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Community responses: poverty, childcare and mothers' transitions to work

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Rosemount Lifelong Learning is a community-managed, anti-poverty organisation which provides high-quality childcare and lifelong learning opportunities for families from North Glasgow. Between 2002 and 2003, we were involved in a collaborative research project with the Scottish Poverty Information Unit and the Centre for Research into Families and Relationships, looking at the barriers women face moving from unemployment into sustainable employment. The research examined 'how care and financial issues impact on the process of transition, how strategies developed at a national level have been experienced by families within a specific locality and how community-based resources such as Rosemount Lifelong Learning can affect the impact of those policies'.¹ The research was funded by the European Social Fund, as part of a 'demonstration project' in order to inform local and European employment policy.

The research, which used several participatory methodologies, has yielded benefits for participants who gained skills which they were able to use in higher education and, in one case, to gain employment as a research assistant. It has had a demonstrable impact on policy development, especially the development of the Scottish Executive Working for Families programme and has helped Rosemount to develop innovative services in partnership with new stakeholders.

Findings

The research began by examining what is meant by care. Twelve women kept 'care diaries' for two weeks, in which they recorded details of the practical issues they faced organising formal and informal care. In subse-

quent interviews, they reflected on these diaries and on their views about care:²

'I would sort of think, you know, when I was writing things down, oh God, I didn't realise that I done so much, you know, in a day. It was trying to fit everything in...just sort of makes you look a lot differently at your life. I mean, 'cos when you're just going from day to day, you just take it for granted, you know, you do one day and the next day and you don't really think about it.'

The research showed the day-to-day reality of managing caring responsibilities on a low income, and the added complexity when women became involved in education or employment. It showed the importance of informal care from relatives, an issue which has received little consideration from policy makers, who tend to view formal and informal childcare as alternatives.

However, the widespread incidence of poor health meant that informal support networks tended to be very fragile.

'She's my main support, my Mum. I was never able to do anything without my Mum. But she's not fit enough now. She had an operation that went badly – although she would never say 'no', then I know her good days and her bad days and I would never pressurise her into, you know, if she was really unwell that day, then I wouldn't have been going over and I wouldn't have been at work, it's as simple as that.'

Coping with their own poor health and the health needs of those they cared for is a significant barrier to employment for many women.

The second study examined financial barriers experienced by women making transitions into employment or higher education, including lack of information about in-work benefits, delays in payments of tax credits and a lack of affordable nurseries, after-school care and breakfast clubs. There were many additional costs such as creditors' demands for repayment, costs of informal care, travel costs, prescription charges, school meals, packed lunches for themselves, school clothing, work clothes, and paying into 'worksheets' (for example, for when someone leaves work).

Surprisingly, the transition to full-time higher education was more problematic than the move into work. Women were extremely reluctant to come off benefits and take on student loans, incurring high levels of debt

and losing access to housing benefit. Caring responsibilities tended to rule out the possibility of supplementing student loans through part-time jobs. The ideal solution was to find a part-time course and stay on benefits, but there were very few courses available at the right level, and these might be only available in the evenings.

'That's a problem because I've got to find somebody to watch [C] at night. I have been getting that but I'm going out at tea time and I'm not getting to put him down to bed, two nights a week. The full-time course would have been ideal – it was four full days, but it just wasn't working out for me financially, so I had to go part time. I don't like part time and I will be lucky if I can stick it because I can't cope with going out at 5 o'clock at night.'

Although the women in this research were critical of government policies, their personal goals were not any different to these, which aim to encourage mothers in low-income families to take up employment. They saw paid employment, or employment after further education, as a positive goal, which would bring rewards for them and for their families. However, in practice, all of the women in the study found it very difficult to carry out their plans because of the difficulties in combining paid employment and care.

Impact on policy: to launch two Working for Families pilot projects

On 1 September 2003, Communities Minister Margaret Curran came to Rosemount Lifelong Learning to launch two Working for Families pilot projects:

'Innovative projects such as Rosemount Transitions will give these parents greater opportunities to work and learn, while their children are cared for in a safe environment. Next year, parents across Scotland will benefit from similar projects, as a result of the £20 million investment we have allocated for this purpose.'³

The Rosemount Transitions project, which implemented the recommendations of the earlier research, created a four-person information, support and guidance service with a wide remit. Issues presented by service users

included health, addictions, bereavement, children's behaviour, domestic violence, rape, debt, benefits, childcare, bursaries and student loans, study skills, application forms and bullying at work.

From 2004, Working for Families initiatives were developed across ten local authorities in Scotland with high levels of child poverty.⁴ One of these initiatives was the (Rosemount) HNC pilot project, developed by a partnership of Glasgow City Council, Jobcentre Plus and Rosemount Lifelong Learning specifically to address the barriers to full-time higher education, identified in our research. In 2005/06, 22 parents attended full-time HNC courses at five colleges in Glasgow, remaining on benefits and receiving childcare support, the majority of whom graduated in July 2006. The success of this project demonstrates the advantages of removing benefits traps, as described by one of the earlier research participants:

'Anybody that's going into college or university that have children, they should get free childcare. In the long run, these people are going there to get an education, so when they're coming back out, they are going to put money back into the system through their national insurance and so on when they have their qualification.'

Rosemount staff, directors and service users are pleased to see positive results from the dissemination of our research, especially where this leads to policy initiatives such as Working for Families.

The research has also enabled us to improve our integrated range of childcare, guidance and education services in response to changing local needs. Unfortunately, the childcare infrastructure remains the biggest obstacle to the progress of individual parents and childcare providers. Our research clearly shows that parents want to move out of poverty, but not at the expense of their children's well-being. They want access to affordable quality childcare, but this is not readily available for all parents. There is very little childcare for parents making transitions from adult literacy and lifelong learning classes to further and higher education. Furthermore, although Working for Families helps some parents to take up work, for example, by subsidising childcare costs for the first few months, childcare in the UK remains the most expensive in Europe.⁵ Problems caused by under- and overpayments of childcare tax credits are well documented. As a childcare provider, we experience pressure from funders to increase sustainability by reducing grant dependency by increasing parental fees. Some nurseries which have been driven down this route have only been able to do so by relinquishing their anti-poverty objectives.

Ironically, the welfare to work approach to alleviate poverty, favoured by the UK government and Scottish Executive, has resulted in in-work poverty in the sector which is designed to be the bridge to employment for parents; the hidden losers in childcare are the low-paid members of this predominantly female workforce working in voluntary and private sector nurseries where we are unable to maintain parity with nurseries paying slightly better local authority salaries. As an organisation which supports women to move out of poverty, including in-work poverty, we are painfully aware of the problem of the undervalued childcare profession.

Notes

- 1 S Innes and G Scott, *Women, Care and Transitions*, Rosemount Lifelong Learning Research Report 1, Centre for Research on Families and Relationships and Scottish Poverty Information Unit, 2003; M Gillespie, G Scott and C Lindsay, *Women, Poverty and Transitions to Work*, Rosemount Lifelong Learning Research Report 2, Scottish Poverty Information Unit, 2003; G Scott, M Gillespie and S Innes, *Breaking Barriers: poverty, childcare and mothers' transitions to work*, Rosemount Learning and Scottish Poverty Information Unit, 2003
- 2 All quotations in the paper are drawn from the Rosemount research projects – see note 1.
- 3 M Curran, Presentation at Rosemount Lifelong Learning, 1 September 2003
- 4 Information on Working for Families has been archived by the Scottish Executive, but can be accessed online at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/People/Social-Inclusion/17414/15075/Q/ViewArchived/On>
- 5 Working Families, *Policy Paper on Childcare*, 2006