

Childcare and Adult Education A Discussion Document



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1. INTRODUCTION

AONTAS, the National Association of Adult Education, has consistently identified the absence of adequate childcare provision as a key barrier to adults taking up educational opportunities in Ireland. With no coherent service in place nationally and few having access to affordable places, moving childcare to the top of the government policy agenda has been a key objective for campaigners in recent years. In the late 1990s, the emergence of a **National Childcare Strategy** and the subsequent development of a major national funding programme, the **Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP)**, seemed to mark a considerable success for those who campaigned long and hard for better childcare provision.

The EOCP, which is administered by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, represents a major investment under the National Development Plan (NDP) in our national childcare infrastructure. New coordinating bodies at national and county level will help oversee this package of investment which is intended to meet the childcare needs of a sizeable part of the population. However it remains to be seen if this particular programme of funding, increasingly being promoted as a cure-all for the childcare problem, is suitable for the particular needs of the adult education sector.

This paper examines some of the current models of childcare used in adult education in Ireland. The main aim is to look at the strengths and weaknesses of the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme alongside alternative childcare models. What emerges is not a comprehensive discussion of childcare options for adults in education, but a snapshot of some aspects of current provision. Encouraging a discussion on the relevance of EOCP and other childcare models to adult education will ensure that the issue stays high on the policy agenda in the immediate future and in the longer term.

2. BACKGROUND

Documenting the Childcare Issue

AONTAS has campaigned on the childcare issue within two main strands of work during the past number of years:

- In seeking to influence overall adult education policy the need for improved learner supports, including better childcare, has repeatedly been highlighted.
- In its work with women's groups and networks, AONTAS has repeatedly stressed the particular needs of women learners in relation to the childcare issue.

Directly Influencing National Policy

In 1995 at its Annual Conference, AONTAS made a response to the White Paper on Education, **Charting our Education Future**. The key themes of this response were the three 'r's of recognition, resources and representation for the adult education sector. The development of childcare facilities was a key demand within the resources theme. Again four years later, during the AONTAS consultation process on the 1998 Green Paper, **Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning**, one of the main concerns voiced within the sector was a lack of properly funded childcare facilities.

The AONTAS response to the Green Paper entitled **Making an Impact**, stated that parents simply could not participate in work, education or training options without childcare support and that while women were often more affected by childcare issues, it is also an issue for men as learners and as parents. The paper welcomed the National Childcare Strategy and recommended its swift implementation as a first step in addressing the childcare deficit. However the measures contained in the Strategy were considered to be only part of the solution for adult education.

It is notable that AONTAS was not alone in stressing the need for expanded childcare provision to meet the varied needs of those in adult education. The 2000 White Paper, **Learning for Life**, the key policy document for the development of adult education services in Ireland notes that during the consultation process leading to its publication 'numerous submissions stressed the issue of inadequate childcare as the major barrier to adult learning opportunities, particularly for women' (p.78).

Supporting Women's Networks in Influencing Policy

Women's groups mushroomed during the late 1980s as a creative response by women themselves to their own experiences of marginalisation. Exclusion of women from education and training existed and still exists for a number of reasons including their tendency to be economically dependent on a partner or social welfare, absence from the live register and the inflexibility of course provision. However, chief among the barriers to women's participation is a lack of affordable childcare.

Women's groups and networks have provided courses backed up by locally based childcare where possible, giving many women an opportunity to learn where it would otherwise be impossible. But given the current costs of insurance, premises and attracting trained personnel, this is proving more and more difficult. The AONTAS report on **W.E.N.D.I – the Women's Education Network Development Initiative 1998-2000**, aimed at addressing women's educational disadvantage, named flexible needs-based childcare support for learners as key to participation. It stated that 'locally based education groups through providing safe and accessible childcare attracted many women who could not otherwise participate in education' (p.4).

