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Summary Report

The early learning and childcare needs of parents who work atypical hours or live in rural communities

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Introduction

First 5 (2018) is a whole-of-Government strategy to improve the lives of babies, young children and their families. The First 5 Implementation Plan (2019) outlined a commitment to ‘undertake research on the early learning and care and school-age childcare¹ needs of parents who work atypical hours or live in rural communities and develop recommendations for further actions’. This commitment is also shared in the Department of Rural and Community Development’s (DRCD) Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy, 2021-2025.

To fulfil this commitment, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability and Youth (DCEDIY) conducted a multi-component research project (see Figure 1). The project was overseen by a Project Oversight Group with membership from DCEDIY, DRCD, the Department of Trade, Enterprise and Employment, and the Irish Government Economic Evaluations Service. This report provides a summary of the combined research findings from the multi-component project.

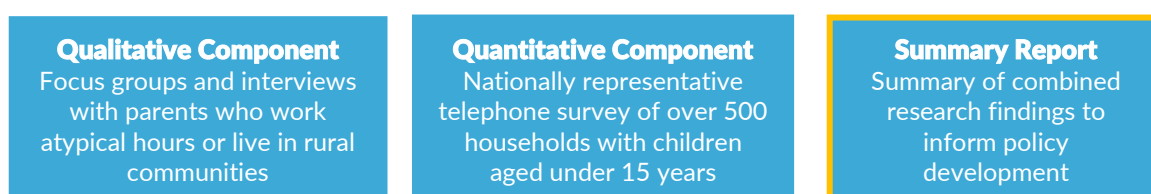


Figure 1. Research Components

The objective of the study was to assess the early learning and childcare needs of parents who work atypical hours or live in rural communities.

Methodology

This study included a qualitative and a quantitative research component.

The qualitative component consisted of semi-structured interviews and focus groups conducted by Sandra Roe Research, between September and November 2022. In total, 15 participants were recruited through national and community organisations including local City/County Childcare Committees (CCC) and the National Parents Council (NPC) as well as convenience sampling.

The quantitative component consisted of telephone surveys conducted by IPSOS MRBI between 20-29 January 2022. In total, 588 parents/guardians of children aged

¹ Referred to hereafter as early learning and childcare where appropriate

15 years or under were recruited to take part in a 15-minute survey through Random Digit Dialling (RDD). Quota controls by age of child in the household were used to ensure representativeness of the sample.

Key Findings

Key findings from the study are summarised according to the two main topics that emerged across the qualitative and quantitative study components.

Availability and accessibility

The *availability and accessibility* of early learning and childcare options was a prevalent issue for parents who work atypical hours and those who live in rural communities. This issue was evident in both the qualitative and quantitative study components.

Parents in the qualitative component described being reliant on parent/caregiver or grandparent care due to a lack of access to suitable alternative options. Parents in rural areas highlighted the limited availability of centre-based early learning and childcare in their surroundings. Whereas parents working atypical hours described a lack of options outside of traditional working hours. The recommendations from parents in the qualitative component were also strongly centred around increasing availability and access to early learning and childcare, including funding out-of-hours or on-site services for parents who work atypical hours and investment in facilities and spaces for parents living in rural areas. Some parents also recommended strategies to support parent/caregiver care and flexible working arrangements.

I am living in a rural area with about the population of 1,200 and there is no crèche (for under 2's) in the town...

Female, in rural area

Findings from the quantitative component similarly reflected patterns of higher levels of parent/caregiver care and limited availability of early learning and childcare among families who live rurally and those who work atypical hours. These patterns were evident across both early learning and care and school-age childcare arrangements. However, only the differences in relation to school-age childcare arrangements were statistically significant. These findings indicated significantly higher usage of at home parent/caregiver care among those working atypical hours as well as limited availability of centre-based school-age childcare options particularly for those who live rurally and work atypical hours.

While not evident in the quantitative component, access to early learning and childcare arrangements to accommodate the evolving needs of families emerged as a key difficulty for parents in both rural and atypical working groups in the qualitative component. Parents described how their needs change as their children get older and often different forms of early learning and childcare are required for children within the same family.

Impact of difficulties and challenges

The *impact of difficulties and challenges* associated with arranging early learning and childcare was another prevalent issue in both study components. However, the findings were somewhat mixed.

In the qualitative component, parents emphasised how the difficulties they faced in arranging early learning and childcare impacted their work options and their wellbeing. In

I like being part-time but I am doing it because of (my husband's) work...

Female, working atypical hours

particular, parents highlighted that a lack of options restricted their ability to return to work after having children. For the families interviewed, it was common for one parent to give up work or reduce their hours to part-time to facilitate another parent working atypical hours or to travel long distances to early learning and childcare in rural areas. Parents in urban areas and those working atypical hours also described a dependence on parental and unpaid leave to meet their early learning and childcare needs. The qualitative component also highlighted some negative impacts on parents' wellbeing including stress, guilt, and feeling they had less free or family time. These impacts were particularly noted by families who work atypical hours.

These experiences are somewhat reflected in findings from the quantitative component. Parents who worked atypical hours were the least likely to report being satisfied with their early learning and childcare arrangements and were also the most likely to report experiencing at least one difficulty in arranging early learning and childcare. In relation to the difficulties experienced, parents in rural areas working atypical hours had the highest rates of difficulties across the three most common difficulties reported: having spaces/places available, affordability, and did not suit my hours/work patterns. However, satisfaction rates (respondents reporting being fairly or very satisfied with the early learning and childcare arrangements for their

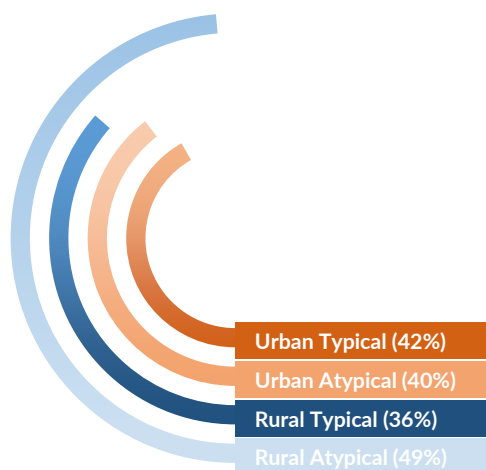


Figure 2. Experienced at least one difficulty arranging childcare

child(ren)) for parents working atypical hours were still above 70% and less than half of all parent groups reported experiencing at least one difficulty in arranging early learning and childcare (See Figure 2). There were also no significant associations between groups in relation to satisfaction and difficulties experienced. Across all parent groups, difficulty finding available places or spaces was the most common difficulty reported.

Conclusion

The findings from this project provide some insight into the early learning and childcare needs and experiences of parents living in rural areas and those working atypical hours. They indicate a greater reliance on parent/caregiver or familial care and highlight issues that these families encounter in accessing early learning and childcare, particularly centre-based due to the location and operating hours of existing provision. There was also some evidence that a shortage of early learning and childcare options among these families restricts their working arrangements. The findings suggest a potential compounding of issues for families who live rurally and also work atypical hours.



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