Enabling working parents?
The experiences of parents in the childcare market

Citizens Advice briefings
Policy for how we really live
Summary

The face of work is changing in Britain. Female participation in the labour market continues to rise, and two parent families increasingly find it is imperative to have both adults in work. At the same time, changing conditionality, cuts to benefits and changing work incentives within the benefit system all add to the pressure on parents to take on work or increase their hours in work.

However, our current childcare system is not set up in the interests of parents who are trying to work or study to move forward in their lives. This report relates the experiences of 20 parents of young children trying to navigate the childcare and labour markets. It follows on from previous Citizens Advice research that highlighted the inflexibility of childcare provision.¹

This report describes how difficult it is to navigate the complex system of childcare funding and delivery, how it requires that parents and carers spend too much time and energy in order to understand their childcare choices, and the impact that using childcare will have on their household income. It explores how parents deal with undersupply of childcare, and shows how this can leave them unable to access the flexible provision that they need to stay in work, study or progress their careers when their children are young.

If finding childcare is difficult, maintaining a childcare arrangement can be even more so. Parents face numerous setbacks in making childcare work, with some finding that this challenge is not worth the financial reward.

Lack of access to sufficient flexible and affordable childcare can have a serious impact on parents’ ability to work, study and progress their careers. The parents we spoke to had struggled to maintain the delicate balance between their jobs or study and their childcare. Either work/study or childcare needed to be flexible, and where both were not, this led to parents changing jobs or careers, missing out on progression opportunities and in some cases leaving the labour market altogether. Those who managed to make it work often did so at a cost to family life and severe strain on their household budgets.

Parents often felt that the market was rigged against them, and that the system was set up in a way that made it hard for them to work. In two-parent families, there was pressure on the main ‘breadwinner’ both to provide financially and to keep up with family-unfriendly workplace cultures.

These personal stories suggest that childcare policy needs to be based in a more person and family-centred approach. Too often the focus has been on developing the market by boosting demand or supply of childcare, and on improving early

¹The practicalities of childcare, Citizens Advice, 2014.
childhood education or maternal employment. But not enough effort has been put into designing a holistic childcare system that fits with people's real lives, behaviours and needs. Numerous factors affect whether parents are able to find a childcare arrangement that works for them practically, including the number of children in the family, the number and types of hours worked by parent(s), the distance of places of work/study from home, the availability of informal care, the child-rearing values of the parents, and the health of all family members.

In the face of this complexity, government intervention in the market should focus on increasing accessibility and flexibility. In the short term, this will mean improving the existing market by bringing information provision into the digital age, encouraging an increase in the supply of flexible childcare through economies of scale and ensuring flexibility in the delivery of the free 30 hours for three and four year olds, or - more radically - allowing parents the option of accessing 15 hours from the age of two.

In the medium and longer term, focus should be placed on integrating the current fractured market into a more coherent system. This better childcare system would:

- Offer a simplified range of provision, to make choosing childcare easier for parents, and reduce the amount of time and effort needed to find it.
- Divert funding into supply rather than demand, concentrating on increasing the number of free hours available to parents or heavily subsidising pay as you go provision at a low rate (e.g. £2 per hour). This would make it easier for parents to only use the exact amount of childcare they need, and to understand how much better off they would be in work.\(^2\)
- Where possible increase supply in a way that allows parents to use the same childcare provider for children of different ages. Provision attached to schools is a good example of this.
- Increase local accountability for ensuring sufficient affordable childcare in every Local Authority, including at unusual hours, to allow parents who need those hours to have equal opportunities to work.

There are also implications for employers. Few parents we spoke with had access to flexible start and finish times, the opportunity to increase or decrease hours when childcare provision changed or the ability to work from home when necessary.\(^3\) Where possible - and of course there are numerous industries and roles where this

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\(^2\) This approach would likely still need to involve some direct subsidy for lower income parents through the tax credit system.

\(^3\) A survey of 2,000 nationally representative employees in 2012 found that while just under one third (32%) work part time (13% of men and 49% of women), fewer work flexitime (25% overall: 30% men, 20% women), even fewer work from home on a regular basis (20%, overall: 25% men and 15% women) and very few work mobile (14% overall: 22% of men and 8% of women). Middle managers and above were more likely to take up flexible working options than line managers and employees. Source: Flexible working provision and uptake, Chartered Institute of Professional Development, 2012. http://www.ask4flex.org/UK_-_Flexible_Working_Survey_Report--CIPD.pdf
is not - more widespread access to this kind of flexibility would help to balance some of the inflexibility of some types of childcare provision. Workplace cultures need to change too, to ensure that parents who are not the primary caregiver are able to work sensible hours and contribute meaningfully to their children's care.
Introduction

Our current childcare market does not work in the interests of parents. It has been subject to sustained policy intervention through several different government departments since the 1990s, with the goals of increasing maternal employment and improving early years education. Supply has increased hugely as a result of this; for example the number of nursery places has increased from 59,000 in the late 1990s to 1.7 million in 2015. However it has also resulted in an extremely complex market including a proliferation of different types of provider and funding, described in brief below.

The current childcare market: funding

Funding comes from several different streams.

- The Department for Education funds 570 hours of free childcare per year for all three and four year olds, and for the 40% most disadvantaged two year olds. This is delivered as 15 hours per week for the 38 weeks of traditional school term-time, and the funding is delivered directly to providers. This funding is set to double to 30 hours per week for working parents from 2016.

- HMRC funds up to 70% (80% until 2010) of childcare for parents on a low income through the childcare element of tax credits, which will rise to 85% of costs under universal credit from 2016. This funding is delivered directly to parents, in arrears.

- Those on higher incomes can - through their employer - claim tax relief of up to £55 per week in the form of childcare vouchers, which can be redeemed with certain providers. This will be replaced by a ‘tax-free childcare’ scheme this autumn (2015), which will allow parents to claim 20% of their childcare costs up to a maximum of £10,000, which equates to up to £2,000 per child per year. This scheme will be administered through individual childcare ‘accounts’ controlled by parents with payments going directly to childcare providers.

The current childcare market: providers

The financial support available to parents can only be used with Ofsted registered providers, of which there are four main types: registered childminders, day nurseries, local authority ‘maintained’ settings (usually attached to schools) and play or pre-schools. Each has their own advantages and disadvantages, while opening hours, costs and levels of flexibility vary widely. Quality also varies, although Ofsted regulation stipulates that staff must have Level 3 qualifications and

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2http://www.fct.bigmallet.co.uk/sites/default/files/files/Childcare_cost_survey_2015_Final.pdf#overlay-context=annual-childcare-costs-surveys
ensures that settings that do not reach adequate standards for early years education are closed.

The practicalities of childcare
At Citizens Advice, we see some of the difficulties caused by a changing labour market that demands increasing flexibility from employees, and a changing benefit system that seeks to incentivise employment and increase hours and earnings through conditionality. In this context, we undertook quantitative research to find out whether the childcare market was providing the type of flexibility low and middle income parents need. We found that:

- Using childcare involves large upfront costs. 90 per cent of providers require payment in advance and 40 per cent require a deposit, but tax credits are paid in arrears
- There is limited flexibility to change childcare arrangements with 57% of providers requiring a month or more notice to make any changes
- Higher quality providers are more likely to require monthly payments and are less likely to offer flexibility. ⁵

Childcare policy and provision that fits real life
In order to find out more about how this lack of flexibility was impacting on low and middle income parents, we undertook this small piece of qualitative research, talking to 20 parents about their experience or arranging and using childcare, focussing on the impacts on their employment and wider lives.

This piece of research forms part of a broader programme exploring how government policy fits with the real lives of those on a low income, and how it can be improved to better take account of people’s actual motivations, behaviours and ambitions for their families. Our starting point is our experience of government policy-making, which too often starts by looking at existing funding and delivery systems and works out how they could be changed to meet policy intentions. We think that policy-making needs to start at the level of the individual, family or community and be rooted in what they need to move forward.