In 2001 AONTAS made a submission to the National Anti-Poverty Strategy under Educational Disadvantage, which further highlighted the childcare problems of community based women's education groups. These groups, the submission noted, require 'additional funding for childcare, transport and monitoring supports' (p.6) in light of their key role in Irish women's education. Also in 2001, **At the Forefront**, a piece of research into women's community education conducted for AONTAS by the **Women's Education Resource and Research Centre (WERRC / UCD)** identified 'absence of childcare as the primary barrier to participants in community education' (p.52). It was further noted that a lack of coordination of childcare services at government level, and the spread of responsibility for childcare schemes among a range of government departments was making provision more erratic.

Currently AONTAS is delivering the S.T.A.N.C.E programme – **Strategies to Advance Networks Collective Empowerment** – which seeks to develop the political and representative skills of women's community education networks in Ireland. One of the issues arising repeatedly with participants is childcare, and how central it is to women's learning opportunities. Networks involved in the programme are seeking to influence childcare policy in their own localities and nationally with AONTAS support.

The key point stressed by AONTAS through all of the above named reports and projects, has been that **adequate affordable and accessible childcare should be an integral part of funded programmes and not an add-on or an after-thought.**

Despite the ongoing campaign outlined above, childcare support is still lacking in the adult education sector. In the summer of 2002 AONTAS held a series of regional meetings where members voiced their concerns about the current state of adult education on the ground in Ireland. At each meeting childcare was again identified as a huge barrier to participation in education, with particular difficulties being felt by women's groups and in rural areas.

A strong view emerged that the childcare structures being put in place under the National Childcare Strategy and investments such as the EOCP are to be welcomed. However few immediate benefits from these developments are being felt in adult and community education. The questions therefore have to be asked, what has the government been doing on the childcare issue and why are the benefits not being felt in this sector?

3. GOVERNMENT ACTION ON CHILDCARE

Key Government Reports

AONTAS has in fact been supported in its call for improved childcare by a variety of recent reports to the government. The **Report of the Partnership 2000 Working Group on Women's Access to Labour Market Opportunities**, chaired by the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, identified barriers to women's involvement in training and employment. A full chapter of the report devoted to 'the critical need for childcare' opens by noting 'a unanimous view within the Group that the inadequacy or lack of affordable childcare is a very significant barrier to the participation by women in the labour market and by extension in education, training and employment opportunities' (p.57). Furthermore, the report recognises that,

'Women seem to make choices about the nature of their participation in the labour market based on what may either be a need or desire to combine such participation with family responsibilities. In a situation where there is a lack of adequate and affordable childcare provision, such decisions may be made on the basis of need even where the desire might be otherwise' (p.61).

Specifically addressing the field of education, the **Report of the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education** also looked at the obstacle of childcare. This report noted that provision of childcare allowances in the adult education sector is limited to participants in VTOS, Youthreach and Senior Traveller Training. The action group clearly recognised the ineffectiveness of this arrangement and underlined the need for a great deal of expansion in the area of childcare. The point most heavily underlined by the report was the need for flexibility and the development of a range of options for learners so that they can 'choose the childcare option that suits them best' (p.97). However little has happened in terms of implementing the recommendations made in this report. In fact a more recent report, that of the **Taskforce on Lifelong Learning** published in late 2002 looked only very briefly at access issues for adult learners. Childcare and eldercare were mentioned as barriers for 'certain groups of women' but unfortunately no discussion of the issue or recommendations followed (p.35).

With regard to developing a childcare service in Ireland, the report upon which government has most heavily relied is that of the **Expert Working Group on Childcare**, also known as the **National Childcare Strategy**. It is to this report and Strategy that we now turn.

A Strategy for Childcare Coordination

The Expert Working Group on Childcare was established to develop a means of integrating the different strands of childcare delivery in Ireland. Its report, the National Childcare Strategy published in 1999, has laid the foundations for better childcare provision for all including those involved in adult education. The report opens with the acknowledgement that ‘there is a virtual crisis in childcare supply in Ireland’ (p.iv) and criticises the very uncoordinated and patchy childcare service persisting in this country, despite a range of reports recommending action. The Strategy contained recommendations for a fundamental restructuring of childcare provision, and the lack of coordination of childcare was the first issue to be addressed. In order to build a framework around which to develop a service, the establishment of new national and county level bodies was proposed. The following is an outline of the new structures set up under the Strategy.

