

***'A small-scale qualitative research study on the early learning and childcare needs of parents who work atypical hours, or live in rural communities'***



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## Section 1: Background and Context

### Background

First 5: A Whole of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families, published in November 2018, sets out an ambitious programme of work across Government Departments to improve the experiences and outcomes of children in Ireland from birth to age 5 across all aspects of their lives in the coming ten years.

One of the major objectives of First 5 is that babies and young children have access to safe, high-quality, developmentally appropriate early learning and care and school-age childcare which reflects diversity of needs. To meet this objective, the following Strategic Actions have been identified:

- Make high-quality early learning and care and school-age childcare for babies and young children more affordable,
- Maintain and extend the supply of high-quality publicly subsidised early learning and care and school-age childcare to best serve the developmental needs of babies and young children, ensuring that it also reflects the needs and preferences of parents and families; and
- Ensure that early learning and care and school-age childcare provision promotes participation, strengthens social inclusion and embraces diversity through the integration of additional supports and services for children and families with additional needs.

The First 5 Implementation Plan, published in May 2019, describes the actions that will be taken in the initial implementation phase of First 5. Among the actions is a commitment to *‘undertake research on the early learning and care and school-age childcare needs of parents who work atypical hours or live in rural communities and develop recommendations for further action’*. This First 5 action is also a commitment of the Department of Rural and Community Development’s Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy, 2021-2025, with a view to enhance services in rural areas in a way that enables people to both live and work in rural areas.

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) has designed and delivered a research project in fulfilment of this action. The project was overseen by the Project Oversight Group, with membership from the DCEDIY, Department of Rural and Community

Development, Department of Trade, Enterprise and Employment, the Irish Government Economic and Evaluations Services (IGEES).

### **Aims and objectives**

The overall research project aimed to support the delivery of the commitment in First 5 and Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy *“to undertake research on the early learning and care and school-age childcare needs of parents who work atypical hours or live in rural communities, and develop recommendations for future action”* through gathering evidence to inform the development of policy, in particular, policy for early learning and care and school-age childcare and childcare, and for rural development.

There are three Phases to the overall research project:

- Undertaking a nationally representative parent survey of over 500 households with children aged under 15 years the early learning and care, and school-age childcare needs of parents who work atypical hours or live in rural communities,
- Undertaking a small-scale qualitative study through a series of focus group discussions with parents who work atypical hours or live-in rural communities. The qualitative study will complement the parent survey, in exploring key themes in more detail with parents.
- Development of a report on the combined research findings to inform policy development.

### **Definitions for this research**

- **Parents/guardians:** Parents refer to parents/guardians with children under 15.
- **Parents living in rural communities:** Parents living in rural communities are those living in geographical areas of low population density, including outside towns and cities, and may include Gaeltacht and island communities. According to the CSO (2016), a rural area is an area type with a population less than 1,500 persons.
- **Atypical work:** *“Atypical work patterns include those whose employment consists of shift work, evening work, night work, or work on a Saturday or Sunday.”*

**Parents who work atypical hours:** Parents who work atypical hours could include those in shift work (including night shift work), weekend work, very early or very late hours, part-

time work, seasonal work and other work that might be considered outside of a typical working day or week.

## Context

### Atypical work

The Central Statistic's Office (CSO, 2016a) describes atypical work in the following way: *"Atypical work patterns include those whose employment consists of shift work, evening work, night work, or work on a Saturday or Sunday."* EU-SILC (CSO, 2021) statistics show a rise in atypical work in Ireland of 6.3% between 2011 and 2019, growing from 36% to 42.3%. There was a decrease of 4.3% in atypical work in Ireland as a result of the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic.

According to the CSO (2020) Labour Force Survey statistics outlined below:

- Approximately 192,300 male parents are engaged in atypical work at least sometimes
- Approximately 143,700 female parents are engaged in atypical work at least sometimes

**Table 1: Persons 25-64 working atypical hours by sex and domestic situation, 000s, Annual average 2020**

Males	Parent, min 1 child <15, partner works	Parent, min 1 child <15, partner does not work	Parent, min 1 child <15, lone parent	No children	Total
<b>All employees</b>	246.5	95.1	10.9	500.6	853.1
<b>Usually does shift work</b>	58.6	23.9	2.5	111.4	196.5
<b>Does evening work at least sometimes</b>	104.4	36.7	4.1	180.8	326
<b>Does night work at least sometimes</b>	37.6	13.4	[1.8]	59.5	112.3
<b>Does Saturday work at least sometimes</b>	85.6	31.6	3.7	165.3	286.2
<b>Does Sunday work at least sometimes</b>	56.7	19.7	2.4	103.8	182.7

<b>Does atypical work at least sometimes</b>	136.6	50.2	5.5	254.8	447.1
<b>Females</b>					
	<b>Parent, min 1 child &lt;15, partner works</b>	<b>Parent, min 1 child &lt;15, partner does not work</b>	<b>Parent, min 1 child &lt;15, lone parent</b>	<b>No children</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>All employees</b>	267	20.3	58.2	468.5	814
<b>Usually does shift work</b>	47.3	5.4	13.6	82.8	149.1
<b>Does evening work at least sometimes</b>	72.5	7.7	17.4	144.2	241.8
<b>Does night work at least sometimes</b>	21.9	2.5	3.6	33.2	61.2
<b>Does Saturday work at least sometimes</b>	61	6.9	19.2	125.9	213.1
<b>Does Sunday work at least sometimes</b>	44.6	5.7	12.5	88.6	151.3
<b>Does atypical work at least sometimes</b>	104.8	10.6	28.3	199.5	343.3

Source: Labour Force Survey (LFS), Central Statistics Office, Ireland.

