Believe in childcare? The childcare needs of ethnic minority communities in Northern Ireland

Believe in children
Barnardo’s
Northern Ireland

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In partnership with
Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities

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Introduction

Barnardo’s NI and the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities (NICEM) have both provided specific services to black and minority ethnic (BME) communities in Northern Ireland (NI) for more than 20 years. Our organisations regularly engage with BME children, young people and families to help inform policy and practice development. Difficulty accessing childcare is consistently raised as a concern by BME parents when we talk to them about key issues which impact on their lives.

Given the growing BME population working and choosing to raise their families here it is important that their specific health, education, social and childcare needs are considered at both a policy and practice level. Affordable and flexible childcare offers many benefits to families and has a key role to play in reducing the risk of poverty. As well as enabling parents to work, good quality childcare can also provide valuable learning and social development opportunities for children.

About this briefing

With rising prices and a low wage economy, many families in Northern Ireland are experiencing financial hardship and finding it increasingly difficult to make ends meet. High childcare costs place additional pressures on already stretched budgets and a lack of affordable, local provision is also a significant barrier to employment. These issues can restrict the ability of households to have dual earners particularly in terms of mothers looking for employment or returning to work (Lawton and Thompson, 2013; McQuaid, Graham and Shapiro, 2013). Maternal employment is a key factor in reducing child poverty; more mothers tend to be working in those countries where childcare costs account for a relatively small proportion of disposable income.

It has been reported that problems accessing childcare are compounded for ethnic minority parents who are often socially isolated, work atypical hours and lack extended family support and information about systems and services (Wallace, McAreavey and Atkin, 2013; Johnston, 2011; McGovern, Meas and Webb, 2011). A policy and economic appraisal to inform development of the NI Childcare Strategy (Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister [OFMDFM], 2010) also stated that childcare provision in Northern Ireland for children from ethnic minority families is poor. However, the specific needs of BME families are not addressed in the NI Executive’s Bright Start Strategic Framework, recently published as the first step towards an affordable and integrated NI Childcare Strategy for 2014 (NI Executive, 2013).

To date, little research has been carried out on childcare and ethnic minority communities in Northern Ireland. In response, and to usefully inform the NI Childcare Strategy as it develops, Barnardo’s NI and NICEM worked in partnership on the Believe in Childcare? research project (Kernaghan, 2014). This paper outlines the key findings of the study which aimed to identify and understand more about the childcare needs of BME families with children aged 0-12 and was conducted in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust (SHSCT) area.

Policy context

- There is no statutory basis for the provision of childcare in NI unlike other regions of the UK such as England and Wales where the Childcare Act 2006 places a statutory duty on local authorities to ensure there is ample childcare provision in their area to meet the needs of local working parents.

- Northern Ireland remains the only nation in the UK without a dedicated Childcare Strategy. The Bright Start Strategic Framework was published as working towards an affordable and integrated Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy for 2014. It does not provide an associated plan detailing how the Framework’s identified first actions will be implemented; however the key actions outlined include provision of more childcare places in schools and communities; the need to address the ways in which information related to childcare provision is communicated; and the promotion of training and development opportunities for those working in the childcare sector.

- Parents in NI do not have the same access to Family Information Services available in England, Scotland and Wales to support parents in taking up the financial help available to them towards

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1 A commonly used term in the UK to describe people who are in the minority because of their skin colour and/or ethnicity.
2 See OECD Family Database at www.oecd.org
3 The project received ethical approval from Barnardo’s UK-wide Research Ethics Committee and was overseen by a Research Advisory Group consisting of representatives from the Southern Health and Social Care Trust (SHSCT), BME parents and representatives from Barnardo’s NI and NICEM.
4 The SHSCT has experienced the largest increase of ethnic minority groups in the last 10 years. It has the highest percentage of households that do not have English as a main language (3.8%) (Northern Ireland Research and Statistics Agency [NISRA], 2011) and the largest numbers of ‘newcomer’ pupils accounting for 37.5% of the NI total (Northern Ireland Neighbourhood Information Service [NINIS], 2012).
5 Bright Start www.ofmdfni.gov.uk/bright-start-strategic-framework-key-actions.pdf
The urgent need for good quality, affordable childcare at a local level in Northern Ireland has been well documented (NICMA, 2008; Dennison and Smith, 2012; McQuaid et al, 2013). The success of Universal Credit here in meeting the Government’s aim to make work pay will also depend on the level of childcare available. It is estimated that 30,000 extra childcare places would have to be provided in NI to have 70% of lone parents in employment (as targeted in the Welfare Reform Act). The increase in residents born outside NI was mainly driven by migration from people born within the 12 EU accession countries – figures indicate the largest two groups are Polish (19,700) and Lithuanian (7,300).

