

Childcare

***View From Chair 8 June 2010 Business Newsletter
Bob Collins, Chief Commissioner, The Equality Commission***

Every working parent knows the importance which childcare has in their lives and their children's lives.

It can be a decisive factor in the choices they must make about employment – where they work, what hours they work, or even whether they work. It is also crucial to the welfare, happiness and development of their children.

Access to affordable, high quality childcare is essential for parents who need to balance work and family responsibilities - and if that is not available it is still mostly mothers who will be required to make the difficult career choices or sacrifice job opportunities as a result.

The difficulties caused by inadequate childcare provision impact most severely on people who are already facing great financial and social difficulties. In many cases it is child care issues which prevent women being able to find suitable work, or maintain steady employment, with an inevitable impact on their income and their children.

These difficulties have a greater impact in Northern Ireland than they do elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Just over 27% per cent of the working-age population here is economically inactive – a much higher proportion than the UK average of 21%. The lone parent employment rate is just 52%. And the percentage of children (aged 0-14) in Northern Ireland, at 20.7%, is higher than that in England, Scotland or Wales.

All this contributes greatly to child poverty, and studies have identified 24% of children in Northern Ireland as living in poverty. Childcare and poverty are linked in another way as well in that both have a clear link to educational attainment; the one can be a significant aid, the other a real barrier. Educational attainment, in its turn, influences the potential for entering and, thereafter, advancing in employment.

Government initiatives are being developed to make an impact on this situation and they deserve support and encouragement. To make any significant impact on poverty, however, we need to see a greater focus throughout our society on the needs of children and, in particular, on the practical steps which can be taken

to improve the capacity of children's parents and families to find rewarding long-term work and to provide good quality care for their children while doing so.

That will require greater support for people moving into work and greater efforts to make sure that people in work can stay there and progress while meeting all the challenges of nurturing their children and caring for their families. Businesses can play a crucial role by ensuring that they have good "family-friendly" policies in place to enable all their employees to participate fully in their career while dealing with all the challenges of parental and family life.

Support for what has to be a growing childcare sector will be essential to tackling these issues. In a time of severe financial constraints that will not be easy, but the benefits for our economy and for our whole society should be obvious. We cannot develop and prosper without making it possible for all working parents, including women and lone parents, to play full role in the labour market – and if we fail the most vulnerable of our children our community will ultimately pay a heavy price.