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for Education

Childcare in England: Parental perceptions of availability, flexibility and affordability – A qualitative study

Research report

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Executive summary

The Department for Education (DfE) commissioned Ipsos MORI to carry out research with parents of children aged 0-4 to understand their views and experiences of the availability, flexibility, affordability, and quality of formal and informal childcare, as well as what childcare arrangements work well and identify any unmet needs.

Between July and September 2021, 55 interviews were conducted with parents who took part in Wave 9 of the DfE Childcare Survey.¹ Quotas were used to ensure a diverse range of family characteristics and childcare arrangements.

Family context and childcare needs

The age of the child and parental working arrangements, as well as availability of family support or other informal childcare, determined the level of need for formal childcare. In many cases at least one set of grandparents lived reasonably close-by to support with informal childcare; it was rarer for both sets of grandparents to live close-by and it was not uncommon for no grandparents to be living close enough to help with childcare apart from emergency situations. Some participants were single parents, and either shared childcare responsibilities with the other parent or were solely responsible and therefore relied more heavily on formal childcare.

A main reason for using childcare was to facilitate parents to return to work or to increase working hours. The older the child, the more likely that both parents returned to work, at least part-time. However, some parents (especially mothers) made the decision, for financial or personal reasons, to stay at home with the child until at least the age of 3 or 4 years old.

Apart from allowing parents to return to work, the child's socialisation and development was seen as a key benefit of using formal childcare. This was especially the case for parents of children aged 2 and over to ensure that they were used to being around other children before starting school, as well as their physical, emotional and language development.

Most respondents felt informed about the childcare in their area. Word of mouth was the most common source of information about formal childcare, both for nurseries and childminders, and the views and experiences of friends who were parents too were often most trusted. Drawing on other sources of additional information was also common, such as websites about childcare providers, Ofsted reviews of local nurseries, parent reviews of nurseries on Google, and/or nursery open days / virtual tours.

¹ The survey results can be found here: <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/childcare-use-perceived-impact-child-development-information-working-home-and-awareness-and-use>

There were also parents who struggled to find information they judged to be trustworthy or who did not know where to begin their search for information. Some knew that better information could be obtained, but did not know where. For these parents in particular, there was a need for clear signposting to sources of information on childcare options generally as well as entitlements and eligibility (including for specific family situations such as where one parent in full time education, or families with twins) before birth or from when a child was born.

Overall, many agreed that parents needed to be proactive from the child's young age to find enough information about childcare and funding support, and some wished they had begun their search for information and/or been directed to information earlier, to be well informed and able to plan ahead for their childcare needs (e.g. registering for waiting lists).

Availability, flexibility and affordability of childcare

There were mixed views around availability of childcare. Some parents felt that availability was poor, with long waiting lists and needing to enrol a child before birth, others reported there being a high volume of available places, but when considering the quality, flexibility and affordability of settings, availability became more limited. Some parents felt greater availability of childcare was needed during school holidays in particular, including holiday childcare options for families with multiple children of different ages.

Parents judged the flexibility of childcare this in terms of the flexibility of the provider, and also in terms of their own working conditions (if working parents). Parents looked for formal childcare settings that allowed flexibility in the set attendance hours each day, especially at drop off and pick up times. In particular, some parents would have liked settings to open earlier and close later to be able to fit a full working day within the childcare hours and with more leeway between working hours, pick-ups and drop-offs. Parents also valued formal childcare settings that allowed flexibility in changing the days or hours of the week their child would attend, with reasonable advance notice. Parents found this useful for emergency situations or when working atypical hours. This was also less of an issue for those with a higher household income, as they could more easily afford extra childcare hours in emergency situations.

For working parents, flexible employers were instrumental in shaping their views of the flexibility of childcare settings. Parents who had flexible employers (and able to adjust their working hours / days) were more likely to think their childcare experience was flexible. Those with less flexible employment often thought childcare was not flexible enough to meet their needs.

For some, particularly single parents without informal childcare options, looking for flexible employment became a priority due to the lack of flexible childcare options available. These parents were limited in the types of work and hours they could take on while fitting around the arrangements of less flexible childcare (e.g. having to work at specific times of day around childcare pick-ups at set times, with costs incurred for lateness).

For many, government funded hours were the only reason their household could afford the formal childcare they used, and they would have struggled to make ends meet otherwise, especially for lower-income households. While free hours funded by the government helped alleviate some of the financial strain, childcare was still a considerable part of parents' spending, sometimes using up most or all of one parent's wages. Needing flexibility from the provider often resulted in higher costs, and some parents reported limitations with how settings engaged with funded hours (e.g. some did not accept these to cover 'wrap-around' hours or lunch hours). Parents also would have liked to be charged only the hours of childcare they used rather than a single cost for the full or half day. Receiving financial support from the end of maternity leave as well as more flexibility from providers in freely using funded hours was considered to go some way in easing parental burden.

Flexibility, availability and affordability fed into parents' perceptions of the quality of childcare settings. Other factors such as staff attitude and experience, hygiene, access to outdoor areas, and staff to child ratios were also important for parents' judgements of quality. Most parents interviewed were very positive about the quality of the childcare settings they used, and they had done research and visited settings to ensure the childcare they chose met the needs of their child.

Overall, it seemed rare for parents to be fully satisfied with all aspects of their childcare: settings judged as available and flexible tended to be most expensive, those that were affordable and flexible were often most popular and therefore had less availability, and those that were affordable and available were potentially considered to be of lower quality. Parents for whom formal childcare did not meet the availability, flexibility and affordability they needed made concessions in other areas, including career progression, financial health or adapting to the stress and burden brought by their childcare arrangements.

Ideal childcare scenarios according to parents

Overall, parents tended to be happy with their childcare arrangements and generally deemed them to be of very high quality, albeit quite expensive. However, when prompted on what the 'ideal childcare arrangement' would look like, a need for greater flexibility was often the main point raised by respondents.

The ideal arrangement was one where settings would be able to offer flexibility around the hours that parents paid for, as well as some leeway to change these in advance. This is because parents felt they had to pay for fixed hour slots (or day rates), even if they used fewer, or different, hours.

The ideal arrangement would also be one where parents could benefit more from government funding as childcare was widely perceived to be an expensive service. Furthermore, among those using funded hours already, it was thought that providers often lacked flexibility with these. Some were unhappy about their provider being selective in what they could accept funded hours for – such as not accepting funded hours to cover for lunch hours.

More generally, the ideal childcare arrangement was one that could offer support to parents at all times of the year. Especially for working parents, this meant during school holiday periods. Finally, being able to benefit from informal childcare support was seen widely to be a major contributor to the ‘ideal childcare arrangement’. This was true for both working, and non-working parents

For more detail on parents’ ideal childcare arrangements, see the *Summary of key findings* section at the end of this report.

Contextual Quantitative Data

The qualitative findings from this report should be contextualised with Wave 9 of the DfE Covid-19 Parents Childcare Survey which Ipsos MORI conducted with parents of children aged 0-4 in July 2021. As mentioned, the qualitative interviews were conducted with survey respondents from this wave of the survey who agreed to be recontacted for further research. Here we provide headline figures which offer a useful background for the qualitative analysis and conclusions that are drawn in this report.

Survey results suggest that overall, a majority of parents perceived childcare to be readily available, with only 7% having struggled to find childcare provisions for their child as of March 2021.² However, among parents whose child was receiving formal childcare in July 2021, 61% said they would use more hours of formal childcare for their child each week, if these hours were available.

In terms of flexibility, one third of parents (32%) reported problems with finding childcare flexible enough to meet their needs, while 31% did not. This suggests that flexibility remains an issue for one in three families in England.

² When asked ‘Have you experienced any of the following [disruptions] since March 8th this year (the date on which schools reopened)?’ – seven families in ten (70%) said ‘none’.

Finally, among parents who used childcare since 2020, childcare was perceived to be less affordable now than in the past, with almost one third (29%) reporting their childcare costs as having increased in 2021.

