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# Childcare for Parents with Atypical Work Patterns: The need for flexibility

Informal Childcare Research Paper Three

Jill Rutter and Ben Evans



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### About our research

Since the late 1990s the uptake of formal childcare – in nurseries and from registered childminders – has increased in the UK and initiatives such as the roll out of children's centres and subsidies for childcare costs through the tax credit system has increased the availability and affordability of formal childcare. Despite these changes, the numbers of parents using informal childcare remains high. Daycare Trust defines informal childcare as *childcare that is largely unregistered by the state for quality control, child protection and/or taxation purposes*. In the UK many families use informal childcare provided by relatives, friends, paid babysitters and unregistered nannies, yet research on this issue is very limited. To fill this knowledge gap Daycare Trust is undertaking a major research project on informal care, funded by the Big Lottery Fund. *Childcare for Parents with Atypical Work Patterns* is the third research paper which focuses on a particular issue in relation to informal childcare, with previous reports focusing on grandparents and young people who babysit.

### About the authors

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# 1. Introduction

Until the late 1990s childcare was seen as a private matter in the UK, with limited government investment or intervention and with patchy access to formal nursery provision or after school clubs. In many parts of the UK, the absence of formal childcare meant that working parents relied on their family and friends to provide informal childcare and many women without these support networks left the labour market when they had children. Since 1998 formal childcare provision has expanded rapidly and initiatives such as the free entitlement to part-time early childhood education and subsidies for childcare costs through the tax credit system have made childcare more affordable. Despite this recent investment in formal childcare, its increased availability and greater affordability, the number of parents using informal childcare provided by friends and relatives remains high. Recent research by Daycare Trust suggested that nearly half (47 per cent) of parents surveyed had used informal childcare for their oldest or youngest child over the last six months (Rutter and Evans, 2012). This was more than the 31 per cent of parents who had used formal childcare for their youngest and oldest children. The widespread use of informal childcare among families in Britain was also highlighted in the most recent Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents from the Department for Education in which 38 per cent of parents in the survey had used informal childcare in the one reference week of the survey (Department for Education, 2012).

Over the last two years Daycare Trust has undertaken

a major research project that has examined the use of informal childcare in the UK. The study defined informal childcare as:

*childcare that is largely unregistered by the state for quality control, child protection and/or taxation purposes (Rutter and Evans, 2011).*

Using this definition, informal childcare is provided by a range of different people: grandparents, siblings, other relatives, friends, neighbours, au pairs and unregistered nannies.

Daycare Trust's research has looked at the patterns of use of informal childcare in different families. One of the key findings of this study is that parents who work outside normal office hours, usually defined as 8am to 6pm, often rely on informal childcare to remain in work. As Britain has increasingly become a 24/7 society, there are large numbers of parents whose employment involves work outside normal office hours. Singler (2011) reviewed formal childcare provision for parents who work outside normal office hours, highlighting the absence of formal provision and parents' reliance on informal childcare. In order to take forward this work, as well as the findings of our research on informal childcare, Daycare Trust wanted to investigate childcare strategies in more detail for parents who work outside normal office hours, alongside others who have atypical work patterns, for example, agency workers whose hours of employment vary from week to week.



## 2. Research methodology

This report looks at childcare issues for people with atypical work patterns. We define these as:

- work outside the normal office hours of 8.00am to 6.00pm. Atypical hours working encompasses a wide range of work patterns, including extended hours, evening or weekend work and shift work. Long periods spent travelling to work can also turn 'typical' hours into atypical hours.
- irregular working patterns, including agency working, zero hours contracts, workers who have only been able to secure short-term employment, some of those working in the informal economy and some self-employed workers.

Atypical work patterns can be planned or known about in advance. Alternatively, atypical work patterns can present themselves at short notice, often making childcare difficult to plan.

We were interested to explore a number of issues in greater depth:

- the nature of atypical work patterns in today's Britain;
- childcare use among parents who have atypical work patterns, in particular how parents use informal childcare; and
- whether the absence of informal childcare was a barrier to work among parents with atypical work patterns.

In order to answer these questions, the research has drawn on:

- an analysis of the Labour Force Survey;
- a representative survey of 1,413 parents undertaken in 2011;
- a representative survey of 857 informal carers aged 15 and over, with the survey undertaken in 2010 and 2011;
- 10 focus groups held with parents who use informal childcare; and
- 2 focus groups held with young people who provided informal childcare.