New Childcare Structures

The Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (DJELR) now has lead responsibility for the coordination of Government Childcare Policy within its Equal Opportunities Childcare Section. Three significant bodies are in development for the coordination of childcare:

1. An Interdepartmental Policy Committee for Childcare to bring about cross-departmental cooperation in childcare at government level
2. A National Coordinating Childcare Committee to oversee the development of childcare infrastructure nationally
3. County Childcare Committees to coordinate childcare at local level

The role of the County Childcare Committees will be of particular importance to those providing adult education opportunities at local level. Their remit is:

- To develop a coordinated strategy for childcare provision in the area/county

- To monitor the implementation of this strategy
- To increase the supply of childcare services and facilities
- To support countywide networks of childcare providers
- To update the baseline data provided in the National Childcare Census
- To develop an information strategy on the provision of childcare in the county
- To establish effective links with appropriate county structures e.g. The County Development Board, Local Development Boards, the Health Board etc.

The County Childcare Committees are at various stages of development throughout the country, some having been up and running for well over a year and some still in the process of recruiting staff. It is almost too early for them to have a significant impact on local childcare provision. In the meantime, responsibility for childcare development remains largely in the hands of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform.

Most of the strands of childcare previously overseen by a range of different government departments have transferred into DJELR under the National Childcare Strategy. In March 2001, childcare measures that had been operated by the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs for out-of-school and after school care in disadvantaged communities were also transferred to DJELR, to avoid an overlap of responsibility. The funding of childcare development is now delivered largely through the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme.

Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme 2000-2006

The National Development Plan identified childcare as a priority area and £250m (317) was allocated under the Plan to the Department of Justice Equality & Law Reform to fund a childcare development programme until 2006. This Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme has three aims:

- To improve the quality of childcare in Ireland
- To increase the number of childcare places and childcare facilities
- To introduce a coordinated approach to the delivery of services

Funding is made available under this programme to those in the childcare sector wishing to improve or expand their service provision. The main types of funding available are:

- **Capital:** To establish or renovate childcare facilities for community based groups
- **Staffing:** To support staffing costs for community based childcare facilities
- **Capital:** To build or renovate childcare facilities for self-employed childcare providers catering for more than 20 children at one time

There is also funding available for:

- National Voluntary Childcare Organisations
- The development of local networks
- The support of innovative projects
- The support of local training models

In general the EOCP funds the development of physical premises and staffing. It is in many ways a building programme, designed to expand the number of places available in crèche facilities. Although there is money available for 'innovative projects', the bulk of funding is going towards crèche facilities, and there is no provision for childcare allowances or supports for individual parents or those seeking to access educational schemes.

Although it is a welcome development, EOCP is quite a rigid scheme. Simply building more crèches may not meet the needs of all those returning to education. Yet EOCP is being promoted as one of the key ways of filling the gap in adult education childcare provision. AONTAS has consistently advised that there is a need for more flexible childcare options for adults seeking to return to education, and EOCP should only be one aspect of provision.

4. EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES CHILDCARE PROGRAMME AND ADULT EDUCATION

It is often argued that a community-based childcare centre is ideal for those participating in community education. EOCP represents a positive opportunity for those in the community sector who already have a childcare facility in operation to expand and improve that service. For some it is therefore a welcome initiative. But the question remains as to whether such an inflexible model of childcare can be effective in the adult education sector as a whole.

Where the EOCP works for Adult Education

Adult Education as a sector has struggled to maintain a steady funding income over the years, with the result that many providers throughout the country are adept at making ends meet and working with cocktails of funding from a mixture of sources. Similarly with childcare, it seems that in the community sector in particular, providers have managed to struggle along by making maximum use of resources from a variety of funders, rarely depending on one funding source to support a childcare facility.

The Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme fits comfortably as a new part of the funding cocktail for some community groups. With its focus on building and staffing grants, it can be a welcome boost to an existing community childcare facility. Two community education centres where the funding has worked well to date are Waterford Women's Centre and Longford Women's Centre.

Waterford Women's Centre

The childcare facility in the women's centre is small and can accommodate only seven children at a time. Therefore priority is given to young babies, as their mothers like to have them on the premises. Funding was initially received from the ESF to buy and renovate the building for the women's centre, including the crèche facility. When funding was needed to staff the centre, an application was made to the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme.