Introduction

The Department for Education commissioned Ipsos MORI to conduct 55 qualitative interviews with parents of 0-4 year olds about childcare in England. The specific aim was to understand the experiences and views of parents with regard to the availability, flexibility and affordability of formal and informal childcare, as well as the perceived quality of formal childcare. As much as possible, parents were asked about childcare in 'normal' times as opposed to their experience during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The overarching research questions were as follows:

- How do parents describe flexible childcare? What are parents' needs when it comes to flexibility?
- How do parents perceive the affordability of childcare? What are the factors that play into this?
- How do parents perceive the availability of childcare in their area? What else would they need?
- What are parents' unmet needs with regard to the formal childcare market?
- What are their perceptions / understanding of how the government supports families to access childcare?
- For those not using formal childcare, why do they not use it?
- How would parents describe good quality childcare? What factors are important to them?

Method

Sample

The sample was drawn from Wave 9 of the [Childcare Survey](#) conducted by Ipsos MORI in July 2021 on behalf of the Department for Education, with participants who agreed to be contacted for follow-up qualitative research. The sample included parents who used all types of childcare – none, formal only, informal only, and both formal and informal. Fieldwork took place during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Quotas were defined to ensure a diverse range of parents based on the above characteristics around childcare use (formal, informal, none), as well as age of child, region, work status and income. For full details regarding the quotas and achieved sample, please see the Appendix.

Recruitment

A specialist recruiter contacted parents in the sample to invite them to take part in the research project. The recruiter used a screener that was developed to confirm the demographic details of the participant (based on the sample information collected in the survey) and whether their childcare arrangements had changed since completing the survey.

Data collection and analysis

Fieldwork was conducted by Ipsos MORI qualitative researchers between July and September 2021, either online or over the phone. Each of the 55 interviews lasted around 45 minutes.

A discussion guide was used to structure the interviews. This guide was designed to capture parents' family context, their childcare arrangements and the reasons behind them, including their views on the availability, flexibility, affordability and quality of childcare in their area.

Throughout the fieldwork period, structured and detailed notes were produced, supplemented by digital recordings of the interviews. Regular team analysis sessions were also held to discuss the emerging findings and themes in more detail. Analysis was an iterative process, and this final report presents a summary of the key findings from the systematic approach to analysis.

Interpreting the findings

This is a qualitative study which, by its nature, is not designed to be statistically representative. It is intended to be illustrative, providing insight into the family contexts and childcare arrangements of a small selection of parents. The findings presented in this report reflect only the perspectives of those interviewed and cannot be generalised to a wider sample of parents. Furthermore, these findings reflect participants' experiences and perceptions; the information provided has not been verified through other means. Findings have been anonymised throughout to protect the identity of participants. Where quotes are included, these have been attributed by single/couple household, child age and work status to ensure anonymity.

Family contexts and needs

Most families lived in two generation households (i.e. parents and children living together, without grandparents). In most cases at least one set of grandparents lived reasonably close-by to occasionally support with informal childcare; it was rarer for both sets of grandparents to live close-by and it was not uncommon for no grandparents to be living close enough to help with childcare apart from emergency situations. Some participants were single parents. In these cases, childcare responsibilities tended to be either shared with the other parent or grandparents on a weekly basis. A few single parents could not count on support from the other parent or the child's grandparents and had to rely either on formal childcare (if working) or resolved to be stay-at-home parents to look after their child.

In most couple households at least one parent worked full-time. For some families with children under the age of 1, one parent was at home either on maternity or shared parental leave. The older the child, the more likely that both parents returned to work, at least part-time. However, some parents (especially mothers) made the decision, for financial or personal reasons, to stay at home with the child until at least the age of 3 or 4 years old. In some households, both parents worked full-time by the time the child was 3 or 4 years old.

The age of the child and parental working arrangements, as well as availability of family support, determined the level of need for formal childcare.

Sources of information on childcare

Overall, most respondents felt informed about the availability of childcare in their area. Word of mouth was relied on by many parents as a trusted source of information about childcare – both for nurseries and childminders. The views and experiences of friends who were parents too and had gone through finding and using childcare were seen as a trusted source of information. Drawing on several sources in addition to word of mouth was also common. For example, the internet was widely used as an additional source, including general websites about childcare providers, a specific provider's own website, and Ofsted reviews of local nurseries.

On the internet, again, the views of other parents were drawn upon, for example through reading reviews of nurseries on Google. These, however, were generally interpreted with a level of caution in case one particular parent left a negative review among overall many positive reviews.

Those keen to gather more information made use of open days and drop-in visits to nurseries to perceive the look and feel of some of the places they had seen online. This was true for parents who were more sceptical of online reviews and Ofsted reports.

Some parents treated these reports as more of an indication and were wary that one good report did not necessarily translate into assurance for good quality.

“Obviously don’t take [on board] everything that Ofsted say, but you should still get a feel of the report.” – *mother, working part-time, one year old child, couple (ID 39)*

Overall, many agreed that parents needed to be proactive from a child’s young age to find enough information about childcare and funding. Among these, parents of older children wished they had begun their search for information earlier, or that information had been provided to them at the time of their child’s birth by their midwife, for example.

There were also parents who struggled to find information they judged to be trustworthy and of good quality. This was due to less experience with internet searches in general, or fear of online scams. Others simply did not know where to begin their search for information or did not know any other parents in the area to ask. Some knew that better information could be obtained, but did not know where.

Formal vs. informal childcare arrangements

The main reason for using childcare was to facilitate parents to return to work or to increase working hours. Although the financial benefits of returning to work were often minimal due to the cost of formal childcare, some parents were aware of the long-term implications of not paying National Insurance contributions and into their pensions.

Some participants did not use any childcare and opted for one parent to look after the child instead. There were various reasons for this, mostly unrelated to the availability of formal childcare, including the belief that children would be best looked after by the parent rather than a stranger, the parent not feeling ready to be apart from the child for long periods of time or the child being 'clingy', as well as costs.

Overall, parents who were not using any type of childcare tended to either work part-time, or not work at all. Not working full-time made it easier for some parents care for their children without needing childcare. On the other hand, full-time working parents had less choice and would need a degree of support from the childcare setting to be able to continue working. Among the reasons for not using any childcare at all, parents tended to mention high cost and personal preferences.

Several parents were able to draw on informal childcare from the child's grandparent(s). In few instances this was 'formalised' with set days when the grandparent(s) would take the child to allow the parent to work. However, many parents (for whom this was an option in theory) were uneasy about putting this amount of pressure on their parents or parents-in-law, especially if they were older or in poor health. In other cases, grandparents were still working themselves or did not live nearby, which made this option unviable. Finally, childcare support from grandparents was often discussed in light of the Covid-19 pandemic and the health risks associated with that, especially for older subgroups of the population. For some parents who had had children within the last two years, informal childcare support from grandparents was disregarded altogether to safeguard their parents' health.

Perceived benefits of childcare

Apart from allowing parents to return to work, the child's socialisation was seen as a key benefit of using formal childcare. This was especially the case for parents of children aged 2 and over to ensure that they were used to being around other children before starting school, as well as their physical, emotional and language development. The range of educational and social benefits varied widely across our sample. Some spoke of their children being taught how to read and write while in a childcare setting. Others were keen for their children to be potty trained by the childcare staff. Some even noticed improved manners and behaviours such as taking shoes off before entering the home, or

spontaneously helping the parent with setting the dinner table or filling the dishwasher after a meal.

“There is no need for her to be at home at that age [aged 3]. She should be learning now. And she will be able to socialise with her peers. And to learn to speak properly.” – *mother, working part time, three-year-old child, couple (ID 40)*

“[My child] speaks two languages, so we can see that he really starts to bring home words which we didn't use or know. He really brings words from nursery, now especially as he's at the age where he starts talking. The development is amazing.” – *Mother, not working, two and half year-old child, couple (ID 42)*

Some parents were also conscious about the post-childcare steps they would take when their child turned 5. This meant that whether the nursery had an adjoining school was relevant to some parents as it meant they could reserve a place at the school. This was especially the case among the parents who envisioned a childcare setting as the first milestone of their children's education. Those who used childcare mostly as a form of childminding to allow them to work were less likely to bring up future school plans.

