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Parents Working Atypical Hours

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Executive summary

Introduction

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) commissioned Ipsos to undertake qualitative research with parents claiming Universal Credit (UC) and working atypical hours. Atypical working hours was defined as working early mornings, evenings, nights, weekends, variable shifts, split shifts and being 'on call'.

Finding suitable and affordable childcare is vital to support parents into work. [The Universal Credit \(UC\) childcare offer](#) gives eligible parents the opportunity to claim back up to a cap of 85% of their childcare costs. The UC childcare offer can only be used for formal childcare providers (such as nurseries or childminders). These providers typically do not offer evening or weekend childcare. The research sought to explore the experiences of parents claiming UC and working atypical hours to understand whether and how childcare availability or flexibility affected their working hours.

Qualitative interviews were used to provide depth of insight into parents' childcare needs and their labour market participation. Forty in-depth interviews were conducted with parents working atypical hours and claiming UC. Quotas were used to structure the achieved sample and ensure representation of parents with a range of circumstances. The findings presented in this report reflect only the perspectives of those interviewed and cannot be generalised to the whole population.

Household and work context

- Respondents' household circumstances affected their ability to work and childcare needs. Important drivers of differences in childcare use were the age of the youngest child in the household and the number of children. Other drivers included whether the family was a single or couple parent household, and whether they lived close to family who provided informal childcare.
- The types of job roles typically undertaken by respondents required them to attend a fixed place of work. Lacking flexibility in working location and patterns meant finding formal childcare to match working hours could be challenging. Good relationships with managers and colleagues supported respondents to voice their preferences for working hours.
- Parents working atypical hours frequently relied on informal childcare to provide flexibility. For couple parents they would stagger their work patterns to fit childcare arrangements.

Childcare preferences and satisfaction

- Participants tended to use a mixture of formal and informal childcare. Participants relied on informal childcare to assist with dropping children off and picking them up from formal childcare providers.
- The cost of formal childcare was critical in determining the number of hours used. Participants sought to minimise their use of formal childcare where they had access to other options, such as regular informal childcare.
- Participants felt they could trust the quality of formal childcare. Participants also felt that formal childcare settings offered benefits to their child's socialisation, enabling them to engage and play with children of a similar age.
- Participants who worked variable hours appreciated flexibility in opening times offered by childcare providers. Childminders were often seen as flexible. Other formal childcare providers were felt to be less likely to offer extended opening hours, or flexibility to meet the childcare needs of parents working atypical hours.
- Participants arranged childcare to enable regular atypical working. There was concern amongst participants that if arrangements were to change, it would take time and effort to find other options.
- Once established, participants were satisfied with their childcare arrangements. Satisfaction amongst participants was attributed to the quality of childcare provided.

Awareness and use of UC childcare offer

- Participants tended to be aware of the UC childcare offer and had commonly first heard about it via word of mouth. Work coaches were also a source of awareness, however respondents felt that the UC childcare offer usually came up spontaneously and this was not always timely.
- Participants were less aware about the types of childcare providers that UC childcare offer could be used for. Participants presumed it could only be used for childminders or nurseries and were less aware it could also be used for other childcare types such as holiday clubs.
- The UC childcare offer was valued by users for the significant difference it made to their childcare costs. Users found the process of claiming via the UC childcare offer to be straightforward. Participants using the offer reported a preference for the costs to be paid upfront rather than in arrears because they often struggled to make the first upfront payment.
- For participants who were not aware of the UC childcare offer, this was their reason for not using it. Among those that were aware, but did not use it, there was confusion about the eligibility criteria, and a perception that the offer applied only to households on very low incomes. It was not always clear to

participants that other childcare offers could be used in conjunction with the UC childcare offer.

Challenges and support

- Workplaces frequently had additional shifts and overtime available to staff. Participants reported that increasing their working hours on a regular basis, or taking overtime, required additional informal childcare due to the lack of availability and affordability of formal childcare, especially at short notice.
- Participants working atypical hours said they would benefit from evening opening hours and weekend availability from formal childcare providers. This would better align with their working shifts and patterns. After school clubs and increased support during school holidays was requested by participants.
- Participants were not always aware about the financial support with childcare costs that was available and said it would help if all the information was in one place. Respondents did not suggest where they might look for this information but saw a role for Work Coaches in explaining and ensuring awareness of the UC childcare offer to all eligible parents. Parents may also benefit from a website which lists all the types of support they could be eligible for as a parent.

Conclusion

- Families sought to minimise formal childcare costs by making use of flexible working arrangements, using informal childcare and in the case of couples, staggering working hours. Participants tended to make working and care arrangements to fit around the availability of formal childcare. Participants working atypical hours wanted more flexibility from formal childcare providers, including longer opening hours and weekend availability. This would enable parents to take overtime or additional shifts should they wish.
- Working participants with school aged children lacked affordable childcare options during school holidays. They would prefer to use holiday clubs, but often noted limited availability and found the irregular costs too expensive.
- Improving awareness among eligible UC claimants that the UC childcare offer can be used to pay for holidays clubs could enable more parents to use them where appropriate. Paying and reclaiming irregular childcare costs was felt to be challenging.
- Participants suggested that information about the available childcare support should be available in one place and given proactively by Work Coaches. This would help to ensure that UC claimants were aware of all the financial support with childcare costs they are entitled to. Work Coaches could also have a role in providing reassurance to working parents about the extent they would be better off if they worked more hours.

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Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the research context, methodology, and how to read this report.

Research context

Finding suitable and affordable childcare is a crucial factor in supporting parents to work. Coram's [Childcare Survey 2022](#) found that just 19% of parents working atypical hours were satisfied with childcare in all areas in their local authority, compared to 59% of parents working full time typical hours.

For many working families, especially those with low incomes and without access to informal childcare provided by friends and family, support with formal childcare costs was a vital factor in enabling them to work. The Government provided support to households with children through a number of childcare offers.