Square brackets [ ] indicate an estimate based on fewer than 50 observations. Users should treat estimate with caution.

Data may be subject to future revision.

The literature on atypical work highlights both positive and negative aspects of this type of work. With the contentious nature of atypical work it should be understood that it provides a number of positives including; providing employment opportunities for those who would be otherwise unemployed. (Kelly & Barrett, 2017; OECD, 2015; Addison & Surfield, 2006). The CSO Labour Force Survey Bulletin (2019a) also states that persons with atypical working patterns in Ireland are more likely to work ‘always’ or ‘often’ under time pressure (38.7%) than those working normal patterns (33.0%).

While the majority of respondents in this research were from households with two parents, there are considerable challenges for lone parents working atypical hours. CSO (2016b) statistics state that 25.4% of all family units with children are headed by a lone parent and 86.4% of all lone parents families are headed by a mother. Therefore, lone female parents who are working atypical hours may be a group who face particular challenges in relation to accessing childcare services.

### **Parents living in rural areas:**

The CSO's Urban and Rural life in Ireland statistics (2019b) show rural areas with high urban influence had the highest proportion of 'couple with children' households in 2016 at 45.3%. Of the families with children, 'satellite urban towns' and 'independent urban towns' have a greater proportion of young families with all children under 15 years of age at 53.7% (63,785 families) and 51.2% (73,223). In addition, 'highly rural/remote areas' had a greater proportion of families (44.2%) with all children ages 15 years and over than any other area type.

Recent CSO statistics (2022) on the distance of households to childcare services found that, on average, a childcare service was located 1.6km from a residential dwelling in the State. The counties with the longest average distance to a childcare service were in Leitrim (3.2km), Roscommon (3.0km) and Mayo (2.9km). In the western region (Galway city, Galway county, Mayo and Roscommon), 84.4% of residential dwellings were less than 5km from a childcare service.

Pobal's 2020/21 Early Years Sector Profile Report identifies that 37% of early years childcare services are based in rural areas whilst the remaining 63% are in urban areas. The Growing Up in Ireland Study (ESRI, 2013: 63) found "infants in rural areas were more likely than infants in urban areas to be placed in non-relative care, perhaps reflecting the wider spread of households in the former; but they were also less likely to be placed in a centre as an alternative to relative care, possibly reflecting lower availability of crèches in rural areas."

## **Section 2: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

This section outlines the key methodologies used in this research study including research design, focus group recruitment, research limitations, analytical approach and ethical considerations.

## Research design

The DCEDIY and researcher agreed the best initial approach was to conduct online focus groups with parents who work atypical hours or live in rural communities. Conducting the focus groups online was judged to be the best approach as participants could take part remotely and did not have to travel long distances or have to arrange childcare. However, as a low number of participants attended the initial focus groups, a secondary approach of conducting one to one telephone interviews was employed.

## Focus group recruitment

Participants were recruited to participate in the online focus groups with the assistance of a number of organisations. Firstly, local City/County Childcare Committees (CCCs) assisted with the recruitment of participants through sending information about the focus group in their weekly newsletter and on their social media platforms (see appendix 2). City/County Childcare Committees (CCCs) work collaboratively to provide support to over 4,400 early learning and childcare service providers in Ireland. Secondly, the National Parents Council Primary assisted with the recruitment of participants by sending information about the focus groups out to parents via email. The National Parents Council Primary is the representative organisation for parents of children in primary or early learning and care.

Recruitment for the online focus groups was conducted through Eventbrite. Analysis of traffic to the Eventbrite page where participants signed up to the online focus groups showed there were a total of 111 people who clicked through to this landing page from emails, newsletters, social media etc. A total of 22 people signed up to participate in the online focus groups and seven people turned up to participate in the focus groups. A further eight participants were recruited to participate in one to one telephone interviews. These further eight participants were recruited by the researcher through convenience sampling.

**Table 2: Overview of Research Participants**

	Gender	Occupation	Working atypical hours	Partner working atypical hours	Living in a rural community
<b>Respondent 1</b>	Female	Architectural technician	No	Yes	Yes



			(Yes previously)		
<b>Respondent 2</b>	Female	Out of hours medical service operator	Yes	Yes (Prison Officer)	Yes
<b>Respondent 3</b>	Female	Nurse	No (Yes previously)	Yes	Yes
<b>Respondent 4</b>	Female	Garda	Yes	Yes (Prison Officer)	Yes
<b>Respondent 5</b>	Male	Prison Officer	Yes	Yes (Garda)	Yes
<b>Respondent 6</b>	Female	Officer Administrator	No	Yes (Medical worker)	Yes
<b>Respondent 7</b>	Female	Teacher	No	Yes (Prison Officer)	No
<b>Respondent 8</b>	Female	Accountant	No	-	Yes
<b>Respondent 9</b>	Female	Financial Services worker	Yes	No	Yes
<b>Respondent 10</b>	Female	Hospital worker (non-medical)	Yes	No	Yes
<b>Respondent 11</b>	Female	Paramedic	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Respondent 12</b>	Female	Associate Director of Global Company	Yes	No	Yes
<b>Respondent 13</b>	Male	Civil Servant	No	Yes	Yes
<b>Respondent 14</b>	Female	Local Authority worker	No	Yes	Yes
<b>Respondent 15</b>	Female	Occupational Therapist	Yes	Yes	Yes

### Research participants

Table 2 above provides an overview of the study's research participants. It describes respondents' occupations, if they work atypical hours, if their partner works atypical hours and if they live in rural communities. As can be seen from table 2, there were a total of 15 respondents. The majority of

respondents (86.7% or 13 out of 15) were female and two (13.3%) were male. A total of 53.3% (8 out of 15) of respondents were currently working atypical hours and 73.3% (11 out of 15) of respondent's partners were currently working atypical hours. Finally, 93.3% (14 out of 15) of respondents were living in a rural community.