EOCP funding for staff costs has been received for the staffing of the childcare centre from September 2001 for three years. Further applications are being

made to the EOCP for capital funding in order to expand the crèche building itself. If successful, this may in turn lead to another application for increased staffing support at a later stage.

*As the Centre is small and the EOCP cannot provide a total solution, the women's centre have applied to the Health Board for help with childcare provision. Women whose children cannot be accommodated in the centre are encouraged as much as possible to access their own childcare outside the centre, as there are so few places. The Women's Centre can provide help in sourcing local childcare and an allowance in this respect is paid to women under the **DJELR Equality for Women Measure** from funds received by the women's centre.*

The belief at the Centre is that childcare has to be an integral part of providing courses and that courses are impractical without built in childcare support. The centre is flexible in the kind of in-house provision it offers. As the crèche is attached specifically to course provision, childcare is available mostly during the day, but also in the evenings if courses are running. As the courses themselves are designed to meet women's changing needs, so the supporting childcare must meet the same changing needs. Provision therefore needs to be very flexible and constantly reviewed.

A range of agencies and programmes are needed to support the provision of childcare to the women using Waterford Women's Centre. However the funding provided under EOCP is a significant boost to the basic resources of premises and staffing that the centre really needs.

Longford Women's Centre

Longford Women's Centre is a multi-functional centre for women in Longford town. The centre originally grew from a NOW funded project as part of the EU employment initiative. A range of services is provided including counselling, information, domestic violence support, education and training and many more.

The Women's Centre operates a childcare facility, Catkins Nursery. As it can only meet a small part of the demand for childcare locally and has an extensive waiting list, centre management has successfully applied to the Equal

Opportunities Childcare Programme for funds and the childcare facility is currently being extended. This will facilitate the intake of babies and allow room for provision of after-school services, which are currently restricted. At present the facility can in theory hold 32 children, although this would be at an absolute maximum. Realistically around 25 children can be comfortably catered for. It is hoped that the extension will allow these numbers to be increased.

Two full-time workers staff the childcare centre but there are also 12 FÁS Community Employment staff. Management believes the childcare facility could not function or offer an affordable rate of childcare without this support from FÁS. The flexibility of the FÁS staff means that children can be cared for on a fulltime, sessional or part time basis, with rotating shifts among staff. The current rate for a child in full time care per week is € 70. However, flexible rates can be applied where there is a special need or smaller parent income.

The childcare facility in Longford works well because it is not geared solely at providing childcare for those attending classes at the centre, but is open to all local parents. Management feels it would not be financially viable to offer childcare only to support courses, and the full time commercial operation of the crèche means it can also be made available to those who need it on a drop-in basis only or who can't afford childcare elsewhere.

The sourcing of support from different agencies has been essential. Although turnover is by necessity high among the FÁS CE workers, the centre would not be able to work without them and would be economically unviable. The funding from EOCP means that facilities can be extended, and the close working relationship between the Women's Centre and various bodies in the Longford region means that the centre remains well placed strategically.

It is also notable that Longford has seen an influx of immigrants in recent years which presents new challenges to all those working at the Women's Centre. The childcare facility has allowed these women to make use of the centre alongside local women, but realistically it can only meet the needs of a very small number of those on low incomes who need and would like to avail of childcare services in the area. Staff at the centre are now exploring ways of addressing the childcare needs of immigrant parents with relevant local agencies.

The EOCP in Longford has been a welcome additional source of funding for an already established community childcare facility. As with Waterford the premises are being expanded so that more provision is possible. However the staffing of the facility comes largely from FÁS and it is unlikely that EOCP alone could provide a real childcare solution in Longford.

The above examples are useful in demonstrating that small community run centres can benefit from EOCP, but childcare facilities operated through VECs can also benefit. An excellent example presents itself in the Adult Education Centre in Ennis, Co. Clare.