At the time of the research, [the Universal Credit \(UC\) childcare offer](#) gave eligible parents the opportunity to claim back up to 85% of their childcare costs up to a maximum of £646.35 per month for one child and £1,108.04 for two or more children. To use the UC childcare offer, parents paid the childcare costs upfront and then claimed this back via UC. Plans have since been announced for support to be offered to parents to help with the initial payment.

The UC childcare offer must be used to pay for childcare with registered providers. Usually that means registered with Ofsted, the Care Inspectorate in Scotland, or the Care and Social Services Inspectorate in Wales.

Childcare policy is devolved, therefore parents in England, Wales and Scotland can be eligible for different support with childcare costs. In England, for example, eligible families can get [30 hours of funded childcare](#) per week for 38 weeks of the year during school term time for children aged 3 and 4. Similarly in Scotland families can get 1,140 hours funded childcare for 3 and 4 year olds, equivalent to 30 hours per week in term time. Wales offers more funded hours to three- and four-year-olds and a greater number of weeks per year are covered by the entitlement. These childcare offers can be accessed at the same time as claiming Universal Credit, Tax Credits, childcare vouchers, or Tax-Free Childcare. Depending on their eligibility, parents who claim certain benefits or meet other requirements may also receive funding for childcare hours for [two-year olds](#).

Research aims

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) commissioned Ipsos to undertake research with parents claiming Universal Credit (UC) and working atypical hours.

Atypical working hours was defined as working early mornings, evenings, nights, weekends, variable shifts, split shifts and being 'on call'.

The research sought to understand the experiences of this group and whether and how childcare availability or flexibility restricted their working hours. Specifically, the research aimed to:

- understand the family context and household employment, including working patterns
- explore childcare preferences concentrating on availability, flexibility, cost and quality
- investigate how satisfied parents were with their childcare arrangements and any suggested improvements
- explore the awareness and use of the UC childcare offer among parents
- understand additional support that could be provided to working parents

Overview of the methodology

Qualitative interviews were chosen to provide depth of insight and capture the nuances behind parents' childcare needs and their labour market participation. Forty in-depth interviews were conducted with parents working atypical hours and claiming UC. Full details of the sampling, recruitment, fieldwork and analysis are included in Annex 1 with an overview provided here.

Given the variety of family circumstances, quotas were used to structure the achieved sample and ensure representation of parents with a range of circumstances. Quotas were set for:

- single or coupled households
- a partner working atypical hours, gender
- single males
- age of youngest child in the household
- number of children in the household
- use of childcare
- household income
- region including urban, rural and coastal areas

Data analysis was undertaken using the framework method which involved writing detailed notes including quotations and interrogating the data to look for patterns.

How to read this report

The remainder of this report is broken down into sections to cover the range of evidence collected. By its nature, qualitative research is not designed to be statistically representative. This report is intended to be illustrative of a range of experiences and viewpoints. The findings presented in this report reflect only the perspectives of those interviewed and cannot be generalised to the whole population.

Verbatim quotes have been included to illustrate important points and common themes. Where verbatim quotes are used, they have been anonymised. Four respondent characteristics accompany the quotes, to provide a brief overview of the parent and provide context to their comments. These are gender, household status - single/ couple parent, type of childcare used and the age of the youngest child.

Some quotes might have the same attribution, but do not necessarily come from the same respondent. Case-studies have been included to provide illustrative examples of experiences, situating the findings in specific household contexts.

Household and work context

This chapter details respondents' household and work context. It also covers the value of work to respondents and their views on earnings progression in work.

Household circumstances

Respondents' household circumstances affected their ability to work and their childcare needs. Important drivers of differences in childcare use were the age of the youngest child in the household and the number of children, whether the family was a single or couple parent household, and whether they lived close to family who provided informal childcare.

Participants with a youngest child aged four or under and not in school, used formal childcare providers offering early years education, such as nurseries or childminders. The cost of childcare varied by the age of the child and by region. Families with children too young to be eligible for the early years' entitlements frequently had the highest monthly childcare costs.

Primary school age children attended compulsory education for 38 weeks of the year. Participants working outside of these hours and times needed to arrange childcare and where necessary pay formal childcare costs to enable them to work. Participants noted differences in their childcare costs during school holidays, particularly the summer, which at six weeks in length, was challenging.

The number of children in the household affected childcare costs and influenced the number of formal childcare providers required. Depending on the age of their children, families with more than one child had children who went to different childcare providers which created complexity when arranging work and childcare. Older children of respondents, who were sometimes adults themselves, were a source of support with childcare for younger members of the family.

Being a single or couple parent household affected work and childcare arrangements. For example, in couple households, parenting responsibilities could be shared and working hours staggered, with one parent working while the other cared for children. This is illustrated by the following case of a couple parent household with two children, aged two and six.

Case Study One – Couple household with both parents working atypical hours:

The eldest child was at school, and the youngest attended nursery three days a week. Both parents worked atypical hours. The family used formal childcare, but found this was expensive, so staggered their working hours to minimise childcare costs. One parent worked three nights in a call centre working (9pm – 6am). The other parent worked as a refuse collector 6am-3:45pm 4 days a week. Both jobs involved fixed working hours with no flexibility in timings, or the place of work. The family were supported with informal childcare provided by a family member as needed.

Case Study Two – Single parent with shared custody:

Single parents with regular shared custody arrangements were enabled by these to arrange work and childcare. For example, one male single parent ran his own business. He shared custody of his three children, with two mothers. The children lived with him one week in two. He worked more hours during the weeks his children lived with their mothers, and fitted hours around childcare arrangements when the children are with him, to be able to spend more time with his children. His working hours therefore varied between 25 and 60 hours a week. He arranged any travel and overnights trips required to take place during the times his children lived with their mothers.

