

Childcare – undervalued and under-resourced?

by Bridget Nodder

You don't need me to tell you that the average childminder earns a great deal less than a City banker.

But, despite all the bank bail-outs, you probably assume that the average high-earning banker is contributing more to the economy than any childminder could.

Well, that's where you'd be wrong – according to a report published recently by the New Economics Foundation.

The prestigious thinktank has done some calculations and it estimates that the average childcare worker creates more than £7 in economic value for every £1 they earn – rising potentially to more than £9 if the social benefits of childcare are also included.

In stark contrast, the Foundation asserts that the highest-earning City bankers are actually destroying £7 in value for every £1 they earn.

The Foundation reached its verdict on bankers by taking into account the enormous cost to the economy of the current banking crisis and the burden on the public purse.

It's not for me to comment on the value or otherwise of high-flying bankers, but I can certainly vouch for the enormous and largely unsung value of childminders.

Childminders and other childcare workers play an absolutely pivotal role in enabling thousands of parents in Northern Ireland to take a job or return to work.

We're all aware of the embarrassingly high economic inactivity rate in Northern Ireland – that's the proportion of people who aren't in work but potentially could be if they were willing and able to look for and take a job.

This region has the highest economic inactivity rate in the UK and the Northern Ireland Executive has vowed to try to reduce it.

No less than 23,000 women in Northern Ireland are economically inactive but say they would like a job. And the most common reason that those women give for not being able to work is 'family and home'.

Childminding is by far the most popular and affordable form of childcare in Northern Ireland. But the number of registered childminders has fallen sharply over the past few years.

Research commissioned by my own organisation, NICMA – the Childminding Association - indicates that nearly a third of parents in Northern Ireland have difficulty finding childcare, suggesting serious shortages in many areas.

One woman who is very aware of the value of childminders is the new Acting First Minister and Enterprise Minister, Arlene Foster. Ms Foster has previously featured in this newspaper, espousing the benefits of childminding, having used childminders for her own children.

Another Minister who is very supportive of childcare is Agriculture and Rural Development Minister, Michelle Gildernew.

Thanks to an innovative funding package from her Department, NICMA will be able to pilot a project which we hope will result in some 400 additional childcare places in a number of rural areas.

This is a very welcome development. But, as things stand, that grant is part of a temporary funding scheme for rural childcare and will only last for 16 months.

What we really need is much greater mainstream funding from the Executive for childcare.

The Executive has committed itself to drawing up a childcare strategy. However, it is first conducting an economic appraisal of options for delivering childcare.

While we have no objection to this appraisal, it is slowing down the likelihood of achieving any serious action on this issue by the Executive this side of the next scheduled Assembly Election in 2011.

We have highlighted to the Executive a number of cost-effective 'quick wins' which would make an enormous difference to both the quantity and quality of childcare in Northern Ireland.

One major 'quick win' would be to tackle the lengthy delays in getting registered faced by many new childminders.

Another would be to put in place a start-up package for new childminders, providing a grant to help with initial start-up costs and one-to-one mentoring – we estimate this would cost just £340,000 a year to operate.

We know that many would-be childminders get put off by registration delays and the cost of setting up a childminding business – these simple measures would go a long way in helping to combat those problems.

All Executive ministers have talked about the need to deliver to the electorate – childcare is one issue on which the Executive can deliver right now if it wishes.

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