Among those who could benefit from formal and informal childcare, the benefits of both forms were hugely appreciated. Formal settings were seen as fulfilling the learning and social functions of childcare, as well as enabling parents to work. Informal childcare (often from grandparents) was valued more for the love and care that family members or close friends could provide to the children. Overall, there was no clear cut in terms of family income when looking at respondents who did or did not make use of both formal and informal childcare.

Case study 1

Number of children: 1

Childcare: No childcare

Entitlement to free hours: No

Lone parent with an income: £10,000 - £19,999 per year

Not working (previously worked part time but lost job due to COVID)

Urban area

General overview

Sarah is a 28-year-old parent living in social housing with her partner. She has one child aged 2 (soon to be 3) and is pregnant with her second child. Sarah is currently unemployed after losing her part-time job during the pandemic, although her partner is in full-time employment. Presently, she does not use any type of childcare because she is able to look after her child full-time. Prior to being unemployed, she used to receive informal support from a "lifelong friend" who would help her during the week while she was working. She no longer receives this due to her friend having another child. This was her only access to childcare as formal childcare was unaffordable and largely unavailable – long waiting lists were the key barrier. She is also does not think that she is currently eligible for government funded hours.

Current childcare arrangements

Sarah is the primary caregiver of her child. When she lost her job during the pandemic, she saw this as a chance to become a full-time mother, although she was looking to arrange some formal childcare. Before the pandemic, she was particularly interested in childminders, although this was not affordable on her part-time income.

The main reason for using informal childcare was having a trustworthy individual taking care and showing affection to her child while she was at work. She recognises other added benefits of using formal childcare such as her child being able to socialise with other children, as well as adults.

What has worked/not worked- thinking flexibility, affordability, and quality

Thinking back to the informal childcare she received, she was extremely pleased with it: "amazing. - you can't beat someone who loves your kid as much as you do". In her opinion, friends and family are likely to be more affectionate with her daughter than staff in a formal setting. However, she would nonetheless like to receive childcare support but is struggling to find the right job. Being unemployed means she cannot afford childcare: "prices should be lower - it should correlate with how much I make."

Overall, in terms of availability, she thinks information is hard to find "especially [for] childminders". Flexibility is also an issue. When looking into nurseries there was a limited number of days which required a minimum charge: "I should be allowed to put my child in for 2.5 days without paying for 3 because that's what I need". Finally, she would prefer an independent day nursery instead of a more 'national nursery provider'. She imagines independent nurseries to be driven less by profit, and more by genuine affection and care toward children.

Views and experiences of formal childcare

Parents discussed the availability of formal childcare in their area, the flexibility of different settings they had used or considered using, and the affordability of these options.

As these three factors strongly interacted with each other, parents tended to discuss these themes together. It seemed rare for parents to be fully satisfied with all three of these aspects of their childcare. Settings judged as available and flexible tended to be most expensive, those that were affordable and flexible were often most popular and therefore had less availability, and those that were affordable and available were potentially considered to be of lower quality.

The next sections go into further detail about parents' views on availability, flexibility and affordability of formal childcare, and how these factors interact with each other.

Availability of childcare

There was a mixed picture when it came to views around availability of childcare. Some parents had no awareness of availability as it was not relevant to them, not using formal childcare; others felt that availability was poor, with long waiting lists and needing to enrol a child before birth; yet others reported there being a high volume of available places, but when considering the quality of settings, availability became limited. Issues around availability were exacerbated for parents with more than one child. In these cases, coordinating between nursery and school drop-off and pick-up complicated matters, especially if parents worked atypical hours.

Some participants mentioned that availability varied depending on the day of the week, with Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays generally the most popular days for using formal childcare. Availability also varied depending on the setting's approach to funded hours. Some parents struggled to find nurseries that would work with their childcare entitlements. This led to frustration on their part as the range of availability became reduced due to the issue of entitlement compatibility.

“I found it hard to find a nursery that would accept 15 hours in term time only without any kind of additional hours. Different nurseries have different approaches but it was surprising how different the approaches were for free hours. I've heard that it's because they don't get enough money from the government to make them viable so it is very hard to find a good nursery that is willing to take your child if that is the only payment they are getting.” – *mother, not working, four year old child, couple (ID 23)*

Some parents thought that the availability of settings varied depending on the time of year, with settings being less available during half-term periods. This was not a universal stance however, with other parents finding little difference in the availability of childcare throughout the year.

“They do shut in the school holidays, so there isn't anything that I'm actually aware of, locally, that you can use all-year round, and all term-time round.” – *mother, not working, two-year-old child, couple (ID 180)*

The availability of informal support, as well as parents' working status, were important in shaping parents' views. Parents working part-time, or not working at all, were less likely to have issues with availability than those working full-time, and thus needing more constant childcare support.

Although the availability of formal childcare in rural areas was slightly less than in urban areas, there was no clear picture that emerged. This issue was closely linked with flexibility, in that the available childcare places were often not flexible enough to meet rural parents' needs. Others mentioned that because their local town only had a handful of options, it was harder to find the childcare that offered the quality they were looking for. Furthermore, some found that the existing childcare settings often had long waiting lists and parents needed to sign their children up in advance – some booked a place as soon as the child was born.

Case study 2

Number of children: 1

Childcare: Formal and informal childcare

Entitlement to free hours: Yes

Lone parent with an income of £20,000 - £29,999 per year

Part time, atypical working hours

Rural area

General overview

Sasha works part time (all day Mon/Tue/Weds) while her partner works all hours (seasonally) on the family farm. While their income is not great, they are in fact quite comfortably off because they pay nothing for their housing.

Current childcare arrangements

They established a pattern when their child was 12 months old - a pattern which was planned before the child was born: the respondent returned to work; Sasha's mum looked after the child all day on Mondays; the child went to nursery on Tue/Weds/Thurs; and Sasha herself looked after the child on Fridays. This mixed childcare pattern has lasted three years until the child starts school in September.

Sasha is extremely positive about their childcare arrangements, and feels her child has a perfect mixture of parental love, grandparental love (which is different) and the structure, discipline, learning and activities gained from formal childcare. All three childcare sources bring something different to the child's development, all involved are very happy with the arrangement (parents, grandma and child) and the child is happy and well prepared to start school soon.

What has worked/not worked - thinking flexibility, affordability, and quality

They planned ahead for childcare before the baby was born - they looked at the Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB) website about entitlements and followed this up by talking to someone at the CAB, and also looked at the gov.uk website, so they were aware of the free childcare. There are only two nurseries in the local town, both of which have a one-year waiting list, but this was fine as the respondent was prepared well in advance of needing the childcare. They were recommended one of the nurseries which they visited almost immediately after their child was born, and registered the child so that she could go there when she reached 1yo, when the respondent planned to return to work.

For the first two years, it was costly because their income did not entitle them to free childcare hours, but they felt it was reasonable (£50 for a ten-hour day) and it was affordable because they have no housing costs. In the last year it has been even better because the nursery costs were entirely covered by their free childcare hours (apart from holidays). The respondent cautioned however that most working-class families (as they are), on their income, could not have afforded to support the pattern that worked so well for them.

The normal hours of the nursery have worked well for the family and have facilitated the respondent being at work for three full days a week. The nursery provision was also flexible, being able to take the child on the odd additional day at short notice when Sasha's mum was unwell. Admittedly this has been facilitated over the last eighteen months by the nursery having spaces because of the pandemic (the respondent's husband, as a farmer, was deemed to be in an essential occupation during the pandemic so their child could continue to go to the nursery).

They regard the quality of the nursery as excellent, providing learning and structure. Their daughter is very happy there and she is well prepared for her transfer to school.

Issues accessing childcare

Overall, there weren't major concerns in terms of the availability of childcare. Most respondents agreed that they could access formal settings if they wished to. Differences arose when it came to diverging priorities and needs by different types of parents. Respondents tended to bring in aspects of the flexibility, affordability and quality of formal childcare settings when discussing availability. Thus, although childcare could often be readily available, the cost and flexibility of childcare tended to be parents' main concerns.