Daycare Trust interviewed 1,413 parents who used informal childcare through an omnibus survey conducted by IPSOS Mori in 2011. We also interviewed 857 carers who provide informal childcare through an omnibus survey conducted by IPSOS Mori in 2010 and 2011, during different weeks to the Parents' Survey. Two screening questions were used to identify respondents who provided informal childcare to family and friends, or who had worked as an unregistered nanny, au pair or babysitter during the last six months. From these two screening questions we identified 857 survey respondents, of which 129 were aged between 15- and 24-years-old.

Both surveys used a quota sampling method to recruit a representative sample of about 6,000 adults and young people over 15-years-old. It was conducted face-to-face and in the homes of respondents who were selected from 180 different sampling points in England, Scotland and Wales. (The survey was not undertaken in Northern Ireland.) It is important to note that the survey of informal carers is not comparable with the survey of parents. They were two separate groups of people and no relationship should be assumed between them.

We undertook 12 focus groups with parents at different locations in Britain and with different social characteristics. The focus groups explored the research questions that are central to the project: the use of different types of childcare, parents' decision-making processes and their perceptions about the advantages and disadvantages of informal childcare. (Further details about the parent interviews are given in Rutter and Evans, 2012.)



## 3. Atypical work patterns in the UK

Atypical patterns of work are no new trend: the emergency services, transport and some manufacturing industries have always relied on shift work. But there is evidence that atypical hours employment is growing as a consequence of the 24/7 society, with, for example, those working in the retail sector now expected to work on Sundays or late into the night. A further aspect of changed working practices are the greater proportions of temporary, agency and casual workers in some sectors, as well as a growth in the number of employees who work on 'zero hours' contracts. This is permanent contract where the employer does not guarantee to provide work and pays only the hours that are worked and is prevalent in retailing.

There have been some studies that have attempted to quantify atypical hours working. Hogarth et al (2001) suggested that only 35 per cent of employees work 'standard' hours, with Woodland et al (2002) concluding that nearly half of all single parents are working atypical hours. We undertook our own analysis of atypical work patterns using the Labour Force Survey (for Quarter 1, 2012, the most recent data that was available) supplemented by Daycare Trust's Parents' Survey.

Analysis of the Labour Force Survey suggests the following prevalence of atypical work patterns:

### Overtime and hours of work

Some 35.8 per cent of those in employment have worked overtime at some time in their main job.

The UK also has a long hours work culture compared with many other European countries, with long days turning 'typical' work patterns into atypical hours. Some 19.3 per cent of those in employment worked more than 45 hours per week, with the self-employed (27.5 per cent) most likely to work more than 45 hours per week.

### Shift work

Some 14.4 per cent of those in employment worked shifts most of the time in their main job and 2.8 per cent worked shifts some of the time, with 82.8 per cent of those in employment never working shifts. Shift working is less common among those with professional or managerial occupations and more common among those who work in health and social care, the hotel and catering sector and manufacturing industry.



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### Weekend working

Some 29.1 per cent of those in work usually work on a Saturday, with 20.2 per cent of those in work usually working on a Sunday.

