



Flexible child care

Key findings from the AIFS Evaluation of the Child Care Flexibility Trials

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1

Introduction

Given the importance of child care in enabling parents to engage in paid work, there has been a recent policy focus in Australia on meeting the needs of parents who work non-standard or variable work hours and who may have difficulties finding care that supports such work hours. Interest in the extent to which child care is flexible enough to meet the needs of parents who work non-standard or variable hours led to the development of the Child Care Flexibility Trials, a project conducted by the Australian Government in 2013 and 2014.¹ One of the objectives of these trials was to gain greater understanding about parents' and service providers' perspectives on flexible child care. The other main objective was to test a number of approaches to the delivery of flexible child care, with a focus on families whose needs did not fit with standard models of child care delivery. A key aspect of this was to explore the level of demand for greater flexibility and whether this demand could be met in the long term in a sustainable and replicable way.

The Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) was commissioned to undertake an evaluation of the trials. The evaluation measured the extent to which the goals and expected outcomes of the trials were achieved, and was based on interviews with and surveys of parents, service providers and other key stakeholders. This paper provides a summary of the key findings from this evaluation.

There were a number of components to the trials, each designed to test different ways of delivering flexible child care. Different approaches were trialled within selected sites across Australia, and involved the government working with service providers and also key stakeholders, including representatives of the police, nurses and paramedics in selected jurisdictions of Australia. The focus of specific trials included:

- flexible care provided through family day care (FDC);
- extended hours of operation in long day care (LDC) settings;
- weekend care in a centre-based setting;
- school holiday care for older children and for children with special needs.

In addition, coordinated by the National Outside School Hours Services Association (NOSHSA), more than 60 action research projects were developed within outside-school-hours care (OSHC) services, with the overall aim of this approach being to improve the skills and knowledge of educators, and to identify opportunities to create more flexible and responsive service provision for local communities.

More information about the components of the trials is presented in Box 1 (on page 2). Key evaluation findings regarding each project's implementation and outcomes are also presented in this box.

The take-up of some projects in the trials was quite low (see box text), but discussions with service providers and parents, and related survey data, helped to provide some explanations for this, and to provide more general information about the challenges and opportunities relating to the demand for and supply of flexible child care.

¹ The Child Care Flexibility Trials were announced by the Australian Government's Department of Education and Training (then named the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations) in March 2013. The trials concluded in 2014.

Box 1: Child Care Flexibility Trial components

Flexible care through family day care

- This trial involved the provision of FDC, with parents being able to arrange new or changed bookings through a single point of call, with care to be available 24/7, and changeable at short notice. Within each of six sites, it was intended to pair families with a team of two or three FDC educators who would provide flexible child care by offering weekend, weekday evening and overnight care.
- In total, 31 families enrolled and received care as part of the trial. The model that was trialled *did* meet the needs of many families requiring flexible care. In fact, some of the “flexible” features of care being trialled were already being offered by individual educators. FDC was especially valued because it could (often) provide the flexibility required to match parents’ varying work hours, be booked for shorter sessions or paid per hour, and involve care outside of standard hours.
- However, access to this model of care was dependent on there being a match with specific educators willing to provide flexible care to families who needed it, at the times they needed it, and in the geographical area they needed. Matching of families to educators within specific locations was problematic. This matching was even difficult for families needing standard hours of care, with educators already at capacity, or unable or unwilling to provide the high degree of flexibility that some parents sought, given the possible effects on their own wellbeing and that of their family.