Traditional economic theory suggests that if there is sufficient demand (i.e. parents looking for childcare), then the supply (i.e. the childcare market) will respond to their needs. The chief intervention in the childcare market for the under threes has been through demand-side funding to low-income parents who have then been encouraged to exercise choice in navigating a complex market. It is clear that this has been limited in impact, with the maternal employment rate static, and relatively low for parents of children under the age of 3. It is especially low for lone parents. ⁶

⁵ Practicalities of childcare, ibid
⁶ In 2013, the employment rate for working age women with dependent children 67.5 per cent, compared to 76.2 per cent for those women without dependent children: http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/childmind-the-gap_Feb2014.pdf
This report aims to highlight the importance of instead starting from the point of view of the parents who need to use childcare. In analysis, we used the COM-B model to try to better understand parents behaviours and choices when it came to childcare and work. When analysing the data we asked:

- **Capability**: Did parents have the skills and knowledge to access childcare that fit their family's needs?
- **Opportunity**: Were they able to access the childcare they needed, and jobs that fit with the available childcare?
- **Motivation**: What place do different types of motives play when weighing up and balancing work and childcare?

Our analysis suggests that the answers are far from straightforward, and that the complexity of the childcare market and funding add to the difficulty of ensuring that all parents have the skills, knowledge and opportunity to access affordable childcare when they need it. Limited access to childcare and the persistence of inflexible and insecure working conditions also affect parents' motivations around work in their children's early years. The conclusions suggest that radical simplification of the childcare market and concerted action by employers are key in addressing the needs of working parents.

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7 The COM-B model, first published in 2011, proposes that an individual's behaviour is influenced by many factors, all of which can be grouped into three components: motivation (reflective and automatic mechanisms that activate or inhibit behaviour), capability (psychological or physical ability to enact the behaviour) and opportunity (physical and social environment that enables the behaviour). Michie S, van Stralen MM, West R. (2011). The behavior change wheel: A new method for characterizing and designing behaviour change interventions.
I knew it [finding childcare] would be really complicated so I dealt with the childcare first and then organised my work around it.
1. Finding and maintaining childcare

Navigating the current childcare market requires high levels of knowledge and skills to analyse the relative merits of different providers and time to research and evaluate; the market assumes a high level of parental capability. The chart below shows what the process might look like in an ‘ideal’ world where parents have the time and the resources to make an informed decision between several local providers with availability. The complexity of this process is a problem in and of itself, but the parents we interviewed generally found that they had a lot less choice than might be implied by this model i.e. the limited supply of childcare provision reduced their opportunity to take up the childcare they need.

**Figure 1: Stages of the childcare search**

The chart below illustrates the complex reality faced by parents in finding and maintaining childcare. As we will see in the subsequent chapter, the challenges faced during this process had significant impacts for the parents we interviewed: on the hours they could work, their longer term career plans, household finances and their family life.
1.1 Different starting lines

The parents in our study started their childcare journey from different points. Amount of time available to look for care, knowledge of childcare funding, access to informal care and location all affected the relative ease or difficulty of finding affordable childcare that fit with work or study.

Access to informal care

Of these, access to informal childcare was most important. Relying on friends or family to supplement childcare was not without tension, but those parents who could do so had found that they could be more flexible about the type of formal childcare they could accept. They were able to settle for less than ideal formal childcare arrangements that didn’t quite fit their working hours, or pay for more expensive providers that had space, but use fewer hours.

However, not all parents had this luxury. Those who lived far away from their family were at the greatest disadvantage. Along with losing out on the potential for help with childcare from family members, they also tended to have fewer informal ties and friendships in their communities that would either provide alternative access to informal care or information on low-cost formal childcare.

Even where parents lived close to family members, there could still be barriers to using informal care. Younger grandparents or siblings were often still in work or looking for employment, while older grandparents’ ill health or frailty meant that they couldn’t look after young children for extended periods of time.

“They are older and it’s a lot to ask. So we try not to push it too much”
Case studies: the differences made by availability of informal care

Sarah worked as a children’s centre co-ordinator before the birth of her first child. She and her husband live far from all of their relatives and can’t rely on any informal care. When she went back to work part-time after her first child she struggled to find anywhere that would cover the hours she worked, and ended up having to use a very expensive nursery for three full days, as the provider wouldn’t accept children for partial days. When returning to work after the second child this was the only local setting that could take both children, and she had no option but to use it if she wanted to return to work as she had no recourse to informal care, even for one day a week. Ultimately, the cost of this setting for two children proved unsustainable, and she took voluntary redundancy when the opportunity arose, with the aim of starting to work again after the children are in primary school.

By contrast Isabella had access to a lot of informal care, so when she went back to university and part time work she found suitable childcare relatively easily. Her partner at the time worked shifts which could have made it difficult, but her parents live locally as does her sister. This made the initial process of finding childcare easier - she was looking for a setting for two full days but she could be flexible about which days were needed as her family were able to look after her child on any of the other days. If Isabella hadn’t had this informal care she would have really struggled financially (as it was childcare costs were hard to manage) but especially practically. When there were occasional practical problems caused by work hours, for example when both Isabella and her partner’s shifts made it impossible for them to pick up their daughter from childcare at 6pm, family members were almost always available to look after her at the last minute.

Availability of the secondary caregiver in two-parent households
The secondary caregiver having the time and flexibility to contribute meaningfully to the childcare burden was also important in finding a formal arrangement that worked. As it happens, this research was conducted solely with female primary caregivers, but the difficulties would likely be similar if the gender roles were reversed.

Lone parents were at a clear disadvantage here, with no one else to share the childcare responsibilities with. But even where there were two caregivers, the default was generally to seek childcare that worked around the primary caregiver’s hours of work.

“He [her partner] works 5 days on and 5 days off I can’t arrange anything around him, so I was only looking at whether it worked with my college course”

The three main reasons were:

● The secondary caregiver having to take on more of a ‘breadwinner’ role and maintain or increase commitment to their job post the birth of a child. This sometimes went hand in hand with limited flexibility or increased hours.

● The secondary caregiver working in a non-flexible full-time role. Even where this involved standard office hours, this could mean that the secondary caregiver couldn’t be relied on to drop off or collect children. In some cases this was
clearly due to roles requiring presence at specific times. In others it was unclear whether this lack of flexibility reflected employers’ policies or a perception that parents, and in particular male parents, can't or shouldn't ask for flexible hours.

The secondary caregiver working unpredictable hours. Several of the parents’ partners worked shifts (e.g. nursing, in a bookmakers) while others worked in roles where time on and off was changeable or unpredictable (e.g. the army, as a fisherman, in a sales role involving unpredictable travel).

“It was never 9 to 5 - he worked when he could fish...it was tricky to work out when I would need her looked after or not”

Parents’ resources
Knowledge of childcare funding also affected the childcare search. Some parents knew very little about the potential help available to them, and were searching blind, unable to make a fully informed judgement on how much the end cost to them would or should be.

“It wasn't easy to do the maths....in the end we went with a simple, instinctive plan. I didn't know I was eligible for help through tax credits until later, people at work told me. I just spent a lot of my salary”

While there were some who had done detailed calculations using benefit calculators, there were also some who had decided that work wasn't “worth it” based on childcare cost without having done much looking into the exact amount they would be eligible for in childcare support through tax credits or childcare vouchers.

The complexity of the system was off-putting for parents, especially those with slightly higher incomes who needed to work out whether childcare vouchers or tax credits would work out best. Those who were eligible for the maximum help with tax credits seemed to find it somewhat easier to plan, as a flat proportion of the fees was more intuitive, although payment in arrears did sometimes cause problems.8

“I just phoned up the tax credits and they told me they would pay 75% of it”

Finally availability of time to look for a provider was crucial in finding the right provider, or finding a provider at all. Parents moving back into work after a period of maternity leave usually found that they had the time and space to plan. However, parents who needed to find childcare at shorter notice - either because they had just found employment or because their previous arrangement had broken down - found themselves at a significant disadvantage. One parent was

8 We did not interview anyone who had exceeded the cap on financial help with childcare costs.
dismayed to find out the level of advanced planning that some of her local providers assumed:

“I thought having four weeks to get the childcare in place from the time I found the job was plenty. Turned out I would have had to have her name down from birth for some of the better places round here!”

