

Submission to the Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs on the Affordable Childcare Scheme

From The Iona Institute

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Introduction:

The State rightly wishes to help working parents with young children. One way it can do this is by facilitating high quality, affordable day-care. This is what the Government is aiming to do through its Affordable Childcare Scheme. Our question is whether this is fair if it neglects other options such as at-home-care. The State should not assume that most people want to put their children into day-care. So what do people really want? The Iona Institute commissioned a number of polls conducted by Amarach Research to find out. The answers are below.

The public's preferred child-care options

Public policy should be a response to what the public actually want, unless there is a strong, compelling reason to do otherwise. Child-care policy is mainly about early-years care because that is when children are most dependent. What do members of the public see as the preferred child-care option when children are under school age?

In 2013, The Iona Institute commissioned Amarach Research to find out the answer to this question.

Q. Below are some possible arrangements for caring for children under five (i.e. not attending primary school) during the working day. Please tell me which arrangement you would ideally prefer for your children if circumstances allowed, even if you don't have children under five.

One parent stays at home: 49pc

A day-care centre: 17pc

Minded by another family member: 27pc

Other or don't know: 7pc

As can be seen, only a small minority (17pc) see placing a child aged five or under in a day-care centre as the preferred option.

Just under half believe parental care at home is best, and 27pc say their preferred option is care by another family member such as a grandparent.

Data from the Growing Up in Ireland longitudinal study show that the sort of childcare children are actually receive when they are aged 3, is not far off the choices people ideally want to make.

The ERSI study, 'Childcare, Early Education and Socio-Emotional Outcomes at Age 5', which draws on Growing Up in Ireland data, shows that when children are aged 3, 50pc are being minded by a parent during the day, eleven percent are in the care of a relative, 12pc in the care of a non-relative, and 27 percent are in a day-care centre.

Again, the question arises, why favour the minority choice, day-care, over other choices, without good reason? To favour one choice over others without good reason is inherently discriminatory. As we will now see, there is no good reason to favour day-care over other choices.

Discriminating in favour of day-care unjustified by the evidence

Putting public funds into day-care instead of other options might be justified if day-care was significantly better for children in terms of educational and behavioural outcomes than other forms of care, including parental care at home. Two recent studies from the ESRI show this not the case.

Both studies are based on data from the Growing Up in Ireland longitudinal study.

One is called 'Non-Parental Childcare and Child Cognitive Outcomes at Age 5' (2015). It looked at children aged 3 and examined whether or not different types of child-care affected their vocabulary or non-verbal reasoning at age 5. It found no significant difference whether a child was in day-care, parental care, or some other type of care.

Another study called 'Childcare, Early Education and Socio-Emotional Outcomes at Age Five' (2016), examined, as the name implies, non-cognitive outcomes (behaviour and so on) as distinct from cognitive outcomes. Like the earlier study, it found little difference in terms of non-cognitive outcomes whether a child was in day-care, or at home, or in some other arrangement. (There appear to be small detrimental effects if they are in daycare for 30 or more hours per week, and small beneficial effects if the children are from disadvantaged backgrounds or lone-parent households.)

This being so, there is no good reason for the State to across-the-board favour day-care over the other choices parents make about the care of their children, especially when day-care is the first choice of only a small minority of people.

Marked male/female differences in work preferences

Late last year, we also asked Amarach to survey people in order to determine what people's ideal work/life balance is. The question we asked is identical to one *The New York Times* asked.

Q. If money were no object, and you were free to do whatever you wanted, would you stay at home, would you work full time or would you work part time?

(Response of women and men with children under 17)

Prefer to stay at home: 35pc (women) 18pc (men)

Prefer to work part time: 48pc (women) 45pc (men)

Prefer to work full time: 17pc (women) 37pc (men)

The purpose of the question is to ask people what their work choices would be if under no financial pressure to work.

The responses show that only a minority of both sexes would choose to work full-time. For both sexes, almost half would opt to work part-time when their children are aged under 17. However, there are very marked gender differences in regard to who would work full-time or stay-at-home. Only 18pc of men with children under 17 would opt to stay-at-home versus almost twice that number of women. Conversely, twice as many men as women in this category would work full-time.

This marked gender difference directly challenges the notion that men and women, given a free hand, would choose the same work/life balance. Much of the advocacy for universal, State-subsidised child-care is based on this mistaken premise.

The national household survey (3rd quarter, 2016), produced by the Central Statistics Office, showed that 315,000 women were working part-time compared with 146,000 men. Significantly, 83pc of part-time working women did not regard themselves as underemployed. (The equivalent figure for men was 67pc).

What this shows is that women are more likely than men to achieve their desired work/life balance because even though men and women want to work part-time in roughly equal number, women are much more likely than men to achieve this goal.

It is worth noting that another ESRI study, 'Mothers' Return to Work and Childcare Choices for Infants in Ireland' (2013) found that only a small minority (18pc) of mothers with babies aged under one year returned to work for career reasons. Sixty-five percent did so for financial reasons and the remaining 17pc had other, unspecified reasons.

Women who stay at home more undervalued than women in the workplace

Amarach also asked in last year's poll whether society values women in the home more, or women in the workplace. This question was identical to one asked by *The Irish Times*.

Q. Which does society value more, women who work in the home, women who work outside the home, or both equally?

Women in the home: 14pc (female) 19pc (male)

Women in the workplace: 44pc (female) 31pc (male)

Both equally: 42pc (female) 51pc (male)

We can see that almost half of people believe that women in the home and women in the workplace are equally valued, but far more people believe women in the workplace are more valued than women in the home.

Again, there is a marked gender difference. Women are more likely than men to say their stay-at-home peers are undervalued compared with women in the workplace.

This result is not a surprise when we see how invisible, relatively speaking, women in the home are in public debate. This is increasingly seen in public policy as well, which is something of a mystery when public policy, broadly speaking, should respond to what people actually want, as discussed above.

Conclusion: State policy must be neutral between different child-care choice

There is no good reason for public policy to discriminate in favour of day-care and against other options. It is not supported by what people actually want, as the above results show. In addition, it is not supported by any Irish evidence showing that young children in day-care have markedly better outcomes than children being looked after at home during the working day by a parent, another family member or another adult.

For these reason, we believe the Affordable Childcare Scheme is not the path to go down. In fact, the name is misleading because it is biased in favour of one type of childcare, i.e. centre-based day-care.

It would be far better to adopt a more neutral policy in respect of the various child-care preferences of parents. In Finland, for example, day-care is subsidised but parents who mind their young children at home, receive a generous monthly supplement. In other words, Finland respects both choices.

Obviously, we cannot do more than resources allow, but the political class needs to reassess the growing bias in favour of day-care and move towards a more neutral policy. This bias is unjustified. It is very likely that an equitable childcare policy designed to meet people's *actual* preferences would meet with widespread electoral support.

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