Single parents where the partner did not share custody were more limited by their circumstances as they could not rely on the other parent to support with childcare.

Case Study Three – Single parent working night shifts:

This is illustrated by the case of a single female with twins aged two. The single parent worked nights for a call centre from home, working full-time hours, usually 8pm-2am, six days a week. Working nights from home enabled the parent to look after the children as they slept. The children attended nursery one day a week.

Living near support networks, and family who were willing and able to offer informal childcare enabled parents to work. Informal childcare was commonly used to reduce formal childcare costs and to look after children during times that parents worked, and there was no formal childcare availability, for example weekends.

Case Study Four – Single parent using formal and informal childcare:

This case study illustrates a single male parent who used a mixture of formal and informal childcare. There were two children in the household, one aged three and another aged over 16. The respondent worked as a farmer, and their working hours varied depending on the weather and season. Working days were typically long and spanned six days per week. The three-year-old attended nursery three days a week, between 9am and 3pm. The older sister and grandparents provided childcare at the other times when the father was working.

However, informal childcare support was not available to all working participants. Some respondents lived at a distance from family, and others discussed how the poor health or work commitments of grandparents and other family members meant they could not commit to providing regular support with childcare.

Types of work undertaken by respondents

Respondents' job roles varied by sector and seniority. The sample included some of the following jobs: supermarket assistants, health care workers, a cleaner, an optical assistant, a nurse, a support worker and a call handler.

Due to the types of job roles typically undertaken by respondents they often attended a place of work. Their work involved engaging with people face-to-face and providing a service in a specific location therefore cannot work from home. Participants working atypical hours in locations outside of the home frequently worked long hours in a single shift. Lacking the flexibility that other respondents were afforded in their working location and patterns meant finding formal childcare to cover their working hours could be more difficult. Participants in these circumstances relied on informal childcare to provide flexibility, or staggered work and childcare responsibilities among couple parent households.

Several participants who could not work from home mentioned supportive line managers who would allow short notice absence if needed, for example if their child was ill and they could not work from home in their job role.

There were examples of respondents who could work from home some or all the time, for example in roles providing customer services over the telephone or working in payroll. In these cases the opportunity to work from home offered some flexibility to arrange work and childcare in different ways. For example to care for children at home when they were ill while continuing to work.

Good relationships with managers and colleagues supported respondents to negotiate and specify their preferences for working hours. There were cases where participants could request the atypical working hours that best suited them. For example, they could request hours that fitted around their partner's work pattern, or request to work compressed hours when family members were available to care for

their children. However, such requests needed to be planned and participants noted that accommodating short notice changes in shifts was challenging.

“They are brilliant. I say what shifts I can work, and they say thank you so much because they are grateful for somebody to be there.”

Female, Single, Formal and informal childcare, 2 to 4 years old

Respondents reflected generally that some employers were more open to conversations about work and family than others. Participants’ perceptions of working culture influenced whether they felt able to begin a conversation with a manager to request flexibility of the hours they worked.

“It is very male dominated in his work, all the workers are men. I’m not sure they understand about childcare or needs of children.”

Female, Couple, Formal and informal childcare, 2 to 4 years old

Working participants had changed their job role in cases where the demands of their work could not be accommodated by a combination of their personal and family circumstances, the availability of childcare, or affordability of childcare. For example, one single parent had worked on cruise ships involving long periods of time away. They were now self-employed as a dog walker. Another respondent had worked as a waitress but now worked as a home support worker. This offered the respondent more regular hours that could fit around childcare and paid better.

The value of work

Work was important for all respondents. They noted that work enabled them to model positive behaviours to their children, demonstrate the importance of working for what you have in life and not be dependent on government. Respondents in couple parent households both wanted to make a financial contribution to the household. Having an independent source of income gave participants a sense of agency and satisfaction.

“It’s important to show my child that you need to work to get stuff, buy your own things.”

Female, Single, Formal childcare, 4 to 8 years old

Participants recognised they experienced several non-financial benefits to working. This included time away from the home to engage with other adults. Work could also create a sense of purpose, with benefits for mental health.

“I love my job and I think it just gives me that, I don’t know, just, I don’t want to say freedom but it allows me to socialise and have my own life outside of family life.”

Female, Couple, Formal childcare, 4 to 8 years old

Views on earnings progression in work

Progression in work was classified as either increasing working hours and or by increasing income from work. The emphasis participants placed on their in-work progression varied. There were participants who were working on progressing whose employer had offered training and promotion opportunities. These respondents eagerly took them to support their development and likelihood of future progression.

“Career wise, there is lots of progression in my work...I am doing a dispensary opticians course now and I will also have the opportunity to buy into the business later...there is also opportunity for management training.”

Female, Single, Formal and informal childcare, 2 to 4 years old

Participants with young children tended to feel that progression at work was not as feasible at the time of the interview due to family commitments, but it was something they might consider when their children grew older and started school for example. Other participants did not want to progress at work and concentrated on maintaining consistent work and childcare arrangements. They valued good work relationships which supported their preferred working pattern, their favoured work life balance and provided financial stability.

Participants not aiming to increase their earnings felt that progression to senior roles led to more responsibility and less work flexibility. These participants did not want to progress to a more senior role if it might risk compromising their work life balance. The interaction between government benefits and increased earnings could also be a concern and limit aspiration for in-work progression. Participants were concerned about their UC payments being reduced or cut completely if they increased their pay or hours.

“I have been in my same position for 12 years...My manager has asked me many times about training to be a senior care assistant or team leader...I will earn more than what I am on now if I progress...but that would mean I would lose my benefits.”

Female, Couple, Formal childcare, 4 to 8 years old

Childcare preferences and satisfaction

This chapter details the factors influencing participants' use of childcare when working atypical hours and their satisfaction with childcare arrangements.