1.2 Finding a provider

Getting informed about local providers

Parents’ ability to find the childcare they needed was heavily dependent on the amount and quality of information they had about the local market. While those who were able to rely on personal recommendations from friends, family or community members tended to have found it easier to locate a suitable provider, others really struggled. Local Family Information Services (FIS) were seen as a useful source of information, but ultimately limited, and just the start of a time-consuming process that involved a large number of calls and visits. These could be quite emotionally draining, especially where the outcome was that the provider was simply too expensive.

“There should be more of a national thing, all of the childcare, ratings and people can write reviews and see prices so you can compare, otherwise you have to go to all these places, and look round, and as for prices, and there are admin fees and deposits you have to leave. If you’ve looked around and it’s out of your league then you’ve wasted your time”

One parent, whose child was disabled, described calling every nursery in her city, only to find that none of them could take her child for less than double their rate for a child who is not disabled. Beyond her unhappiness at the lack of available affordable childcare, she also felt that she had been forced to spend a large amount of time on fruitless calls, when that information could easily have been made centrally available through FIS.

It was clear that some parents were making their provider shortlists based on incomplete information about the childcare available in their area, and this was in turn limiting their choices more than necessary. However, this often made choosing between providers more straightforward as there seemed to be so few options available.
Practical barriers
Regardless of their level of knowledge, parents often found that they came up against practical barriers in securing the childcare they needed, including securing an initial payment, location, and availability of places at the time they needed.

Initial payment
Our quantitative research found that 90% of childcare providers require advance payment and 59% of providers ask for monthly payment. The experience of some of our clients looking for face to face advice on childcare suggested that this might sometimes prove a barrier to accessing childcare. This research confirmed that this does indeed pose difficulties, especially for parents reliant on tax credits. When probed, parents described borrowing from friends and family, or getting into credit card debt in order to pay for the first month.

Case study: advance payment as a practical hurdle
Ashley is a single mother who felt she needed to go back to work after a year’s maternity. She didn’t think she could afford to think about costs, as childcare was simply an essential, and she knew she would get some help through tax credits as she was in low wage work and returning part-time. However she was surprised to have to pay in advance and claim tax credits in arrears, and found that it really “threw her out”. She went into debt to jump that hurdle and get back into work, and then found herself adding to that debt on a monthly basis to cover the shortfall between her income and costs of essentials and childcare. Ultimately she felt it necessary to reduce her regular work hours from 16 to 11 to reduce her childcare costs. She then took on some self-employed work at home to make enough hours to be eligible for tax credits.

However, parents generally did not mention this spontaneously as an important practical barrier to finding a provider. Instead, location of providers was seen as a key issue and one that was a very prevalent theme across interviews.

Location
Finding childcare in the right location was extremely difficult for many of the parents we interviewed. Some cited accessible location as the most important criterion in their initial search for providers. Several families needed a place within walking distance as one or both parents did not drive, or the only family car would be in use by one of the working parents at pick up or drop off time:

“It needed to be easy for us to get to, the double buggy was heavy”

For one parent, this meant taking the free 15 hours at a nursery on her doorstep rather than one several miles away which offered more attractive hours which would have enabled work, as she did not have access to reliable public transport.

9 Practicalities of childcare, Ibid
For parents with long commutes, finding childcare was especially difficult, as it meant, in practice, either choosing for their child to go on a long journey every day, or needing to pay for a large number of extra childcare hours to encompass the commute.

“I needed flexibility to drop off early, I had a fifty mile commute so that immediately ruled out all nurseries. So I started by looking for childminders”

This difficulty increased when the parent was reliant on public transport, as the following case study illustrates.

**Case study: the cost of a long commute**
Samar’s partner was in the army when their first child was young, and therefore she faced similar practical barriers to lone parents. Having left school with poor GCSEs, she had started a three year full-time college course before she became pregnant, and was determined to finish it after the birth of her son. However her college was a two hour bus commute away, which meant that she needed a huge number of childcare hours. She was lucky enough to have an offer from a childminder who looked after him for sixty hours a week at an extremely low hourly cost. However when this arrangement broke down, Samar was unable to find any affordable way of keeping her son in childcare close to their home. Therefore she then spent a year taking him on a daily four hour commute to college to use the creche there.

**Availability**
No matter what their priorities, availability was usually the most important factor in the childcare arrangements that parents arrived at:

“I only had a choice between two in the end - the only ones with full time vacancies”

Indeed availability was so limited in certain areas that parents ended up with complex arrangements using multiple providers that were extremely difficult to sustain, simply in order to be able to manage part-time work. This was a particular problem for parents with more than one child, as their choices were limited to providers that had space for all of their children.
For those with a mix of pre-school and school-age children, having access to flexible before and after-school clubs helped them avoid this issue, as they did not have to address the added complexity of arranging for their older children to travel between two different childcare locations.

1.3 Choosing between providers

Few parents thought that they had found anything close to the ideal childcare arrangements. Even where there had been some choice, parents voiced considerable frustration at what they saw as the compromises they had to make along the way. Some of these compromises would lead to difficulties maintaining their childcare arrangements, which is explored in the next section.

Type of setting

While ideally parents would at minimum have a choice of the type of childcare provider they want to use, practical difficulties securing places or affordability meant that several of the parents we spoke to ended up in their second choice type of setting.

In one example a parent - after checking the availability of every single nursery in a very wide area - found only one which was able to offer her child a place, but only from 9-12 on Tuesday mornings, therefore she felt forced to opt for a childminder. Using a childminder instead of a nursery was a particularly frustrating compromise, especially where the individual childminder's ethos clashed with that of the parent.

“I hate using her, but it was our only option. It's not the type of care I'd provide for him and I feel like he's losing out”
Conversely, other parents who favoured childminders found that they were forced to use nurseries even where this was an option they could ill-afford, or a type of care that they thought was not particularly suitable for their young child.

Quality
Given the issues with availability outlined above, few parents were in a position to discount many providers from their shortlist. Some described being unhappy with the quality of their provider, but feeling like they were forced to stick with them for lack of other options.

However, where there was some choice, quality was a red line for parents, and one on which providers would be chosen over another, or discounted. From a parental perspective, quality was usually not directly related to education or Ofsted ratings, but the parents' assessment of how well treated their child would be, and whether they would have opportunities to enjoy themselves while developing socially and educationally. Providers were selected or rejected on ‘feel’.

“I was shocked/ Some of them were disgusting, children crying everywhere...it was kind of chaos”

“It’s [the childcare provider she chose over another] a better more loving, caring environment. There is pressure from government to focus on ‘numbers and letters’...[but] they will have more time when they go to school...relationships and empathy are more important to me.”

Those parents with slightly less restricted incomes felt it important to pay more for the ‘right’ provider, even if it meant putting strain on the family budget, because they would feel guilty otherwise. For example one family found that this initial choice of “the best” led to incredible strain when their second child arrived, and they felt that they couldn’t “deny” their second child the opportunities the first child had had, even thought they could ill-afford it.

“I might have got cheaper childcare [when second child needed care]...but I wanted to give them both a good start so I never even considered moving [providers]”

Hours used
The number of providers offering sessional childcare has increased in recent years. In addition, some day nurseries only allow parents to use whole days, or a minimum number of days per week. The impact on parents is that they may be forced to use or pay for childcare hours that they do not need to cover their working patterns. Using more hours than needed was extremely frustrating for the


\[11\] Hignell, K Practicalities of childcare, 2015.
parents interviewed, as it directly impacted on the family’s disposable income in the context of already tight budgets.

**Case study: successfully limiting the hours paid for**

Jennifer had a long search to find a flexible nursery, and considered herself very lucky to have come across it through word of mouth after extensive internet searching.

“If we had not found a flexible nursery provider [childcare] would have cost around £600. With the pay-as-you-use nursery the cost was about £250 per month. There was one we really liked but they asked us to commit to a contract...we liked the feel of it...but you've got to think about costs and it was a £400 difference per month”

Jennifer was very conscientious about reading the Ofsted reports for all potential providers, and was annoyed that her provider had been criticised for providing pay-as-you-go arrangements. This decision was criticised because it meant that the setting had less ability to plan personalised education for the children. In Jennifer’s view, the provider should be praised for filling a very important space in the market, and she thought that she would not have been able to work if she had not found it.