Most parents were looking for formal childcare from when the child turned 1, however some commented on there being nursery settings only taking children from 18 months old. Many spontaneously brought up the cost of childcare as well as government entitlements – this was the case across household income bands. It was common for parents wanting to wait for the 15 free hours when their child turned 2 or 3 (depending on the household income) before starting nursery. This impacted the overall availability of formal childcare, as settings became more competitive when families became eligible for different entitlements. Overall, between the age of 0 and 2, availability per se was not considered a major concern, but most parents remained deterred by cost.

Working parents were among those who often spoke of flexibility issues when discussing the availability of formal childcare. Most found childcare to be readily available in their area, but when it came to the hours they needed childcare for, their choice became more limited. Flexible nurseries were the most sought after, which the report expands on below.

Flexibility of childcare

Opening hours, employer flexibility, and manageability of funded hours were the most important factors for participants when it came to judging the flexibility of childcare. By manageability of funded hours, we mean whether settings accepted the hours or not; and if they had any limitations as to which hours parents could use entitlements for. For example, some settings did not accept funded hours to cover lunch hours. In turn, participants saw this is a lack of flexibility from the provider's perspective.

In terms of hours, most parents working typical hours had a tight schedule in the mornings and afternoons or early evenings. There was some variety as to when nursery settings opened in the morning, generally ranging from 7am to 8am. Most parents would have liked for settings to open earlier than they did to afford them some leeway between the drop-off and needing to be at work. Similarly, picking up children after work was tightly scheduled for many parents.

“It has worked OK for me because my employers have been accommodating. If they had not been, and they had said that I had to start work at 7am, I would have really struggled.” – *mother, working full time, three year old child, single (ID 29)*

Employers of both parents played an important role in decision-making around returning to work after maternity leave, especially for parents working atypical hours. Families where one or both parents worked atypical hours struggled with the available hours from childcare providers. In these cases, parents 'pieced together' support informally if this was a possibility or decided for one or both parents to work fewer hours to accommodate the childcare arrangements. The use of a childminder over a nursery was also discounted in most of these cases, as the amount of time the child would need to be with a childminder was deemed to be too long, both for the child and the childminder. On the other hand, working atypical hours could also be an advantage to some, especially if the household had both a typical and an atypical worker. This meant that parents could share childminding duties where the one working in the day would take up duties in the evening, while the other did the opposite – looked after the child in the day and worked in the evening.

When thinking about settings' flexibility, some parents would have liked greater flexibility in changing the days of the week their child would be able to attend the nursery. This is different on a case-by-case basis, with some providers being more or less flexible than others. In some cases, settings attached to schools seemed to provide greater flexibility in this regard, to the relief of families with differing weekly schedules.

Parents would have also liked greater flexibility around the hours offered by nurseries, but understood this may not always be feasible. Because of family emergencies or work

pressures, parents who had to bring their children to nursery before or after the arranged time were unhappy with the lack of flexibility from their nursery. For example, one parent would have preferred being able to drop their child off at 9 am instead of 8 am, and not having to pay for the extra hour they did not use childcare. Once again, this depended on each individual nursery, as there were some which did allow later drop-offs and earlier pick-ups.

Overall, parents working full-time and on fixed hours were less likely to find formal childcare flexible. On the other hand, those working part-time and with an ability to manage their working hours thought that their childcare arrangements were more flexible. These also tended to be parents who made less use of formal childcare as a whole, as they spent more time at home. Understandably, if less formal childcare was needed to begin with, parents were more prone to think their arrangements were flexible. Conversely, those looking for full-time formal childcare were more likely to judge it as inflexible. Flexible working conditions also played a key role in parents' perceptions of settings' flexibility. Households where one parent worked more flexibly than the other were also more likely to perceive childcare as flexible. This was appreciated by respondents:

“If I was a single mum, the hours would not be flexible enough - [however they are now] only because my husband can be flexible.” – *mother, working part time, one year old child, couple (ID 16)*

The approach that different settings used toward the government funded hours was another factor determining parents' perceptions of flexibility. Some found that using funded hours made their interaction with a given setting less flexible, with some settings operating a 'take it or leave it' approach. For example, one parent lamented the lack of flexibility with their setting, forcing them to pay for the lunch hour even if they had not used the full 15-hour allowance that week. Rather, they wished that lunch hours could be included within the funded entitlements. Flexibility and affordability were often discussed together by respondents illustrating the intertwined nature of these topics. From a parent's perspective, a setting's own approach to funded hours resulted in a lack of flexibility on the setting's side.

“They [nurseries] are not flexible at all, especially using the free hours that I use, there is no flexibility at all.” – *mother, working part time, two year old child, single (ID 7)*

Finally, informal childcare support was another factor that made parents' overall experience with formal settings more / less flexible. Those who could benefit from grandparents' or siblings' support with childcare were more likely to have a positive view on flexibility:

"I always have a backup if there is any problem - my husband, my in-laws, or family friends." – *mother, working full time, child under one, couple (ID 31)*

There were also parents who thought their childcare experience had been very flexible. In terms of settings, the more flexible ones offered parents the chance to change hours in advance, providing there was a suitable notice period. The length of the notice period varied from setting to setting: from one week to one month before. Parents who benefited from this tended to be pleased and as such, valued their settings as relatively flexible.

Impacts of lack of flexibility

The lack of flexible childcare had two main consequences – firstly, parents (mostly mothers) working fewer paid hours than they would have liked to, and secondly, considerable stress in arranging drop-offs and pickups. As mentioned above, the flexibility of employers played a substantial part in working parents' experience of flexible childcare. Indeed, when prompted on what flexibility meant to them, most working parents tended to give answers relating to the flexibility of their employers. Initiatives which helped parents were returning part-time (on days / hours which suited the parent) as well as condensed hours, which freed up entire days to be at home with the child. Parents working atypical hours had different flexibility needs, for example having to choose a night or weekend shift to arrange childcare during the day or weekend with the other parent or a grandparent.

"Fortunately, we have understanding bosses but obviously the stress affects our work performance - so it is not great." – *father, working full time, child under one, couple (ID 18)*

It was common for working parents to have to alter their working hours / patterns as a result of their childcare needs. For example, one parent whose childcare provider did not accept funded hours in school holidays, negotiated a change of working hours with her employer enabling her to work in term-time only, and thus be available to look after her child during school holidays. This reinforces the view that employer flexibility was key to parents for whom settings were less flexible.

"If we couldn't [find flexible childcare], I would have to change my days and the amount I work." – *father, four year old child, working full time, couple (ID 22)*

Working conditions need to be considered within the current office/home working conditions resulting from the national lockdowns. Some parents were thankful they could keep working from home as their colleagues went back to the office, as this allowed them

more flexibility to take care of their children. This was not described as an ideal situation, however. Some would have preferred going back to their offices but could not as they struggled with finding flexible childcare settings. This suggests that parents judged availability and flexibility as related topics. Settings were available, but if they did not provide flexible offers, then respondents would judge childcare to be unavailable to meet their needs.

For some, poor flexibility of formal settings had significant cost implications on their household income. When faced with economic hardships, parents were clearly frustrated by the weight that childcare costs were taking on their lives.

“The contract is all very one sided [in favour of the nursery]. There is no legislation to protect parents. If you want to take a day off, or take a holiday, you still have to pay for it - even a bank holiday. If there is Covid [in the nursery] and you don't want to take your kid in, you've still got to pay for it.” – *father, working full time, child under one, couple (ID 18)*

Flexibility of childcare also interacted with the issue of wrap-around hours (e.g. later pick-ups / earlier drop-offs, as well as lunch hours) adding considerably to the overall costs. This was true especially among those making use of the free entitlements. Some found they could not distribute these hours flexibly (for example they couldn't cover lunch hours) and had to pay for any extra hours they needed instead of being able to move the free hours around to fit their needs. Having to pay for lunch hours was a key obstacle to flexibility in formal childcare settings.

