

Low-income, shift worker parents forced to use low quality nurseries ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

A new report by Citizen's Advice reveals self-employed parents or those in jobs with 'irregular hours' face restrictions to securing high-quality childcare.

The report, 'The practicalities of childcare: an overlooked part of the puzzle', is based on a survey of 400 childcare providers across the country. Survey questions were developed in response to 700 consumer enquiries about childcare in one year, which commonly related to notice periods and retainer fees.

Citizens Advice found that outstanding and good settings needed more notice to change childcare arrangements than lower quality settings, which it says is a problem for parents who work outside of normal hours, do shifts or work unreliable hours and need to be able to change their childcare hours.

More than 75 per cent of outstanding nurseries and childminders, and around 65 per cent of good settings said they required a month or more notice to change arrangements.

In contrast, 52 per cent of those judged as 'requires improvement' by Ofsted required the same notice period.

Childcare providers told Citizen's Advice Bureau's that providing flexibility is difficult, as they need to operate at near full capacity to keep their business going. Also, they are limited by statutory child: adult ratios.

The report also outlines the challenges faced by low-income families in using high-quality childcare.

Of the 400 providers that were surveyed, just over 15 per cent judged outstanding and around 18 per cent that are good said they accept weekly payments. This compares to 31 per cent of nurseries and childminders with an Ofsted grade of requires improvement.

Citizens Advice says that for low-income families finding a month's childcare costs in advance alongside other upfront costs could lead to significant financial hardship.

The way that childcare providers structure payments can also make a big impact on small financial work incentives, says the report, such as if a provider requires payment for a whole day regardless of the hours actually needed.

This can leave parents with only the option of using a childminder to provide care as they typically charge on a per hour basis.

Reasons providers gave for doing this included: needing upfront charges to pay for upfront costs, such as rent, rates and staff; a low profit margin to shoulder the lack of income when a place is booked but not used; and having to use session structures to reduce disruption from people coming and going.

In light of the findings, Citizens Advice goes on to make a number of recommendations, including:

- that childcare providers be paid early education funding upfront rather than in arrears;
- for local authorities to ensure that parents can access flexible, evening and weekend childcare and this is routinely assessed;
- that chief executives of local authorities make sure that payment arrangements and access to financial support for parents is included in sufficiency assessments of local childcare provision;
- for the secretary of state for education Nicky Morgan to review the use of childcare deposits in conjunction with providers to determine best practice for local authorities to pursue locally.

Gillian Guy, chief executive of Citizens Advice, said, 'Our evidence shows that the most suitable childcare options for those on unstable hours are likely to be of poorer quality, which could have a damaging impact on a child's ability to learn and develop. Parents who work shifts or irregular hours may find that the lack of availability will be a major block to getting work. A last minute change of shift or an unexpected meeting could mean parents see their hard work undone by extra costs.

'Up-front costs are a hurdle for families trying to make ends meet, and for many it will simply not be possible to scrape together a deposit and advance payment to hold down a place for their child. If parents are unable to access or afford decent childcare then they can be prevented from going out to work. Government has made excellent progress in helping with costs but everyday childcare is at odds with modern working Britain.'

Commenting on the report, Graeme Cooke, research director at think tank, the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), said, 'Many parents, especially mothers, find it difficult to take up work because the cost of childcare is so high and the quality of provision is so patchy. Reforming our childcare system would help many more families with the cost, improve the quality and allow families to decide how they want to balance work and care.

'Britain needs a universal, high-quality and affordable system of childcare, combined with reforms to parental leave. That would support children's development, boost employment rates for parents - particularly mothers - and advance gender equality.

'Without any price controls, simply extending tax relief is unlikely to make childcare more affordable for families. We also need to raise the quality of childcare on offer

Related link: REPORT: The practicalities of childcare: an overlooked part of the puzzle? [3]

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