### **Research limitations**

It should be noted that this is a small-scale research study with 15 participants. While it was anticipated that a larger number of participants would take part in focus groups, only 15 participants were recruited to the study. Therefore, there are limitations in terms of the findings due to the small number of participants. However, challenges in recruiting participants is perhaps not surprising due to the nature of parents working atypical hours.

### **Discussion guide**

A discussion guide was developed by the researcher and approved by the DCEDIY. A full copy of the discussion guide for the focus groups and one-to-one interviews can be found in Appendix 1.

### **Analytical approach**

The focus groups and telephone interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. The qualitative data was then analysed according to key emerging themes related to:

- parents who work atypical hours;
- parents who live in rural communities;
- parents who work atypical hours and live in rural communities.

### **Ethical issues**

All due consideration was given to ethical issues arising at every stage of the research process. However, the main ethical issues which were addressed in this research were informed consent; confidentiality and anonymity; and record keeping including data protection and security. All data was anonymised so as not to identify the participants who took part in the research, e.g. any identifying information was removed and no names of participants or where they live etc. were included in the report. In terms of informed consent, participants consented to participate in the research when

signing up for the research and verbal consent was also obtained at the beginning of focus groups and interviews.

### **Section 3: Key Themes from the Research**

#### **Introduction**

This section of the report provides a thematic analysis of the qualitative research data. It identifies the key findings and themes which arose from the research data analysis. The section is divided into three parts:

- Key themes related to the needs of parents who work atypical hours
- Key themes related to the needs of parents living in rural communities
- Key themes common to both parents who work atypical hours and live in rural communities

### **Key themes related to the needs of parents who work atypical hours**

#### **Many childcare options are not suited to parents who work atypical hours**

A key theme to emerge from the research was that the majority of childcare options available are not suited to parents who work atypical hours.

#### **Crèches:**

For example, the opening hours of crèches are generally not suited to parents who often begin work early in the morning, work late in the evenings and work night or weekend shifts. Some parents who work atypical hours are also on rosters where they work different hours every week which is challenging for crèches who usually prefer children to attend the same days and hours each week.

- *“Say if we went to a crèche it wouldn’t be open and the local crèche doesn’t open until 8 in the morning so we couldn’t drop them at 7.10 when (my husband) was going. You would have to take time off and we wouldn’t be back with the hours we work.”* [Female Garda]
- *“I work in a hospital but have different hours each week...the lady (in the crèche) is very, very good and we are trying to work out a balance over four weeks and get an average and I maybe need four hours one week, ten hours another week and 12 hours the next week. I don’t know if we can sustain it going forward.”* [Female hospital worker]

#### **Childminders:**

Similarly, parents who work atypical hours reported difficulties in securing childminders as a childcare option due to working long hours, evenings, night shifts, weekends and holidays. This included difficulties in recruiting childminders to work long and atypical hours and the high cost of paying a childminder for long and unsociable hours. Some parents discussed having childminders but it not lasting due to the unsociable hours. Parents working different hours or rotas each week was also identified as a barrier to employing a childminder in terms of having a consistent income and hours.

- *“At the start we looked into a few people (childminders) and then they came back and said, ‘wait you would be working late and weekends?’ And it would be different if the hours were different and they weren’t working on the weekends...One girl said she would help but it didn’t work out because of the hours.”* [Male prison officer]
- *“There are childminders but I can’t tell them when my finish time is. I can’t guarantee I will be finished at 8pm. There are times I have walked in at 12pm or 1am in the morning.”* [Female paramedic]

#### **Au pairs:**

Some parents discussed au pairs as a form of childcare that could work for those working atypical hours. However, some parents didn’t have a preference of an au pair as a childcare option as they didn’t like the idea of someone living in their house. Others considered an au pair as a childcare option but didn’t have a spare bedroom in their house to accommodate them.

- *“A neighbour of ours had an au pair but we have a three bed house and don’t have room.”*  
[Female paramedic]

#### **Reliance on family for childcare**

Many of the parents consulted who work atypical hours rely on family members, generally grandparents, to provide childcare as they feel there were no other childcare options available to them due to the hours they work. This was particularly the case for parents who both worked atypical hours. Parents who rely on family to provide childcare stated they were unsure if they would be able to continue to work atypical hours unless their family members supported them. Some parents talked

about having feelings of guilt for relying on family members, particularly older grandparents. Some parents who work in higher risk environments were concerned for grandparent's health during the Covid-19 pandemic.

- *"The reason we had to go down the route of family is our hours. You are not going to have someone to work the hours we work. I work until 4 in the morning and I work four days on and four off. I do earlys 7am to 7pm and then 4pm to 4am. (My husband) works five shifts and then the second week its two shift and that rotates and he has every second weekend off. We rely on my father in law and we pay him but otherwise we would be rightly screwed."*

[Female Garda married to a prison officer]

- *"We work shift work and they can be off in terms of not working together because I am in the prison and (my wife) is a Guard and we work weekends and that is hard to get babysitters and the hours don't match up and no one will do it. We start early in the morning and work late and unsociable hours and our problem is I work 8am to 8pm and the problem is something might happen and then I can't make it home...it would be difficult to get a childminder mind them."* [Male prison officer married to a Garda]

### **One parent working part-time or giving up work**

Another theme to emerge related to parents who work atypical hours was one parent in a family giving up work or working part-time to provide childcare in order to accommodate another parent who is working atypical hours. In some cases, both parents were working atypical hours and in other cases one parent was working atypical hours. For example, the female partner of a male prison officer who works shifts and weekends discussed working part-time in order to provide childcare, cut costs and be available to bring children to extra-curricular activities. Two other participants said they were currently discussing one partner giving up work to accommodate a partner who is working atypical hours. In both cases, the male partner was considering giving up work or working part time as they were earning less than the female partner.