Extended hours in long day care

- Two services provided extended hours in their long day care services.
- *Service 1* aimed to provide participating families with access to extended hours of operation at the start and/or at the end of the weekday at six centres across Australia. Participating centres offered extended early morning sessions (commencing at 5 am at the earliest) and/or extended evening sessions (until 8 pm at the latest). A separate fee was payable for the extended session of care, and parents were required to book this session in advance.
 - While some centres reported that families showed significant interest in the extended sessions, only one centre had sufficient permanent enrolments to continue an extended session beyond the trial period. At the end of 2013, three of the centres had no enrolments in the extended hours service, and as a result the trials at these centres were discontinued early. In total, 18 families were reported to have enrolled in the extended hours sessions over the trial period.
 - The extended hours were especially helpful to some families, and so in this respect the trial met the needs of these families. However, the low take-up may in part have reflected that the model of delivery (requiring parents to book sessions of care ahead of time and to pay extra for those sessions) did not meet other parents’ needs for flexible care. It may also have been due to a lack of demand at those particular services.
- *Service 2* piloted a range of changes to 12 children’s services, including early childhood education and care and OSHC services. Changes included extending care through the New Year period, extending operating hours at eight services, trialling the idea of opening for weekend sessions (this was not pursued, after a survey of parents revealed lack of demand), reducing the length of notice required for cancellation, and the provision of a number of other new activities within specific services.
 - There was a strong uptake of the extended hours offered at these services as part of the trials, with numbers building slowly. Accessing extended hours did not require a separate booking or an additional fee. This may have meant that parents were able to make use of the extended hours in a flexible way.
 - The other changes were implemented successfully (such as changing the New Year opening period, and changing cancellation processes), although some changes (e.g., the provision of take-home meals) did not have sufficient demand and were not expected to continue beyond the trial period.

Weekend centre-based care

- This project aimed to meet a perceived community need for weekend and evening child care. The initial scope of the trial was to provide care on weekends (Saturdays and Sundays) at one school-aged care service. The scope was later expanded to include evening care from 6 pm to 10 pm.
- While this service was extremely highly regarded by parents using it for standard hours care, the take-up of care on weekends and evenings was far lower than had been expected. During the life of the trial, a total of 31 families expressed an interest in the evening and weekend extended sessions. Of these, six were new families and 25 existing families. The design and delivery of this program certainly appears to have qualities that would be valued by parents seeking care at these hours for school-aged children, so this suggests that the low use of weekend (and evening) care might be because parents have other options available to them. The extended weekday hours and weekend care offered through this project ceased operating at the end of the trial due to insufficient demand.

School holiday care for older children and children with special needs

- Two services provided school holiday care for older children and those with special needs.
- At *Service 1*, the aim was to establish a trial vacation care program tailored towards 11–14 year olds. Much attention was given to the development of an age-appropriate program, finding a suitable location and the staffing mix. Community and parent engagement aimed to increase awareness of the program.
 - The program ran in four school holiday periods, with a total of 38 children participating, averaging eight children per day. This was lower than needed to be viable, and so the program was downscaled to allow a version of it to continue.
 - The data collected in the evaluation (which was limited due to the low take-up) suggested that the program did offer a significant improvement for school holiday care of older children, compared to programs generally designed for a younger age group, and so had the potential to be very helpful as a means of addressing the school holiday care needs of parents of older children.
- At *Service 2*, the proposal was to deliver vacation care program for children aged 5–12 years old with autism spectrum disorder. The program itself was carefully considered and designed to be as flexible as possible for parents, while taking account of the special needs of the children attending.
 - In the holiday period when it was offered, average daily attendance varied between 6 and 11 children per day. The take-up for this program, however, was lower than needed in order for it to remain financially viable.
 - From the data collected through the evaluation (which was limited due to the low take-up), it appears that parents appreciated the idea of this service, but a major barrier to its use concerned the lack of availability of transport. Cost was also a factor for some.

Outside-school-hours care projects

- This component involved the planned delivery of 60 action research projects based in OSHC services across Australia. The purpose was to use existing infrastructure and invest in improving the skills and knowledge of educators, and to identify opportunities to create more flexible and responsive service provision for the local community. As such, through a “best practice” approach, the trial sought to enhance service delivery, improve accessibility and build capacity within the sector to develop flexible services that are more responsive to the needs of their local community. This trial included funding to engage community coordinators in “high need” communities, to bring together groups of service providers running programs for school-aged children, and to broker activity care packages tailored to the interests of local children.
- There was significant diversity in the types of projects being undertaken by services participating in the action research projects. It was noted by participants that by taking a “community development” approach to these projects, they were more likely to find local answers to local issues.