Ennis Adult & Community Education Centre

The Adult Education Centre in Ennis run by County Clare VEC offers a range of adult and family education programmes including literacy, VTOS, Youthreach, Refugee Language support and a Family Learning programme. A new crèche facility has recently been opened at the Ennis Centre and is able to meet the needs of most parents using the Centre for training and education. The crèche is purpose built and only caters for those utilising the Centre; it is not open to the general public.

The crèche was built with funding from the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme. It represents another situation in which this particular funding programme can be useful, in this case servicing a complex which offers a whole range of programmes and services to adult learners under one roof. Clare VEC recognised the need for quality and convenient childcare attached to their educational programmes. In particular, growth in the number of local women returning to education who required a childminding service provided the inspiration for this facility to be completed.

Full time childcare provision is available during the day and there is also an after-school service on offer. All participants in courses at the Centre as well as staff can avail of the facilities. Most of the provision is financed by the childcare allowances which are available to participants in the VEC run schemes (VTOS, Youthreach) and participants top this contribution up to the tune of €1 per hour, to a maximum of €10 per week. Childcare at the Centre is therefore very

affordable. It is quite a large facility and can cater for about 45 children at any one time. Given that courses are running at different times and staff are available on different shifts, this means most of the childcare needs of participants are met and no waiting list has developed for the childcare facility.

There are currently 11 staff at the childcare centre in Ennis, some of whom are employed part time. Their positions are currently funded by the Department of Education and Science. However, an application has been made to the EOCP for a staffing grant for the future so that the facility can continue to improve its quality provision.

The Ennis Centre provides a good example of a facility providing various services in a single venue to a group of learners who are concentrated in a given town. This can potentially be a viable way forward for many VECs operating similar facilities in urban centres such as Ennis. Using the VEC childcare allowances (described in a later section) is also a good way of resourcing this type of childcare facility.

Where the EOCP does not work for Adult Education

The cases described demonstrate that using the EOCP as one option to boost an individual community childcare facility can be beneficial. However such a rigid scheme may not work when it is applied to a national programme of education with a broad mix of participants. Supplying crèche places alone will not meet the needs of all participants in any given programme, especially one which operates in a whole range of different settings and centres.

Back to Education Initiative (BTEI)

BTEI is one of the main pillars of Government policy for adult education laid out in the White Paper 2000. It aims to address the needs of those with minimal or no educational qualifications and provide a re-entry route for those who wish to upgrade their skills. BTEI is intended to provide flexible courses in terms of delivery and timing, allowing training to fit with family, work and other responsibilities.

BTEI involves the expansion of existing schemes such as VTOS, PLC, Literacy, Youthreach and the Senior Traveller Training Programmes, with new forms of provision such as part time

and modular options. Ten per cent (10%) of places have also been reserved for community education. Adults with less than upper second level education are the priority target group for this initiative, but other target groups include:

- Those not in work but not eligible to be on the Live Register
- Disadvantaged women experiencing particular barriers to participation
- Lone parents and those with other caring responsibilities

These groups have an obvious interest in childcare support, and so childcare provision will be a fundamental need of many potential BTEI participants.

Unfortunately there is in fact no integral childcare provision or allowance attached to the BTEI scheme. Resources for childcare have not been included in the overall funding of the initiative and are therefore largely outside the responsibility of the Department of Education.

Childcare support for full time BTEI participants may be provided via existing VTOS and Youthreach measures through the VECs. However, part time participants on BTEI can only access childcare support through the DJELR Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme.

Although the EOCP is to be welcomed in the context of the implementation of the National Childcare Strategy, the suitability of this strand of funding for BTEI has to be questioned. A number of issues present themselves in relation to funding BTEI childcare with this measure:

- EOCP provides essentially for capital expenditure (buildings and renovations) and staffing costs for crèches. Where there is no existing crèche, or where such a centre is under development, childcare support is unavailable for BTEI in the short term.
- Longer term, providing crèches and staffing is an inadequate response to the childcare needs of many parents. AONTAS has long maintained that there need to be a variety of options open to learners in recognition of their differing needs.
- Giving responsibility for the handling of BTEI childcare to the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, while the Department of Education and Science (DES) has responsibility for the scheme itself causes practical difficulties for those involved in the organisation of BTEI at local level. An extra layer of administration is created. As

applications for BTEI places must be made to DES, and childcare can only then be accessed by applying to DJELR, an unnecessary additional round of administrative work has been created for already over-stretched local organisers.