- *“I like being part-time but I am doing it because of (my husband’s) work. I did work full time but I felt I was never doing anything 100% and it was chronic and the bills were going on and it is much easier that I am off during the week.”* [Female Teacher married to prison officer]
- *“My husband is away working Monday to Friday...if things don’t fall into place with childcare next year he will be the one to give up work because I am the one earning more money.”* [Female paramedic]

### **Recommendations to government to support parents who work atypical hours**

Parents who work atypical hours made a number of recommendations as to how the government could support them in relation to childcare.

#### **Subsidies/tax relief:**

A common recommendation made by parents was for the government to provide childcare subsidies or tax relief for parents who work atypical hours. This was suggested as providing childcare can be more expensive for parents working atypical hours due to long hours, evenings and weekends. Parents also felt those working atypical hours, who are often essential workers such as Garda, medical workers and prison officers, should be valued more by the government due to the importance of their work by providing subsidies and tax relief.

- *“I think there should be some subsidy for families that are working out of normal hours the same as the way the ECCE<sup>1</sup> is subsidised that they would be in for a few hours. That should be provided for someone that works out of hours and they are dependent on those workers. There should be something there for parents, subsidising wages or providing childcare services out of hours.”* [Female out of hours medical service operator married to a prison officer]

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<sup>1</sup> The Early Childhood Care and Education Programme (ECCE) programme is a universal two-year pre-school programme available to all children within the eligible age range.

### **Parental leave/unpaid leave:**

Another recommendation made in the research was for the government to provide parents who work atypical hours with more parental or unpaid leave. According to those consulted, providing parents who work atypical hours with more parental leave would help support the provision of childcare. Some participants cited other countries such as Sweden where there is government policy to support longer maternity and parental leave.

- *"I would be happy with more unpaid leave to make sure we are covered at home. It is not all about money. I am contracted to do overtime but I would be happy to lose it."*

[Male prison officer married to a Garda]

### **Out of hours childcare services:**

A common suggestion made by parents who work atypical hours was the government provision of out of hours childcare services. It was suggested that crèches and other childcare facilities should be supported by the government to open longer hours than currently provided. Crèches being supported to open 24 hours and at weekends was suggested and examples of such out of hours childcare provision were discussed by respondents. A drop-in out of hours childcare service was also discussed by parents who work atypical hours.

- *"I would like to have the option of (out of hours childcare). I could pick them (children) up and bring them to school and I know they are rested and fed I could go home and get some sleep and I know they are safe and well looked after."* [Female paramedic]

- *"In England during Covid-19, they opened schools for parents of police because there was no childcare but there is no option like that in Ireland. There are nurses and paramedics and fireman and prison officers but it is not even an option."* [Female Garda married to a prison officer]

- *"I remember when Covid-19 came in they (government) said about opening crèches for essential workers (for longer hours) and that would have been brilliant and would have taken*



*the pressure off...If crèches could open seven days a week and certain amount at weekends it would definitely help parents like us working shift work.” [Male prison officer married to a Garda]*

### **On-site childcare:**

Another recommendation made by those consulted was to provide on-site and out of hours childcare, particularly for parents who work in the medical field e.g., in hospitals. Parents felt on-site out of hours childcare would have many benefits including being able to see their children during their working day, being able to breastfeed etc. Parents felt on-site out of hours childcare would also serve to encourage more parents into the workforce and retain workers, in particular in the area of healthcare. A number of parents gave examples of hospitals in other countries providing childcare on site for medical and other hospital workers.

- *“On-site childcare in large organisations it would be amazing because you know they (children) are safe...and it would encourage more people into the workforce as well. In terms of out of hours, more people would do it in services that are lacking bodies, like nursing and healthcare are crying out for staff and if the childcare facilities were there it would encourage more people to work.” [Female out of hours medical service operator]*
  
- *“I have a friend who is a nurse in England and she was telling me it is not unusual to have a crèche in the hospital...From the parents perspective, you can go check on them on your breaks. It would help in relation to issues like if a childminder is sick and you are relying on just one person. You have surveillance of your child and you are closer to them. In Ireland that concept isn’t around.” [Female Occupational Therapist]*
  
- *“In the US you can drop in and see your kids in the childcare in hospitals. In the States they don’t get long maternity leave and mothers can continue to breastfeed your child in the crèche. Like if you child was upset you could call into them and comfort them which would be great.” [Female paramedic]*

## Key themes related to the needs of parents who living in rural communities

### **Lack of childcare facilities and spaces in rural communities**

One of the main themes to arise related to the childcare needs of parents living in rural communities was a lack of childcare facilities and childcare spaces for babies and pre-school aged children in some rural areas. Some parents discussed having to travel long distances to bring their children to childcare facilities or having their children in two or three different childcare facilities. A number of parents stated that a lack of childcare facilities and spaces in rural areas has impacted on their capacity to either return to work part-time, full-time or at all. Another impact of a lack of childcare spaces raised by parents was their children not knowing other children in the area before starting school.

