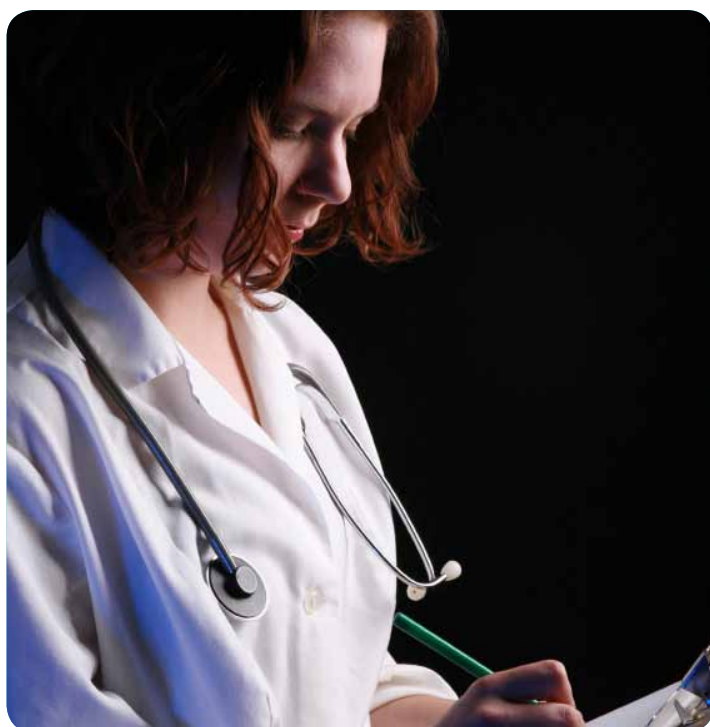
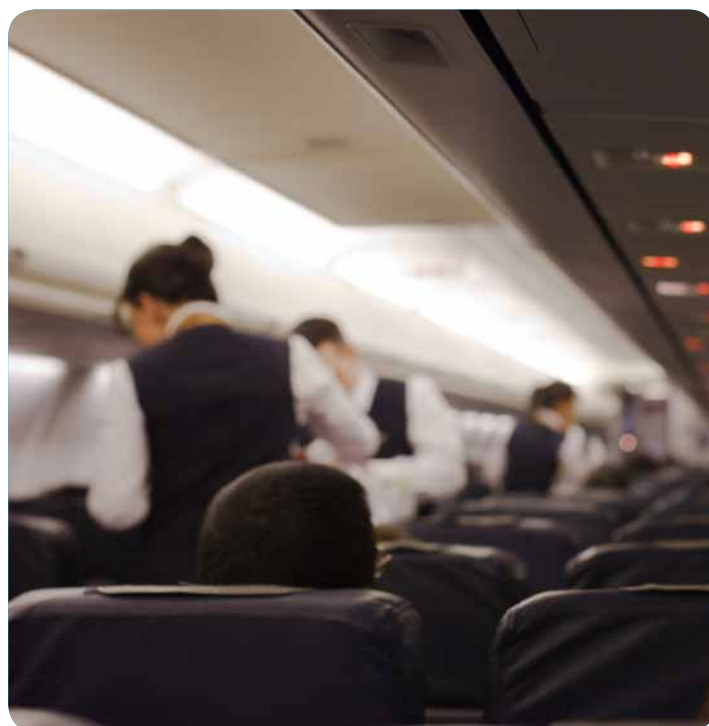


Executive summary

Open all hours?

Flexible childcare in
the 24/7 era

Rosanna Singler





Executive summary

Changes in the economy, most notably the growth of the service sector and the requirement for 24/7 access to services, have led to a culture where employees are increasingly required to work outside of the standard working hours of 8.00am–6.00pm. With only 17 per cent of working families with dependent children working exclusively standard hours, this is a pressing issue for those parents who need to access childcare during atypical hours. There is much evidence to suggest that formal childcare is rarely available to meet this ‘non-standard’ demand. In this study, atypical hours will be defined as any hours worked outside of the standard day (8.00am–6.00pm), including early mornings, late evenings, overnight, weekends and irregular shift work. Very little centre-based care is open beyond 8.00am–6.00pm, from Monday to Friday. Only a small number of individual childminders and groups provide care outside of this and they tend to be more expensive.

Since 1998 the National Childcare Strategy has seen government give greater emphasis to expanding the childcare market to enable employees to remain in the workforce once they

have children. This is based on the recognition that enabling parents, a substantial proportion of the workforce, to remain in and re-enter work is of significant value to the economy and a vital part of government plans to end child poverty. This policy is also integral to the gender equality agenda. However, at both a national and local level, childcare for parents who work atypical hours has largely been ignored. Local authorities have a duty to ensure that sufficient childcare is available for their local parent population, yet they have largely failed to investigate fully or meet the needs of this group. The majority of parents, particularly those from low income groups, fill this gap with informal childcare, that is partners or ex-partners, grandparents, other family members and friends.