- Applicants who cannot be assured childcare provision in advance of applying to BTEI for a place are therefore discouraged from applying.
- In rural areas in particular, crèche facilities will not meet the needs of all those seeking to access BTEI and other schemes. Isolation and lack of public transport makes crèche provision less useful. For that reason, the narrow focus of the funding available through DJELR Equal Opportunities Scheme cannot address the issue of those who are forced by their physical location to use alternative childcare provision.

Some of these issues have already been noted by the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education (2001) when it reported on the EOCP that 'initiatives are only now commencing and individual learners need to be able to choose the childcare option that suits them best – it is not clear that there will be that much choice, if any, available' (p.97).

In summary, the fact that the childcare attached to BTEI is not an integral part of the scheme and is not coordinated as part of the BTEI package by the Department of Education and Science is seen as unacceptable and flawed. The scheme is in marked contrast to an initiative such as the Education Equality Initiative (EEI) where childcare provision is an integral part of all projects where appropriate. EEI projects aim to tackle educational disadvantage by providing a whole range of necessary supports including childcare, mentoring and guidance to adult learners as key aspects of the learning package. Stemming from the work of the earlier **Women's Education Initiative (WEI)**, EEI pilots were established to attract the most marginalized back into education and to overcome such barriers as the absence of affordable childcare. Given that BTEI has similar target groups, the provision of integral childcare should really be a key aspect of the initiative.

Further Considerations: Administrating EOCP

A final and less specific doubt that needs highlighting in relation to EOCP is the actual efficiency with which it is being rolled out. Although € 317m was earmarked under the NDP for childcare investment, there has been a notable under-spend recorded in some areas to date. According to a recent report commissioned by the Economic and Social Research Institute (2002), there was significant under-spend in year one of the Programme with obvious knock-on implications. The report notes that in 2000 in the Border, Midlands and Western Region expenditure was estimated at about 8.7 percent of the target (p.123).

The second major difficulty associated with the investment earmarked under NDP is whether it can realistically meet the growing childcare demand by 2006. The ESRI report also records a predicted growth in the number of mothers in employment by that time, so that NDP funding will just barely meet demand if it is fully implemented (p.124). However, further significant investment will then be needed post 2006 to ensure supply does not then slip.

5. ALTERNATIVE CHILDCARE MODELS

Department of Education Administered Schemes

Investment in childcare under the NDP is dedicated to building an infrastructure. However childcare allowances for participants in statutory training and education schemes are also available in the adult education sector. The Department of Education and Science maintains the responsibility to allocate certain funds to VECs for childcare associated with the schemes

- VTOS
- Youthreach
- Senior Traveller Training Centre Programmes

The allowances to participants in VTOS, Youthreach and Senior Traveller Training may be used to cover:

- Direct provision of crèche facilities in centres, or in rented premises, including staff, equipment/refurbishment, rental, insurance and other overheads.
- Purchase of places in existing community or commercial crèches (with priority given to the former where feasible). This is subject to a maximum of € 63.50 per week per child for a full day session, with pro-rata adjustments for shorter sessions.
- Payment of childminders, subject to a maximum of € 63.50 per week per child for a full session, with pro-rata adjustments for part-time sessions. This is be subject to (a) registration as required under the Child Care Act, (b) presentation of invoices on headed paper, (c) a rolling sample check for tax clearance certificates.

In no case are funds paid directly to students, but a registered childminder or facility will be paid directly by the VEC.

The FÁS Model

Practically the same model of childcare allowance was introduced by FÁS for its trainees in 2001. The amount allocated per participant (€ 63.50 per week full time sessions with

adjusted allowances for part time minding) is the same as that available to VTOS participants.

Complaints are often voiced about the need to use only registered childminding to avail of these allowances. In rural Ireland especially, but to a lesser extent throughout the country, the option of using a registered childminder is often impractical. It can be more suitable for learners to leave dependent children with friends or relatives for a variety of reasons, often related to their physical location, lack of transport and other problems.

