

Charlie Weston: Our failure to properly tackle childcare's sky-high cost is a scandal ^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

IT is a burden that working parents in few other countries have to bear. The cost of childcare is scandalously high, amounting to the equivalent of a second mortgage for many working couples.

Our childcare costs are the second most expensive among some 35 countries that make up the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), which is basically all western nations.

Only in the US is it more expensive to access childcare.

In fact it is not unusual for the monthly cost of one child to be around €1,000. No wonder so many people give up work to become stay-at-home mums or dads.

The sheer expense of having someone look after our children actually damages our competitiveness, according to the National Competitive Council.

It said last month that the cost of childcare can amount to 90pc of the second earner's income. This compares to 57pc in the OECD.

And the cost of children is a key reason for low levels of female participation in the workforce.

During the summer the issue becomes more acute, as closed schools means children have to spend longer in care facilities.

This "summer premium" for childcare can be as high as an extra €600 a month for parents who are both working and have two children in creche.

Where both parents work outside the home, many children end up in child-minding facilities for nine to 10 hours a day - rather than five hours a day during the school term.

And parents have to pay for childcare places during the summer even when they are away on holidays, as the place has been booked and has to be paid for.

The "summer premium" cost affects working couples with primary school children.

But it also hits working couples with pre-school children, as the State's Early Children Care and Education scheme (ECCE) only applies during term time. The ECCE covers the cost of three hours each day of child care, but only during term time.

Most OECD countries either have subsidies or direct payments to offset the high cost of childcare.

A spokeswoman for Children's Minister Katherine Zappone said work on the affordable childcare scheme is expected to be in place by autumn 2017.

Part of the problem is that working couples are too busy and too stressed out to lobby on the cost of childcare issue.

Just because working parents do not assert themselves like older people does not mean their plight should be ignored.

Much more urgent action is needed.

-reprinted from Irish Independent

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