The lack of flexibility from nurseries was found to impact the ability of the non-working parents to find suitable work. This was especially true among single non-working mothers who could not count on informal childcare support. As a result, for some non-working parents, looking for flexible employment (e.g. one parent was looking for work as a delivery driver) became a priority in order to juggle their childcare needs.

“I won't be able to find a job. If I have a job that starts at 9.30am and finishes at 2pm. ... Nurseries don't have those hours. They might do 8am till 1pm. But then who's going to pick [the child] up at 1pm if I finish at 2pm?” – *mother, working part time, one year old child, couple (ID 11)*

Parents who had access to informal childcare support were less affected by this issue. Being able to count on relatives, neighbours, or friends with children in a situation of unexpected need for childcare was widely appreciated. Some even spoke of looking to relocate closer to the grandparents / in-laws at the end of their maternity leave or when children were due to start school, in order to be more flexible with informal childcare and

their work commitments. Among parents with a higher household income, this was also less of an issue, as they could afford the extra childcare hours in emergency situations.

“We have to fit our lives around the childcare not the other way round” – *mother, working full time, child under 1, couple (ID 582)*

A less common experience was for some parents to continue relying mostly on informal childcare due to the inflexibility of formal settings. This was not considered to be a major issue, but parents raised concerns around the absence of the developmental benefits that children receive from attending formal settings (such as sociability, structure, organised play, discipline).

Overall, flexibility, or lack thereof, needs to be seen in the context of availability - the most popular, and therefore most over-subscribed nurseries offered the most flexibility, however, availability was scarce. Similarly, the most flexible settings were not necessarily affordable.

“Flexibility in school holidays, and hours, and also money. I think they tie together, because it's all well and good having childcare that's open all the time, but then I don't have the funds to access it. So they kind of work in tandem with each other. Affordable flexibility” – *mother, not working, two-year-old child, couple (ID 180)*

Case study 3

Number of children: 1

Childcare: Informal childcare

Entitlement to free hours: No

Family annual income £65,000 - £99,999 per year

Full time work (but currently on maternity leave)

Urban area

General overview

Sana is a mother in her late 20s living with her partner and their 6-months old child in an urban area. She usually works full-time as a teaching assistant and is currently on maternity leave. Her partner is self-employed in the knowledge-economy. She is the primary caregiver of her baby, but she receives occasional informal childcare support from her partner's parents – a couple of hours “on some weeks” when she has to leave the house and cannot take the baby along for example.

Current childcare arrangements

In three months, her maternity leave will end, and she will start looking for formal childcare. However, it does not make sense for her to go back to full-time work and opt for full-time formal childcare due to the cost of the latter. Moreover, due to the lack of flexibility from her employer, she would not be allowed to work part-time.

Thus, her dilemma revolves around whether to stay out of employment and have to pay her maternity money back, or go back to full-time employment and spend most of her earnings in childcare: “if I don't go back to work, I'd have to pay my maternity money back, but if I do, [full-time formal childcare] doesn't seem financially worth it [given] what I'd actually bring home”.

What has worked/not worked- thinking flexibility, affordability, and quality

Sana is nonetheless keen for her daughter to attend nursery so that her “development needs are met” – emotionally and physically. So far, she has found settings to be not as flexible as she would like, both in terms of the hours they offer (that would allow her to continue working full-time), and the cost. She is keen to continue her career, but is concerned that she would have to find a different job/employer that would allow her to work part-time. The lack of flexibility from Sana's employer and the resulting stress caused by having to find the appropriate childcare solution have been roots of concern for her: “I often think that if I put her [the child] in somewhere and it turns out to be rubbish, then I am the cause of that because I chose to go back to work.”

Ultimately, Sana's story sheds light on the impact of non-flexible employers and the challenges faced by some working mothers attempting to balance childcare and careers: “It's almost known that when you have a child that's it [in terms of career]. Until they're at school you can't do a lot, unless you have a job that allows to work part time”.

Case study 4

Number of children: 1

Childcare: No childcare

Entitlement to free hours: No

Couple with an income of £10,000 - £19,999 per year

Part time, Typical working hours

Urban area

General overview

Tamsin (37 years old) lives with her partner and their one-year-old son in an urban area. Currently she works part-time (8 hours) in a retail store - prior to having her son she worked full-time as a supervisor in the same store. Her partner is unemployed but looking for work, and previously he worked as a manager at a large grocery chain.

Current childcare arrangements

Currently Tamsin is the primary caregiver, with no access to informal or formal childcare. She has no access to informal childcare as both her and her partner's parents live over three hours away, so this is not an option.

They do not have access to formal childcare due to affordability. Even on supervisor wages in retail she thinks this would not cover the childcare costs. However, due to their son turning two she will soon have access to 15 government funded hours per week, which she intends to use in order to give her son the opportunity for more social interaction.

What has worked/not worked- thinking flexibility, affordability, and quality

Since being offered the 15 government funded hours Tamsin has been looking at a number of nurseries, but found issues with availability and flexibility. She feels that this is a result of using the government funded hours instead of paying privately: "I think it is more flexible if you can pay". She expressed that nurseries would only offer 3 or 5-hour slots instead of full days, which limits her opportunity to work as she doesn't have enough time to get to work, do a shift and be back in time for pick up. She finds that nurseries employ a strict attitude in regard to the slots available with limited flexibility: "the nursery said these are the days and these are the time slots and its pretty much take it or leave it."

Tamsin's ideal childcare arrangements would be a mix of informal (if family lived closer) and formal childcare. She felt that this would offer her son the best opportunity for social development and also give her the time to work more hours and progress in her career, as she was doing prior to having her son.

Affordability of childcare and take up of entitlements

The cost of childcare was discussed both in absolute terms (i.e. whether they felt it was or wasn't expensive) and in terms of affordability for the respondent's household.

There was a general consensus that childcare was expensive when paying in addition to the funded hours or if their child wasn't eligible. Some participants felt the cost was reasonable given that nurseries were businesses, and some wished that nursery staff would receive higher wages given the importance and value parents placed on their work. Others felt the cost was disproportionate, with calls for prices to be more standardised across settings.

"It is not very affordable. I am pretty much on minimum wage for both my jobs. It is incredibly expensive. If you own a nursery you are doing very well out of life! Private nurseries can charge what they want and people pay it because they have no option." – *mother, working full time, three year old child, single (ID29)*

Even for those using funded hours, there were often additional costs such as for the time over lunch which was not always covered by the free hours, or for the cost of the lunch food itself, nappies or additional activities during the day.

"It's £5 an hour [for the lunch hour], which isn't much, but it adds up over the term." – *mother, working atypical, four-year-old child, couple (ID 86)*

Parents often compared the cost of childcare with the amount they earned or would earn if they returned to work, with some calculating that they would be spending their salary on childcare alone with nothing or very little left over. This impacted non-working parents' decision on whether it was 'worth' returning to work. Parents across varying levels of household incomes discussed the cost of childcare in this way.

"It's like I would be going back to work just to purely pay for childcare." – *mother, not working, child under one, single (ID 632)*

Mothers who considered returning to work felt 'stuck in the middle'. The cost of childcare meant that one household income (mostly theirs) was just about sufficient to cover the cost of childcare while they were at work. This caused a dilemma with the guilt many mothers felt about returning to work rather than spending time with their child, at minimal financial gain. Furthermore, the toll on career progression caused by taking time off work after maternity leave for childcare was seen as a burdensome reality by career-orientated mothers. In some of these cases, this was a result of informal childcare not being

available, and formal childcare being unaffordable before their child became eligible for government support (i.e. free hours). This was especially true for those on 'average pay', whose income threshold did not trigger the eligibility for funded hours from the age of 2, and could not afford the otherwise unfunded childcare. This is because their income was above the maximum threshold for the eligibility of funded hours before the age of 3.