It is worth noting that where there was a choice, cost was only occasionally a deciding factor between formal providers, as all childcare was seen to be very expensive, with little difference between provider costs within a local area.

**Using the free 15 hours**

The free 15 hours for 3 and 4 year olds has been the first attempt at providing a limited form of universal childcare in the UK. It has become increasingly popular, with the DfE estimating that 97% of 3 and 4 year olds use at least part of the offer.12

This popularity was reflected by the parents interviewed, one of whom described the offer as “a godsend”. It was for some the first childcare that they had been able to use, despite previous attempts to arrange childcare. For example, one parent who had been preparing to put childcare support through tax credits towards a small number of childcare hours to allow her time on her own to look for work was surprised that her two and a half year old child with special needs was eligible for the free 15 hours. This arrangement allowed her a lot more time to look for work than anticipated, and eventually meant she could take on more hours of work than she had initially thought would be possible and pay for additional hours of childcare to cover it.

However, for others the restrictive sessions offered to them made using all of the entitlement really difficult. They often found that providers were only able to offer either morning or afternoon sessions all week (e.g. 9-12 or 1-4 every day). The morning sessions were seen as the most desirable and in several places offered to children who had been there the longest, or simply on a first come, first served basis. This annoyed some, who didn’t understand why places were not offered

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based on the needs of working or studying parents. In some areas, availability was so low that the offer was at even more restricted times. In one case, a mother was offered 9-11.40 four days a week and 9-2 on Friday.

“It’s good I can use it at the primary school [that he’ll be attending] but I’d never have been able to use the hours they offered me if I was working. As it is I don’t use the Friday”

The quote above reflects that at some providers, the free 15 hours offer appears to work best for those parents who can be flexible. Which in turn meant that it worked less well for the working parents interviewed. It was very difficult to make the free offer fit with existing childcare where the parent was already in work and using childcare before their child became eligible for the offer. Where childminders didn’t provide funded hours this meant that parents were having to lose out on some of the offer while at the same time paying for more than 15 hours childcare in total. The same thing happened where the nurseries that parents were already using were unable to offer the 15 hours at times that fit with work hours.

“We could have used the whole 15 hours funding somewhere else but we weren’t going to pull her out as she was really settled. So we only use 8”

Nevertheless, the unanimous positivity of parents about the principle of the free hours is important in thinking about what works from the childcare user’s perspective. By contrast, none of the parents were spontaneously positive about the financial support on offer through tax credits or vouchers.

**Striking out: finding no childcare at all**

The compromises outlined in the previous section describe the situation for more fortunate parents; several of those we interviewed were not able to find any childcare at all that fit with their work patterns and ability to pay. While the 15 hours free was popular and hugely appreciated by parents, it was thought to barely “scratch the surface” of their childcare needs.

“It’s [15 hours] too short. Who can do a job between 9 and 12?”

Those who needed childcare at unusual hours were at a great disadvantage, and described intense difficulty in finding childcare that works. Unusual hours were more important for certain types of parents:

- Those who did flexible hours at work, which was generally those in low paid work but also encompassed all whose sectors were reliant on shift work (e.g. health care, hospitality);
Those who depended on public transport, who usually needed longer hours or providers that started earlier to later to make up for increased commuting times;

Those who were studying, who sometimes had lectures and seminars in the evening or long hours on particular days; and

Lone parents who had no one else to help them cover early starts, late finishes or unusual hours.

The experience of our parents suggest that it is close to impossible to find childcare before 7am and after 7pm on weekdays or any time at weekends.¹³ For some, even finding childcare outside of 9am to 4pm was difficult. Childminders were seen as just as inflexible as nurseries in this regard, and there seemed to be little incentive for childminders to offer care early in the mornings, in the evenings or at weekends. One parent who wanted to return to nursing failed to find a single childminder who was prepared to provide care that covered her shifts, which would generally be changed from month to month. Childminders explained to parents that they need to know in advance when they are going to be needed to fit around the other children taking up places in the setting and their own domestic responsibilities.

While this problem revealed itself as practical when parents were faced with it, it is also a question of of affordability. Some parents mentioned that expensive au pair care would solve their problems, while others assumed that the most expensive (thus unaffordable) nurseries might be able to provide for their needs. This was sometimes experienced as an acute sense of unfairness, with one saying she felt punished for her choice of a nursing career.

Inability to arrange formal childcare could lead to greater reliance on family members to plug the gap, or even to giving up on specific employment opportunities, or the idea of working altogether until children reach primary school age. The impact on parental employment is described in greater detail in the next chapter.

¹³ 75% of providers do not provide evening care. Hignell, K Practicalities of childcare 2015.


1.4 Maintaining a childcare arrangement

Pressure to maintain and re-arrange childcare was present for the parents we spoke to across their children’s early years. When asked to describe the process of finding childcare in two words, common responses were “a nightmare” “stressful” and “exhausting”. Conversely, after experiencing the process of finding childcare, those who had managed to find an arrangement that worked saw themselves as “lucky”. Few continued to see access to high quality affordable childcare as a right, and reflected that their original optimism about the process had been “naive”.

This sense of luck in turn led to insecurity about retaining childcare. Parents went to great lengths to keep existing arrangements in place, including paying for hours and days they could ill-afford. For example one parent paid for her child to start childcare several months before it was necessary in order to secure a place at a particular pre-school which had told her that they might be oversubscribed by the time the mother needed to go back to work. Another parent had taken an extended period of unpaid leave from work when her childminder had taken time off to care for an ill relative.

“We wanted to keep her and her standard of care...you know when you've got good childcare to hang on to it”

The implication of this was that the rarity of satisfactory and sustainable childcare arrangements greatly impacted on the parents. Because their valued childcare wasn't flexible, their work had to be instead. When work couldn’t provide the necessary flexibility, it could lead to difficulties in their jobs and careers, as discussed in the next chapter.

Lack of flexibility

Those who had found an arrangement that worked but later found they needed more flexible childcare were put in a very difficult position. Few were able to get the changes they needed, even where flexibility had been discussed at the beginning of the childcare arrangement:

“In theory you could swap their day three times a month. In practice there was never any space available to do this”

For example, one parent described wanting to add an extra day to work more, but decided not to as her current childminder wasn't able to provide the hours. The only alternative would have been to move her children into an untested new setting.
for all of his childcare. Even more limited types of flexibility, for example the ability to work an extra hour and pick up later one day, was often not possible.\(^{14}\)

**Starting again**

Even when parents manage to balance work and inflexible childcare arrangements, things did not always work out as planned. Childcare arrangements ending or breaking down was a frequent occurrence in these parents’ lives. A common cause was the arrival of a new child, but there were a large number of factors that precipitated the need to go back to the beginning of the childcare search, including relationship breakdown, moving home or town, grandparents moving away or finding work, nurseries closing down, or childminders needing to take on full time children at the expense of children using a part time place.

Once again, parents faced the problems outlined above, often now exacerbated by the difficulty of arranging childcare around the needs of two or more children. The pattern among the small number of parents in our sample was that the more times a parent faced the childcare search, the more likely they were to give up on trying to reconcile work and childcare. This is addressed in greater detail in the next chapter.

**Long term affordability**

The other reason that parents gave up on or changed work was the difficulty in finding childcare that was affordable in the medium or long term. Financing childcare was rarely seen as easy, and was thought by those in work to take up far too much of the household budget:

> “It costs more than my wages alone - thank god for tax credits and housing benefit”

Parents often described how their arrangements that had been or seemed affordable in the short or medium term became unaffordable over the long-term. This was either because the strain of the childcare cost on the family budget hit breaking point, or because there was a change in the family circumstances that resulted in less income or less direct help with childcare costs. For example, one London-based parent was able to manage childcare while studying because of a direct subsidy and access to a creche at the local FE college. However the kind of hours and wages available to her meant that she was unable to find childcare that fit with her potential earnings once she moved into the labour market. Another lone parent was affected by a tax credit overpayment. Repaying this made a large difference to her weekly budget, making the cost of ongoing childcare unsustainable.