However, there are many problems in the reliance on informal care. Those who are reliant on grandparents may not always find this source of care available and/or reliable, because of grandparents’ own employment, health issues or other commitments. Higher income parents who work atypical hours may be able to use nannies and au pairs but high costs make these forms of

care inaccessible to low income families. In other families, parents work at different times in order to manage childcare (so called 'shift-parenting') yet even these parents may sometimes find themselves in a position where their shifts overlap. Lone parents, or couples who need to work at the same time, who have no relatives or social networks to fill in this gap, may not be able to take up employment that involves atypical hours.

This study assesses the demand for atypical hours childcare at different times (that is, early mornings, overnight and so on) and investigates the reasons for the difficulties faced by parents at these times. This was achieved through online surveys and interviews that were conducted with parents. Those providers who had delivered childcare at atypical times and national childcare organisations were interviewed to discover what could be done to improve availability.

Key findings

- A significant number of parents work atypical hours in one form or another – 16 per cent of parents work shifts; 1 in 10 work over 40 hours and a staggering 4 in 10 parents work hours which vary week to week – this may not necessarily be atypical hours but it has an impact on demand for childcare, making it irregular and unpredictable.
- Parents in a weak labour market position are more likely to be concentrated in jobs which demand they work at least some atypical hours. This indicates that low-income groups form a large part of the demand for atypical hours childcare. Affordability is therefore a key consideration for those developing atypical hours childcare services.
- The majority of parents do not have a choice in the hours that they work, as the industry that they work in tends to dictate their hours.
- Lone parents are more likely to be found in jobs that demand they work atypical hours. However, in many cases, informal care provision is difficult to access as they may not be in a position to share childcare duties with their partner, for example. Moreover, those without family (those who have moved away from an extended family or are recent immigrants, for example), are in a similar position.
- Ethnicity is a factor in predicting atypical hours. Further research is needed to understand this pattern more fully but this is significant because, as with lone parents, some black minority and ethnic groups tend to be in a weak labour market position. So, with a view to preventing or reducing unemployment, atypical childcare policies need to focus on this group.
- A significant number of parents experience unmet demand for formal childcare at atypical times (including overnight). This is contrary to the suggestion that parents are happy with informal care at atypical times. Meeting this demand is essential for economic growth, as parents who cannot access childcare are at risk of falling out of employment. It is also essential for the success of the Government's welfare reform proposals, as without appropriate childcare parents who are not currently employed will be unable to move into work.
- Many parents who need childcare at times that vary from week to week (reflecting their varying hours) have trouble accessing childcare, as formal providers are not flexible enough to meet this need.
- Parents report needing childcare on an ad hoc or emergency basis (at very short notice) which causes other challenges for providers.
- Parents express concerns around the suitability of formal care at some non-standard times – late evenings and overnight in particular. However, parents are willing to use formal care on the basis that they trust the provider. In the case of overnight, late night and early morning care, it is preferable that a childminder provides care at the child's home.
- Some parents are not happy with using childminders as they feel they do not have the same 'checks and balances' as care provided in a group setting and are unreliable. There is little awareness that registered childminders have to follow the same Ofsted requirements as group-settings. This demonstrates that

government, at both a national and local level (Family Information Services, for example), and childminding organisations, must do everything they can to communicate this to parents.

- Suitability is less of an issue for parents requiring childcare at weekends – when nurseries and childminders tend to be unavailable. In relation to child welfare, there is no reason why childcare should not be provided at the weekend, as long as parents have sufficient family time together at other times.

Multiple barriers to the provision of childcare at atypical times were uncovered from this research, although the case studies in many cases illustrate solutions to these barriers:

- The difficulty of establishing demand is one of the most significant barriers – as this prevents providers from even attempting to set up services in the first instance. Parents might fail to report unmet demand for formal care as they do not feel it is available and do not request it. For these reasons, and other methodological problems (such as low response rates to surveys, a lack of qualitative data), local authorities find it very difficult to uncover a comprehensive picture of demand. However, both the case studies and this report show that it is possible to establish demand once parents are asked in slightly more detail about their needs for atypical hours childcare.
- Demand for childcare that is irregular, ad hoc or requested at short notice is cited as a problem by providers as it makes it difficult to arrange staff adequately (to meet regulations and give their own staff enough notice) and cost-effectively. Childminder networks are often able to meet these needs, as such networks tend to have a range of availability, which allows the childcare coordinator to find someone who is available at relatively short notice.
- Providing atypical hours care in group-settings can cause difficulties for staffing – that is finding staff willing to work, needing to pay staff more at atypical times and managing staff-to-child ratios to meet varying levels of demand. However, the case studies show that

this can be overcome by using a core group of staff who work more or less set hours, with a smaller number of staff who work hours that change each week, according to parental demand. Some providers find staff who are willing to work atypical hours because of their own personal circumstances.