"My career has to be put back because of how expensive childcare is." – mother, working full time but on maternity leave, child under one, couple (ID13)

Affordability was weighed up against earnings and the benefits of using formal childcare. If a childcare setting afforded the necessary flexibility to a family and was considered to be high quality, despite being costly, it could be seen as good value overall. Other factors playing into affordability, and closely linked with quality, were whether good quality food was served to children and the type of extracurricular activities offered by the provider. Sending children to nurseries was often seen as important for the child's social and physical development, with parents being keen on children having a wide range of experiences both indoors and outdoors. Some parents were willing to pay more for nurseries that took children out to green spaces (such as forests and parks) or had the possibility of interacting with nature within the setting itself (e.g. a nursery farm).

However, while the cost could be considered good value, the decision to pay for childcare had a substantial impact on the household budget. Many parents would have liked the option to use childcare more or full-time, but this was often not financially viable. If formal childcare was not seen to be flexible or to meet other needs of parents, this was seen to have a negative effect on family life.

The impact depended on the severity of the financial burden, and some were faced with difficult decisions about cutting back in other areas of spending, using several credit cards to pay for childcare, not being able to build up savings or indeed having to use savings, and having to be 'more careful in the supermarket and not buying luxuries'. This was again expressed by parents at all levels of household incomes, with relative cuts to their lifestyle, such as no or fewer holidays, not being able to buy a new home, cutting back on leisure activities or impacting decisions around having more children.

"It's not affordable and has affected our decision to have a second child. We pay more than £80 a day, about £1,300 a month which is more than our rent. We are blessed that we earn very well but it is very difficult to save with such high costs and we would like to buy a house. We have not been on holiday since our son started nursery."
–father, working full time, three year old child, couple (ID 1188)

“We can only go on holidays every three years. Actually, it’s been four years now.” – *mother, working atypical, one-year-old child, couple (ID19)*

Some parents didn’t use formal childcare at all purely due to the cost. For example, childcare costs for families with several children of different ages could be unaffordable:

“When the school holidays come, I would then have to find and pay for childcare for my other two, as well as my 2 year old, and the holiday days that you get from a job is not going to cover 6 weeks in the summer and all the other holidays that the kids have. So, by the time I’ve ended up paying out childcare for 3 of them, in the summer holidays and the school holidays, it’s just not really worth it.” -*mother, not working, two-year-old child, couple (ID 180)*

Where childcare settings spread the costs of childcare evenly across the year, this was generally appreciated by parents so they knew exactly what their monthly outgoings would be. Many paid for childcare 52 weeks of the year (as required by their childcare setting), therefore also paying for childcare when the child was not using it (i.e. when on holidays with the family).

Awareness and use of entitlements

Awareness of different entitlements and forms of government support geared toward childcare varied across interviews. For those who were aware, the most common sources of information about entitlements were word of mouth, government websites (including in relation to claiming Universal Credit), other childcare related websites (e.g. Mumsnet, Bounty or Emma’s Diary) or nurseries directly. Some participants drew on other sources, such as Citizens Advice Bureau. There was a sense among those who had heard about entitlements through word of mouth that if they hadn’t been lucky enough to be told by a friend or family member, they might have missed out on government support because there weren’t clear channels for being informed.

Those with children under 1 generally only had a very vague awareness of entitlements, unless they had older children as well. Most parents with children over the age of 1 seemed to be aware of the tax-free childcare and the free hours offered to families depending on the household income and age of the child. This was especially true among parents with more than one child for whom accessing entitlements was less novel. Unsurprisingly, families accessing childcare for the first time were the ones who struggled most to find information on entitlements.

Some were aware that entitlements were available, but did not fully understand the eligibility criteria or what support they could receive. For example, one family who had recently started receiving Universal Credit was unsure whether this would affect their eligibility for any other childcare entitlements. They had so far paid for childcare on their own, and while they suspected they were eligible for more government support, they remained unsure on where to access information about this. One parent with twins also struggled to find accurate information on entitlements despite looking on the government website, as the online tool only catered for looking up eligibility for one child at a time.

In some instances there was discontent with the eligibility criteria for entitlements. For example, where only one parent worked and the other was in education, given the household income, they would have been eligible for free childcare had both parents worked at the same level of overall household income. Similarly, where both parents received an average income, they felt penalised against single parents (of 2+ year olds), who would receive free childcare, or higher earners, who could more easily afford childcare.

Those who did receive government support tended to be grateful and pleased with what they had received so far. For many, free childcare was the only reason they could afford it in the first place and would have struggled to make ends meet otherwise. This was especially true for lower-income households. Others said that government funded hours allowed them a higher degree of flexibility with nurseries as it made any extra hours or additional food expenses more affordable. Finally, in terms of working mothers, government funded hours made returning to work financially viable or indeed lucrative in some cases (which it would not have been without free hours). This was especially true among mothers who could afford to pay for extra hours (beyond the government funded hours).

Flexibility also varied in terms of nurseries accepting different arrangements when it came to government funded hours. One parent faced a lack of nurseries offering a full day of childcare to those using the 15 free hours. Instead, they found that nurseries tended to offer fixed 5-hour slots which made it difficult to fit in with the family's needs, such as having to share the family car during the day, needed to take the child to nursery.

“The 15 hours is designed for 5 mornings or 5 afternoons but invariably you do full days so you always end up with [more] to pay for.” - *mother, working full time, one year old child, single (ID 626)*

Single working mothers struggling with childcare costs

Some respondents, especially single working mothers who struggled with the cost of childcare, felt they were left unaccounted for in terms of government support. A vicious cycle seemed to exist for single mothers with children aged under 3 claiming the 15 government funded hours to pay for formal childcare. They could not afford any more hours, meaning they were forced to work part-time (or very few hours) to look after their children. As a result, and in the absence of informal support, they were unable to increase their working hours to the threshold that would have entitled them to receive the 30 government funded hours. The obstacle for them was that without being able to work more, they would not qualify for the extra free hours, and without these extra hours, they could not afford to send their children to nursery for longer. Although this condition seemed to affect a specific type of parent, it highlighted some of the struggles that mothers had in terms of not being able to afford childcare to meet their (working) needs.

“The problem is that until [the child] is in childcare for more than 15 hours, I cannot work that extra time which would entitle me to the full 30 hours.” – *mother, working part time, two year old child, single (ID7)*

Case study 5

Number of children: 2

Childcare: Formal childcare

Entitlement to free hours: Yes

Lone parent with an income of £20,000 - £29,999 per year

Part time work, atypical working hours

Urban area

General overview

Jane is a single parent in her mid-30s living in an urban area. She has two children aged 2 and 4, and works part-time as a self-employed tutor on two evenings during the week and one evening on the weekend. She uses formal childcare and receives informal support from the children's father on the evenings she works, but struggles with the flexibility and affordability of formal childcare. She has no access to any other informal childcare and the 15 hours of free entitlements are not enough for her to work additional hours, which she would like to do.

Current childcare arrangements

Her 2 year-old (soon to be 3) child goes to nursery for 15 hours across 3 afternoons a week, during term-time only. Despite wanting to arrange more formal childcare, this is not affordable on Jane's part-time income.

The main reason for using childcare is for her child's social and educational development. She is keen for her youngest child to be able to socialise with other children, as well as adults.

What has worked/not worked- thinking flexibility, affordability, and quality:

Although she is extremely pleased with the "absolutely brilliant [and] fantastic experience" of using formal childcare, the 15 free hours are too little to allow her to work enough to be financially secure. Looking after her children prevents her from working as much as she would like to. Consequently, she is not eligible for 30 free hours, and without these, she cannot afford additional formal childcare: "Until I earn more money, I can't get the 30 hours, but until I get the 30 hours, I can't earn more money."

Having children (and the relationship break-down) had a "massive impact" on her career. Prior to having children, she had two jobs – on top of her private tutoring, she was also a school consultant. However, she no longer has the time to work both jobs, and has had to put her consulting career on hold until her children are older. The reduced income led her to compromise on other spending: "We've had to massively cut back on the things that we do. Things like foreign holidays. There isn't money for that."

Furthermore, due to her reliance on funded hours, she found that her (private) nursery was not at all flexible. She is not able to use the funded hours to cover childcare outside of the standard 'school day' hours – for example, if she needs childcare after 4pm, she would have had to pay for it herself.