In total, 42 interviews with service providers, educators and stakeholders were undertaken to capture views about the implementation and outcomes of the trial projects and more general views about flexible child care.

The views of parents were important for the evaluation of the trials. A sample of parents came from the stakeholder groups (police, nurses and paramedics) and their families ($N = 69$). Other parents were drawn from services that had some involvement in the trials, although not all these parents had taken part in the “flexible” aspect of the care being trialled ($N = 50$). Parents from these two groups participated through qualitative interviews. We also conducted an online survey about flexible child care, with participants ($N = 260$) being a subset of parents at the services of school-aged care projects.

Key findings from the evaluation are set out in this paper in two main sections. First, in section 2, we present a discussion of the key learnings from the trials, capturing information about the delivery of trial projects, and more general findings regarding the delivery of flexible child care. Then, in section 3, we provide a discussion of what parents told us, through this evaluation, about what they sought to better meet their flexible child care needs. A final section concludes.

2

Overall learnings about flexible care

The evaluation, through information provided by parents, service providers and other stakeholders, allowed us to consider broad issues regarding the supply and demand for flexible child care. The main learnings are that:

- parents' child care needs and preferences are diverse, so parents need a range of easily accessed child care options;
- identification of demand for flexible care is not straightforward;
- “flexibility” is just one of the characteristics of care that parents look for;
- delivery of a flexible child care solution is dependent on service provider commitment and educator availability; and
- when introducing a new child care option, timing and continuity matters.

Some learnings relate specifically to the outcomes of the trial projects, others to the broader questions of supply and demand for flexible child care. They are considered in more detailed in the remainder of this section.

Parents' child care needs and preferences are diverse, so parents need a range of easily accessed child care options

Parents who participated in the evaluation research had diverse child care needs and views about how they wished those needs to be met. There was also evidence that those views changed as children grew and as they experienced different forms of care.

Some families appeared to have a greater unmet need than others for child care (during non-standard hours, especially). Those needing more or different child care options included families with less flexibility themselves in terms of family support or local area solutions for child care (e.g., single-parent families, families in regional areas, or those with children with special needs).

There was a view among parents working non-standard and variable hours that it was difficult to find effective child care solutions. However, no one clear solution emerged from the data. Generally, there were preferences for more occasional care, for more in-home care and for nannies to be more affordable, as described in section 3.

Through the family day care trial, it was observed that some parents expressing interest were actually seeking carers who would come to their home. This FDC coordinator told us:

I guess probably there is a small element of client base that actually would rather, when it's out-of-hours care, have a carer come into their home because it's very difficult for some of them. I'm just thinking about a recent case [where] they don't want to take a baby out in the middle of the night. Or if they're coming home from work at 7 o'clock in the morning they want to be able to come home and, you know, begin the routine, rather than trying to collect children, transport children, take them home and get them

ready. So I think in these instances they're probably looking for a more in-home care as opposed to out-of-home. (FDC coordinator)

Some wished for their child care (or OSHC) to be open during hours that better aligned with their own work hours. Commonly this was related to opening or closing hours not quite matching work hours. As stated by this mother:

Mostly [the challenge] was just when I started work at six o'clock. The day care didn't open till 6.30. So, I sort of had to rely on other people to take my son to day care. (Mother, single parent, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

The inflexibility of hours offered though long day care was a particular issue for workers with unpredictable or variable hours. For example, this mother said:

That's the thing. It's 6 am to 6 pm, and in the majority of your standard day care centres if you're late, the late fee is something like \$15 a minute. For, say a shift worker ... we might get a late callout at 5.30, taking you half an hour late, that's an absolute fortune. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