- Parents are struggling to find a package of care that fulfils their needs. For example, parents need someone to pick their children up from school when they work late evenings. This highlights the need for universal, integrated services that include a mix of home-based and centre-based care, so that parents can mix and match to suit their needs.
- Without support at a local authority level, very few providers decide to set up their own atypical hours services, because they are unable to identify and attract demand and ensure that they are financially viable. When providers attempt to provide this service many fail, as demand takes too long to build and parents do not tend to switch providers as soon as they become available. Both the case studies and existing research show how external support in setting up such services can help to overcome these barriers.
- Registration processes (through Ofsted) are an issue for childcare providers considering providing services at atypical times (particularly overnight care). A lack of perceived demand for care at this time compounds this issue, as providers do not feel that it is worthwhile to go through the process if they are unlikely to find enough demand to warrant the extra time and money necessary. If a local authority can help providers find sufficient demand, providers will be more likely to register.

Recommendations

In view of these findings our recommendations are as follows:

Local government

Local authorities must play a greater role in coordinating childcare for atypical hours:

- Pay closer attention to atypical hours in their Childcare Sufficiency Assessments – probing more deeply, in both surveys and interviews, the needs of parents who work atypical hours, rather than assuming a lack of demand because parents are not actively seeking childcare.
- Assess demand at a local community level by engaging with parents who work atypical hours but do not use formal care. This can easily be achieved through ‘on the ground’ visits to specific locations such as Sure Start Children’s Centres.
- Promote and support childminder networks.
- Offer ‘pump-priming’ grants for an agreed period to provide sufficient time for atypical hours childcare services to find alternative means of funding or become self-sustaining businesses (such as social enterprises).
- Support universal, integrated services that include a mix of home-based and centre-based care, so that parents can mix and match to suit their needs, consisting of centres with home-carers attached, with someone coordinating the partnership to ensure services meet parents’ specific needs.
- Help to set up 24-hour centre-based services that are large enough to support a drop-in crèche and out-of-school provision, if the demand is there. International research illustrates how this can be achieved. For example, in Denmark one or two institutions in four different municipalities have attempted to establish a 24-hour service.
- Provide approved ‘sitter services’ where children are cared for in their own home by a registered carer.

- Help to secure funding for community nanny schemes, whereby parents can share a nanny who provides care in their own home with one or more parents. Local authorities can also support these schemes to become social enterprises that will eventually self-fund.
- Encourage and support primary and secondary schools to provide wraparound care in the form of breakfast and after-school clubs with opening hours that genuinely meet the needs of parents.
- Ensure that childcarers who provide care in a child’s home (for example, nannies or babysitters), register with Ofsted. Although registration is not compulsory, joining the Childcare Register on a voluntary basis means that parents can claim Tax Credits and use employer-supported childcare vouchers. Childminders will already be registered on the Early Years Register to provide care in their own home, but if they provide care in a child’s home they also should join the voluntary part of the Childcare Register.
- Support parents to be able to access local information about providers who would be willing to provide childcare outside of standard hours and/or at short notice.



Central government

Government should offer the following types of support:

- Increase the level of support and guidance for providers developing atypical hours services. This could include help setting up partnerships (particularly with large employers), the funding of childcare coordinators and the provision of best practice information.
- Promote the take up of financial support for childcare – such as Tax Credits and childcare vouchers – making parents aware that these can only be used for registered childcare. Expanding the number of registered childcare providers who provide care in the child's home and/or out-of-hours, such as childminders/sitters, would make childcare more affordable for low income groups.
- Encourage and assist large employers of staff working atypical hours, such as the NHS, to form partnerships with local childcare providers to help build demand, connecting parents to provision.
- Implement a government and employer based campaign to change workplace culture and to increase the acceptability of parents who need to reduce atypical hours, leave on time or require more regular hours.
- Extend the hours over which parents are able to take free early education entitlement for three and four-year-olds in the forthcoming review of the same in the Code of Practice. Currently the entitlement may not be accessed outside of 8.00am–6.00pm, but this should be extended from 7.00am–7.00pm, to enable parents with long working days or long travel to work times, to be able to use their free entitlement to cover this period. Since there are restrictions on the number of hours that may be taken in one day, and the number of days over which the entitlement may be taken, this change would not have an adverse effect on a child's welfare.
- Enable parents to request flexible working from day one of employment, with a stronger emphasis on their right to reject atypical hours and request more regular hours.

For 25 years, Daycare Trust has been championing childcare – campaigning for quality, accessible, affordable childcare for all. We do this because children are our future. We lead the national childcare campaign by producing high quality research, developing credible policy recommendations through publications and the media, and by working with others. Our advice and information on childcare assists parents and carers, providers, employers and trade unions and policymakers.

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Daycare Trust

2nd Floor, Novas Contemporary Urban Centre
73–81 Southwark Bridge Road
London SE1 0NQ

Tel: 0845 873 6260 or 020 7940 7510

Fax: 020 7940 7515

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