Jane concluded that she'd like to "prove" that she can work more and thus be eligible for the 30 free hours. The extra hours were seen as a precious necessity enabling her to increase her working commitments and as such, essential for her and her family's financial wellbeing.

Quality of childcare

Across interviews, parents were generally positive about the quality of the formal childcare they used, which may reflect the research they undertook and careful judgements involved in selecting their childcare provider in the first place.

Parents' key consideration when judging the quality of childcare was that the setting should be a place where their child was happy and safe, which they could tell by their child's behaviour (e.g. happy behaviour and wanting to stay at the nursery) among other factors. Some parents who felt guilty about leaving their child in childcare for long days, were relieved knowing that their child was enjoying their time there.

An important marker of good quality was the attitude and behaviour of staff, with parents appreciating an environment where their child was cared for as they would be by a parent or family member. Staff personality was generally seen as more important than staff qualifications, although qualifications were often assumed as a basic requirement.

“I think it's all about personality, if someone is new and it's their first job they can still be amazing.” - *mother, not working, two year old child, couple (ID 105)*

Parents also valued close relationships with the setting and regular updates on their child's activities and development.

“The staff are fantastic, they interact really well with him, give me feedback, care about his development, and crucially, he wants to go back” –*mother, not working, three-year-old child, couple (ID 1012)*

“I'm happy with the care, every day [the staff] are talking to me about what they have done, they are happy. The staff give me 5 mins for feedback every afternoon. I have no concerns.” - *mother, working part time, two year old child, single (ID 526)*

Apart from being in a caring environment, many respondents were looking for a variety of engaging and educational indoor and outdoor activities, high quality or specialist food choices (e.g. no sugar, vegetarian) and children being treated respectfully. Hygiene was also mentioned as a factor parents looked out for when choosing a childcare setting – both in relation to Covid-19 measures and generally.

“There's plenty of staff, staff are well-trained, there's a lot of stability in staff, you're not getting high turnovers, there's lots of resources for the children. Generally, it's a good environment, just generally very good, when you go in you can see. And happy children, appropriately

sized toilets and all that kind of thing, outdoor space, different toys and plenty of craft activities, plenty of books.” – *mother, working full time, one year old child, single (ID 626)*

Many respondents brought up staff to child ratios without prompting. Even if most did not know the exact required ratios for a child’s age, they placed high importance on this when judging the quality of childcare settings. Ratios were felt to be important for keeping children safe and preventing accidents, as well as for ensuring individual children were getting attention and support for development. Several parents emphasised the need for higher ratios when the children were outside, for example in parks.

“The ratios are very important. They are in place for a reason. If you don't keep to the ratios, that is when major accidents can happen. It is irresponsible.” - *mother, working full time, three-year-old child, single (ID 367)*

When thinking about ratios, the difference between nurseries, where more children could be together, and childminders, who could only have a few children, was also brought up. Some parents preferred nurseries for the reason that their child was able to socialise with more children, and there were more members of staff on site generally. With childminders, on the other hand, the importance of not having too many children of the same age for the childminder to deal with was mentioned, somewhat contradicting the benefit of children having other children of the same age to socialise with.

Overall, most parents interviewed seemed to prefer sending their children to nurseries as they judged these as higher quality than childminders, however, some were happy with the quality of childminders too. Childminders were seen as less formal settings that tended to be smaller and more ‘family-like’ than the more ‘school-like’ nurseries. This was usually linked to the personal preferences of the family and the experiences of fellow parents.

Those who perceived childcare as the first step towards school and education (in terms of the social and educational development of their child) tended to lean more towards the use of nurseries linked to a school as there could be more of a focus on education and preparation for moving up to the school. On the other hand, childminders were seen more as an extension of the family unit – due to the setting being smaller and less formal than a nursery. For some parents, it was also a result of word of mouth information from other parents. One parent, for example, chose a childminder after having seen the positive effects on the children of a friend.

Case study 6

Number of children: 2

Childcare: Formal childcare only

Entitlement to free hours: Yes

Couple with an income of £45,000-£65,000

Full time work, atypical working hours

Rural area

General overview

Daniel (early 40s) lives with his wife, his daughter (age 3) and son (age 5) in a rural area. Both he and his wife work shift patterns and often plan their working hours around childcare arrangements. He works as a police officer and his wife has a skilled job in a supermarket. Their son attends the village school, and their daughter currently goes to the pre-school attached to the school.

Current childcare arrangements

Currently, his 3-year-old daughter attends pre-school nursery for 30 hours a week during term-time. This has recently increased from 15 hours as a result of their entitlement to the government funded hours when his daughter turned 3. As both parents work shift patterns, they arrange their working hours around pick up and drop offs at the pre-school. Without the funded hours, he thinks his wife would probably have to give up work to look after the children.

What has worked/not worked - thinking flexibility, affordability, and quality

Overall, Daniel spoke very positively about the pre-school, expressing that his children were always happy and excited to go, he felt that the pre-school teacher is friendly and knows the children well: "my daughter is more than happy with her preschool teacher, a lovely lady with a fantastic attitude." He feels that his children have developed good socialisation skills from being at the preschool.

Availability is also very good; they have been able to choose the days and hours they wanted and can change the days if they need to. They attend the only local nursery available to them, but they've not had issues getting both children into the nursery. When looking for a home, they partly chose the area because the pre-school/school had been recommended. Daniel feels that the only limitation is that the pre-school is only open during term-time, meaning him and his wife have to use most of their annual leave to cover childcare during the school holidays: "I have to sacrifice quite a lot of my annual leave and free time because the pre-school is closed."

Summary of key findings

Below is a summary of the key findings from this report. These are split by each section of the report.

Formal vs. informal childcare

- A main reason for using childcare was to facilitate parents to return to work or to increase working hours. Although the financial benefits of returning to work were often minimal due to the cost of formal childcare, some parents were aware of the long-term implications of not paying National Insurance contribution and into their pensions.
- Apart from allowing parents to return to work, the child's socialisation and development was seen as a key benefit of using formal childcare. This was especially the case for parents of children aged 2 and over to ensure that they were used to being around other children before starting school, as well as their physical, emotional and language development. The range of perceived educational and social benefits varied widely across the sample, including language development and learning to share with other children for example.
- Some participants did not use any childcare and opted for one parent to look after the child instead. The reasons for choosing this arrangement varied and were mostly unrelated to the availability of formal childcare. For example, some believed that children would be best looked after by the parent rather than a stranger, the parent not feeling ready to be apart from the child for long periods of time or the child being 'clingy', as well as costs in relation to earning potential of going back to work.

Sources of information

- Overall, most respondents felt informed about the availability of childcare in their area. Word of mouth was relied on by many parents as a trusted source of information about childcare – both for nurseries and childminders. In particular, parents trusted the views and experiences of friends who were parents too and had gone through finding and using childcare.
- Drawing on several sources in addition to word of mouth was also common. For example, the internet was widely used as an additional source, including general websites about childcare providers, specific providers' own websites, and Ofsted reviews of local nurseries.
- For some, information on the types of childcare available was less clear and some parents who didn't have recommendations from people they knew didn't know where to look for trusted information.

