



Evidence Brief

**Informal childcare, non-standard
childcare, childcare for disadvantaged
parents, employer-supported services
and large-scale childcare provision**

2011

Disclaimer

The views and interpretations in this report are those of the researcher and are not the official position of the Ministry of Social Development.

Readers should note that this report has not been through the Ministry's full publication quality assurance process but is being published as it may be of value and interest to the social services research community and others. The report has been edited and proof read, but the layout and content has not been reviewed or updated since the report was finalised. Web links for references have been updated where possible.

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This evidence brief focuses on the use of informal childcare, non-standard care, childcare for disadvantaged parents and employer-supported services. It does not include information on the use and provision of formal childcare services. For recent information on these services, refer to Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2008 and 2011). Information has been included on two recent studies looking at the impact of large-scale subsidised childcare because this may be of interest.

Key points

- Informal childcare, frequently provided by grandparents, is an important part of work-family balance strategies. Some countries have started to make care support and/or leave entitlement available to grandparents.
- Services for both preschool and school-aged children are more limited for those parents who work irregular hours, shift work or in the weekends, compared with standard hours. There are examples of childcare services provided at non-standard times in Australia and Europe. Examples of out-of-school hours programmes and initiatives targeting disadvantaged groups are also included.
- Barriers to providers seeking to set up care services outside standard hours include the following:
 - it is difficult to assess the real level of demand for childcare outside core hours
 - childcare staff have to be paid higher wages for working atypical hours, which will raise the price of childcare for parents
 - recruitment is difficult because the childcare workforce is dominated by women with children who would not necessarily choose to work atypical hours for their own childcare reasons.
- Employer-supported services are most common in the public sector and among large firms with a significant female workforce.
- On-site childcare centres are usually only provided by a small proportion of large companies. Other employer-supported services include:
 - the provision of back-up or emergency centres that are designed to handle breakdown(s) in regular childcare arrangements
 - the provision of a childcare co-ordinator for staff
 - assistance with childcare costs or pooling resources amongst each other (eg, per industry or sector) to buy childcare places
 - the use of portable childcare subsidies or vouchers.
- Many developed countries are currently considering a move toward subsidised, widely accessible childcare or preschool, as offered in the Scandinavian countries. Two recent studies of the longer term impact of providing large-scale subsidised childcare indicate it has a positive impact on mothers' labour force participation and children's participation in childcare. The impacts on educational outcomes for children are mixed.

Informal childcare and home-based care

Informal childcare is generally defined as care arranged by the child's parent either in the child's home or elsewhere, provided by relatives, friends, neighbours, babysitters or nannies and is generally unregulated. This type of care is not necessarily unpaid (OECD 2011).

Home-based care may be informal (eg, family, friend and neighbour care) but can also include regulated family childcare. Home-based childcare is a common arrangement for many young children in the United States, especially those from low-income families and ethnic minorities. Home-based services or informal care can be more flexible in meeting the needs of these parents. These services can also be the preferred option of parents with large numbers of children or living in rural areas (Bellett & Dickson 2007).

There is less support for home-based or informal care than for other types of care, and little research exists on which initiatives best support such care (Porter et al 2010; Rutter & Evans 2011). Parents in countries that have high levels of formal care typically rely less on informal care (OECD 2011).

In New Zealand, financial assistance is not available to providers or users of home-based services for school-aged children.

Use of grandparents to provide informal childcare

Across the OECD, the most common form of informal care is grandparents looking after their grandchildren. In Nordic countries, care by grandparents seems to complement parental and formal care; in other countries (central and southern Europe), it often substitutes for parental care (OECD 2011).

Some countries have explicitly recognised the role that grandparents play in the provision of informal childcare.

- Parental benefit can be taken by Czech, Russian or Slovenian grandparents or other people, if they provide day care for the child and the parents agree to transfer their entitlement.
- In Hungary, a child home-care allowance can be provided to grandparents, if they take care of their grandchildren older than 1 year in the household of the parent.
- In Portugal, a working grandparent is entitled to 30 days leave following the birth of a grandchild to an adolescent still living at home.
- In the Netherlands, grandparents can be recognised as childcare providers and receive relevant financial support; this led to a rapid increase of childcare spending but had little effect on formal labour supply. Spending is currently being scaled back in view of austerity measures introduced in the Netherlands (OECD 2011).