This contrasts with the flexible care some families had through family day care. For example, in one family using family day care:

Well, we normally drop the boys off there at about a quarter to eight in the morning and are picking them up somewhere around about 4.30 ... If we have to start earlier or finish later that's not a problem for her. So there's a little bit of flexibility with the hours there, which is good. (Father, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

Identification of demand for flexible care is not straightforward

Given the diversity described above, it should not be assumed that formal child care is sought by all parents, even among those whose work involves non-standard or irregular hours. In this evaluation, there were many families who arranged their work schedules such that they had no or very little need for formal child care. These mothers, both partnered with under-school-aged children, told us:

We probably only want to stick to two days [in child care]. Look, I don't want her in all the time, if that's alright. We want to be her primary caregivers, so I don't want her in day care any more than two days a week really. We change our life around that. (Mother, partnered, with under-school-aged children)

I've used work to our benefits—what I might perceive as a benefit for me—so that it's either my husband or myself who's caring for our children at any time. (Mother, partnered, with under-school-aged children)

Some of these families used informal care, including grandparents and friends, while others relied only on themselves. While such arrangements were not always problem-free, they were seen by many to be the best solution for them. As such, the availability of high-quality, flexible formal child care solutions as offered through the trials was not seen by all families to be an improvement. Understanding the demand for care is critical for services that seek to offer flexible care in a viable and sustainable way. This was voiced by different service providers, including this long day care coordinator:

Then you have to go back and look at it on the financial side. Well, we couldn't afford to be open from 6.30 to 8 with nobody here every night. Because financially it wasn't feasible, and I had to try and explain that to the parents, that from 6.30 to 8 was completely different. It ran by bookings and things like that. We just never got anybody at all. (LDC coordinator)

“Flexibility” is just one of the characteristics of care that parents look for

As a result, take-up of new, extended or more flexible options can be affected by the ease of access to and costs of those options, as well as other central characteristics of a service, such as location.

Some high-quality and well-developed child care programs were tested through the trials, and yet low take-up by parents meant that the trialled components of the programs were not financially viable in the long term. The key learnings from this were that take-up of child care will be affected by the fundamental characteristics of that care, not just its flexibility. This related to the location of the care (e.g., having FDC educators located close to home or work), the availability of transport (e.g., for children with special needs), and the cost of care.

The ease of access to flexible care can also facilitate or deter access to that care, with the most flexible options being offered as part of usual operating arrangements, and the least flexible requiring booking arrangements in advance. For shift-working families, having to have fixed bookings for child care, whether through FDC, LDC or OSHC, was particularly problematic. Some were fortunate in having access to arrangements that were more flexible, as was the case with this family:

We’ve got a good understanding with our day care. We can just ring up and go, “Righto, can we book them in today?”. So that’s sort of as we need it. So sometimes it could be three or four days a week that we need it, and other days it could be only one or two days a week that we need it. (Father, single parent, under-school-aged child only)

Also, the wellbeing of the children was a key feature in parents’ decision-making about work and care, and as such parents talked about the potential for care to provide opportunities for their children to develop relationships, or to develop socially or cognitively.

Delivery of a flexible child care solution is dependent on service provider commitment and educator availability

Across both long day care and family day care, service providers had difficulties in finding financially viable ways to accommodate parents who had rotating and variable rosters that did not also compromise the wellbeing of the individual educators and their families. This was especially the case for the provision of the most flexible care, for families with variable care needs. For example, a service coordinator told us:

And then you’ve got burnout where some educators are doing [flexible hours] and not taking a break for themselves. Their coordinators had been working with them to try and encourage them to do that, but they didn’t want to let families down.

In the long day care setting, extended opening hours were managed by adjusting staff rosters. Some saw such adjustments as positive; for example, it facilitated rostered days off, or meant staff started earlier and had more time to set up and plan for the day before the arrival of most children. However, problems were sometimes observed. For example, a coordinator with long day care noted:

I’ve found that a few of the opening staff, who have been getting up earlier and things, they haven’t minded it other than I’ve found that they’ve been a bit sicker. So they’re getting a little bit more rundown because being up, you know, earlier every morning, about 4.30/5 o’clock, to come into the centre, and then their families still expect them to be on at night at home.