- *“The local creche don’t have the capacity for any more children and there aren’t any places when my second child starts I won’t have three (children) in the same place.”* [Female nurse living in a rural area]
- *“There is such a demand in the area. The numbers are very high looking for childcare in their area. My daughter went on the list four and half years ago when she was born and she still wasn’t offered a space, she goes to the summer camp to get to know the other kids and has to go to the other creche.”* [Female paramedic living in a rural area]

### **Lack of childcare services offering ECCE and full-time services**

Another challenge highlighted by parents living in rural areas was a lack of services offering both ECCE and full-time childcare services. As a result of this, parents are travelling long distances to access childcare services that offer both ECCE and full-time childcare services or have different children in different childcare services.

- *“I am living in a rural area with about the population of 1,200 people and there is no creche in the town. There is two preschools and one will only operate the ECCE scheme and the one my son is in they have to be two years. The other place I tried him with, I am half way between the*

*two places and I would have been on the road for half the morning.” [Female Local Authority Employee living in a rural area]*

- *“If the boys go to the ECCE and creche they will be together as well but it all depends because we are on two waiting lists because there are very few places who offer both ECCE and creche. In (the local town), there is only one and is quite a large town and there is a waiting list of four years for (another town). The toddlers that are there already get preference if they are going to the ECCE.” [Female Associate Director of Global Company living in a rural area]*

### **Lack of transport between schools and afterschool childcare services**

A theme raised by some parents living in rural communities was a lack of transport between schools and full-time school-age childcare services. While some parents reported school-age childcare services being located close to schools, the majority of these services or homework clubs only operate until the early afternoon. Therefore, this type of childcare is not an option for parents who work full-time. Some parents stated they would use local school-age childcare services if there was transport between their children’s schools and the services.

- *“There is the creche in (the next village)...but it isn’t really an option as they don’t have a pick-up service as it is far away and I would have to pick her up and drop her off. Some of the mams use it or their sister in laws drop them down to it so because there is no pick up service it rules it out.” [Female architectural technician living in a rural area]*
- *“Oh my god I would use it (childcare service) full-time the days I am working if there was transport to the creche! It was a bit much to try do the Mondays and Tuesdays. The second child is starting (school) in September and I will have a three and two o’clock finish. They (childcare service) used to do a collection and then Covid impacted on it and the numbers and the demand increased and they didn’t have the transport or the staff. That is what is lacking in the area for parents who work.” [Female nurse living in a rural area]*

### **Reliance on family for childcare**

Many parents living in rural areas also discussed relying on family, primarily grandparents, to provide childcare. The main reasons for this included all of the themes discussed previously in this section, including a lack of childcare options available in rural areas for example, lack of childcare facilities or spaces for babies and pre-school aged children, difficulties in finding childminders, lack of before and after school services and lack of transport between school and school-age childcare services. Some parents also cited the cost of childcare as a reason for relying on family for childcare. However, overall parents living in rural areas felt the cost of childcare was not as high as in towns and cities. Many parents discussed feeling guilty for relying on grandparents to provide childcare due to their age and the increased risk of exposure to illnesses such as Covid-19 while minding their grandchildren. However, parents also felt there were positives related to grandparents minding grandchildren such as having close relationships.

- *“I would be lost without my mum. Now she is 83 and she collects my son and then my husband’s parents collect him other days from school. My son is only in afterschool two days a week. I’m not sure what I’ll do when they are both in school.”*  
[Female working in financial services living in a rural area]
  
- *“My daughter went on the list four and half years ago when she was born and she still wasn’t offered a space...My parents will have to collect her after school and do her homework with her. They are elderly and my dad is in an out of hospital for treatment every month and with the coughs and colds going around.”* [Female paramedic living in a rural area]
  
- *“My mother-in-law is so good and easy going and there was something lovely about them being minded by her nanny and it made life very easy and we did pay her but it was a lot cheaper and there was tender loving care.”* [Female nurse living in a rural area]

## Recommendations to government to support parents who live in rural communities

### More funding for rural childcare services

A key recommendation made by parents in relation to how the government can support parents who live in rural communities was to provide more funding to childcare services in rural areas. This included more funding for both private and community creches in order to accommodate more children, particularly babies and pre-school age children, in rural areas. Lack of childcare spaces in local services was identified as a key challenge for parents living in rural areas. Providing more funding for the payment of childcare workers was also suggested by some parents in order to increase the number of childcare workers and improve recruitment and retention rates in the sector.

- *“Maybe if the rural childcare is allowed to expand and there is a fund there that they can say we need to build or extend it by another amount of buildings or rooms there should be funding there to start building on to facilities if it is needed. Both facilities we have need to be expanded. Portacabins shouldn’t be an option for our children.”*

[Female paramedic living in a rural area]

- *“The government need to pay childcare workers more and attract more people into it and open up more spots that will help. A lot of people come into childcare and leave. They are on the same salary at 25 as when they leave college.”*

[Female Associate Director of Global Company living in a rural area]

### More funding for services offering ECCE and full-time childcare

Some parents living in rural communities suggested the government should provide funding for childcare services to provide both ECCE and full-time childcare services.

- *I think the government could fund more positions and more ECCE schemes that would help the creches as well. All the people in the rural areas here are sending their children to the towns for childcare now.”* [Female Associate Director of Global Company living in a rural area]

## Key themes common to both parents who work atypical hours or live in rural communities

### **Evolving 'Early Learning and Care and Aftercare' needs of parents**

Both parents who work atypical hours and parents who live in rural communities highlighted their evolving childcare needs. As children get older the childcare needs of parents change according to their children's needs. For example, the childcare needs of babies are different to children in ECCE and school-age children. Parents discussed using different types of childcare provision depending on the ages of their children. Different parents also had different preferences for their children's childcare at different ages. For instance, some parents had a preference for a childminder for babies, a crèche for toddlers, ECCE for pre-school aged children and before and after school services/homework clubs or childminders for older school-age children.