Factors influencing childcare use

Participants tended to use a mixture of formal and informal childcare and had established a work and childcare arrangement that worked for their family circumstances. Cost, availability, quality and flexibility were important in choosing a formal childcare provider. This section discusses the factors influencing participants' use of formal and informal childcare.

Formal childcare

Formal childcare providers used by families included childminders, nurseries, afterschool clubs and holiday clubs. The cost of formal childcare was a critical factor in determining the number of hours they used. Participants sought to minimise their use of formal childcare where they had access to other options, such as regular informal childcare.

Formal childcare was seen by participants as more reliable than informal childcare and less susceptible to short notice change. Participants felt they could trust the staff and quality of the environment in formal childcare. Participants also felt that formal childcare providers offered benefits to their child's socialisation, enabling them to engage and play with children of a similar age.

Families typically explored their options and made a childcare arrangement that suited their preferences. However, when considering childcare options, the availability of formal childcare could be an issue. Participants sometimes had to put their children on a waiting list to get a place, particularly for younger children. Long waiting lists meant that some very popular childcare providers were inaccessible. The length of waiting lists for providers affected whether participants pursued formal childcare options to allow them to work.

Some participants who used nurseries had considered using childminders but found there was a lack of local availability. Childminders would have been their preferred choice as they were seen as cheaper and offering more flexibility with opening hours. There was a particular lack of availability for participants in rural areas.

"We live in a really small town...there are childminders around here and we did consider them as they are cheaper than the nursery...But they had no space."

Female, Couple, Formal childcare, 2 to 4 years old

Living in a rural area limited the number of childcare providers families had to choose from more generally.

“I remember when we were looking, a lot of the childminders round here closed at 4 or 5, which is no good for me as I could not pick up after work until 6pm... Yes, we do live in a rural area, so that might be it.”

Female, Single, Formal and informal childcare, 2 to 4 years old

When choosing formal childcare providers, participants considered the location, which was particularly important for those travelling to and from work. Nearby childcare meant they were able to commute for work and have time to drop off/pickup their child.

“Yes, the location is obviously a big thing that I had considered, just with being able to get to work in time, traffic and all that kind of thing. My childminder is only maybe about five minutes away from me so as I say again, it has just worked out perfectly.”

Female, Single, Formal childcare, 2 to 4 years old

Participants who worked unpredictable hours appreciated flexibility in the opening times of formal childcare providers. Childminders were often seen as more flexible than nurseries, by opening earlier and closing later, and were sometimes chosen for this reason. Formal childcare providers, such as nurseries, were felt to rarely offer extended opening hours that were suitable to meet the childcare needs of participants working atypical hours. These providers often requested set days to be booked in advance which was not suitable for participants who worked different shift patterns each week.

For participants choosing formal childcare, the quality of childcare was an important factor. Participants often looked for recommendations from other parents, online or by reading Ofsted reports. If participants were able to afford it, they were willing to pay extra if they considered the childcare setting to be of better quality.

“The quality of the nursery [was most important]. My priority was how my son related to and interacted with the staff”.

Male, Single, Formal and informal childcare, 2 to 4 years old

The child's preference became increasingly prioritised as the child grew older. This was because children could voice their likes and dislikes, which participants then took into consideration when choosing formal childcare providers, alongside other considerations such as cost and location.

Informal childcare

Informal childcare tended to be used alongside formal childcare. Participants heavily relied on informal childcare to assist with dropping children off and picking them up from formal childcare providers. Those who used informal childcare appreciated and understood that it enabled them to work because it allowed them to work later shifts.

“They [childcare arrangements] work really well, I wouldn’t be able to do what I do if they didn’t work.”

Male, Single, Formal and informal childcare, 2 to 4 years old

Informal childcare was also used by working participants on an ad-hoc basis. For example, participants asked family members or friends for support with childcare during school holidays and when formal childcare providers were closed, such as early evenings, or over weekends. Informal childcare was also used when a child was unwell.

In circumstances where their family either did not live locally, or were unable to provide support, due to working themselves or to health conditions, working participants could not rely on informal childcare. This could be very challenging, particularly for single parents.

“I’m very happy and grateful for my family’s time looking after my baby, but I wouldn’t be able to work without this support. The support also depends on their availability, but I don’t want to be a burden.”

Female, Single, Formal and informal childcare, under 2 years old

Those who frequently used informal childcare throughout the week felt a sense of guilt and being a burden towards their family or friends.

“I do feel so guilty leaving him with my mum, even though I know my mum spoils him... I do feel bad for asking my mum’s help too much. She works and has her own life. Sometimes I do turn down work, because mum can’t help out”

Female, Single, Informal childcare, 4 to 8 years old

No childcare

There were two respondents who chose not to use any childcare. They did so because of their child’s age. In one case, the child was 15, and the parents felt childcare was no longer necessary and, when appropriate, the child could be left alone. This enabled them to work longer hours than when their child was younger and have greater flexibility with shift patterns. When their child was younger, they had relied on informal childcare support.

Another couple did not use childcare and managed to both work by arranging working hours as a couple to ensure someone was always available at home.

“We have never used childcare, my husband and I have always worked around it...in the past, I have worked in care homes and in supermarkets doing night shifts”

Female, Couple, no childcare, 12 to 16 years old

Satisfaction with childcare arrangements

Balancing childcare and work arrangements was challenging for most participants, especially single parents and parents with children below school age. Although participants found it challenging to balance childcare and work arrangements, they had found an arrangement that worked for them for most of the time.

Participants had put in place arrangements to enable regular atypical working. There was concern amongst participants that if these arrangements were to change it would take time and effort to find other options. Amongst participants, there was a sense of dependency on routine, and anxiety around this changing. Unplanned events, such as school strikes, or family members being unavailable to provide informal childcare, would disrupt arrangements and cause difficulties for participants.

“Like next week, both sets of grandparents are on holidays, so they can't have them. I will have to take 2 days off work...you can run out of holidays too, so then you have to take unpaid leave.”