When introducing a new child care option, timing and continuity matters

In the trials, this emerged as a significant issue for service providers and parents. The trials commenced in the middle of a school year, at which time many parents had already established their care and work arrangements for the year and were reluctant to change them. This reluctance was further exacerbated by the uncertainty about whether the flexible care arrangements being offered would continue beyond the trial period. As reported by one of the family day care coordinators:

We did get feedback from families on the ad that: “Oh, so what happens at the end, once the trial finishes. Where do I go then?” You know, they thought that it had kind of stopped and finished—that was the end of it. But obviously we were able to explain that, but potentially people might have looked at that and thought: “That’s not secure for me, I need to look elsewhere”.

The timing of the trials also mattered to service providers, with some feeling they had insufficient time in the development phase of the trials to establish their program. It was also expressed that building demand for new services takes time, especially allowing for the development of partnership with parents. This was seen as something that could not be fully developed given the trial nature of the project. For example, as stated by one of the project stakeholders:

The correct timing for the rollout and completion of a project should not be underestimated. Any major decisions for families regarding changes to child care require adequate time for households to accommodate new schedules and arrangements for care.

3 What parents want in order to meet their flexible care needs

This section highlights common themes that emerged from the qualitative and survey data in regard to how parents want their child care flexibility needs to be met. While parents contributing to the evaluation were not a representative sample of all Australian parents, they provided insights that especially highlighted issues faced by families in which one or two parents work non-standard hours.

Greater availability of child care options

A constraint felt by a number of families in the evaluation was related to their inability to access the formal child care they needed. Parents talked about placing children's names on waiting lists for LDC and FDC, and about constraints in the availability of OSHC. It is not surprising, then, that some parents voiced their wish for more child care to be available:

I think the big issue is that we need more places and more child care centres. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

I think they need more places. Every year at the school they struggle to get all of the new prep kids that need to get into the before- and after-school care in. And they don't know what to do in the end if they can't get their kids in. They have to find some other alternative arrangements. And all the schools are the same. Some schools only have before-school care and no after-school care or vice versa, and some schools start later at 7.30, which is not very suitable to all parents either. So, I don't know, I think more and more parents are working out of necessity or whatever, and the government wants more and more people to work to keep the country running, so I think they need to expand their before- and after-school and day care places so that as many kids as possible can get in. (Mother, partnered, school-aged child only)

Of course, within the context of this evaluation and the nature of the parents participating in the interviews, many wanted this care to be better suited to shift-working families, as discussed further below.

Access to more formal care was sought by many parents, including those who had no informal care options available to them, and those who had less flexibility in their work arrangements. Further, regardless of work arrangements, formal care was increasingly sought by parents as their children grew through the preschool years, when child care was seen to provide important opportunities for development and socialisation.

A general comment is that some parents sought more information about the formal care arrangements available to them. The invitations to participate in the FDC trials seem to have alerted some parents to the option of FDC for the first time, especially for those returning to work after a period of leave. This highlights the usefulness of distributing information on different child care options to parents when they are likely to be making decisions about child care.

In terms of specific types of care, some parents valued and preferred one type of care over the other. For example, shift-working families who had a "flexible" FDC educator very much valued this care, whether or not that was arranged through the trials. However, others who had hoped to access more flexible arrangements through FDC had found that not all FDC educators

were able to provide care for their variable or non-standard hours. Some parents reported experiencing problems with being matched to FDC educators who could provide care for the hours needed, given the necessity of care being available within a localised area and possibly for more than one child care place. Outside of the trials, parents talked about being unable to use FDC because of long waiting lists. Also, parents mentioned that they had not gone ahead with FDC because, like centre-based care, they were required to book in set days of care. (See also the discussion below regarding access to flexible care.)