- *"At the moment I am working part time they (children) are in crèche in (the local village). The youngest is in crèche a full day and the second youngest is in half ECCE and half day care. My husband works shift work. I drop (my daughter) to my parents in law and they drop her to school and she goes to afterschool."* [Nurse living in a rural area]

Many parents also talked about their school-age children "outgrowing" crèches at a certain age. Some parents also discussed older school-age children wanting to be minded in their own homes rather than in the home of childminders.

- *"There is the crèche in (the next village) and (my daughter) is getting a bit old for that and I don't think there is anyone her age there anymore and it isn't an option anymore."*  
[Female architect technician living in a rural area]
- *"I was using a childminder in her house and (my son) wanted his own space and to be home with his own things. There can a tricky dynamic with other kids (in the childminders). They were in and out of the car a bit as well."* [Female accountant living in a rural area]

### **Parents using parental leave as childcare**

Both parents who work atypical hours and parents who live in rural communities reported using parental leave as a form of childcare. The use of parental leave by parents was for various reasons including many childcare options not suiting parents who work atypical hours, lack of crèche spaces for babies and young children and grandparents who are minding children still working part-time. Parents of children with additional needs also reported using parental leave to facilitate bringing their children to medical appointments.

- *“Mam worked on a Tuesday and what I done was I used to request every Tuesday off and I was on parental leave and I worked a 36 hour week and I minded (my daughter) until she was two and then I put her into crèche one day a week and I did the same with (my other daughter). I used to mind her as well on Tuesday.”* [Female architectural technician living in a rural area]
  
- *“Basically for the first year after my first child was born I was off work and then I had unpaid leave and got the year out of it.”* [Female Garda living in a rural area]
  
- *“From the angle of a child with additional needs there isn’t anything else really outside of parental leave. I think parents get a year more. For me, it’s the amount of appointments if you want to go back to work it is very hard to sustain that. I took parental leave for the first two years to go to appointments.”* [Female Occupational Therapist living in a rural area]

### **Challenges related to childcare of children with additional needs**

#### **Crèches:**

Three parents of children with additional needs were consulted as part of this research. Both parents who work atypical hours and parents who live in rural communities who have children with additional needs highlighted challenges related to the provision of childcare of children with additional needs. One of the key challenges identified was securing childcare provision in crèches and ECCE places in local childcare services. One parent living in a rural area detailed having to travel a long distance with her child with additional needs for childcare and ECCE provision as the local crèche was not able to

provide a space due to staffing and funding issues. She also felt her child being in a crèche which was a long distance away from their home acted as barrier to her returning to the workforce.

- *“I had to bring him (my son) into town. That was one of the big reasons I couldn’t really work...I think crèches should be able to support children with special needs. There isn’t funding available to private crèches and he went to a community crèche in town and they are funded to have the necessary funding to have the right amount of staff...Even for his ECCE years it was still the same we couldn’t change him to the local crèche because they needed the extra staff for his needs.”* [Female Office administrator living in a rural area]

Another parent discussed the challenges of her child with additional needs not settling into preschool. She believes this was due to not being able to access a crèche place for her child with additional needs when he was younger.

- *“If my son had started in the crèche younger we wouldn’t have all the transition issues we have now. If we had started at a younger age we would have the issues we have now and he would have been useful to the staff and wouldn’t be as upset.”*  
[Female Local Authority Employee living in a rural area]

### **Childminders:**

Another parent who has a child with additional needs, works atypical hours and lives in a rural area, highlighted the difficulties in recruiting childminders who are qualified to mind children with additional needs, know sign language and understand their needs. She discussed employing a number of childminders before finding a suitable childminder who was able to cater to the needs of her child with additional needs. The parent who works atypical hours, as well as her husband, felt a childminder in their home was the only suitable childcare option for her child with additional needs. This was due to working long hours, catering for her child who requires specialised equipment and often has to attend medical appointments.



- *“We have been through so many difficulties over the years in terms of finding someone who understanding the needs of a child with disabilities...Not everyone has Lámh sign language or can learn it. They (childminder) need to be able to understand the needs of the child with a disability.”* [Female Occupational Therapist working atypical hours]

## **Recommendations to government to support parents who work atypical hours and live in rural communities**

### **More before and after school childcare services**

All parents consulted recommended that the government should fund more before and after school childcare services for school-age children. It was suggested that purpose built childcare facilities should be built in or beside primary schools so children do not have to travel between school and childcare services. A number of parents described breakfast clubs and after school childcare services which were not fit for purpose in terms of their facilities and location. Parents also recommended that before and after school childcare services should be available for longer hours and during school holidays similar to crèches to accommodate parents working full time.

- *“It (after school building) was built a good few years ago. It’s an odd shaped building and it is really too small for the smallies that are there. They are in a kitchen in the GAA hall and the building is cold and from the 1970s and it has been closed due to heating not working. They are locking doors because the doors aren’t secure. We use the facility for the mother and toddler group and it is cold and the toilets are old and leaking and it is not fit for purpose and what it is being used for children.”* [Female Local Authority employee living in a rural area]
- *“(The local) Educate Together do childcare in their school. If I was to make a recommendation it would be that any new school building, it would be great to have the childcare build on site. If it is a rainy day the kids (in our after school) get soaked. Educate together are an example of doing it the right way.”* [Accountant living in a rural area]

### **Longer maternity and parental leave**

Many parents suggested the government should provide longer maternity leave and parental leave to help support parents in relation to childcare. This included supporting the parents of babies and young children who often find it difficult to secure crèche spaces and the parents of children with additional needs who can find it difficult to secure suitable childcare and have to attend regular medical appointments.