\(^{14}\) One in three providers charge a fine for late pickup, late payment or both. Hignell, K Practicalities of childcare 2015.
Other families had a moment of realisation when they worked out that between the cost of childcare, travel and work expenses, they weren’t better off with both parents in work.

“We just couldn’t afford it, it was all on the credit card, between petrol, the cost of working too”

Some described the shock of realising they had made incorrect assumptions and saddled themselves with an unaffordable childcare burden, for example a parent who had not realised that the 15 free hours was only available for 38 weeks of the year, and that she would be liable to pay for a lot more hours than initially envisaged.

“I didn’t realise the hours were only 38 weeks a year I ended up paying £170 extra a month [to enable her to undertake 16 hours of voluntary work per week]. I wasn’t prepared for that!”

This kind of affordability crisis seemed to primarily affect lone parents on very low wages, and two earner families of multiple children where the second earner was on low wages.

“The financial side of it is what makes everything so difficult”

Direct subsidy was particularly important in helping parents to avoid this. Affordability difficulties were significantly eased where the parents were able to access the free 15 hours in in a way that directly reduced the number of hours they were already paying for out of pocket.

“The 15 [free] hours is important. I couldn’t have afforded to work if not for it”

However, as will be illustrated in the next chapter, for some the 15 hours came too late: after their attempts to continue their careers had gone awry, due to difficulties in reconciling work and childcare after the maternity leave period.
I have tried so hard to fit childcare and my job together but I just can’t make it work
2. Impacts of insufficient access to flexible and affordable childcare

Limited access to flexible, affordable childcare affects parents’ abilities to engage with the labour market and progress their careers. Conversely, inflexible employment conditions limited their ability to find childcare arrangements that worked in the context of insufficient supply. This chapter described how these tensions play out in real life and how they can affect parents' motivations around work and career. It also examines the wider impacts that this can have on families in their children's early years.

2.1 Balancing work and childcare

Going back to work

Going back to work was unanimously seen as a stressful and delicate transition point for parents, and difficulties with accessing childcare at this point had a significant impact. Every parent that we interviewed had been in work or studying immediately before having their first child, and most before having their most recent child. All but a couple said that they had initially planned to go back to work as soon as their maternity leave was finished, or, in the case of those who were studying, as soon as their course demanded it.

Motivations to return varied, but usually there was at least one extrinsic factor at play. For those who had permanent jobs it was a contractual obligation and usually an economic necessity once maternity pay was finished. One self-employed lone parent needed to get back to work to keep her business going. Intrinsic factors were also important. Some parents had missed adult company, and this seemed to be especially true for lone parents.

“I was on my own with the baby all the time - I was ready to go back at about 9 or 10 months...I knew work would be easier than entertaining a baby”

Often work was described as a very big part of the parents' identity, and going back to work was just the natural thing to do. Those who had been very career-orientated before their child or children didn't see any reason why that should have to change.
“I thought that’s what women like me do - go back to work”

For others however, poor working conditions before maternity leave made the thought of going back quite stressful. Several had worked long hours in high pressure jobs before their maternity leave and didn’t know how that could be reconciled with child-rearing.

“It’s really difficult to come back to that work rate [60 hours per week] when you’ve had a baby...it was really hard for me to go back”

For the most part, parents were trying to make childcare fit with their pre-maternity roles, though others took the opportunity to move into part time roles in other organisations, usually in the same field. What united the parents was their retrospective realisation that they had thought it would be easier than it turned out to be in practice to arrive at a childcare and work arrangement that worked in practice.

**Favouring part-time**

While all parents need some flexibility in their work, not all jobs allow for it, and therefore the type of role and organisation of their pre-maternity employment became very important in influencing whether or not parents were able to combine work and childcare. Being able to negotiate different hours, start and finish times, opportunities to work more flexible hours and ongoing ability to re-negotiate these terms were all very important for the parents interviewed.

Moving into a part-time role was seen to be relatively straightforward for those who had been working full time prior to maternity leave. This was sometimes a full formal job-share with another person, but in other cases the same role just reduced hours. However a handful found it more difficult to negotiate reduced post maternity hours, for example the youth services worker who had previously had five contracts for providing youth services at different hours who had to renegotiate and drop some of her contracts in order to find a set of hours that fit work with the available childcare. Another parent had an employer who simply refused to let her work part time.

Motivations for choosing part-time varied. Some of these parents had worked part-time before this child, some presumed that full-time childcare would be unaffordable. In addition, part time work was seen to have other advantages, including giving parents more time with their children, having time to save money in other ways, and enabling their partner to work full-time hours.

“Financially we knew I wouldn’t work properly until Beth [her third child] went to school, we knew the cost of two full time children and afterschool would be astronomical”

Negotiating new working hours was often just the start of the process of rethinking roles and careers. For example, several parents experienced difficulty with their
employers once back at work, and found their part-time status was accompanied by a drop in respect for their position.

“My boss didn’t really believe in part time work, she was obviously trying to manage me out and had no contact with me at all during my maternity leave. She was awful to me once I was back”

Full time work was particularly emotionally challenging and guilt-ridden for the parents who chose that route.

“The first months back were so difficult...I didn’t want to leave them. They didn’t want to leave me. Putting babies into formal childcare five days per week felt wrong and still does.”

This sentiment was echoed by all but a handful of the parents interviewed. They generally did not want to put their children into full-time formal childcare from a very young age. However, they did want the option of flexible affordable childcare at the times they needed it to access work and progress their careers. The next section explores the difficulties faced in achieving this.

Maintaining a delicate balance
Once the parent had returned to work, and reached that delicate balance between childcare and work hours, any changes to childcare arrangements now posed significant difficulty.

Figure 3: The difficulty of maintaining a balance between work and childcare

The sustainability of the arrangement tended to rest on the flexibility of the workplace. Employers were sometimes really helpful, for example allowing parents to change days of work when childcare arrangements needed to change, or add an extra day of work a week when more childcare became available. However some parents found that their employers either couldn't or wouldn't be flexible, and in
particular that it was impossible to work in any other way than exactly part-time or full-time. This could lead to frustrations over lack of progress, with several describing how they wanted to take on more hours but were hampered by the full-time part-time dichotomy, as illustrated in the example below.

Others found it difficult to add more work hours even where their employer was offering, because it was difficult to work out if they would be better off. For example one parent added an extra seven hours a week at awkward times, as she thought it would be really helpful financially, but had to go back to her previous arrangements after a few months as she felt that the extra complications with childcare weren't worth the increased pay.

“I just can't be flexible enough to do these jobs and I don't think, with childcare, the extra hours are going to benefit me money wise....I took extra hours a while ago and Housing Benefit [the administrative office] did the calculation wrong, telling me I'd be a lot better off. I ended up £20 a week better off for an extra seven hours.”

Sam
Status: Lone parent
Children: 3 (ages 11, 9, 3, youngest is disabled)
Career: Previously a fashion buyer, moved into community development
Childcare use: Free 15 hours only, informal care provided by family

Access to childcare
Sam had real difficulties finding any childcare for her disabled son, as all providers said that they would need to charge double, yet her son is not “disabled enough” to be eligible for extra childcare funding. After an unexpectedly long maternity leave, she was only able to return to work when her father (at the time unemployed) offered to care for her son on a part-time basis. Her father later had to stop caring for her son when he found work, but luckily at this point the primary school that her son will attend was able to offer the free 15 hours at the attached pre school. This meant that Sam could stay in part time work.

Career impact
Sam has always been very ambitious, with work forming a big part of her identity. She gave up a relatively high-paying job for a more fulfilling career in the charity sector while she was still with her partner. Her split from her partner and her youngest son’s unexpected health problems have put her in a very challenging position. She is unhappy to have to claim benefits to make ends meet. She is very committed to her current role, and was recently successfully acting up as manager for a period.. She was horribly disappointed to lose out on the permanent manager position to her male job-share colleague who could take the full-time position. She looked into the possibility of finding full-time childcare to allow her to apply for the position but had found it completely unaffordable given her son’s extra needs. She worries that she will never have a chance to progress, given that even when her son is in school, it may be impossible to find affordable wrap-around care for him. In part, she blames her employers’ very rigid rules and views on how to roles can be split: they are offered either exactly full-time or part-time, with management positions always full-time.
Implications of lack of workplace and childcare flexibility

Insufficient access to flexible affordable childcare also hampered parents’ ability to take up opportunities at work. Across interviews parents reflected on the importance of “being present” to enable progression. They felt constrained in their ability to be present in ways that would help their careers. Even simple things like staying an hour later, or being available a few hours earlier to attend a key meeting were hampered by the strict times kept by providers. Access to informal childcare made a large difference here, making up for the lack of flexibility of formal childcare in allowing parents to be there for the extra hours or important work events where being present is important to progression.