In Northern Ireland the average cost of a full-time childcare place is £156 per week, and it has been estimated that some parents are spending 44% of their weekly income on childcare for one child (Dennison and Smith, 2012).

Under new government proposals working parents on low incomes who earn enough to pay income tax will receive 85% of their childcare costs. However, the lowest earning families for whom childcare costs present the biggest barrier to work are excluded from this support and will continue to receive the lower 70% subsidy. This will affect those more likely to work part time in low paid jobs or on zero-hours contracts, and falls far short of covering childcare costs for many of the poorest families.

**BME families in Northern Ireland**

The most recent Census results for Northern Ireland (NISRA, 2011) show that:

- 1.8% of the usually resident population of NI belonged to minority ethnic groups, more than double the proportion in 2001 (0.8%)
- English was not the main language for 3.1% of usual residents aged three years and over
- Residents born outside NI accounted for 11% of the population (202,000), which was a two percent increase from 2001 (151,000)
- The increase in residents born outside NI was mainly driven by migration from people born within the 12 EU accession countries – figures indicate the largest two groups are Polish (19,700) and Lithuanian (7,300).

Migration has brought positive economic benefits and skilled workers to Northern Ireland as well as elements of diversity including culture, food and language. Some areas have also been affected by unexpectedly high levels of migration resulting in additional pressures on health care, housing and education (Russell, 2012). For example, 21% of new births in Dungannon were to mothers born outside the UK in 2011, with 16% in Craigavon and 14% in Belfast (NISRA, 2011). Research has identified two particularly common barriers for BME communities living in Northern Ireland:

**Language:** The lack of English language is an obstacle for BME communities in terms of social integration, communicating needs to others, gaining employment, and accessing information and services (McGovern et al, 2011; Bell, Caughey, Hansson, Martynowicz and Scully, 2009). While statutory agencies are required to provide interpreters to ensure services are accessible for those that do not speak English, recent research indicates there is a shortage of interpreters in the public sector for certain languages (McWilliams and Yarnell, 2013). It has also been noted that the translation of some written documents has been ineffective due to differences between the spoken dialect and written word in some languages (Johnston, 2011).

**Lack of awareness/information:** Newcomers to Northern Ireland may be unaware of services they are entitled to and may have no information about the processes required to obtain access. Some studies have found evidence of institutional racism in Northern Ireland regarding the ability of non-English speakers to access information and services and the lack of awareness and training for staff working with ethnic minorities (Connolly, 2002; McWilliams and Yarnell, 2013).

**About the research**

In order to effectively influence childcare policy and practice, the main objectives of the Believe in Childcare? research (Kernaghan, 2014) were to:

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6 FIS are a vital resource for parents, ensuring that they have reliable information about childcare in their local area, someone they can speak to about their childcare needs and access to extra support to find and take up the right childcare through brokerage services. www.daycaretrust.org.uk/nafis

7 www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/People/Young-People/Early-Years-and-Family/Childcare

8 Welfare Reform Group, Briefing for Social Development Committee, December 2011

9 Most recent figures found that 43% of parents in NI used daycare as their main form of childcare, while 25% of parents used a registered childminder and 15% of parents used informal childcare (Dennison, 2013).


11 Other groups were drawn from India (4,800), the United States (4,300), Germany (3,900) and the Philippines (2,900).
gain an understanding of the types of formal\textsuperscript{12} and informal\textsuperscript{13} childcare arrangements BME parents typically use and their levels of satisfaction with their chosen childcare.

understand the types of working patterns BME parents may have and how this relates to their childcare options.

identify barriers that BME parents may face in accessing and using certain types of childcare.

gauge awareness among ethnic minority communities about childcare services and benefits relating to children of this age.

A mixed method approach was used combining quantitative and qualitative research methods, and conducted in the following three phases:

\textbf{Parent questionnaire} – Available in both online and paper formats in 11 different languages\textsuperscript{14} the anonymous questionnaire resulted in a final total of 308 valid responses.