- *“There is an issue with six months maternity leave. When your child had additional needs, six months is sometimes not enough. There are additional appointments and I think they should provide longer maternity leave for those who need it. The children need additional care that sometimes only parents are aware of and it is hard to train and trust other people with that. Then there is the medication and gastric feeding. I think they should extend the maternity or parental leave. It would have been reassuring if I could have been financially secure and minding my child for longer.”* [Female Occupational Therapist living in a rural area]

### **More flexible working hours**

Finally, it was suggested that the government should legislate for employers to accommodate more flexible working hours in both the public and private sector. It was suggested that parents being supported to work more flexible hours would help facilitate the care of school-age children, for example parents being able to take time off every day to pick children up from school would be supported. It should be noted that such provisions are included in the government’s new Work Life Balance Bill (2022).

- *“I think one thing the government could do is legislate for flexible working hours...Say if you take off time in the afternoon for school runs, what difference would it make and go back to work? If the government could legislate for that. In a job like mine, it isn’t tied to special times so the government could do that and push employers to be open to that and be able to take time off in the middle of the day.”* [Male civil servant living in a rural area]

## **Section 4: Summary of Key Findings**

### **Introduction**

This section of the report provides a summary of the key findings from the research study.

### **Key themes related to the needs of parents who work atypical hours**

- Parents who work atypical hours reported that many childcare options are not suited to parents who work outside of the normal childcare hours provided by crèches and childminders.
- As a result of this, many parents who work atypical hours rely on family members, in particular grandparents, to provide childcare.
- It was common for one parent in a family to either work part-time or stop working to provide childcare and accommodate the other parent working atypical hours. The parent who was earning less money was usually the parent to give up work or work part-time.
- Recommendations as to how the government could support parents who work atypical hours included subsidies or tax relief to finance childcare, extended parental leave or unpaid leave, funding of out of hours childcare services and on-site childcare e.g., in hospitals.

### **Key themes related to the needs of parents who live in rural communities**

- One of the key challenges identified by parents living in rural communities was a lack of childcare facilities and spaces, in particular for babies and pre-school aged children. This often results in parents travelling long distances for childcare services.
- Parents living in rural communities also reported a lack of childcare services offering both ECCE and full-time childcare services.
- A lack of transport in rural areas linking school-aged children to local after-school childcare services was an issue for some parents.
- Similarly, parents in rural communities often rely on family to provide childcare due to the aforementioned challenges related to childcare provision in rural areas.
- Key recommendations as to how the government could support the childcare needs of parents in rural communities included more funding for rural childcare services to increase the number of families and spaces available and more funding in rural communities for childcare services to provide both ECCE and full-time childcare services.

### **Key themes common to both parents who work atypical hours and live in rural communities**

- A common theme for both parents who work atypical hours and parents living in rural communities was the evolving childcare needs of parents as children grow up. Children at different ages often require different types of childcare most suited to their needs. For example, the childcare needs of babies are different to the needs of pre-school and school-age children and different forms of childcare can be required for children within the same family.
- Parents who work atypical hours and parents in rural communities both reported using parental leave as a form of childcare for different reasons.
- Parents of children with additional needs identified a number of challenges related to securing childcare such as crèches and ECCE providers not having the capacity to accommodate children with additional needs and childminders not being qualified to mind children with additional needs.
- Both parents who work atypical hours and parents who live in rural communities reported relying on family, usually grandparents, to provide childcare for various reasons. Parents working atypical hours rely on family as many childcare options do not suit their hours of work and parents who live in rural communities rely on family due to the lack of childcare options in rural areas.
- Recommendations made to government included more purpose built on-site before and after school childcare services, longer maternity leave and parental leave and legislation to support more flexible working hours.

## Section 5: Conclusion

This report details the findings of a small-scale qualitative research study on the early learning and care and school-age childcare needs of parents who work atypical hours, or live in rural communities. The research is linked to an action which is part of the First 5: Implementation Plan and is also a commitment of the Department of Rural and Community Development's Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy, 2021-2025, with a view to enhance services in rural areas in a way that enables people to both live and work in rural areas.

The research identified a common theme for both parents who work typical hours and parents who live in rural areas which was a lack of access to suitable childcare and the reliance on family, particularly grandparents, for the provision of childcare. There were varying reasons for relying on family for childcare, for example many childcare options are not suited to parents who work atypical hours and parents in many rural areas do not have access to full-time childcare services, particularly for babies and pre-school aged children. Before and after school services are also lacking in many areas with some operating in facilities not fit for purpose and for shorter hours than are needed by parents. Overall, many parents stated they would not be able to work without the support of family.

A common impact of the lack of childcare options for parents who work atypical hours or parents who live in rural areas was parents not being able to return to work after having children or working part-time. The study found it was common for one parent to give up work or work part-time to provide childcare and to accommodate another parent working atypical hours. Similarly, parents who live in rural areas stated that travelling long distance to access childcare had a knock-on impact on their ability to work full-time.

Parents of children with additional needs highlighted the challenges related to the provision of childcare for their children such as crèches not being able to accommodate children with additional needs or difficulties finding childminders who are qualified to mind children with additional needs. Parents of children with additional needs commonly used parental leave for childcare reasons, particularly when their child was younger and to accommodate medical appointments.

Parents who work atypical hours and parents who live in rural communities also reported using parental leave to support their childcare needs. This included parents who work atypical hours taking unpaid leave to extend maternity leave and parents in rural areas using parental leave to accommodate grandparents who are providing childcare but still working part-time.