Despite technological changes, parents in office-based roles described employment situations where they couldn't work flexible hours, or log in to work emails outside of the office.

“It started at 9.30 on the dot. I signed in and out. If you missed even 30 minutes you were told to take time off in lieu. I often found it difficult to get in for 9.30. But when I wanted to make it up I couldn’t and I couldn't work from home. I felt guilty.”

But even those who had more flexible arrangements struggled. One parent had managed to find an employer who was happy for her to work from home several days a week, which allowed her to save a huge amount of money on childcare, but even here she felt held back by her inability to be “present”. She also worried that people would judge her for being a home worker and went to great lengths to hide the fact that she was. The case study below highlights how sometimes both childcare and workplace flexibility need to be in place to allow parents to further their careers.
2.2 The career impact

Barriers to career change

Career change could also be hampered by the difficulties of arranging affordable childcare that fits with work. Several of the parents in this research had been made redundant or lost their jobs during the recent recession, which overlapped with the time when their children were young. For those parents, moving into new roles posed more thorny challenges than those faced by parents who were returning to previous roles after maternity leave. In particular, the need to find a workplace close to childcare to enable drop-off and pick-up tended to limit the physical area of their job search. For example, one parent had recently experienced a restructure at work, and at the time had considered moving on. She had considered applying for jobs in London, which would involve a much longer commute. She had felt this could have been more beneficial for her career than staying in her current workplace, where her job felt insecure in the medium term. However, needing to fit
in the extra travel and balancing this with childcare had meant that she had ultimately decided this was not a possibility.

“The logistics just wouldn't work in terms of childcare...You can't be out of the house at 7am, and back at 8pm at night if you have children... but then again I am looking for career progression.”

Across several interviews, parents described either consciously limiting the scope of their job search, or having it limited for them by poor access to affordable childcare. The case study below describes the big effect this can have on the parent in question and the household more broadly.

Study disrupted
Parents who were studying or attempting to study could also find their progress hampered by their access to childcare, in some cases to the point where they had given up their course or decided to delay starting or finishing them while their children were young. This was due to one of several reasons:

● Parents found the funding and subsidy system(s) particularly difficult to navigate, making it difficult to work out whether undertaking a course was affordable or not. In cases like this it was easier to err on the side of caution.

● Finding childcare to cover late/evening lectures or time spent on work experience or placements as part of a course was extremely difficult, if not impossible.

● Termly changes to timetables could only be accommodated if childcare hours were also easily changed.

Childcare availability on campus was important in enabling parents to continue to study, as this type of provision was seen as having been designed expressly around their needs, and such providers were seen to have more understanding of the pressures faced when combining study and childcare.
Reaching a breaking point

A strong theme across interviews was the conflict parents felt between their aspirations (sometimes explicitly described as feminist) and the reality of their ability to work and study in the context of limited access to affordable childcare. They often noted that they had taken what they perceived as lesser roles and modified and re-modified their career plans over the course of their children’s early life.

Anna
Status: Married
Children: 1 (aged 4)
Career: Worked as a waitress, now a freelance interpreter, attempting to become a lawyer
Childcare: Free 15 hours plus informal

Access to childcare
Anna had worked full-time as a waitress prior to the birth of her only child, and went back to this role after her Statutory Maternity Pay ran out, as she had access to informal childcare provided by her mother-in-law. At this time she started to think about getting some qualifications to improve her career prospects. She moved into part time (mornings only) work and enrolled in the Open University for a law degree part time, on a two hour per day legal secretarial course, and started volunteering one day a week to improve her CV. At this time her mother-in-law found full time work and, at very short notice, stopped caring for Anna’s son. Anna was very upset and panicked; she’d already paid for her secretarial course and stood to lose money if she didn’t complete it. She didn’t even look into formal childcare as she didn’t think it would be affordable. A friend who also had a similar aged child offered to look after Anna’s child four days a week 8.30-2, for minimal payment. Anna’s father-in-law provided childcare on Fridays, as he works four days a week.

Career impact
The restaurant where Anna had worked closed around this time, so she broke her childcare arrangement and became a stay-at-home mother. This was the start of an 18 month period of unemployment, the first of her adult life. She applied for “countless” jobs during this period. Often she wasn’t even able to make interviews at short notice as she had no childcare. Finally, after a lengthy applications process, she was offered a promising job as a hostess at an international hotel. She was very excited about this as it was a stable job with a lot of potential for career development given the size of the company. However, there were only four days between job offer and start date to arrange childcare. Anna’s childcare needs were limited but unusual. The job was shift work (7.30-2 or a later shift) and although she asked, it wasn’t going to be possible to only work the later shifts, therefore Anna would often need to leave the house by 6.30a.m. By this point her son had started the free 15 hours, so she needed a childminder to be in the house from 7.20 (when her husband leaves for work) or to find a preschool/or a nursery that opened from 7 that would drop her child to preschool. This was impossible to find and she turned down the job:

“I don’t know how you’re meant to do it. How can you start in a week and find that kind of childcare so quickly? After that I was very upset. I really liked that job, and there was an opportunity to develop and grow. I felt a bit lost.”

During this period the family was under significant financial strain. Anna’s partner was working two full time jobs, reducing the opportunity for them to spend time together as a family. They were using credit cards to cover day-to-day spending. Anna felt very frustrated.

“I was almost jealous of him getting to go to work, I wished I didn’t have the responsibility to make sure there was childcare in place before I could take a job”

At this point she considered moving closer to her parents so that her mother could take care of her child full-time but this option was rejected as too risky as there was no guarantee that both her and her husband would find jods if they moved. She has instead picked up a few hours of freelance interpreter work during her son’s pre-school hours as a short-term means of contributing to the household finances.
years to fit with childcare availability and affordability. Once the difficulties of trying to make it work had become too difficult to sustain, it seemed more “sensible” to look for a job or workplace more compatible with the childcare available. Several of the parents noted that this had been a positive development for them, and they were considering or had already undertaken new qualifications. It was striking though, that these parents were usually moving into careers that would be less well paid than their previous positions, or would require a long period of economic inactivity before they could contribute to the household finances again.

Some had come to a decision that a period of time out of the workplace was necessary given the complications and cost of childcare while their children were so young.

“We knew I would never be able to find a job that paid enough for childcare for two kids. I wouldn't be making money”

Others thought that they had lost out on their career as a result of the lack of available affordable childcare. The case study overleaf describes the kind of childcare compromises that can hinder a parent’s efforts to build a career.

Some career compromises were less dramatic than those described in the case study, but still had the potential to have long term impacts on the parents in question. For example, one parent who had been working on a fixed term post as an accountant before her maternity leave found it impossible to find part-time posts in this field when she needed to return to work, as all the roles advertised were full-time. She had eventually taken a job as a PA in a local company as it was the only job she could find at a reasonable distance from her home that would allow her to work mornings only. While she was happy with the salary and working conditions, she was unhappy to not be using the qualifications that she had worked towards. She was also worried about what this time out of her career (as opposed to time out of work) would mean for her future options.

“My career as an accountant or anything to do with finance has been hindered by having to work part-time. My career has just totally stopped. I am planning on having another child, so I have to think I won’t be able to get back to it until they're in school. That's in 7 years time and then it will be 10 years since I've done finance - who will employ me?”
Loss of identity

Giving up on work (albeit temporarily), moving into less prestigious or well-paid work or accepting a slowdown in career progression was very difficult for some parents to accept. They described how it challenged their strongly-held identity as working adults and ambitious people, and the sense of loss they felt.