### Zero hours and on-call working

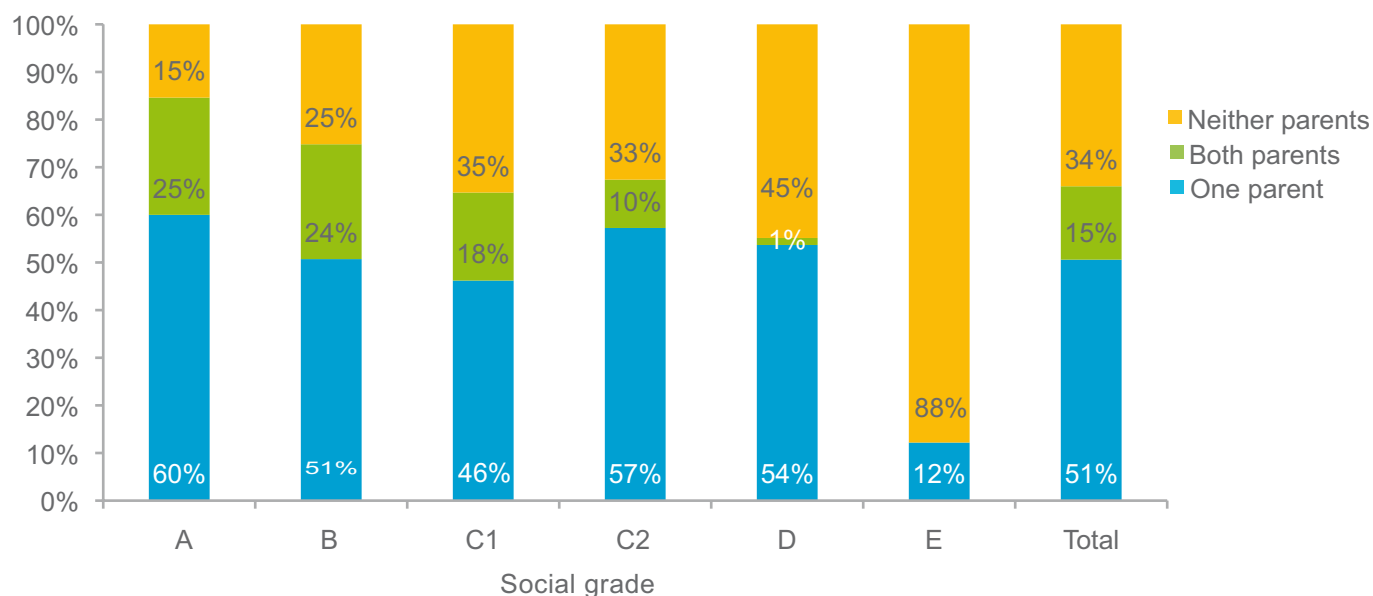
Some 0.4<sup>1</sup> per cent of those in employment had zero hours contracts and 1.8 per cent experienced 'on-call' working, where they could be asked to work at short notice. Zero hours contracts are most common among those in unskilled elementary occupations (0.8 per cent), but also in the hotel and catering (1.1 per cent) and health and social care sectors (0.8 per cent).

### Temporary work

Some 1,506,000 people were estimated to be in temporary forms of work, the greatest proportion of whom (39.4 per cent) were doing so because they could not find a permanent job. Among temporary workers some 45.5 per cent of them were on fixed term contracts, 18 per cent undertaking agency work, 21.2 per cent were casual workers and 4.2 per cent were seasonal workers. There is an over-representation of those in unskilled elementary occupations among temporary workers, with 17.1 per cent of all temporary workers being in elementary occupations, almost all of which are poorly paid. Workers born outside the UK are also usually more often in temporary forms of work, for example 13.3 per cent of workers born in Nigeria were in temporary forms of work.

<sup>1</sup> Labour Force Survey, April – June quarter, 2011, as this variable is not measured in all quarters.

**Figure 1: Atypical hours working in couple households**



N=1,128 parents in couple households Source Daycare Trust Parents' Survey

**Table 2: Shift working and overtime by social grade among responding parent and partner with children under 16**

		Social grade					
	Overall	A	B	C1	C2	D	E
Shift work by parents and/or partners	41%	20%	22%	40%	55%	74%	71%
Planned, paid overtime by parents and/or partners	19%	14%	22%	19%	22%	8%	0%
Unplanned, paid overtime by parents and/or partners	9%	5%	9%	11%	10%	5%	0%
Planned, unpaid overtime by parents and/or partners	10%	27%	14%	11	5%	1%	0%
Unplanned, unpaid overtime by parents and/or partners	14%	35%	20%	17%	4%	2%	0%

N=1,128 parents in couple households Source Daycare Trust Parents' Survey

## Daycare Trust's Parents' Survey

Daycare Trust's Parents' Survey examined the prevalence of atypical work patterns in relation to the hours that parents worked. Some 43 per cent of parents who responded worked outside normal office hours (8.00am – 6.00pm) and another 37 per cent of parents had a partner who worked outside normal office hours. One third of parents (33 per cent) did not work outside normal office hours. A parent of social grade A – professional and managerial jobs – was most likely to work outside normal office hours, as was his or her partner, with this work pattern declining down the social grades (Figure 1).

Daycare Trust's Parents' Survey asked the reasons for working atypical hours, with shift work being the most frequently cited reason. Forty-one per cent of those in families where one or both parents worked atypical hours cited shift work as the main reason for atypical working patterns (Table 2). Those in social grades C1, C2, D and E were most likely to work shifts. Overtime was another frequently cited reason for atypical hours work patterns. There was a strong association between social grade and unpaid overtime, with those in social grades A and B being more likely to cite unpaid overtime (both planned and unplanned) as a reason for atypical hours working. Table 2 presents data on shift working and overtime, broken down by social grade.