The research highlighted a number of negative impacts of the challenges of childcare provision for parents who work atypical hours or live in rural communities which included increased stress, feelings of guilt for relying on grandparents to provide childcare, lack of free time for parents, lack of time together as a family and lack of time for parents to spend together. Parents who work atypical hours particularly felt this way of working impacted negatively on their family life, personal relationships and time together as a family at weekends and holidays.

Finally, the research identified a number of recommendations as to how the government can support parents who work atypical hours or parents who live in rural communities. A common recommendation made by all parents included more funding for childcare provision, e.g. funding for out of hours or on-site childcare for parents who work atypical hours and funding for more childcare facilities and spaces for parents living in rural areas. Other common recommendations included longer maternity and parental leave for all parents to support the provision of childcare, purpose built on-site before and after school childcare services, subsidies or tax breaks for parents to finance childcare who work atypical hours and more flexible working hours for all parents.

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## Appendix 1: Focus Group Discussion Guide

- Good evening, firstly I want to thank you for taking the time to attend this online focus group. I know as parents you are all busy people so we really appreciate your time and contribution to this topic.
- My name is Sandra Roe. I am an independent researcher conducting this research on behalf of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.
- The research is linked to an action which is part of the First 5: Implementation Plan. First 5 is A Whole of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families, published in November 2018.
- This First 5 action is also a commitment of the Department of Rural and Community Development's Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy, 2021-2025, with a view to enhance services in rural areas in a way that enables people to both live and work in rural areas.

### Housekeeping:

- All information shared in the focus group will be treated anonymously and confidentially. Something you say may turn up in the report I will write but nobody's names or identifying information will be included.
- I am going to record the audio of the meeting not the video. I will use the audio recording to transcribe the focus group and it will be deleted afterwards. Is everyone OK with this?
- One person speaking at a time.
- If you could use the raise your hand feature if you wish to contribute that would be great. Go to Reactions and then 'raise your hand'.

### Introduction:

- Can you introduce yourself briefly e.g., what age is your child/children, how many children you have, where you live (i.e. rural/urban area) and if you work atypical hours?

- **Can you tell me what type of childcare you use?**

*Prompt questions:*

- How many hours is your child/children in childcare?
- Does your child/children avail of the ECCE Programme?
- Does your child/children avail of pre or afterschool childcare?
- Does your family support you in terms of childcare?
- What works well about your current childcare arrangement?
- What does not work well about your current childcare arrangement?

- **Why did you pick that type of childcare?**

*Prompt questions:*

- What were the main reasons for picking this type of childcare e.g. suits work hours, cost, availability, convenience, location, quality?

- **Are there many childcare options available in your area?**

*Prompt questions:*

- What types of childcare are available in your area?
- For parents living in rural areas, how far do you have to travel to access childcare services?
- What types of childcare options would you like the government to provide in your area?
- Do you think childcare supports should be available to all parents? If not, which groups of parents? Why?

- **In an ideal world, what childcare options would you like to be available to you?**

*Prompt questions:*

- What types of childcare services do you think work best for parents work atypical hours e.g. creches, childminders, pre and after school services?
- What types of childcare services work best for parents in rural communities?
- What opening hours in childcare services work best for parents who work atypical hours/live in rural communities?

- **How expensive is your childcare?**

*Prompt questions:*

- How does the cost of your childcare compare to other alternatives?
- How affordable is childcare in rural areas, e.g. compared to urban areas?
- Does the cost of childcare impact on other areas of your life?
- How would you like the government to address the cost of childcare?

- **What are the key challenges related to childcare?**

*Prompt questions:*

- What are the key challenges related to childcare for parents who work atypical hours?
- What are the key challenges related to childcare for parents living in rural areas?
- What are the key challenges related to childcare for single parents?

- **Does the childcare you use impact on your work?**

*Prompt questions:*

- Do you think the childcare you use/have available to you has an impact on your employment/unemployment situation, ability to engage in education and training?
- Does the childcare you use have an impact in relation to your job e.g., hours you can work, working full-time/part-time, working nights, shift work, weekends?
- Does your partner work atypical hours?
- Does your partner working atypical hours have an impact on the type of childcare you can avail of?
- Does the childcare you use impact your partner's work/employment situation?
- Do you think working atypical hours has an impact on other areas of your life e.g., work life balance and family life? If so, please explain?

## Appendix 2: Example of CCC Focus Group Recruitment Correspondence



Cork City Childcare

23 September 2022 · 🌐



Parents, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) are currently doing research on the childcare needs of parents who work atypical hours or live in rural communities.

Are you a parent who works atypical hours (e.g. part-time work, shift work, nights, weekends) or a parent who lives in a rural community?

If so, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) would like to hear from you about your childcare needs.

We are holding a number of online focus groups to consult with parents about this topic.

If you are interested in taking part please sign up via Eventbrite at the links below:

- Focus Group 1 – 10th October 2020 @ 8pm: <https://www.eventbrite.ie/.../dcediy-consultation-with...>
- Focus Group 2 – 11th October 2020 @ 8pm: <https://www.eventbrite.ie/.../dcediy-consultation-with...>
- Focus Group 3 – 14th October 2020 @ 8pm: <https://www.eventbrite.ie/.../dcediy-consultation-with...>
- Focus Group 4 – 18th October 2020 @ 8pm: <https://www.eventbrite.ie/.../dcediy-consultation-with...>
- Focus Group 5 – 19th October 2020 @ 8pm: <https://www.eventbrite.ie/.../dcediy-consultation-with...>
- Focus Group 6 – 20th October 2020 @ 8pm: <https://www.eventbrite.ie/.../dcediy-consultation-with...>



**Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY)**

**Research on the childcare needs of parents who work atypical hours or live in rural communities**