Many parents valued the quality of centre-based care, and so often used this in conjunction with some informal care to meet their child care needs. The lack of flexibility in most child care centres was an issue, as was the cost. Nevertheless, parents generally valued the quality of this care and the stability it offered them and their children.

Some respondents thought that workplace child care could be a good option for them. This was imagined as providing the qualities of centre-based formal care, but with the flexibility to be used like occasional care, 24 hours per day. As stated by one nurse, in addition to the flexibility that workplace child care would give, it would save on travel costs and time:

The only way that it could possibly improve would be if there was care available on the hospital grounds, or attached to the hospital grounds ... It would cut out a lot of travel expenses and time if care was available at the hospital. (Mother, single parent, school-aged child only)

That parents sought different forms of formal care is relevant also in that it is important that a range of child care options be available to parents so they can choose that which suits them and their children. This in itself provides more flexibility to parents, as discussed by the following respondent, who noted that care with different qualities should be available to families:

Maybe the government could consider a few options like flexible child care, where it's open at different times, 24 hours pretty much. And then maybe have another system set up like many that's affordable for families to actually use, that can come to the house at night for older kids like my son, who'll go to school next year. And then that won't have an impact on their life. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged children only)

In fact, while parents often expressed their wish for more formal care, many parents preferred that their children were only cared for by themselves or by extended family members. Some had altered their work arrangements to ensure child care arrangements could work with these informal or family-based options.

Extended hours of care

Many of the parent respondents noted having difficulties with the hours that child care is available. Such comments were most often made with respect to child care centres, including OSHC. However, these comments also applied to FDC, given that FDC educators are not all available to provide care outside of standard hours.

We heard often of the difficulties respondents faced when opening hours did not quite match work hours, and this was especially so in the mornings, when parents of multiple children also had problems with LDC hours being incompatible with before-school care opening hours. Some parents were conflicted about the use of early morning child care, given concerns over waking children early in the morning, and so preferred alternate arrangements (such as in-home carers) for the mornings. Others, however, needed this formal care and struggled with their existing arrangements, by juggling between themselves, calling upon the help of others, or adjusting their start time at work.

At the end of the day, parents likewise struggled if their formal care closed at a time that was earlier than they needed. Some, for example, talked about closing hours of 6 pm, which parents often reported as being difficult to work with. Being able to collect their children from care by closing time was sometimes associated with significant stress (and for some, subsequent financial penalty). This was especially so for those with less flexibility in their work hours at the end of the day, or those whose jobs were subject to unexpected overtime, such as was the case for some emergency services and health care workers.

There were marked differences across families in the degree to which these hours were seen to be problematic, depending on the work schedules and flexibility of each parent, along with the commute times from work to the child care centre.

Two services (each covering more than one site) trialled extended opening hours in long day care settings. These extended opening hours proved helpful for those who made use of those additional hours. At one service, parents were required to book in advance and to pay extra for the early starts or late finishes, and take up of this trialled option was quite low. At the other, extended hours were open to all parents, and the numbers of parents using these extended hours was reported to be growing. The low take up in the first may reflect a reluctance by parents to pay extra for the additional time, or to book into those additional hours rather than having them simply offered as part of standard hours. However, it may also reflect a lower demand for extended hours of care in some areas.

With regard to more extended hours of care, parents in this evaluation offered views about using overnight care. Some used it already, through having children cared for overnight by grandparents or FDC educators. Some thought the idea of overnight care was perfectly reasonable, and they would use it, were it available to them. Others were more reticent about overnight care, citing their preference to have their children at home and with their family overnight.