\textbf{Parent focus groups} – Five focus groups with 34 parents were conducted to gain an insight into the results of the questionnaire in terms of the barriers to formal childcare, difficulties faced by working parents and access to information about childcare.

\textbf{Children’s focus groups} – Two children’s focus groups were conducted in primary schools with a total of nine children aged between five and nine.

\textbf{Key findings}

\textbf{Family background}

- Participants were drawn from 25 countries, with 24 individual languages spoken.
- The largest number of participants came from Poland (28.9%) and Lithuania (19.2%). ‘Others’ accounted for participants from Hungary (2.6%), Bulgaria (1.9%), Ukraine (1.9%) and Thailand (1.3%) [Figure 1 shows the participants’ country of birth].
- Respondents to the questionnaire had a total of 610 children between them with the majority having either two children (45.5%) or one child (33.4%).
- Nearly 20% of participants reported being a lone parent (19.8%).
- The majority of respondents were female (81.2%) with nearly 20% male (18.8%).

Most had settled in Northern Ireland for five years or more (56.5%) and were living in Portadown (29.2%), Dungannon (17.9%) and Craigavon (16.2%).

The majority rented privately (64%) with a further 14.3% having a mortgage and 5.2% involved in a co-ownership scheme. Just over 13% lived in a Housing Executive or Housing Association home (13.8%).

- A proportion of participants self-reported that they had poor or no ability to speak (24.1%), read (20.4%) or understand English (14.2%). A higher percentage reported that they had none or poor ability to write in English (28.9%).

- Over half of the participants had no family members living in Northern Ireland who could help them with childcare (54.9%).

\textbf{Figure 1: Participants’ country of birth}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>% of Participants</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>28.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>19.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Timor</td>
<td>9.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>6.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>6.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Guinea Bissau</td>
<td>4.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>4.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>3.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>2.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>0.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>0.6</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{12} Defined as ‘those providers who are providing both early education and care services and who are registered with the appropriate monitoring body for each of the devolved administrations in the United Kingdom’ (Campbell-Barr and Garnham, 2010). Typical provision includes day nurseries; playgroups; out of school clubs; holiday schemes; créches; and registered childminders who look after children in a private home.

\textsuperscript{13} Defined as ‘childcare that is largely unregistered by the state for quality control, child protection and/or taxation purposes’ (Rutter and Evans, 2011). Typical provision includes care by grandparents; other family members; friends; neighbours; unregistered childminders; nannies; au pairs; and babysitters.

\textsuperscript{14} Arabic, Cantonese, English, Latvian, Lithuanian, Mandarin, Polish, Portuguese, Slovakian, Tetum and Romanian.
Income and employment

Key findings from the sample included:

- Over half of the respondents had a weekly household income below the Northern Ireland average of £367 per week.
- Over half (56.8%) of participants identified themselves as employed or self-employed, with proportionally more males (84.5%) than females (50.4%) working.
- The most common job sectors ethnic minorities worked in were food services (25.1%) and manufacturing and production (14.9%). This type of work is typically low wage shift work which may impact on childcare arrangements in terms of both cost and the need to cover atypical hours.
- The majority of participants worked during the day Monday to Friday (55.1%). A sizeable number also worked on a shift pattern including daytime, night time and weekend work (28.0%). A fifth of participants reported working weekday evenings and/or nights (20.0%).
- A greater proportion of women work part-time hours (61.1%) compared to men (26.5%).

Data captured in the adult focus groups highlighted that finding work was a motivating factor in why people chose to live in Northern Ireland. Many parents worked atypical hours which could limit the childcare arrangements they are able to make.

'I don’t mind to be a cleaner. I don’t speak the language but just need a job. The reason we are here is to work, so we need to work, but if we don’t have a place to leave the children, how can we be working?' (Guinea Bissau parent, five children).

Childcare arrangements

- Over one-third of working parents in the survey found that their usual working hours always or often made childcare arrangements difficult with those who worked evenings and/or nights reporting this as a particular issue.
- A third of parents in the survey were dissatisfied with the flexibility that childcare providers offer regarding opening hours to accommodate atypical shift work.

Shift work: Participants from the focus groups also acknowledged the problems that working parents may encounter regarding their childcare arrangements; particularly lone parents or where both parents in a household work back to back shifts.