Overall, our analysis shows that parents with atypical work patterns fall into three groups, based on their type of atypical work pattern and social background:

1. Those in professional and managerial occupations, who are more likely to work unpaid overtime of more than 45 hours every week, with some of this additional work being unplanned.
2. Shift workers, who are over-represented in some sectors, for example, health and social care and retailing, and are less likely to command high salaries. However, the work patterns of shift workers may be predictable, so childcare can be planned in advance.
3. Those in temporary forms of work or other types of irregular work patterns who may find it difficult to predict their hours of work. Many of these jobs could be considered to be in the peripheral labour market, characterised by employment which is temporary in nature, poorly paid and lacks opportunities for promotion and better pay. The unpredictable nature of this work makes it very difficult to plan formal childcare in advance.

These differences, in turn, influence parents' childcare needs which we discuss below.



## 4. Childcare strategies among parents with atypical work patterns

Parents with atypical work patterns can use a number of childcare strategies. They may be fortunate enough to have formal childcare at the times of the day when it is needed, for example, a nursery that stays open later into the evening. ‘Shift parenting’ – where parents work at different times – is another strategy, although not one that is an option for some single parents. They may also use informal childcare provided by friends and relatives (Bryson et al, 2006; La Valle et al, 2000; Le Bihan and Martin, 2004; Singler, 2011; Statham and Mooney, 2003; Vandell, 2003). Families on higher incomes may employ nannies with contracted hours at the times of day when childcare is needed.

Daycare Trust’s research suggests family income appears to affect childcare strategies adopted by those with atypical work patterns. Some workers are compensated for atypical hours working through high salaries and generous overtime payments. Other workers are not, for example, those working in the retail sector. Those with higher incomes may shift parent, use informal childcare, or if these forms of childcare are not available may employ a nanny. Families with lower incomes are unlikely to be able to employ a nanny and consequently have to rely on shift parenting or informal childcare.

Both Daycare Trust’s interviews with parents and its Parents’ Survey show a greater reliance on informal childcare where parents work outside normal office hours. The survey shows that in families where both parents work shifts or outside office hours (8.00am-6.00pm) their use of informal childcare is higher than in families where neither parents have these work patterns. Where just one parent works outside normal office hours, the likelihood of using informal childcare is only marginally higher than in families where no parent works outside normal office hours (Table 3). Our interviews suggest that where just one parent works outside normal office hours, shift parenting is a common strategy.

*“I picked evening jobs and weekend jobs so my partner will have him, but we don’t really see each other just to avoid paying the childcare fee. My boyfriend’s mum works, but she’s quite alright to have him on Saturday, but neither of us has got a big family.”* (Mother of two-year-old boy, Eastern England)

The interviews that we did also suggested that for some parents the presence of informal childcare networks can make the difference between work and unemployment.

*“She was in nursery for a while but then the job, it was like shift work as well so I couldn’t manage that because the nursery only operated for daytime. I had to send her to Jamaica for my Mum to help me out there, my Mum and Dad, and they had her. They had her for awhile but then they’re getting very old, so they sent her back, so I had her, so I couldn’t work.”* (Mother, London)

*“If I get a job and it says ‘9 to 5.30’ I can’t do it, because I’ve got to pick my little girl up from after school club, 5.45, just by about 15 minutes I’ve lost that on a job, and I’m constantly like finding that, like I went for an interview yesterday and I got there and there was loads of people there and I got down to the final eight and everything and she was like ‘yeah because obviously, you’re going to have to do 7 o’clock starts’ and all this like and I’m just thinking well, I just literally can’t do it.”* (Mother, London)

### Childcare strategies for those with temporary or irregular work patterns

While there is some research about childcare use among parents who work shifts or outside normal office hours, there has been comparatively little analysis of childcare use among parents with irregular work patterns, for example, agency workers or those undertaking casual or seasonal work. Two North American studies of families living in very poor urban neighbourhoods highlighted the unpredictable nature of many families’ work patterns and that informal childcare by friends and relatives was the only affordable and available childcare option in such circumstances (Knox et al, 2003; Lowe et al, 2003). Childcare for those whose work is unpredictable or unstable has not been explored in depth in any UK study, although it is raised in a number of studies on recurrent poverty among those who move in and out of poorly paid jobs (McQuaid et al, 2010; Shildrick et al, 2010). Both McQuaid et al