Availability, flexibility and affordability of childcare

- As availability of childcare strongly interacted with flexibility and affordability, parents tended to discuss these themes together. It seemed rare for parents to be fully satisfied with all three of these aspects of their childcare: settings judged as available and flexible tended to be most expensive, those that were affordable and flexible were often most popular and therefore had less availability, and those that were affordable and available were potentially considered to be of lower quality.
- There was a mixed picture when it came to views around availability of childcare. Some parents had no awareness of availability as it was not relevant to them, not using formal childcare; others felt that availability was poor, with long waiting lists and needing to enrol a child before birth; yet others reported there being a high volume of available places, but when considering the quality, flexibility and affordability of settings, availability became limited. However, overall, between the age of 0 and 2, availability per se was not considered a major concern. Most parents remained deterred by cost.
- In terms of flexibility, parents judged this from a settings' perspective, but also from their own working conditions (if working parents). For working parents, flexible employers were instrumental in shaping their views of the flexibility of childcare settings. Parents who had flexible employers (and thus being able to adjust their working hours / days) were more likely to think their childcare experience was flexible. Those with less flexible employers were also those who thought childcare was not flexible enough to meet their needs. The availability of informal childcare support that would reduce childminding duties for parents also influenced their views on flexibility.
- For some, particularly single parents without informal childcare options, looking for flexible employment became a priority due to the lack of flexible childcare available. These parents were limited in the types of work and hours they could take on whilst fitting with the arrangements of less flexible childcare (e.g. having to work at specific times of day around childcare pick ups at set times, with costs incurred for lateness).
- For many, government funded hours were the only reason their household could afford the formal childcare they used, and they would have struggled to make ends meet otherwise, especially for lower-income households. How settings engaged with funded hours also affected parents' views on flexibility (e.g. some did not accept these to cover 'wrap-around' hours).
- The main impacts of not finding flexible childcare were on parents' ability to work, and as a result, on their household incomes. Overall, childcare was a considerable part of parents' spending, sometimes using up most/all of one parent's wages, and needing flexibility often resulted in higher costs. Further, the lack of flexibility from nurseries was found to impact the ability of the non-working parents to find suitable work.

- Other significant impacts of the lack of flexible childcare were that some parents (mostly mothers) had to work fewer paid hours than they would have liked to, and secondly, a considerable increase in stress from arranging drop-offs and pickups
- Others thought that their childcare arrangements were made particularly non-flexible because they had to pay for lunch hours. More generally, parents viewed settings not accepting funded hours for things like lunch hours or longer days as quite inflexible.
- A vicious cycle seemed to exist for single mothers with children aged under 3 claiming the 15 government funded hours to pay for formal childcare. They could not afford any more hours, meaning they had to work part-time (or very few hours) to look after their children instead of working. As a result, and in the absence of informal support, they were unable to increase their working hours to the threshold that would have entitled them to receive the 30 government funded hours. The obstacle for them was that without being able to work more, they would not qualify for the extra free hours, and without these extra hours, they could not afford to send their children to nursery for longer
- Flexibility, availability and affordability fed into parents' perceptions of the quality of childcare settings. Other factors such as staff attitude and experience, hygiene, access to outdoor areas, and staff to child ratios were also important for parents' judgements of quality.
- Even if most did not know the exact required staff to child ratios for a child's age, they placed high importance on this when judging the quality of childcare settings. Ratios were felt to be important for keeping children safe and preventing accidents, as well as for ensuring individual children were getting attention and support for their development.

Ideal childcare scenarios according to parents

When talking about the availability, flexibility, and affordability of childcare, several factors were discussed that parents thought were helpful or would help with meeting their needs. These bullet points showcase broadly what the 'ideal childcare arrangements' would look like to parents:

- Parents valued formal childcare settings that allowed flexibility in changing the days or hours of the week their child would attend, with a reasonable advance notice period. Settings attached to schools seemed to provide greater flexibility in this regard, potentially due to having more availability or resources to pull from the school if required. Parents found this useful for emergency situations or for those with atypical working hours. Among parents with a higher household income, this was also less of an issue, as they could afford the extra childcare hours in emergency situations.

- Parents looked for formal childcare settings that allowed flexibility in the set attendance hours each day, especially at drop off and pick up times. In particular, some parents would have liked settings to open earlier and close later to be able to fit a full working day within the childcare hours and with more leeway between work time and pick ups and drop offs.
- Closely linked to wanting more flexibility in hours, parents also would have liked to be charged only the hours of childcare they used rather than a single cost for the full or half day. In some cases where settings allowed flexibility in pick up and drop off times, parents still had to pay for the full day's hours even if their child had not been there for some of the day. Similarly, some parents mentioned that they still had to pay for weeks when child did not attend childcare at all (e.g. when going on holiday).
- Where childcare settings spread the costs of childcare evenly across the year, this was generally appreciated by parents so they knew exactly what their monthly outgoings would be.
- Overall, parents were grateful for their free entitlements and for many this was the only way they could afford any form of formal childcare. However, some expressed that they wished formal childcare settings would allow more flexibility in the use of their entitlements, for example ensuring they can be used to cover lunchtime hours or can be moved to cover extra hours to fit parents' needs, rather than having to pay extra when they haven't used up their allowance of hours.
- There was a need for clear signposting and sources of information on entitlements and childcare options generally, provided before or from when a child is born, so parents can be well informed and able to plan ahead for their childcare needs (including registering for waiting lists). Some parents also requested further information on eligibility criteria, and support for specific family situations, such as where one parent is in full time education, or families with twins.
- Some parents felt greater availability of childcare was needed during school holidays, including holiday childcare options for families with multiple children of different ages.
- Parents who had options for informal childcare support in addition to any formal childcare they used found their childcare arrangements worked better, as those who could benefit from informal support could use this as a back up option if needed.
- Households that had both a typical and an atypical worker found their childcare arrangements worked well in some cases, as they could handover childcare responsibilities between each other when working at different times.

- Some would have preferred free hours to start from an earlier age in order to facilitate their return to work without a significant financial burden. Those who were willing and able to pay mentioned that there was less availability of providers of childcare for children between 1 and 2 years old.
- Employer flexibility was key to working parents finding successful childcare arrangements, including flexibility in hours and being able to work from home for example.
- Overall, most parents interviewed were very positive about the quality of the childcare settings they used, and they had done research and visited settings to ensure the childcare they chose met the needs of their child.

In summary, few parents had their ideal childcare arrangements when it came to meeting the criteria of affordability, availability and flexibility – as well as quality. Parents for whom formal childcare did not meet these criteria made concessions in other areas, including career progression, financial health or adapting to the stress and burden brought by their childcare arrangements. While free hours funded by the government helped alleviate some of the financial strain, receiving financial support from the end of maternity leave as well as more flexibility from providers in freely using funded hours would go some way in easing parental burden.

Appendix

Achieved sample

In total, 55 parents were interviewed. The table below shows a breakdown of the achieved sample of parents and quotas.

	Selected child age					
	0	1	2	3	4	TOTAL
Current receipt of childcare						
Formal childcare only	2/2	3/2	4/2	3/2	3/2	15/10
Informal childcare only	3/2	2/2	4/2	1/2	2/2	12/10
Both formal and informal childcare	2/2	2/2	2/2	3/2	3/2	12/10
No childcare	3/2	4/2	3/2	3/2	3/2	16/10
Childcare entitlements						
Free hours	-	-	3/3	4/3	5/3	12/9
Tax Credits / Tax Free Childcare / Childcare Vouchers / Universal Credit	1/3	3/3	5/3	3/3	3/3	15/15
None	9/3	8/3	7/3	6/3	5/3	35/15
Family type						
Couple	10/6	9/6	8/6	7/6	10/6	44/30
Single parent	1	2/2	5/2	3/3	1/1	11/9
Problems finding flexible childcare?						
Agree	5/5	6/5	5/5	5/5	5/5	26/25
Disagree	3/3	3/3	4/3	3/3	3/3	16/15
Neither agree nor disagree / DK / NA	2/2	2/2	4/2	2/2	3/2	13/10

Family annual income	
Up to £9,999	3/3
£10,000 - £19,999	12/10
£20,000 - £29,999	9/10
£30,000 - £44,999	11/10
£45,000 or more	20/10
Ethnicity of selected child	
White	40/20
BME	15/10
SOFT QUOTA: Number of children	
One child	17/10
More than one child	38/10
Working status	
Working full / part time (incl. furloughed)	40/20
Unemployed	15/10
Working hours	
Typical	22/25
Atypical	18/10
Urban / Rural	
Urban	39/15
Rural	16/15

The achieved sample also obtained a spread of parents by region:

Region	Achieved sample
London	4
South West	7
East of England	7
Yorkshire & Humber	9
North West	6
West Midlands	11
East Midlands	4
South East	5
North East	2



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