‘...because we are Chinese our business time starts from five to 12 o’clock [midnight] and English people time starts at 9am or after until evening time. This is very different and we find it hard to get people to look after our babies and children. That is the problem.’ (Chinese parent, three children).

These types of working patterns were challenging in terms of finding time to spend together as a family. Parents often had no informal family support and reported that they used annual leave when their children were sick. Children also spoke about their routines changing depending on their parents’ work patterns and who was available to care for them.

‘She [mum] went to work at night and my auntie went to work at day and when she went to work at night my auntie had to take care of me. I asked my mum to go to my auntie’s house but she said ‘no’, so she comes to my house.’ (Portuguese child, eight years old).

Zero-hours contracts: Another key theme among participants of the focus groups was the motivation to find work. Participants highlighted the short notice period given to work as a particularly frustrating aspect of zero-hours contracts. Parents felt that their lack of ability to make suitable childcare arrangements at short notice was a barrier to accepting employment or gaining additional hours which in turn impacted on the family’s income. They acknowledged that many working parents faced these difficulties but felt it was especially problematic for them as ethnic minority parents; they often had no other family members or support network to provide additional childcare at short notice or in emergencies.

'It is quite difficult to get a job already and when they are in an agency they have to wait for a message to go to work. So if they get a message today what arrangements can that person make to find somebody else to look after the child?' (Guinea Bissau parent, two children).

Overall results indicate many BME parents work atypical hours and shift patterns, perhaps suggesting the need for a childcare model in NI which also operates outside traditional working hours. A general lack of childminders within their local area was a key issue for parents, and there were very few who worked the hours required. While

15 For those not working at the time of the survey, 12% of the sample classed their employment status as caring for children, partner and home while 12% reported being unemployed but looking for work, with women (13.3%) nearly twice as likely to report this status compared to men (6.9%). Just over 10% of participants reported receiving either maternity pay or sick pay (11.7%).
16 Between 0-30 hours per week.
this is an important issue for BME working parents, this may also be relevant to the increasing numbers of parents generally who are working atypical hours and zero-hours contracts.17

Childcare provision

- More than two-thirds (68.5%) of the sample used some type of formal or informal childcare,18 of which nearly 20.0% reported that they used a combination of both.19 Almost one-third (31.5%) reported using no type of formal or informal childcare.

- The most frequently used types of childcare arrangements were informal and provided by friends, grandparents and other family members.

- The most common factors parents considered when choosing childcare were quality (95.7%); availability in their local area (89.5%); and cost (88.5%).

- Forty percent of parents were dissatisfied with the cost of childcare.

Parents from ethnic minority communities use a wide variety of formal and informal childcare. The reliance on informal childcare (36.7%) is in contrast with other childcare research of the general NI population, in which only 15% reported using informal childcare (Dennison, 2013). The BME parents using informal childcare also had the highest proportion of family members living in Northern Ireland (60.2%), suggesting this is an important factor for some parents in choosing informal childcare arrangements.20 A higher proportion of those that did not use any type of childcare were unemployed or self-employed, had lived in the area for 18 months or less (24.7%), had no family members living in Northern Ireland to help with childcare (70.1%) and had two or more children (70.1%).

Cost: In every parent focus group, cost was discussed as a significant barrier to using formal types of childcare. Many parents reported that paying large amounts of money for formal childcare would negate any earnings they gained from employment.

‘Money is the barrier, it’s big money. If a women and a man are working you might not get a discount and if the salary for one person is £150 and you have to pay £140 so that’s one person’s salary for the week that disappears.’ (Lithuanian parent, one child).

Trust: While cost is an important consideration in having the means to pay for formal childcare, the issue of trust was a key theme arising from the focus groups to help explain why some BME parents prefer to use informal childcare. Many indicated a distrust of using formal childcare providers and a preference to leave their children with family members or friends who they could communicate with and knew well. Some parents also felt that this was beneficial for their children in terms of strengthening their own culture through language and food.