“Part of my struggle has been giving up my life as that person who was able to do that job”

These parents were angry at the loss of control over their lives, blaming either the government for lack of action on the issue, or employers for being insufficiently flexible or understanding of the challenges faced by working parents.

“I feel very penalised that the government doesn’t want me to work”
However no one blamed childcare providers themselves, and indeed there was a strong understanding of the low margins and low pay prevalent across the industry.

### 2.3 Impact on family life

Lack of access to sufficient affordable childcare has other negative impacts outside of maternal involvement in the labour market. For the parents interviewed it was clear that it also had a large impact on the fathers in two parent households, along with other emotional and personal impacts for the mothers and the wider families.

#### Impact on fathers

In two-parent households, the pattern tended to be that there was an increased dependence on the secondary caregiver’s income and consequently increased importance placed on their career performance and progression. Where the childcare situation meant that the mother was no longer able to work at all, this had put a large strain on fathers, forcing them into a “breadwinner” role that had previously been shared. In several cases the fathers had taken on more hours or second jobs, increasing their stress levels and reducing the amount of time available to spend with their family.

“He [partner] is the main breadwinner and he must work harder and longer hours...it’s hard for him too”

“He [partner] hates it, he absolutely hates it because he never sees his kids”

It also meant that some fathers felt forced to remain in roles where they wanted to move on, for the sake of providing stable income in the absence of a second income. In a few cases the mothers we interviewed reflected that their partners would rather be the one that took on the primary caregiver role or moved into part-time work. However the mothers’ position out of the workforce made this extremely difficult to achieve on a practical and financial level, as it would involve the mother finding a full-time job and arranging childcare to fit with that before the father could scale back his work and switch to a part-time role.

#### Practical and emotional impact

In the households that took part in this study, the responsibility for arranging childcare largely fell on the mother, even where decision-making was shared. In two-parent households, the reasons for this were often complex. Pragmatism played a large role, with the parent who worked the fewest hours generally taking on the bulk of the childcare responsibility. Some parents consciously ‘shielded’ the higher earner from the stress and potential career impact of childcare responsibility, for the sake of protecting household income.
The emotional burden of shouldering the whole or major part of the responsibility for childcare weighed heavily on these parents. They often described feelings of guilt when discussing their childcare arrangements. Some felt guilty about their lack of flexibility in terms of work, or having to ask their employers for flexible arrangements to fit with childcare. Others felt guilty about the compromises they made in terms of childcare, the lack of time they had to spend with their children, or the impact that childcare costs were having on the family more widely.

“You have to make compromises that you never thought you would have to make”

Experiences were very mixed among parents who relied heavily on informal care. The benefits were numerous, and the opportunity it opened up for children to develop strong relationships with their grandparents or other family members was strongly valued. However, some parents felt this reliance placed them under a lot of emotional strain. Negative emotions associated with these type of arrangements included:

- Guilt about placing pressure on relatives, especially if they were retired and therefore “ought” to be enjoying their free time;
- Powerlessness over the type of care their child received when being looked after by a family member or friend; and
- Anxiety about maintaining good relations with the provider of informal care.

This could lead to a broader feeling of lost independence. For example, one mother described how her dependence on her parents had meant their relationship had regressed, and that she had little ability to make independent choices or to “rock the boat” in any way.

“That’s not a nice feeling at all...I sometimes feel like I’m still living at home...we have to try so hard not to fall out”

Practically, many parents found that they had very little time to themselves at all. This was especially true for lone parents, who generally had little time when they were not directly looking after their children, but could not usually justify paying for childcare outside of working hours.

“I had to give up all my hobbies I had before. I’m so shattered and arranging more care would be really hard....besides who would I ask? My mum already does enough [providing informal care while mother works]. I’ve just accepted having to stay in alone every night”

For those who weren't working, the 15 free hours had enabled them to have some respite when they were ill, time to catch up on housework and spend some time participating in their local community.
It feels like when you strive, things are worse for you.
3. A childcare system that works for parents

For the parents in this study, trying to balance work and childcare their children’s early years was often stressful and sometimes impossible despite their best efforts. A childcare system that worked for them would look very different than the one we have now.

Looking to the future and reflecting on experience

When thinking about the future, parents spoke about their child reaching primary school age as a “light at the end of the tunnel” which would allow them the opportunity to:

- Work more to either get a career back on track or get a new one started;
- Rebalance responsibilities within the household; and
- Have some time to socialise and “breathe”.

However even within this framework, parents spoke often about their ambitions for the future within the restricted framework imposed by the childcare market as it is. Those who had struggled to arrange or afford childcare were now looking for jobs that could fit with school hours, and ways of minimising their reliance on childcare.

“Ideally I’d like to work part-time hours that fit in with my childcare. Until they can look after themselves, it suits me to have occasional work. I do understand there are other options, but not ones I can do.”

“I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about how I can work so that I don’t need childcare.”

Those who had jobs or careers that required unusual hours were pessimistic about their ability to stay in those roles in the longer term and were actively looking for more “family-friendly” roles.

Looking to the past, and reflecting on the kind of support they would have liked, three key changes were important to parents to support them and enable work in their children's’ early years:

- Cheaper childcare (i.e. cheaper per hour at the point of access, rather than more highly subsidised through tax credits);
- Longer provider opening hours to enable a normal working day; and
- Earlier access to the free childcare offer.
They thought that those changes would improve the accessibility of childcare at the times when it is needed. Their stories also demonstrated that three main motivating factors need to be in place to keep them in employment during these difficult years:

- **Work:** The ability to work or study the right number of hours and childcare available at these times.
- **Career:** Work opportunities in their children’s early years that allow them to continue to progress in their pre-maternity career or build a new one.
- **Finances:** Take home pay after childcare costs that makes them feel like going out to work is “worth it”.

But these stories also reflect the fact that providing childcare is not simply about enabling parents to work. It is about enabling parents to work in jobs that are good for their careers or longer term earning power or to study. In some cases flexible childcare is needed not just to enable work or study but to provide respite for isolated parents, or to reduce pressure on informal carers. And of course, it is about providing a strong developmental and educational environment for children. If the childcare market could meet all of these aims, it would enable their families to thrive during their children’s early years.

The parents we spoke to thought that the availability of childcare was a reflection of how we, as a society, value the hard work of child-rearing and parenting. They felt that the current state of the childcare market reflected that parents are not valued, and that raising children and making enough money to live on are a matter for individual hard work and sacrifice, rather than concerted societal effort to provide a system that works for everyone.

### 3.1 Implications for policy

The experiences of the parents interviewed for this research suggests that there are important questions to be answered about how to provide childcare that allows families to thrive. The current complexity of the childcare market is neither good for the providers - many of whom struggle to remain in business - nor the parents who are forced to navigate an overly complex system and can feel like the must make unwelcome compromises on days, hours or type of work, or give up on employment entirely in the early years. This can in turn have long-term consequences for each individual parent’s career progression and sense of identity, as well as the family’s longer term financial resilience.

Numerous factors affect whether parents are able to find a childcare arrangement that works for them practically, including the number of children in the family, the number and types of hours worked by parent(s), the distance of places of work/study from home, the availability of informal care, the child-rearing values of
the parents, and the health of all family members. Childcare policy should aim to ensure equitable access for all parents in the face of this complexity by focussing on the flexible and low-cost care that parents need, at the times they need it across their children's early years. With this in mind we have set out some long and medium term implications for policy direction as well as some short term recommendations for policy change.

Figure 4: Implications for policy direction

Short term: Increase accessibility and flexibility of existing provision

Improving information provision

Lack of access to comprehensive and easily comparable information hinders parents in their search for affordable, flexible childcare that fits with their working lives. While the Family Information Services were useful for some, it is clear that in too many Local Authorities they still lack sufficient information to allow parents to easily understand the services, price and level of flexibility on offer. Local Authorities should ensure that their FIS provides easily searchable standardised information on each provider in their local area, including:

- Costs per hour and any additional costs
- Provision of the 15 (and later 30) hours and any restrictions on this
- Flexibility within and across days
- Early morning/evening/weekend availability
Payment arrangements (pay as you go/monthly/termly/other)

Ability to care for children with disabilities

Real Time Information on number and days of vacancies

While many Local Authorities do make most or all of this information available, it is often in a static, cumbersome format that still requires parents to spend a large amount of time on the phone or visiting settings in order to work out which providers have spaces that meet their needs and budget. A more user-friendly system would allow parents to enter their childcare needs and be presented with a list of providers who can meet those needs. There is scope for better use of digital tools to solve this problem, and for Local Authorities to work together to achieve economies of scale when developing better digital tools. A dynamic digital tool would also allow for the incorporation of feedback from parents who use local childcare services, which would enable parents to gain an understanding of the ‘feel’ without having to visit every setting under consideration.