**Table 3: Formal and informal childcare use among parents with different work patterns**

	Working pattern		
Type of care used for youngest child	One parent works atypical hours – shifts or outside 8.00am-6.00pm office hours	Both parents work atypical hours	Neither parents work atypical hours
<b>Formal</b>			
State nursery school	5.4%	8.2%	8.8%
Nursery or reception class in a primary school	3.9%	6.4%	5.6%
Private or voluntary sector nursery	7.9%	12.3%	5.3%
Nursery in a children's centre	1.4%	2.3%	2.9%
Breakfast or after school club run by a school	3.6%	8.2%	1.9%
Breakfast or after school club run by another organisation	2.0%	1.2%	1.1%
School holiday project	4.1%	7.0%	2.4%
Registered childminder	3.2%	7.0%	2.7%
<b>Informal</b>			
Grandparents	27.1%	35.9%	25.1%
Other adult relatives	6.1%	12.9%	6.1%
Child's older brother or sister	5.0%	5.8%	2.4%
Neighbours	1.4%	0.0%	1.3%
Friends	6.3%	11.2%	4.0%
Nanny in own home	0.7%	2.4%	1.3%
Nanny share at a friend's home	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%
Babysitter	1.8%	1.8%	1.3%
Au pair, mother's help or other domestic worker	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%
Grandparents or other adult relatives who normally live outside the UK	2.0%	3.5%	1.6%
Other	4.1%	1.8%	2.4%

Base: two-parent families N=1,128 parents in couple households Source Daycare Trust Parents' Survey

and Shildrick et al (2010) argue that the absence of affordable formal childcare or stable informal childcare at the times of the day when it was needed prevented many parents from taking up work that would enable them to escape the 'low pay, no pay' cycle. Himmelweit and Sigala (2004) describe the difficulties of finding formal childcare for parents who move in and out of temporary work.

*"You have to get the childcare and the job available at the same time and they always seem to miss."*  
(Parent cited in Himmelweit and Sigala, 2004)

Apart from these studies, the childcare strategies of

parents with unpredictable work patterns have not been examined in any UK study. As a consequence of this gap in knowledge, we specifically examined childcare among this group of parents. We found that parents with temporary, agency or casual work were reliant on informal childcare. There were three reasons for this. First, formal childcare providers – nurseries, after school clubs and registered childminders – were insufficiently flexible to meet the needs of parents whose hours of work varied from week to week. To guarantee flexible childcare, parents were often asked to pay for five days childcare every week, a strategy that was unaffordable, as most parents with unpredictable work patterns had low earnings.



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*"I do shift patterns at the hospital, if I got one of those then that'd be like say one week of Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday but the following week that'd be Wednesday, Thursday, Friday or Tuesday, Wednesday...I'd have to pay every week for five days, even though my child would only be here three days to guarantee his place." (Mother, Eastern England)*

*"I work three days a week but they won't give me set days – they used to but now they won't. It's only my immediate manager that tries to sort it out for me, but basically I have to work any three days and yet, like you say, to cover that I have to book him in five days to cover it. I just could not afford it." (Mother, London)*

The second reason that parents with unpredictable work patterns relied on informal childcare, rather than formal care, lay in the non-responsive nature of tax credit support for childcare. There has been some financial support for childcare through tax credits since 1994 when a childcare disregard to Family Credit was introduced. This meant that childcare costs of up to £40 per week could be disregarded in the income calculation for Family Credit. The generosity of the disregard was increased at various stages until Family Credit was replaced by Working Families' Tax Credits

in October 1999 which contained a childcare element, initially worth up to 70 per cent of eligible childcare costs up to maximum cost level. After the introduction of Child and Working Tax Credit in April 2003, the childcare tax credit was renamed the childcare element of Working Tax Credit, and the level of support was increased to 80 per cent of eligible childcare costs until April 2011, when support was scaled back to 70 per cent of costs. Today the childcare element of Working Tax Credit will pay up to maximum cost levels of £175 per week for one child in childcare and £300 per week for two or more children in childcare.

Despite this financial support, the uptake of the childcare element of Working Tax Credit is lower than might be expected in some parts of the UK. The complexity of making a Working Tax Credit claim may be a barrier to uptake for parents with low levels of literacy or limited fluency in English.

