

Out-of-hours childcare: expensive and ever harder to find ^[1]

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Finding affordable childcare can be a struggle for any family, but for parents who work outside traditional nine-to-five hours the search is even more difficult.

Figures from the Family and Childcare Trust show that only 7% of local authorities provide sufficient childcare for people who do shift work or have unusual working patterns, a figure that has fallen from 15% in 2015.

"We get a lot of emails from mums, many from the NHS, who have shift changes at very little notice," says Mandy Garner, the editor of *Workingmums.co.uk*. "People are often patching together childcare and it can be so stressful."

An increase in the number of people doing ad hoc work means more families are looking for flexible and affordable childcare. "We have got more parents working outside normal office hours or as freelancers or on zero-hour contracts," says Jill Rutter, the head of policy and research at the Family and Childcare Trust. These workers may need childcare one week and not the next, and will have problems if forced to commit to set days.

Nurseries and childminders tend not to operate before 7am or beyond 6pm, and are not able to offer parents different days each week in accordance with their changing shift patterns. Strict rules on how many carers they need to have for each child mean they are unable to easily take extra children, and if they provide for a child who is not there they will make a loss.

Liz Bayram, the chief executive of the Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (Pacey), says it can also be expensive for nurseries to offer evening and weekend services. "They have to pay for staff outside of normal working hours and it is hard to recruit staff willing to work in that way," she says.

Firefighter Rachael Cooper says returning to work after maternity leave might not be feasible for her because of the lack of childcare options on offer. Her working pattern means doing two days from 7am to 7pm, two nights from 7pm to 7am and then having four days off. The eight-day cycle means she never works the same days each week, making it impossible for her six-month-old daughter Erin to access a nursery and difficult for a childminder to accommodate her.

"No nurseries can accommodate different days each week, and a nanny would be really expensive," she says. "Also I want Erin to go to nursery to learn and to socialise with other children. The other option would be to pay for nursery full-time, but then she may only be going one day a week sometimes."

Cooper has spoken to her employer about flexible working, but that would involve a job share and still would not mean fixed working days. "The other option would be a day job in an office, but I did that when I was pregnant and I hated it," she says. "My parents live in Turkey and, although my husband is self-employed, he has two lads working for him, so needs to be there. I think we will end up with one fixed day at nursery, maybe a childminder and my mother-in-law will retire to look after her. But if these things don't happen I will have to give up work or do something else."

Even if Cooper and workers like her do find irregular or out-of-hours childcare, it is often not eligible for free funding. All three- and four-year-olds and some two-year-olds currently get 15 free hours a week of early education childcare for 38 weeks of the year. This is set to increase to 30 hours a week from 2017. There are strict rules, however, about who can provide these hours and under what circumstances. A childminder has to be Ofsted-registered and must provide the care in their own home between 7am and 7pm for a minimum of 2.5 hours, which does not help parents who need childcare in the evening or early morning within the family home.

Parents needing out-of-hours childcare lose on all fronts because it can be up to 40% more expensive. Although they may be eligible for childcare vouchers they are unable to access universal free hours and there are restrictions on eligibility for working tax credits.

Recognising a need for flexible, affordable childcare, Yvette Oliver-Mighten launched an out-of-hours, at-home childcare service in Nottingham in 2005. @Home Childcare offers wraparound Ofsted-registered childcare to fit either side of the school day as well as out-of-hours care for irregular workers. The service can cost as little as £4.17 a child an hour, in line with the national average, but this is based on

three children so is most affordable for larger families or people sharing the service.

“Out-of-hours care can cost 20% to 40% more depending on the times. In our model, evening childcare is charged at the same rate as day care. However, we charge 20% more for unsocial hours such as late in the evening, overnight or very early in the morning,” says Oliver-Mighten.

This service meets the criteria for working tax credits and childcare vouchers, but is not eligible for free hours, because although it uses registered childminders they operate as home carers and by definition childminding can only be provided in the childminder’s own home.

Part-time GP Natasha Hulme spends £25,000 a year on a nanny who works three days a week. As a partner in her practice Natasha is classed as self-employed and is unable to access a tax-free childcare voucher scheme. The nanny looks after two-year-old Edward and four-year-old Henry from 7.30am until Natasha, or her consultant husband David, returns from work, which can be between 6.30pm and 9pm. “We can afford it but we have to be careful with money. If we could have the free universal childcare hours paid to the nanny that would help,” she says.

In recognition of the problem, the government has run a consultation on plans to broaden the types of hours offered. The education and childcare minister, Sam Gyimah, has said that “childcare needs to be more flexible as well as more affordable, with greater choice over the hours available to parents”. The free hours are currently only available between 7am and 7pm, and the new scheme plans to extend this to between 6am and 8pm, though it will depend on providers willing to offer these hours.

Some feel the plans do not go far enough, because they do not address the need for care in the home, or ad hoc hours. “The government is beginning to wake up to the issue and realise there is a need out there for flexible childcare, but it is expensive. The government is only looking at half of the solution. It needs to consider more flexible models such as home childcare and what parents need,” says Oliver-Mighten. “If you are a shift-working lone parent with one child, how do you work and have affordable childcare? We see parents all the time who say they have given up work as they can’t afford childcare, and yet they want to work.”

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