Where there is clear evidence that working parents are not finding the childcare they need despite local availability, Local Authorities should provide a brokerage service between parents and providers.

Increasing supply of flexible childcare

In the current childcare market, there are many barriers that providers face in offering more flexible provision. They are concerned about whether there will be sufficient demand to justify them opening their service outside of standard office hours. Staffing outside of these hours usually requires higher wages meaning there are higher overheads. In addition, providing flexibility is difficult as many providers routinely need to operate at near full capacity to stay in business. Finally, delivering statutory ratios of staff to children also can also limit providers’ ability to offer flexible provision.

The level of challenge posed by these barriers suggests that - in the absence of radical reform to the childcare funding model - it is not reasonable to require all settings to offer fully flexible provision. However the experience of larger private chains and childcare co-operatives shows that it is possible even within the current funding model to use the economies of scale to work towards increasingly flexible provision in some, if not all, settings within a chain.

Local Authorities need to take a more proactive role in ensuring that a proportion of their local providers are offering truly flexible and ideally pay-as-you-go provision for parents who need it. This could involve encouraging smaller local providers to co-operate and pool some costs and resources, allowing some of them to provide more flexible care. Alternatively they could encourage some childcare chains with this capacity to enter the market in their local area.
Flexibility in the use of the free 30 hours
Increasing the number of free hours available to the working parents of three and four year olds is to be welcomed. However it is crucial that the 1140 hours per year currently on offer are available to parents at times that enable work, study and career progression. Parents should have the opportunity to use the hours:

- On the days and hours that they work or study;
- Across the school year rather than just in term time; and
- At unusual times (i.e. early mornings, evenings and weekends) if their role, course or shift pattern demands it.

However in order for this to be financially viable the hours would need to be fully funded in a way that allows providers to offer this type of flexibility, with unusual hours funded at specified providers in each locality, potentially at a higher rate of subsidy. This would ensure that providers who offer this vital provision are paid proportionately. It is clear that at current levels of funding this type of flexibility is financially impossible without providers cross-subsidising from their chargeable hours, or going out of business.

However, we suggest that without proper funding and the flexibility parents need, the increase in free hours for three and four year olds will not be taken up at its full potential, and barriers will remain in place for parents who want to work. If increased funding for flexibility is not possible within the current funding available for the provision of the free 30 hours, then it would be better to reduce the number of hours on offer per parent than offer 30 inflexible hours. In short, we want to see this policy offered in a way that help parents with all types of work, including those parents with non-standard and irregular work.

Free hours from age 2
A more radical option would be to use the funding available for the increase from 15 to 30 hours for three and four year olds to instead offer a free 570 hours per year (15 hours per week across 38 weeks) to all two, three, and four year olds, regardless of the working status of the parents. This would in practice mean an extension of the free hours that are currently on offer to the most deprived 40% of two year olds to all children.

This would have the advantage of addressing some of the funded childcare gap between the ages of one and three. It would have the added advantage of universalism, which would reduce bureaucratic demands on both parents and providers, as there would be no need to prove or check the working status of parents. It could encourage more parents back into work when their child is at an earlier age, and reduce costs for those already in work across a longer period. It
would also ensure that more children take up a place at an Ofsted-approved childcare setting from an earlier age.

**Medium term: Further flexibility from providers and employers**

*Ensuring access to childcare at unusual hours*

Local Authorities currently have duties under the Childcare Act 2006 to secure sufficient childcare in their area. At minimum, they must produce a Childcare Sufficiency Assessment every three years. While the quality of these assessments varies greatly, they tend to highlight gaps in provision and lack of capacity in the market to meet these gaps. However Local Authorities lack the supply side funding to remedy these evidenced provision gaps in their local areas.

We recommend that tax free childcare be removed from highest earning families and be diverted to a flexible fund that allows Local Authorities to fund a small number of local providers to offer sufficient childcare outside the hours of 8am and 6pm to meet local labour market needs. This provision should be offered at providers’ standard hourly rates.

*Promoting greater parental flexibility in the workplace*

There are also implications for employers. Few of the parents in our sample had access to flexible start and finish times, the opportunity to increase or decrease hours when childcare provision changed, or the ability to work from home when necessary. Where possible - and of course there are numerous industries and roles where this is not - access to this kind of flexibility would help to balance some of the inflexibility of some types of childcare provision. However, with the increase in digital tools that make it easier for office work to be carried out from home outside standard hours, employers need to interrogate their policies and question whether they really are offering as much flexibility as they could.

Workplace cultures need to change too. Parents who are not the primary caregiver should be able to work sensible hours and contribute meaningfully to their children’s care, to help families avoid the pressure on one person becoming entirely responsible for fitting work around childcare.

**Long term: Reducing costs at the point of delivery**

In the longer term, the actual behaviour and needs of the parents who use childcare should be placed front and centre of childcare policy and the design of the childcare system. Overall responsibility for childcare policy should be located in one Government department with the goal of turning a fragmented market into a coherent system.

Changes to ensure the development of a more user-oriented system could be introduced gradually, but would work towards the following principles:
Offer a simplified range of provision, to make choosing childcare easier for parents, and reduce the amount of time and effort needed to find a high quality provider with availability.

Divert funding into supply rather than demand, concentrating on increasing the number of free hours available to parents or heavily subsidising pay as you go provision at a low rate (e.g. £2 per hour). This would make it easier for parents to use only the exact amount of childcare they need, and to understand how much better off they would be in work.¹⁵

Where possible increase supply in a way that allows parents to use the same childcare provider for children of different ages. Provision attached to schools is a good example of this.

¹⁵ This approach might still need to involve some direct subsidy for lower income parents through the tax credit system.
Appendix

Methodology

The overall aim of this research was to build our understanding of parents’ experiences of the childcare market. Specifically, we aimed to:

- Better understand how people really make decisions and take actions on childcare, and the impact the practical barriers have on this; and
- Explore how the practical barriers to obtaining childcare outlined in the practicalities study has a knock on effect on other decisions and behaviours, with a focus on impacts on job-seeking / work behaviours, and decisions around work for specific types of household.

With that in mind we set out to interview 20 parents on low to middle incomes. We took two approaches to recruitment

- Through several Citizens Advice local offices, where clients who had children under school age (almost all of whom were visiting Citizens Advice for help with an issue unrelated to childcare) were asked to fill out a recruitment questionnaire which collected demographic details and information about their childcare use
- Through Citizens Advice Facebook page, where our followers were given the opportunity to fill-in the same pre-recruitment questionnaire using Survey Monkey.

Using this sample of 300 parents, we recruited 20 parents across England and Wales who fit our criteria.

The final demographic makeup of the interviewees is laid out in the table below. All of the parents who took part in interviews were female, all had at least one child below primary school age, and all had either arranged or tried to arrange formal, paid-for childcare in the last three years. Quotas were set on household type, income levels, number of children, health of children, use of informal childcare and work status, all of which were met.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Number interviewed</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Household type</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Couple</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Income (receipt of benefits or tax credits used as proxy)</td>
<td>No tax credits or benefits (excluding child benefit)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tax credits only</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tax credits and other benefits</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of children</td>
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<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More than one</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Health of children</td>
<td>One child with a disability or long-term illness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Use of informal childcare</td>
<td>Have used during working hours</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not currently working</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A semi-structured discussion guide was developed to ensure that all interviews covered the key research questions. The majority of interviews were carried out face to face, and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. A small number were carried out by telephone where the parents’ location would have made it difficult to facilitate a face to face interview. Interviews were recorded and analysed thematically.