Negative past experiences of tax credit over-payment may also act to limit uptake of the childcare element of Working Tax Credit. These are calculated on earnings from the previous year and in the past there have been instances where parents have been overpaid or underpaid because their earnings have changed in

comparison with the previous year. Because of this the last government introduced an income disregard, where income could change without tax credits being affected. This income disregard has now been cut, thus risking a greater amount of underpayment or overpayment. Additionally, support for childcare costs made through Working Tax Credit does not work well for parents with intermittent or unpredictable employment, and therefore a fluctuating income. At present under the tax credit system, your income needs to change for more than one month before your tax credits are recalculated and it takes a period of time to receive new payments.

In several of the focus groups, parents with unpredictable work patterns talked about their difficulties getting help with formal childcare costs through Working Tax Credits. The challenges of getting financial help for childcare through the tax credit system pushed some parents into relying on informal childcare.

*"I need more childcare in the holidays, but to claim for it, it is not worth the effort. I might as well give my nephew £10 to look after them. Nothing is easy about tax credits. They say prove this, prove that, can I have that document. They take forever to sort it out and you're still getting bills coming in. They make you get in debt because of how hard they make it."* (Mother, Derbyshire)

*"My partner is self employed; he's a window cleaner. He had three weeks off because of the snow and I was trying to keep the house going on just my income. I tried to get more on the tax credits, but they froze my claim. I'm being paid by then on what I was earning last year and now I'm not earning as much.... You work 16 hours, but if you drop down to 12 hours, you don't get it [childcare element of Working Tax Credit] at all then. It's difficult if your hours aren't the same every week, my hours are all over the place."* (Mother, Doncaster)

Tax credits and out-of-work benefits are being merged into a single Universal Credit between 2013 and 2017. The structure of childcare support under Universal Credit will be very similar to the childcare element of Working Tax Credit, with a percentage of costs covered up to a maximum weekly limit, with a taper applied based on earnings. Precise details on the process for claiming Universal Credit are yet to be decided as regulations are still to be laid, but there are a number of positive developments which the Government has announced. These changes include a maximum limit



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that will be calculated monthly, which will enable greater flexibility for parents whose costs may fluctuate during the month. The development of the Universal Credit offers other opportunities for simplification for example, by having longer run-ons when finishing a job to avoid having to start a new claim when claimants find new work.



## 5. Formal childcare for parents with atypical work patterns

For parents who lack informal childcare support networks, flexible formal childcare can mean the difference between work and unemployment. Formal provision for those with atypical work patterns may include:

- nurseries and breakfast clubs that open from 7.30am to accommodate parents that have long journeys to work and start work before 9.00am;
- nurseries and after-school clubs that stay open until 7.00pm to accommodate parents that have long journeys from work and finish work after 5.00pm;
- school holiday childcare that opens by 7.30am and stays open later in the evening;
- nurseries that run over the weekend, or late into the evening. Some large hospitals or other large employers in London have workplace nurseries that open late into

the evening or over the weekend;

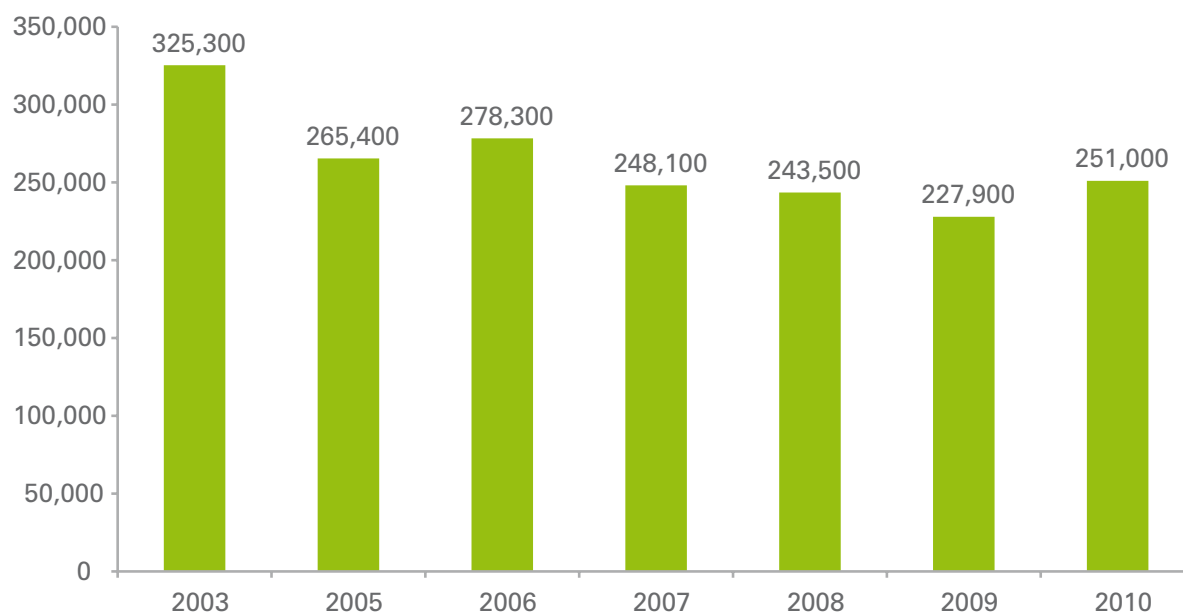
- nurseries, including workplace nurseries, that allow parents flexibility in the hours that they book; and
- sessional crèche provision to help parents who have irregular work and study patterns.