A second concern about these allowances is whether the amount of the allowance is realistic. €63.50 per week seems to fall at the very bottom end of the childcare range: According to survey work quoted within the National Childcare Strategy, average costs of childcare in 1997 ranged between €71.10 per week to €90.15 (p.17). It was further noted that childcare in Ireland as a percentage of average income is among the highest in the EU. The adequacy of these allocations therefore must be questioned.

Despite the obvious flaws in the allowances available to adult learners and trainees, there are still advantages to be recorded. The fact that there is an element of choice in the type of registered childminding to be used is a better scenario than that offered for part time BTEI participants. Learners can at least determine which mode of childcare is most suited to their own situation and do not have a model thrust upon them. It is also generally accepted that such allowances help to attract learners back into education and training.

This is probably the most crucial point about allowances, that they are motivating for potential learners because they are integral to the schemes in question. Quoted in a 2002 ESRI report into women returning to education and training, one VEC representative stated:

'It means when you are offering a course you can say that this allowance is available. I think a lot of women didn't come in looking for courses before. They just took it for granted there is no childcare. Now they know there is, so they are more likely to come looking for a course' (p.68).

This is a demonstration of the incentive of integral childcare that has been so unfortunately overlooked in the development of the Back to Education Initiative described previously.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The issues outlined in this document are some of the main issues currently arising in relation to childcare in adult education. A number of conclusions can be drawn from this discussion, and it is hoped that future policy development in relation to adult education and to childcare will encompass some of the concerns raised here and elsewhere.

The key point made has been in relation to the investment in childcare under the National Development Plan, particularly the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme. It seems that although this is a very welcome development and is necessary to build a strong childcare infrastructure in Ireland, this strand of investment will not hugely benefit the adult education sector short term. While existing community-based childcare facilities may use the EOCP to enhance their provision and offer more places, at present other sources of funding and support are still required to meet the needs of community learners.

AONTAS therefore hopes that this Programme of funding will be fully implemented and swiftly so, but also that more imaginative and flexible models will be developed specifically catering for adult learners.

Allocating childcare funds in the form of allowances doesn't always work perfectly either. It is often felt in the community sector that as some women may have many children, and for other reasons, that it is easier if community providers are allocated a block budget for childcare so they can budget internally. However, it has to be conceded that while existing statutory allowances have their own drawbacks, the fact that they are integral to the schemes they support, and the fact that they can be used in a variety of ways means they are often more practical and offer more choice to learners than rigid crèche building models.

Recommendations

- That the National Childcare Strategy be fully implemented to improve the childcare infrastructure and to improve the coordination of childcare nationally and locally.
- That the total investment earmarked under the NDP be made in full within the timescale, and that consideration be given to the investment which will need to follow post-2006.
- That childcare support be an integral part of all adult education and training schemes developed by government in future, so that lack of childcare does not become a disincentive to participation, and to avoid administrative confusion and overload.
- That the future focus of childcare models be on flexibility, to match the flexibility being increasingly brought into educational schemes in terms of teaching methods, learning approaches and the ethos of family friendly policies.
- That allowances provided under existing VEC and FAS schemes be continuously reviewed, so that the amount is increased according to the real costs of childcare.
- That the uptake of these existing allowances be reviewed so as to determine whether allowances should be paid directly to learners rather than to childcare providers on their behalf. This would allow learners to determine whether or not they would use only registered childcare, and would allow those in rural and isolated settings in particular to access the form of childcare which is of most benefit to them.
- That particular support be afforded to the Community Education Sector in the provision of the most appropriate form of childcare to meet local needs. The specific issue of the threatened withdrawal of Community Employment Workers will have a huge impact on community childcare facilities and needs to be addressed urgently.
- That new childcare challenges be addressed speedily and effectively at national and local level. The particular childcare needs of immigrant workers, refugees and asylum seekers wishing to access education and training need to be thoroughly researched and addressed as quickly as possible at all levels of policy and delivery.
- That in the short term the provision of childcare in relation to part time Back to Education Initiative places be reviewed so that more options can be provided over the lifetime of the scheme to 2006.

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