Building the supply or use of childcare services in disadvantaged or remote areas and at non-standard times

Childcare subsidies have a limited impact where the supply of childcare services is insufficient to meet demand (Mitchell et al 2008). While many parents express a preference for informal care, research suggests there is also an unmet demand for formal out-of-school care services (Singler 2011; Bellett & Dickson, 2007). Waiting lists apply for centre-based early childhood education places.

Services for both preschool and school-aged children are even more limited for those parents who work irregular hours, shift work or in the weekends (Singler 2011). Internationally, various initiatives have been developed that may help parents working atypical hours or living in disadvantaged or remote areas.

In-Home Care – Australia

Government support for childcare in Australia covers In-Home Care¹ for children aged under 13. To be eligible for In-Home Care, families must not be able to access an existing childcare service, or their circumstances must be such that an existing service cannot meet their needs. Families living in rural or remote areas, and families where parents work shift work or non-standard hours, qualify.

Extended Schools – United Kingdom

Since 2010, by legislation, every pupil in primary education in the United Kingdom is entitled to a range of services delivered around school from 8am to 6pm, 48 weeks a year, including school holidays. The activities and services include: study support, play and recreation, sport, music, arts and craft, parenting and family support for parents, and easy access to specialist support services (eg, speech and language therapy). Some of these services are free, but others, like supervised care, are not. Schools work with local authorities, local providers and other schools to deliver these services, which are not necessarily provided on site. Service provision is based on the principle of ‘progressive universalism’: services are available to all, but not everybody needs all services, services need to be effectively targeted at those who are most likely to benefit (OECD 2011).

Through the ‘Extended Schools Subsidy Pathfinder’, some local authorities also receive funding to support schools to subsidise extended school services that are not free to disadvantaged children and young people. The Pathfinder subsidy was first evaluated in 2009. School respondents (80 percent) agreed that the subsidy was important for participation of disadvantaged children in extended school activities. However, around a third of schools struggled to find the best method to identify children eligible for the subsidy. Another drawback was that participation in the programme involved stigma, which further limited the effective use of the services on offer (OECD 2011).

¹ For more information, refer to <http://www.deewr.gov.au/Earlychildhood/Programs/ChildCareforServices/SupportforChildCareServices/Pages/InHomeCare.aspx>

Childcare Working Tax Credit – United Kingdom

In the United Kingdom, the Childcare Working Tax Credit, available to low-income families, offsets a substantial portion of the costs of using a range of approved or registered childcare (Bellett & Dickson 2007). This includes home-based and school-based services, and services for both preschool and school-aged children.

Parents who work 16 hours or more per week are entitled to receive childcare support within the Childcare Working Tax Credit system. The proportion of eligible childcare costs covered by the childcare element was 70 percent when the Childcare Working Tax Credit was first introduced in April 2003. It was then increased to 80 percent from April 2006 onwards. The government announced in the 2010 Spending Review that childcare benefits will return to 70 percent from April 2011 (Goodman 2011).

A previous HMRC² internal study looked at the effects of increasing the proportion of support from 70 percent to 80 percent. The results suggested there was no obvious evidence of any behavioural effects, either in terms of movements into work and/or childcare, or higher costs reported by those already claiming childcare support.

This analysis, however, was hampered by a lack of a suitable control group (Goodman 2011).

An evaluation of a pilot offering a payment to ‘out-of-work’³ parents set at 100 percent of their eligible childcare costs under the tax credit rules found that cost was **not** the single, critical, factor influencing family decisions as to whether to move into work and childcare. While some of the families who were sent an offer letter took up the 100 percent support offered, significantly more families moved into work and formal childcare outside the system of enhanced benefits, and so received the standard childcare support available through the tax credits system. Parents who did take up the system were more likely to be sole parents (Goodman 2011).

