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Families struggle to find childcare - survey

Quality of childcare more important than cost say parents

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Many families seeking childcare in Northern Ireland are finding the search difficult, according to a major new survey on childcare commissioned by NICMA - the Childminding Association.

The poll, carried out by Ipsos MORI, found that 30% of parents surveyed who had recently looked for childcare had found their search difficult, with 17% describing their search as 'very difficult'.

Parents in rural areas were most likely to report difficulty in seeking childcare.

The survey, the first of its kind in Northern Ireland, looked at public attitudes towards childcare, and at parents' experiences and preferences in choosing childcare.

Among the survey's main findings were the following:

- more than half of all parents (52%) said the quality of care was an important consideration in seeking childcare, compared to 26% who said cost was an important factor
- there was a strong preference among many parents for care provided by someone who knows the child – 52% of parents said this was a key consideration for them
- word of mouth recommendation was by far the most favoured method of finding childcare – 74% of parents said this was their preferred means of sourcing childcare
- by contrast, just 11% said they would prefer to telephone an organisation like NICMA to find a childcare provider, while a mere 1% said they favoured searching for childcare via the internet

- among all respondents (parents and non-parents), 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

Speaking as the survey findings were published, NICMA's Director, Bridget Nodder, said her organisation was pleased that parents here clearly value quality, but was concerned that many families are having difficulty finding childcare.

"Given the emphasis NICMA places on quality in the provision of childcare, it is heartening to see that parents really value quality too," she commented.

"However, we're naturally concerned at the evidence that many families are facing problems in finding childcare."

"We're currently conducting a more in-depth survey on the supply and demand for childcare in Northern Ireland – and we're lobbying politicians to help create more childcare places."

"The strong preference for word of mouth recommendation and for knowing the childcare provider is very understandable – but that may be holding back some parents from approaching an organisation like NICMA."

"We can provide information on registered childminders with vacancies, and can advise parents on how to make the right choice."

The survey also found strong public support for action by the Northern Ireland Executive on childcare:

- more than four-fifths of all respondents (83%) wanted the Executive to prioritise the provision of good quality, affordable childcare.
- a similar proportion (81%) wanted the Executive to take action to address the ongoing shortage of childminders.

"This survey demonstrates that childcare is regarded as a crucial policy issue by voters," commented NICMA's Director, Bridget Nodder.

"We hope that politicians will listen to the clear message that's coming from the voters, and take tangible action to expand and improve childcare provision."

The survey was carried out by Ipsos MORI and involved a representative sample of 1,024 adults in Northern Ireland.

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Editor's notes:

1. NICMA – the Childminding Association is a charity, and is the sole organisation representing childminders in Northern Ireland. 74% of registered childminders here are members. For more details about NICMA, please go to: www.nicma.org
2. 1,024 face-to-face interviews aged 16 and over were conducted by Ipsos MORI 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.
3. A report on the survey findings, *Childcare Matters: what the public thinks about childcare*, is being published by NICMA. For a copy of the report please click download additional info from the press release screen.