

Parents 'crucified' by rising childcare cost rely on family ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Parents are being "crucified" by childcare costs that have increased by over a quarter in ten years, experts say.

The latest release of figures from last year's census reveal that the average weekly household spend rose from €123.20 in 2007 to €155.60 last year.

In 2010, the government introduced the Early Childhood Care and Education scheme (ECCE) which gave parents of children aged three upwards three hours of free childcare, including education, every day of the school year.

More than half of children between the ages of three and five and a half used the scheme in the past 12 months, but child carers have warned that it is under-resourced and relying on "voluntary" contributions from parents.

The Central Statistics Office yesterday revealed that the number of people relying on unpaid relatives or family friends for childcare increased from 9 per cent in 2007 to 16 per cent in 2016.

In Dublin, the average cost per hour of pre-school childcare is €4.90 while the national figure is €4.20.

Frances Byrne, director of policy and advocacy at Early Childhood Ireland, said "no parent" would be surprised at the increase in costs over the last few years, but added that the rise could have been much more dramatic without the introduction of a government scheme.

"Parents are getting crucified, people regularly describe it as a second mortgage," she said. "With the introduction of ECCE, we would have hoped that the expense would have gone down more. It shows that without the scheme, it could have been much worse."

While more than half of parents said that they had access to high-quality childcare in their area, only 28 per cent felt it was affordable. In the east of the country, this dropped to 19 per cent.

Ms Byrne said that while the costs of childcare were very high for parents, wages and conditions for childminders were still low. She said that because ECCE only covers the school year, thousands of early years staff sign onto social welfare in the summer to make up for reduced working hours and pay.

On Wednesday night, the Dáil passed a Sinn Féin motion calling on the government to carry out an urgent independent review of the cost of early years services, to increase government funding and to establish a nationally agreed pay scale for early years staff.

The number of people relying on friends and family to look after children for free rose from 9 to 16 per cent. The number who pay friends or relatives to mind children stood still at 3 per cent.

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