Sitter Service Development – Scotland

In an effort to boost the availability and quality of care for low-income families working non-standard hours, the Scottish Executive has recently begun funding sitter services provided by not-for-profit non-governmental organisations, including sole parent advocacy organisations.⁴

- The Sitter Service provides registered childcare in the child’s own home, at times when other care is not available.
- Care can be arranged to fit round shift work or to fill the gaps left by other forms of care (eg, weekends, evenings, early mornings), and is available for occasional use (eg, teacher-only days or days when children are sick).
- Charges depend on the household income and can be covered by the Childcare Working Tax Credit.

An earlier assessment of the costs and benefits of the services found that, for little expenditure, they provided a service that resulted in a range of individual and community benefits (Wilson et al 2007).

² Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, United Kingdom.

³ The 100 percent pilot applied to those working 15 hours or less or not working at all.

⁴ See <http://www.ofps.org.uk/services/sitter-service-development-and-support>

'All day school programme' – Denmark

Denmark provides a comprehensive system of affordable and good-quality childcare, school and out-of-school hours services, and Danish children perform well above the OECD average in most dimensions of child wellbeing. However, migrant children in Denmark fare less well. Several schools located in areas characterised by ethnic and social segregation face difficulties in meeting the learning needs of students within the maximum number of school hours set by law. Since 2006, the Danish Government has established 11 'all-day schools' in disadvantaged areas, which provide services beyond the maximum number of school hours to strengthen language and other academic skills among disadvantaged children. Evaluations of the 'all-day school' project are under way, and, if experiences are positive, the project may be extended to other schools (OECD 2011).

'LA's BEST Afterschool Program' – United States

LA's BEST is one of the first and most successful out-of-school hours programmes in the United States targeted at children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The main features that have contributed to the programme's success include: engagement and interest of students in academic and recreational activities; consistent student attendance; recruitment of highly motivated volunteers from the same community; and setting clear objectives that are monitored on a regular basis. The programme started in 1988 and currently serves 28,000 children from 3pm to 6pm at 180 elementary schools in Los Angeles. It is located in neighbourhoods that are most vulnerable to gangs, drugs, crime and that have the lowest student test scores in the district.

Programme evaluations have shown that students who participate have more regular school attendance; higher academic achievement on a number of test scores (math, reading and language); improve their behaviour and participate more in class than non-LA's BEST students. Moreover, drop-out rates among LA's BEST students are 20 percent lower than the overall district drop-out rate. Those who participate most frequently and for the longest period are the ones who are least likely to drop out of school. In addition, students who attend LA's BEST activities on a regular basis are 30 percent less likely to commit juvenile crime (OECD 2011)

Proactive provision of recreation services for children in sole parent families receiving welfare benefits

A small Canadian study of a programme where a recreation co-ordinator proactively worked with disadvantaged sole parents receiving welfare benefits to identify, organise and pay for recreational services for their children found that it increased participation in recreational activities and paid for itself in reduced welfare payments, reduced health-care costs, and savings in the criminal justice and correctional systems (Browne et al 2001; Browne 2003). This study informed the development of the Families First pilot programme of integrated supports, including proactive recreational services, which augments the welfare-to-work programme Ontario Works in the Peel Region.⁵

⁵ See <http://www.peelregion.ca/ow/ourservices/community-program/ff-fact-sheet.htm>

European examples of childcare services provided at atypical hours

Singler (2011) provides European examples of childcare services provided outside normal hours.

- Some of the larger towns in Denmark have a limited number of nurseries and kindergartens that offer care during evening and night hours, and one or two institutions in four different municipalities have attempted to establish a 24/7 service.
- In France, there are a few examples of 'non-stop' crèches and crèches that offer extended care (eg, 10 hours' care from 6am–9.30pm).
- In Sweden, more than half of all municipalities offer night-opening childcare arrangements to parents who work nights.
- In Finland, recent legislation stipulates that municipalities have to provide childcare at times that parents need it, including during the night, the weekend and so on. Consequently, a striking 62 percent of municipalities report that the demand for this type of childcare is fully or almost fully met.

Problems with providing care outside standard hours

Alakeson (2011) reported that, from a provider perspective, it is difficult to sustain a business providing childcare outside of core hours.