However, many parents who have atypical work patterns, especially shift-workers, prefer their children to be cared for in a home environment, either in their own home or at a registered childminder's home. Childminders, more so than nurseries, have a greater capacity to accommodate out-of-hours or changeable childcare needs. It is significant to note that there has been a year-on-year fall in the numbers of registered childminders in England, with a loss of 18 per cent of working childminders between 2005 and 2010 (Department for Education, 2011). Any large loss in the





**Figure 4: Sessional childcare places in England, 2003-1010**



Source: Department for Education data from Childcare and Early Years Providers Surveys, 2003-2010.

numbers of registered childminders can reduce the overall flexibility of childcare.

In some parts of the UK, private childcare providers and a small number of employers have started to provide registered 'at home' childcare services. Here registered childminders or other groups of people who regularly work with young children provide childcare in the child's own home. The carers are registered with Ofsted, so low income parents are able to apply for the childcare element of Working Tax Credit. The organisation that runs the service – a private company or large employer – brokers the relationship between parent and the 'at home' carer. Such services do have start-up costs, albeit small ones, as well as on-going administrative costs.

Daycare Trust's research on informal childcare, as well as previous studies on childcare provision for parents with atypical work patterns have shown that appropriate formal childcare is hard to find (Alakeson, 2011; Daycare Trust, 2012; Singler, 2011; Statham and Mooney, 2003). Across Britain there is a shortage of provision that is flexible enough to meet parents' needs, whether this is sessional childcare, nurseries and after school provision that stays open later into the evening, or registered 'at home' childcare. Daycare Trust's 2012 Childcare costs

survey indicated that just 11 per cent of local authorities in Britain had sufficient childcare for parents who worked outside normal office hours.

Moreover, the needs of parents with atypical work patterns have not fully been acknowledged by local authorities who have a legal obligation to provide sufficient formal childcare. In Scotland, the 2008 Early Years Framework obliges local authorities to pursue the long-term objective of ensuring that families have 'access to integrated preschool and childcare services in every community matched to an assessment of local demand'. In England and Wales, the Childcare Act 2006 obliges local authorities to provide sufficient childcare for working parents and those parents undertaking training or study with the intention of moving into work. The same legislation requires local authorities to assess if they have sufficient childcare within their area for working parents or those undertaking training. From April 2007 all local authorities had to undertake Childcare Sufficiency Assessments on a three yearly basis, with an annual report and update between the three year reporting periods. Childcare Sufficiency Assessments aimed to identify gaps in childcare provision, as well as outline how these gaps will be filled<sup>2</sup>.

2. It is likely that the obligation to undertake a three-yearly Childcare Sufficiency Assessment will be repealed in England, although local authorities will still be obliged to provide sufficient childcare and produce an annual report.

The first Childcare Sufficiency Assessments were undertaken by local authorities in 2007 and 2008. Very few of them examined childcare for parents with atypical work patterns. For example, in London just 2 of the 32 Childcare Sufficiency Assessments examined this issue. In 2011, a larger number of Childcare Sufficiency Assessments acknowledged the needs of parents who work outside normal office hours. In the same year, the Department for Education announced that parents would be allowed to use their entitlement to free early education between 7.00am and 7.00pm, thus extending the hours over which free early education could be claimed, should nurseries be willing to operate over these hours<sup>3</sup>. However, the needs of parents with unpredictable work patterns were largely not acknowledged by central government nor in the majority of 2011 Childcare Sufficiency Assessments, which tended to assume that parents' childcare needs were predictable from week to week. Just one local authority in England examined this issue in any depth. This is a major gap in analysis and one consequence of this gap is a lack of formal sessional childcare that can be booked at short notice.