Provision: The focus groups indicated that BME parents who are interested in using formal childcare still often rely on family and friends because

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17 For example, see House of Commons Library Standard Note SN/BT/6553 Zero-hours contracts, December 2013.
18 A high proportion of Romanian (80.7%) and Filipino (50%) parents favoured informal childcare only; Portuguese (23.8%) and Slovakian (20%) parents were more likely to use formal childcare only.
19 The group using the combined forms of childcare had the highest proportion of parents who were employed or self-employed (80%), with over one-quarter of working parents working different shift patterns (26.7%). Participants from Latvia (42.9%) and Lithuania (32.2%) were particularly keen users of a combination of informal and formal childcare.
20 Conversely, the parents using only formal childcare arrangements had the highest percentage of no family members living here to help with childcare (71.1%).
they find accessing affordable local childcare difficult, including during traditional working hours. There was also a perception that formal childcare settings allow little flexibility which could be problematic when working hours change suddenly or children are unable to attend due to illness.

Social development and safety: Many parents prefer using, or would like to have better access to, formal childcare. Among the benefits of formal childcare highlighted was the positive impact on children’s school readiness. Some parents were concerned their children’s social development, progress in learning English and levels of independence were being delayed when looked after in an informal setting by family or friends. There was also a view among many parents that formal childcare settings offered a safer environment with adults trained to look after children.

‘I prefer to send the child to the crèche because the child will develop better speech, because there are other children there and they will develop speech… they will develop quicker.’ (Portuguese parent, three children).

Access to information

- One-third of parents (33.8%) found it difficult or very difficult to access information regarding childcare provision, with a further 30.1% reporting it to be somewhat difficult.
- There was a significant lack of awareness among parents about the right to request flexible working hours (47.0%); and the financial support available for childcare-related costs, such as a childcare voucher scheme (69.5%) and Working Tax Credit (25.5%).

In the focus groups the lack of awareness about available financial support for childcare as well as a broader range of social and other benefits was particularly striking. Many parents were unaware of how to access advice or information services, or were reluctant to do so either because they did not find them helpful or due to language barriers. The majority of parents were also unclear about the legalities around leaving children unattended while they were at work and reported the need for clarity in this area.

Problems communicating effectively with professionals, and accessing and understanding advice and information were another significant finding of the research. Many parents highlighted considerable challenges in completing official forms and having their needs understood by professionals across childcare, employability, health and social care settings. Figure 2 shows a considerable proportion of survey participants self-reported that they had poor or no ability to speak (24.1%), read (20.4%) or understand English (14.2%). A higher percentage of respondents reported that they had poor or no ability to write in English (28.9%).

There was general consensus among parents in the focus groups that greater use could be made of existing points of contact such as schools, health centres and local community centres to signpost and disseminate childcare-related information to ethnic minority families.

‘Our shift starts at 7.30am and there is a late shift as well between 1pm and 8pm and childminder only starts at 8am or 9am at the earliest and they finish at 6pm and our shift at the hospital goes on to 8pm. So there is really no childminder that will take the child.’ (Filipino parent, one child).
Recommendations

1. In line with other UK regions the provision of childcare services in Northern Ireland should be on a statutory basis to ensure there is enough childcare to meet the needs of working parents in their local area.

2. The NI Executive should consider models of childcare provision and subsidies in other countries; and examples of practice across the UK in supporting families to take up financial help.

3. The Bright Start Strategic Framework/NI Childcare Strategy should develop an associated action plan which addresses the specific needs of ethnic minority families in the following areas:

   a) The development of additional, flexible and affordable childcare provision at a local level to meet the needs of parents working atypical hours or zero-hours contracts.

   b) Greater information and awareness raising among ethnic minority communities about the financial support available for childcare; different types of childcare and how to access provision; issues relating to unattended children; and the right to request flexible working hours.

   c) The public information campaigns on childcare should give particular consideration to providing a combination of ways to target information to those that have limited or no written or spoken English language.

   d) The training and workforce development targeted at under-represented groups should include the creation of more opportunities for members of ethnic minority communities to become registered childminders.

   e) Professional development should include the provision of cultural competency training for professionals coming into contact with ethnic minority families.

   f) The creation of mechanisms for greater collaboration between the community/voluntary sector, statutory agencies and employers as beneficial in providing information, training and English classes to employees from an ethnic minority background.

4. The Southern Health and Social Care Trust (SHSCT) should develop an Action Plan to address the specific childcare and information needs of BME communities in the SHSCT area as identified in the Believe in Childcare? research.

References


NI Executive (2013) Bright Start programme for affordable and integrated childcare. NI Executive, Belfast.


Northern Ireland Neighbourhood Information Service (NINIS). NISRA, Belfast.