- Although a large number of parents work atypical hours, many use shift parenting (where two parents dovetail work times) or informal care to cope with these working patterns. It is therefore difficult for providers to assess the real level of demand for childcare outside core hours.
- Childcare staff have to be paid higher wages for working atypical hours, which will raise the price of childcare for parents, pushing it out of reach of low-to-middle income families.
- The childcare workforce is dominated by women with children who would not necessarily choose to work atypical hours for their own childcare reasons. This makes recruitment challenging for providers. Working through large employers or groups of employers in sectors where atypical work is common, such as retail, may be one possible route to addressing the sustainability issues for providers.

Employer-supported services

Firms have experimented with various initiatives to promote employee productivity, recruitment and retention through childcare assistance, including on-site childcare centres, employer-supported resource and referral networks, back-up or sick care provision, flexitime or portable childcare subsidies or vouchers.

The OECD (2008) reported that such workplace support is most common in the public sector and among large firms with a significant female workforce. These policies are more commonly associated with highly educated and high-skilled workers, whom firms wish to retain because of the costs of job-matching. Men and women in less-skilled occupations are therefore less likely to benefit from family friendly policies. Empirical evidence linking family friendly policies and enterprise performance still remains mixed and scarce (OECD 2011).

On-site childcare centres

On-site childcare centres grew in popularity during the 1980s and 1990s but, by their very nature, only large companies are big enough to provide such facilities (Morrissey & Warner 2009; OECD 2007). For example, in the United States, 17 percent of large employers (1,000-plus employees) offered childcare at or near the worksite, compared with 5 percent of small employers (50–99 employees). About 3 percent of all companies in Japan with more than 30 employees offered on-site childcare centres. Across Europe, such support is limited, except for large enterprises (over 500 employees) of which 13 percent offered childcare facilities (OECD 2007). Many employers, particularly small firms, have been reluctant to invest in centres because of their high sunk costs, continuing demand for operating subsidies and the relatively small number of children served (Morrissey & Warner 2009).

Back-up or emergency centres

Friedman (2001) suggested that some employers were looking at alternatives to providing on-site childcare. This included back-up or emergency centres that are designed to handle breakdown(s) in regular childcare arrangements. In some cases, mothers returning to work from maternity leave can place their children into these centres for eight weeks, to ease the transition back into work.

Provision of a childcare co-ordinator

Another option is the provision of a childcare co-ordinator. For example, in response to demand for care at non-standard hours, the Greater Manchester Police Force employed a childcare co-ordinator based in the Greater Manchester Police Equal Opportunities Unit and funded from the Force's general budget. The Co-ordinator manages a network of childminders who provide childcare from 6am until the following day, including any time, any day and overnight childcare and school drop off and pick up. This took several years to develop and has been in operation since 2003. When employees also reported problems with childcare during school holidays, a network of school holiday clubs was established, spread across 10 local authorities. To date, this includes over 20 clubs. The Childcare Co-ordinator has been critical in building relationships with local authorities to establish and maintain this network (Alakeson 2011).

Assistance with childcare costs or pooling resources amongst each other (eg, per industry or sector) to buy childcare places – the Netherlands

Employers could help employees with their childcare costs or pool resources amongst each other (eg, per industry or sector) to buy childcare places. This latter model is uncommon, except in the Netherlands, where public policy aspires that the cost of formal childcare is paid in equal shares by parents, the public and employers for one-third each. Before recent childcare reform, about two-thirds of the industrial agreements included childcare support provisions for employees. Since 1 January 2005, employers were expected to contribute to the financing of the childcare support paid to working parents through the tax system, but because only 64.7 percent did so in May 2006 (and because it was deemed unrealistic to expect that 90 percent of employers would make this contribution by 2008), public authorities have moved to make employer contributions towards childcare support paid by the tax authorities mandatory since 1 January 2007. Employers are expected to cover at least one-sixth of the costs of childcare (this can be as stipulated in collective agreements), which translates into a contribution of 0.28 percent of gross wages up to an hourly maximum (OECD 2007).