In many parts of Britain sessional crèches are often oversubscribed, whether they are crèches in colleges and universities, or sessional provision offered in the voluntary sector or children's centres. (In England data from the *Childcare and Early Years Providers Surveys* shows that sessional provision has the highest occupancy rate of any form of childcare.) There have also been many recent media reports of closures of sessional childcare provision. Some of this provision has not been well-managed from a financial perspective, but public spending cuts have also caused some children's centres, as well as colleges, to close sessional crèches. Data from the *Childcare and Early Years Providers Survey* shows that the number of childcare places in sessional crèches fell after 2003 (partly as a consequence of the expansion of full-time nursery provision). The numbers of places in sessional crèches fell again in the years 2007 – 2009, although it increased slightly in 2010 (Figure 4). It will be interesting to monitor future trends in sessional crèche provision, as public spending cuts continue.

Our qualitative work suggested that parents with unpredictable work patterns who do not have informal childcare support networks or access to sessional crèches find it much more difficult to study, look for work or take up employment where the hours of work vary from week to week.



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The reliance on informal childcare among parents with unpredictable work patterns raises important policy issues. If these parents are to remain in work, we need to ensure that there is sufficient sessional childcare for parents who do not have informal childcare. We believe that local authorities should have a specific strategy to support sessional childcare, incorporated within their Childcare Sufficiency Assessment reports. Such a strategy might include advice on financial sustainability for childcare providers. While there are some practical difficulties, for example, around staff to child ratios, we also feel that nurseries could make better use of vacant places, offering them to parents who need emergency or short-term forms of childcare.

<sup>3</sup> It is not mandatory to open between 7.00am and 7.00pm and, to date, there are only a small number of nurseries that do so.

## 6. Conclusions and recommendations

We believe that in an economy which demands a flexible labour market, the absence of informal childcare support networks severely restricts the range of employment available to parents. In low income families the presence of informal childcare can mean the difference between employment and poverty. In recent years those advocating for low income working families have given greater attention to childcare that is both affordable and flexible enough for those with atypical work patterns (McQuaid et al, 2010; Ray et al, 2010; Trade Union Congress, 2008).

The absence of childcare to meet the needs of parents with atypical work patterns remains one of biggest gaps in provision across Britain. We believe that central and local government should show much greater leadership and be more active in developing flexible forms of childcare for parents with atypical work patterns, as not all parents are able to use informal childcare. To these ends we recommend:

- All local authorities should fulfil the obligations set out in the Childcare Act 2006 and the Early Years Framework in Scotland in relation to ensuring sufficient childcare for working parents, including those with atypical work patterns. Central government should hold local authorities to account where they fail to ensure sufficient childcare.
- Local authorities must implement the action plans set out in their Childcare Sufficiency Assessments.
- Local authorities should bring childcare providers together to highlight gaps in the market for childcare for parents with atypical work patterns. Local authorities should use their childcare sufficiency research to highlight the demand for children that is open between 7.00am and 7.00pm, or weekend nursery provision.

- Local authorities should have a strategy for sessional crèche provision to help parents who have irregular work and study patterns, or who are looking for work.
- Local authorities and groups of local authorities should set up at-home childcare services for parents who work outside normal office hours, where registered childminders provide care in the child's own home. Local authorities should publicise these service through their Family Information Services, alongside information about Working Tax Credit support to parents who may need such services.
- Central government should introduce a capital grant to increase the amount of formal childcare for parents with atypical work patterns. This grant could be used to help businesses set up workplace nurseries, prioritising employers whose staff are obliged to work outside normal office hours. The capital grant could also be used to set up 'at home' childcare services that offer childcare to parents with atypical work patterns, as a small amount of funding is needed to set up these services.
- The Department for Work and Pensions must ensure that Universal Credit support, to be introduced between 2013 and 2017, makes it worthwhile for parents on low and modest incomes to stay in work. Levels of support under Universal Credit should return to 80 per cent of childcare costs. Universal Credit also needs to work better for families with fluctuating employment patterns, for example by having longer run-ons when finishing a job to avoid having to start a new claim when they find new work.

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