Female, Single, Formal and informal childcare, 2 to 4 years old

Overall, participants were satisfied with their childcare arrangements. They had spent time and effort in organising their arrangements to make it suitable for them, their preferences, and their circumstances. For those families with more than 2 children, this had become an easier process over time as they had learnt what worked from their other child or children. Additionally, some participants who had multiple children felt satisfied with their arrangements because it was a shared responsibility amongst the older children.

“I use the nursery during the week but if one of my shifts falls on a weekend, my 18-year-old helps out. My older kids help look after the youngest, but this has only started happening recently”.

Female, Single, Formal and informal childcare, 2 to 4 years old

Satisfaction amongst participants was also attributed to the quality of childcare being provided, both formally and informally. Where high quality childcare was being provided, participants felt a sense of relief that their child was learning and developing in a safe environment. Participants also appreciated being given

feedback on how their child is progressing within the childcare setting. Recommendations from other parents in the local area also helped participants to trust the environment their child was in, leading to higher levels of satisfaction.

"I'm 100 percent satisfied, I would say, with my childcare. She [childminder] is amazing with him, and as I said, it's set in stone. So I don't need to really stress out until she can't take him. That's when I stress out, but as I say, it's pretty set in stone, so I don't really need to worry about anything like that."

Female, Single, Formal childcare, 2 to 4 years old

Use of UC childcare offer

This chapter details respondent's awareness of the Universal Credit (UC) childcare offer, users experience of it, and reasons some eligible parents did not use the offer.

Awareness of the UC childcare offer

At the time the research was conducted, the UC childcare offer gives eligible parents the opportunity to claim back, up to a limit of **85% of their childcare costs with registered childcare providers**. Participants tended to be aware of the UC childcare offer and had commonly first heard about it via word of mouth. For example, from friends, family or a childcare provider such as a childminder that knew the family's circumstances.

"My childminder was telling me about it [UC childcare offer] She was saying that I could use it to top up the 30 hours as that is spread across the year. We could use it to top up the holidays."

Female, Single, Formal and informal childcare, 2 to 4 years old

Work Coaches were also a source of awareness. However, respondents felt that mention of the UC childcare offer usually came up spontaneously during conversation, and this was not always as timely as it might have been. Participants would have preferred to be made aware of all available support with childcare costs from the outset of their UC claim, or when they became a parent.

"So, as I say, a couple of weeks ago I was talking to my work coach about my self-employment review and she said about childcare, the Universal Credit childcare. They pay 85% I think it is of my childcare costs, which funnily enough, last week I put my first claim in for."

Male, Single, Formal and informal childcare, 2 to 4 years old

Participants who were aware of the UC childcare offer had good knowledge of how the claims process worked. Participants knew that the UC childcare offer allowed them to claim back, up to 85% of their childcare costs. This understanding was gained either through experience of a current claim, or where participants had claimed in the past.

Participants aware of the UC childcare offer were less aware about the types of childcare providers that UC childcare offer could be used for. Participants presumed

it could only be used for childminders or nurseries and were less aware it could also be used for other childcare providers such as holiday clubs.

Participants were not all aware of the UC childcare offer before they took part in this research. Where they were unaware, as part of the interview, participants were told details of the UC childcare offer. Participants then realised their eligibility and were pleased to hear about the support on offer.

As with respondents who were aware, they would have appreciated being signposted to information about financial support with childcare costs when they first considered childcare options, and earlier in their UC claim.

“Oh my God, I did not know about this, I had never heard of it [UC childcare offer]. This could mean, that I could potentially earn more money by doing more shifts.”

Female, Single, Informal childcare, 4 to 8 years old

Use of the UC childcare offer

The UC childcare offer was valued by users for the significant difference it made to their childcare costs. Parents, especially single parents, expressed that without the UC childcare offer it would not be financially worthwhile or possible for them to work.

“We really did struggle for a few weeks as we had to pay for all the childcare ourselves...when the money came through from UC, it really was great, as we were struggling to pay for it all ourselves.”

Male, Couple, Formal and informal childcare, 9 to 11 years old

There were participants that used the early years entitlement for 3- and 4-year-olds who said they struggled to pay for childcare without the UC childcare offer.

“Without that help [UC childcare offer], I really don't think I could have afforded to pay for childcare myself...I probably would not have been able to work.”

Female, Single, Formal childcare, 4 to 8 years old

Participants using the UC childcare offer must pay for childcare upfront and are then reimbursed via UC the following month after submitting evidence of payment. Overall, participants using the UC childcare offer found the process of claiming the UC childcare payment straightforward. However, it was viewed as an administrative burden when as working parents they are already very busy.

Participants using the offer reported a preference for the costs to be paid upfront rather than in arrears. This was because they often struggled to make the first upfront payment, particularly single parents. Since the research was conducted, plans have been announced for support to be offered to parents to help with the initial payment.

Participants had frequently borrowed money from their family to make their first childcare payment. Borrowing this money then put pressure on household finances to make sure it was repaid. This was not always possible where participants had a change in circumstances. For example, one parent could no longer afford their rent so had to move in with family. This had affected their benefit entitlement, specifically the housing element of their UC claim, and led to them being confused about their household finances, and feeling unable to repay their family.

"I don't understand why they don't pay it up front [UC childcare offer] if you can prove you have an employment contract to say you are working. They should pay it...I had to borrow that money from family...I don't like being a burden on family"

Female, Single, Formal childcare, 4 to 8 years old

Another suggestion from participants was for the UC childcare offer money to be paid directly to the childcare provider, as with funding distributed via the early years' entitlement. Such a change would reduce the administration required by parents and alleviate their concern over the responsibility for checking the payment amounts and dealing with variation in outgoings month to month.

