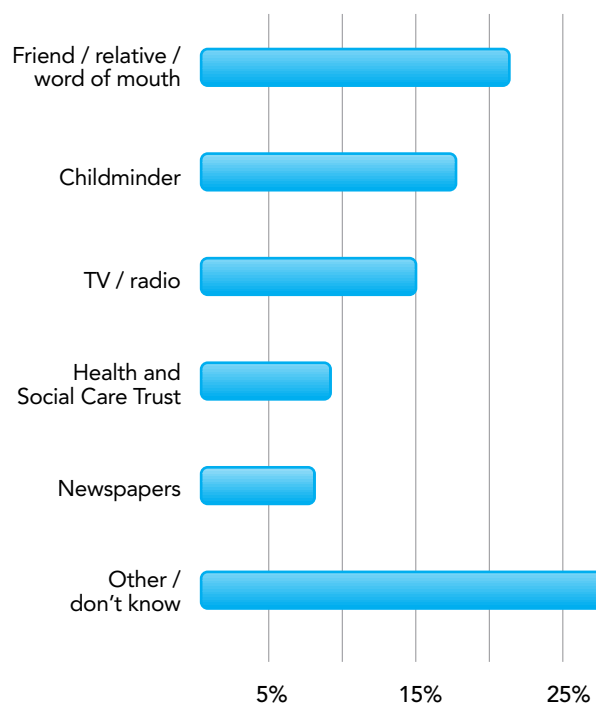
Awareness was greatest in the rural parts of counties Antrim (36%) and Down (37%), and lowest in counties Fermanagh and Tyrone (24%), and in County Derry (24%).¹²

Respondents who said they were aware of NICMA were asked how they had first heard about the organisation (see **Chart 9**). Nearly two-fifths said they had heard about NICMA either through friends/relations/word of mouth (21%) or through a childminder (18%). A further 23% said they had heard of NICMA through the media, either via TV or radio (15%) or newspapers (8%).

Those who had recently sought childcare and had heard of NICMA were much more likely to have heard of it through a childminder than any other means; two-fifths (40%) of this group had heard about it in this way. Those respondents who had heard of NICMA and were in the C2DE social class category were much more likely to have heard of the organisation through the media (TV, radio or newspapers) than those in the ABC1 group; 32% of the former group had heard of it through the media compared to just 16% of the latter. Conversely, those in the ABC1 group were more likely (22%) to have heard of NICMA through a childminder than were those in the C2DE group (15%).¹³

Chart 9
How heard of NICMA.

Base: all respondents who had heard of NICMA (302)



¹² The rural parts of counties Antrim and Down refers to those areas outside the greater Belfast conurbation.

¹³ Caution should be exercised in interpreting any results which break down the group of those who had heard of NICMA into sub-groups, as these sub-groups are relatively small.

8 Conclusion

The most striking finding to emerge from this survey is undoubtedly the widespread belief that the Northern Ireland Executive should be prioritising the provision of good quality, affordable childcare. A large majority also support priority being given specifically to tackling the shortage of childminders in Northern Ireland. There is also strong support for practical measures which would help to achieve that aim.

Nurseries are viewed more favourably than childminders in terms of the quality of care they are perceived as providing. However, the difference in the public's perception of the two forms of childcare is not as great as one might have expected. A relatively small proportion of respondents had a negative view of the quality of either childminders or nurseries. In general, where respondents did not voice a positive view, they felt they had insufficient information to form a judgement (the 'don't knows'). They were more likely to feel they could not make a judgement about childminders than about nurseries. This suggests that there is a need to promote greater awareness of what childminders offer and the quality of care they provide.

Although the 95-strong sample of parents who had recently looked for childcare was relatively small and not necessarily representative, the fact that 30% of parents found their search 'fairly' or 'very' difficult certainly suggests that childcare is not currently accessible to all who require it in Northern Ireland. These findings suggest the problem may be more acute in rural areas.

It is very notable that parents rated quality much more highly than cost or convenience as a significant factor when seeking childcare. At the same time, a widespread preference for informal care – or, at least, care by someone who knows the child in question – was also evident. Allied to this, parents also expressed a strong preference for finding a childcare provider through word of mouth recommendation. These latter two features of the 'demand side' of the childcare market should work in favour of childminders, and undoubtedly help to explain why childminding remains the most popular form of full-time daycare in Northern Ireland. At the same time, as we have seen, childminders do face more of a challenge than nurseries in convincing parents that they offer a high quality service.

This report was prepared by Dr Liz Fawcett,
Liz Fawcett Consulting on behalf of NICMA – the Childminding Association.
May 2008

Technical note

1,024 face-to-face interviews aged 16 and over were conducted across Northern Ireland between 27th November and 18th December 2007. Quotas were set by age, gender, social class and location to ensure that the sample was representative of the Northern Ireland public.

It should be noted that, in certain instances, percentage breakdowns for survey responses presented in this report may add up to 99 or 101, rather than 100. This is because, in each instance, the relevant percentage has been rounded up or down to the nearest whole figure.

Table 1 below outlines the definitions used to determine the appropriate social class category for each respondent.

Table 1.
Social class categories used in analysis.

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

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