Portable childcare subsidies or vouchers

In the United States, some firms use a voucher system. The vouchers are administered through a flexible spending account (FSAs), a federally subsidised pre-tax account. FSAs are limited to \$5,000 a year and can only be used to reimburse parents for childcare costs from providers that provide a tax ID number and among families where both parents are employed (full or part time), attending school or looking for work. The vouchers can be used for any form of legal childcare.⁶

Voucher programmes are more flexible and can be tailored to employees' individual needs. Voucher funds can also fluctuate relative to employee demand and market conditions. Furthermore, because vouchers can be linked to regular payroll operations, they are a tool easily implemented by all employers, regardless of firm size or the number of employees with children, and thus offer wider replicability than on-site childcare (Morrissey & Warner 2009)

A study of the voucher system used at a large American university found that employer-supported childcare vouchers were able to reach those employees most in need of childcare assistance, particularly hourly and single parent employees, and that programme design could encourage participation by those employees facing greater childcare challenges (Morrissey & Warner 2009).

In the United Kingdom, employers may offer their employees help to pay for childcare, including paying cash to pay for childcare costs, paying the childcare fees directly or paying the child's school fees. If the employer offers any of the above, parents are liable for tax and national insurance contributions on whatever aid is given. Employers could provide other types of childcare support, however, without parents having to pay

⁶ For example, childcare centre, preschool, summer camps, licensed family childcare homes, licence-exempt relatives, friends or neighbours (but they must meet minimal safety expectations and have tax ID numbers).

tax or national insurance contributions. These are childcare vouchers,⁷ along with directly contracted childcare and workplace nurseries.⁸

Movement towards subsidised, widely accessible childcare or preschool

Many developed countries are currently considering a move toward subsidised, widely accessible childcare or preschool as offered in the Scandinavian countries (Havnes & Mogstad 2011). Two recent studies look at the impact of widely accessible childcare.

Impact of the use of large-scale subsidised care in Norway

From late 1975, Norway undertook reforms that led to a large-scale expansion of subsidised childcare. Havnes and Mogstad (2011) looked at the impact on children's long-run outcomes of this expansion. They found that subsidised childcare had strong positive effects on children's educational attainment and labour market participation, and also reduced welfare dependency. Subsample analyses indicate that girls, and children with low-educated mothers, benefit the most from childcare. Havnes and Mogstad (2011) caution that their findings are likely to reflect the effects of moving children from informal care, rather than parental care, into formal care of relatively high quality. The findings may be different when moving children from parental care to formal childcare or where the quality of care is lower.

Universal early childhood education and care policy – Quebec

More than 10 years ago, the province of Quebec implemented a universal early childhood education and care policy. Lefebvre and Merrigan (2008) found:

- year after year, the number of children and their weekly number of hours in childcare have increased. More preschool children are in non-parental childcare at a younger age and the intensity of childcare has increased over the years
- the policy has significantly increased the labour force participation and annual weeks worked for mothers with at least a child aged 1 to 4 years compared with mothers in the same situation in the rest of Canada
- the evidence presented shows that the policy has not enhanced school readiness or child early literacy skills in general, with significant negative effects on the Peabody Picture vocabulary Test (PPVT) scores of children aged 5 and possibly negative for children of age 4
- simulations show the bounds of the public benefits in terms of additional net taxes (income taxes less refundable credits and transfers based on a household's 'net' income). Unless one supposes that mothers in the upper part of the earnings

⁷ Employer-supported childcare schemes are voluntary arrangements. The Government supports these initiatives with the tax exemption and national insurance contributions disregards that are available, but it is up to the employer to decide whether or not to offer childcare support to its employees. From April 2011, the amount of tax parents can save will be limited to the equivalent of the basic rate. See www.hmrc.gov.uk/thelibrary/employee-qa.pdf

⁸ Refer to www.hmrc.gov.uk/leaflets/ir115.pdf

distribution are those who returned early to the labour market after giving birth or a maternity leave, and who have worked more weeks, the effect on governments' revenues are modest. The main beneficiary of the larger tax base of a higher labour supply of mothers with young children is the federal government, which does not support the significant public funding of the programme

- the policy has drawbacks in terms of social efficiency and equity. The structure of the programme, with its low \$7 per day fee before taxes, creates strong incentives for families to use long hours of day care for children at a very young age, which may not be the best mechanism for child development. The high transfers in-kind (1.9 billion in 2009) to families using subsidised childcare raise the question of their horizontal and vertical equity (Lefebvre et al 2011).

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