"I'd rather it go straight to the childminder. I'd rather it not go into my bank account and me have to sort it all out and work out how much I've got to give her this month. I'd rather them just pay the childcare directly."

Female, Couple, Formal childcare, 2 to 4 years old

Participants found that having to use Ofsted registered providers had little effect on their use of the UC childcare offer. Regardless of the UC childcare offer conditions participants wanted to use Ofsted registered providers as it indicated good quality provision to them.

"[Being Ofsted registered] means that I feel more secure about the childcare.... It is regulated by the government. And it makes sure that the staff are following rules and the codes of conduct."

Female, Single, Formal and informal childcare, 4 to 8 years old

Reasons for not using the UC childcare offer

Lack of awareness was one reason given by eligible participants for not using the UC childcare offer. Some participants were not aware of the UC childcare offer until they took part in the interview for this research. During the interview respondents were provided with an overview of the policy and participants said it was something they would investigate. There was some confusion among eligible participants about the eligibility criteria for the UC childcare offer, and a general perception that the support

was only for people on very low incomes, so did not apply to people in their circumstances.

"I've not used it and have not looked into it in any detail, I thought it was for very low income people."

Female, Couple, Formal childcare, Under 2 years old

Participants with young children not using the UC childcare offer tended to use alternative childcare offers, such as the Early Year's Entitlement. It was not always clear to participants using other funding offers that these could be used in conjunction with the UC childcare offer.

One family that were aware they could use the UC childcare offer alongside other funding, did not because they considered the formal childcare costs they paid were low and affordable for their family. For example, the family paid £50 a week for a childminder to have their child between 7:15am and 8:30am and to drop their child at nursery, in addition to claiming early years funding. They did not use the UC childcare offer for this payment, as they felt that paying £50 a week was manageable.

Challenges and support

This chapter details the challenges parents experienced when seeking to increase their working hours and/or their income. It will also covers suggestion for additional support to seek to overcome these constraints.

Challenges increasing working hours

For some participants spending time with children was prioritised over increasing working hours. However, some participants wanted to increase their working hours but faced constraints to doing so relating to work, childcare and their personal and household circumstances.

Work-related constraints

Workplaces frequently had additional shifts and overtime available to staff, especially in sectors such as health care and hospitality. There were, however, job roles that did not offer opportunities to increase working hours and had more limited options. In these roles, participants needed to think creatively with an employer to discuss how they might progress or to look elsewhere for additional work.

"You can't really increase hours as a cleaner here...I can't see a way of doing that...there is no scope for extra hours...but we are talking about me becoming a fire marshal that will increase my hours and earn more."

Female, Single, Formal and informal childcare, 4 to 8 years old

Childcare constraints

Participants wanting to increase their working hours on a regular basis were constrained by childcare. Participants would need to consider additional informal childcare due to the cost and availability of formal childcare. Participants tended to feel unable to work additional hours due to challenges in arranging and affording childcare, especially at short notice.

"They have asked if I want to permanently increase my hours. They have the hours available and I am considering it...There is that pressure to be available for the children when they are home after school and during the holidays"

Female, Single, Formal and informal childcare, 4 to 8 years old

For some participants, unavailability of childcare led to turning down the opportunity to work more hours. However, before turning down work, participants explored all

childcare options, including family and friends. Being unable to work more applied predominantly to participants without informal childcare access. Although some participants had not turned work down before, they had been unable to work overtime because of a lack of childcare.

"Yes, I have turned down work, like the other day, my manager asked if I could work...the childminder had no space and my parents were away and her father was not available, so I have had to say no to that."

Female, Single, Formal and informal childcare, 2 to 4 years old

Participants found there was a lack of childcare options during the school holidays. This meant having to arrange other plans, mostly informal childcare and/or taking annual or unpaid leave.

"I wish I could have something for the holidays that gives the kids something to do so they're not just sat around"

Female, Single, Formal and informal childcare, 4 to 8 years old

Participants who worked from home would sometimes care for their child whilst working. This tended to be done irregularly, for example when their child was ill.

"It's easy I take them round [to the nursery/ school], have lunch and start work, then when I've finished, I walk round to collect them. I can pick them up during working hours if they are ill and the school calls me"

Female, Couple, Formal childcare, under 2 years old

There was a limit to the amount of informal childcare participants felt able to ask for from friends and family. Participants that used informal childcare were reluctant to ask for more support from family and friends. Participants recognised that family and friends had other responsibilities and their own lives.

"I cannot rely on my mum much more. She has already agreed to help with some care."

Female, Single, Informal childcare, 4 to 8 years old

Formal childcare options were felt to be expensive and mean that increasing working hours might not result in an increase in income that was worthwhile. In addition families could feel that they would be scarcely financially better off working more hours once reductions in benefits had been considered. For example, increasing hours was perceived to result in benefits such as the housing element being reduced.

"I can't afford to work full time... if I did I would get less help for housing and rent and would have to pay for nursery more myself as my benefits would be reduced."

Female, Single, Informal childcare, 4 to 8 years old

Household constraints

Parents could be constrained in their working lives by their health, and the health of others. For example, one respondent provided care and support at short notice for their ex-partner who had a health condition. Participants that had long-term health conditions themselves managed their working hours alongside their health and feared that working more hours might negatively affect their health.

"I have burnt out in the past...I was really struggling with my stress levels which is related to on-going issues with my ex...he is still in and out of the house seeing my daughter."

Female, Single, Formal and informal childcare, 2 to 4 years old

Challenges increasing income from work

This section focuses on increasing pay at work by changing jobs or getting promoted rather than increasing hours worked. Spending time with their children and the social contribution of their work were more important than increasing income from work for some participants. Participants who did want to increase their income faced challenges relating to childcare and work.

Work-related constraints

Work-related constraints included a perceived lack of progression routes at work. Where employers did not have progression routes to more highly paying roles, participants felt there were few options to increase income from work and preferred stability. This was especially the case where they were reluctant to change employer given good existing work relationships and established working practices, or because they enjoyed the work they were doing.

"There is no progression here, you can't go up the scale ...But I don't mind that. I love doing what I am doing, I feel that I am doing something good in the community, I am helping people."

Male, Couple, Formal and informal childcare, 9 to 11 years old

A preference for stability in work stretched to a fear that changing income might not be financially worthwhile overall as it would affect Universal Credit including the housing element of Universal Credit, or that change would disrupt the stability of household finances.

Where participants had longer-term career aspirations this tended to involve training to be able to qualify for a different role, and through this to increase income from

work. Unless training was to be paid for by an employer, with time provided through work, respondents felt retraining was likely to be expensive and out of reach. The time to train alongside being a working parent was also noted as a barrier.

Childcare-related constraints

Participants had usually arranged a working pattern that they felt made work financially worthwhile. This included drawing on informal childcare where they could, and balancing care with another parent where possible to minimise childcare costs. If participants wanted to work more hours, they felt they needed to use formal childcare, as there was a limit to the extent to which friends and family could support them. Additional formal childcare costs of working extra hours would mean that their take home income would not really change, specifically for participants already receiving the maximum amount from the UC childcare offer. For example, one single parent solely relied on informal childcare as it was not financially viable to use a childminder.

“I looked at a childminder. She had lots of toys and the place looked good, but she was charging £10 an hour and I only earn £12 a hour. So I would be paying for nothing really”

Female, Single, Informal childcare, 4 to 8 years old

Support to progress

Participants had found a work and childcare arrangement that suited their circumstances. Stability was valued by some and only when circumstances changed, such as their children becoming older, might they consider progression in work. Other participants wanted to progress at work and increase their working hours or income sooner. Given that parents need support with work arrangements as well as childcare, employers alongside the Government might offer potential solutions to support parents working atypical hours to increase their income from work and working hours should they wish.

Work-related support

Participants wanted flexibility from their workplace, for example, being able to work from home, choose shifts, or change hours with short notice. Some participants had a good relationship with their manager and were offered this flexibility. Other participants without this flexibility would like to be offered it in the future to allow them to continue to work.

“[What I would want is] for employers to be more understanding of mums...So like more shifts available during school hours, like 8am to 3pm. I would do more hours, if I could just do 8-3pm in term time only.”

Female, Single, Informal childcare, 4 to 8 years old

Participants expressed that they had to work atypical hours because of the lack of jobs offering 'typical' hours in their area and sector. They found that working atypical hours made finding childcare more challenging. If they worked 'typical' hours when more formal childcare was available, they could increase their working hours. For example, a single parent worked 12 hours shifts and was reliant on her mum to offer informal childcare while she worked.

"In [name of place], there are mainly factory type jobs. Which are mostly 12-hour shifts and childcare places tend to close at 6pm."

Female, Single, Informal childcare, 4 to 8 years old

Participants would also like support to change sectors and more access to training opportunities, although did not specify where they might look for this support. Some participants would like to work in different roles but were limited by a lack of opportunities and time to study to retrain, specifically those who did not have the option of informal childcare. For example, a mother wanted to re-train as a nurse or midwife but could not afford childcare while she studied.

"I would love to be a nurse or a midwife, I have always wanted to do that, but that is simply not possible, because I can't afford to pay for childcare. I know friends who have family helping with childcare when studying, but we just don't have that."

Female, Couple, Formal childcare, 2 to 4 years old

Childcare-related support

Participants working atypical hours wanted formal childcare providers to offer longer opening hours, to receive more support with the cost of childcare and to have more information about childcare all in one place.

Childcare availability

Participants wanted longer opening hours from formal childcare. Participants said they would benefit from evening opening hours and weekend availability from formal childcare providers. This would better align with their working shifts and patterns.

"If they could offer longer opening hours, that would be great and I know they're looking at it but probably by the time they introduce it, he's [the son] going to have moved on to school."

Male, Single, Formal and informal childcare, 2 to 4 years old

Participants who were using a nursery often had to use informal childcare before and after, to ensure their child was dropped off and picked up whilst they were at work. Earlier opening times would be an ideal arrangement for parents using formal

childcare because they wouldn't require informal wraparound childcare. This would alleviate pressure on friends and family members, who might also be working.

"I would like to put my son into nursery more during the week so I'm not always relying on my mum and sister. If this was to happen, my son would be able to go into nursery more."

Female, Single, Informal and formal childcare, 2 to 4 years old

Longer opening hours in formal childcare providers were felt to be especially useful for single parents who could not rely on another parent to undertake childcare if they had to work in the evenings or weekends.

"I looked at my school aged children going to a childminder. Like an after-school club or childminder where they could go in the evening and have their meals and I can pick up at 6:30pm after I finish work, but they were just not open late."

Female, Single, Formal and informal childcare, 4 to 8 years old

After school clubs and holidays clubs were preferred by participants over nurseries or childminders due to lower costs for older children. However, they found that availability for these options was limited so often found it difficult to cover childcare. These participants would like to see more availability of formal childcare during the school holidays, such as affordable holiday clubs. If this were to be in place, they would be able to work more hours.

"Yes we've had a couple of jobs we've had to turn away especially over the holidays when one of us needs to be home. We have no emergency childcare available."

Female, Couple, Formal and informal childcare, under 2 years old

Childcare affordability

Some participants, especially those primarily reliant on formal childcare felt that current financial support for childcare did not go far enough. They wanted the UC childcare offer to cover 100% of the childcare cost and support to pay the upfront costs often required on enrolment to a childcare setting.

Participants were not always aware about the financial support with childcare costs that was available and said it would help if all the information was in one place, especially for first time parents. Respondents did not suggest where they might look for this information but saw a role for Work Coaches in explaining and ensuring awareness of the UC childcare offer to all eligible parents.

"What I always feel with the benefit system is that no-one really tells you about them. I think I may have missed out on support I could have had because I didn't know about it."

Male, Single, Formal childcare, 2 to 4 years old

When participants felt guilty for using informal childcare, they would have liked to have been able to pay their friends and family. The unpaid nature of providing informal childcare meant some participants felt like a burden. However, for participants using a mixture of formal and informal childcare, paying for both would be infeasible.

“Ideal setup, I think, I mean, ideally if I could, if there was a way of being able to pay my family to do it.”

Male, Single, Formal and informal childcare, 2 to 4 years old

Conclusion

This research aimed to understand the experiences of parents working atypical hours, and whether and how childcare availability or flexibility constrained their working hours. The factors affecting the extent of parents' labour market participation were complex, with some factors increasing, and others decreasing their working hours.

Families sought to minimise formal childcare costs. Flexible working hours, use of informal childcare such as from grandparents and managing atypical working hours between two parents were effective ways to gain the maximum financial reward from working and reduce formal childcare costs. These measures were used by parents to bridge the gaps between the availability of formal childcare and parents' working hours.

For participants with a good working relationship with managers and colleagues this helped to give parents flexibility at work, for example to determine working hours around childcare availability. Where participants had good relationships with managers, these were highly valued.

Participants had found ways to manage their childcare and work responsibilities. Participants found it challenging to make changes to these arrangements, especially at short notice to work additional shifts or overtime. Formal childcare did not give participants the flexibility they needed to work overtime should they wish nor to meet their needs during school holidays.

Participants wanted more flexibility from formal childcare providers, including longer opening hours and weekend availability. This would enable parents to take overtime or additional shifts should they wish. Working participants with school aged children lacked affordable childcare options during school holidays. They would prefer to use holiday clubs, but often noted limited availability and found the irregular costs too expensive.

Improving awareness among eligible UC claimants that the UC childcare offer can be used to pay for holidays clubs could enable more parents to use the UC childcare offer for this form of childcare. Paying and reclaiming irregular childcare costs was felt to be challenging, and participants suggested it would be easier if money from the UC childcare offer was paid directly to providers.

Participants also suggested that information about the available childcare support should be available in one place and given proactively by Work Coaches during conversations. This would help to ensure that UC claimants are aware of all the financial support with childcare costs they are entitled to. Work Coaches may also have a role in providing reassurance to working parents about the extent they would be better off if they worked more hours.

Annex 1

Qualitative interviews were chosen to provide depth of insight and to capture the nuances behind parents' childcare needs and their labour market participation. Forty interviews were conducted between 21 March and 14 April 2023. Interviews took place via telephone and lasted around 45 minutes.

DWP provided a sample of 3,000 working parents claiming Universal Credit (UC). The sample was selected to ensure representation from different groups, and single male parents were over-represented. However, the sample did not contain details of whether parents worked atypical hours.

An invitation email was sent to parents in the sample outlining the research, providing information about their privacy rights, how Ipsos received their information, and an email address and a named contact that could be contacted with any questions about the research or to opt out if they wished. After an opt out period of a week, a specialist recruitment agency contacted parents to ask if they were interested in taking part an interview, and if so, asked some screening questions to see if they were eligible to take part in the research. When parents were eligible for the research, interview bookings were made. Respondents were given £40 Love2Shop vouchers in recognition of their time and contribution to the research.

Given the variety of circumstances of working parents, quotas were used to structure the achieved sample and ensure representation of parents with a range of circumstances. This are detailed in Table A1 alongside details of the characteristics of the achieved interviews.

Table A1 – Quotas and profile of achieved interviews

Quota	Subgroup	Quota	Achieved
Household status	Single	Min 20	25
	Couple parent		15
Partner working atypical hours	Yes		10
	No	Max 5	5
Gender	Male	Min 5	9
	Female		31
Single parents	Single male	Min 3	8
	Single females		17
Age of youngest child	Under 2 years old	Min 10	25
	2 to 4 years old		
	4 to 8 years old	Min 10	13

Quota	Subgroup	Quota	Achieved
	9 to 11 years old		
	12 to 16 years old	Min 3	2
Number of children in household	1	Min 10	21
	2	Min 10	11
	3	Min 5	5
	4 or more		3
Use of childcare	Formal childcare	Min 10	17
	Informal childcare	Min 10	2
	Mixture of formal and informal	Min 5	19
	No childcare	Max 5	2
Household income	£0-15,000	Min 5	14
	More than £15,000 less than £30,000	Min 5	19
	More than £30,000 less than £50,000	Min 5	7
	More than £50,000		0
Areas of the UK	North East		4
	North West		8
	Yorkshire and The Humber		3
	East Midlands		2
	West Midlands		6
	East of England		3
	Southwest		3
	Southeast	Max 10	7
	London		
	Wales	Min 2	1
	Scotland	Min 2	3
Area of living	Rural	Min 2	8
	Urban	Min 2	30
	Coastal	Min 2	2

During recruitment it was agreed to relax the following quotas, age of youngest child being between 12-16 years old and those using informal childcare only. Age of youngest child being between 12-16 years old was less of a priority group as they are less likely to need childcare outside of school hours. Use of only informal childcare was challenging to recruit to, as the sample was screened it became evident that parents working atypical hours tended to use a mixture of formal and informal childcare. Wales was another quota we were unable to achieve within the 40 interviews.

Interviews were audio recorded with participant consent. Recordings were listened to by the research team and detailed notes and important quotes entered in an analysis framework. The analysis framework concentrated on each area of the discussion guide and captured respondent characteristics. Alongside a researcher analysis session, the framework was interrogated to look for patterns and how insights varied between different respondent types. This included, for example, differences in topics by the age of youngest child in the family, and differences for parents living in rural and urban areas. Interview notes were summarised in a grid which set out the data each interview had provided against each of the interview topics and research questions.