Generally, when parents were asked about the sort of care they would like to see, many said that 24/7 care would be ideal. However, if offered through a centre, the reality of how this would work, and how much it would be used was not so clear. Many parents may still prefer to juggle the care between themselves to allow this care to be provided at home by themselves or family. As this police officer stated:

Well, in an ideal world child care would run 24 hours wouldn't it? Then again, most parents aren't going to be stoked about the idea of taking their kid in there in the middle of night to drop them off for eight hours, so I don't know where the answer is. (Father, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

There was some demand for children to stay with an FDC educator overnight. When parents had this available to them, it seems to have been a good solution and the parents reported that this worked well for both parents and children. In-home carers were also seen as being a good solution for some families requiring 24-hour or overnight care (see the discussion on in-home carers, below).

Weekend care

A specific form of non-standard hours care that parents referred to was weekend care. A number of families said that they had difficulties with (or had to avoid) work on weekends, given that there are no formal care arrangements available.

Many shift-working parents contributing to the evaluation worked weekends. These interviews revealed that some families with children in FDC used that care on weekends, but mostly, parents used informal care or shared the care between themselves at this time. Single parents did not always have the option of sharing the care of children with another parent, and for them, weekend work tended to mean calling upon the help of other family and friends. Within the online survey of parents of school-aged children, among parents working weekends, very few reported using any child care on weekends at all. Generally, when care was needed on weekends, grandparents and friends were called upon to help.

The low numbers of families using child care on weekends may reflect a lack of availability of formal care options on those days. However, it is not clear to what extent families would shift from informal to formal care on weekends, were it available, as parents also expressed that they valued children being in some informal care, in giving them time in a less formal or family environment.

One of the trialled projects specifically focused on weekend child care, but had little take-up of this form of care (see Box 1 for information). This parent reflected on why she thought the take-up had not been there, given the large parent base, and the considerable effort by the service

to spread this information to local businesses. She considered the low take-up to be related to parents already having arrangements in place, and also that parents in couple families often have someone available to look after the children:

But, I think, why would you pay, you know, quite a decent amount of money when you've already got someone organised. I think that's the problem. And I guess on weekends you've got the issue—I'm a single parent but most people aren't single, do you know? So one parent will be working and one will be at home. So, I mean, the requirement is probably less than you expect, but it's still there. (Mother, single parent, school-aged child only)

Some of the demand for weekend care was expressed by parents in the evaluation as being “just in case” it was needed:

I think maybe a Saturday, you know, it possibly could come in handy ... if I needed to help my husband out at business or something, but it wouldn't be a regular thing ... An ad hoc thing, a one-off here and there. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged children only)

For shift-working parents who shared the care between themselves, there were also times on weekends, as with weekday time, that these parents sought some occasional child care to help them out with overlapping schedules.

Nannies or in-home carers

Very few parents in this evaluation had any experience of using a nanny or an in-home carer, but several talked about having looked into this option, or having thought about it.

Families who seemed to be considering this service were those who had been unable to find an acceptable care solution, and were at the time relying on informal carers or juggling the care of children around their work responsibilities. Those with especially difficult work situations (such as when both parents in couple families were working variable or non-standard hours) were likely to have thought about a nanny or in-home carer. For example, this was the ideal arrangement for one family:

I suppose it's not really achievable to have someone go to every person's house, but for me that's the only solution that I can see to be able to keep the kids in their normal lifestyle ... I mean, my husband and I signed up to be shift workers, not them. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

Single parents, families with a number of children, and those living in areas with limited formal care options also saw this as being a solution for them. One police officer, a mother with a police officer husband and three under-school-age children who did not at the time have any formal care arrangements (because previous arrangements were not working), said:

I'd just like there to be a service—and I guess there is, the nannying service—where you can ring and book a nanny, but that type of service is so expensive. A type of family, in-home service where it's a reasonable price and people will come 24 hours a day to be with the kids ... An in-home service for emergency service workers would be better, because the children have more stability and they have everything they need if the parent cannot get there on time. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged children only)

Her difficulties in finding appropriate formal child care were largely related to her inability to find an FDC place that could accommodate her three children.

The perceived cost of having a nanny or in-home carer was the barrier that prohibited most parents from pursuing this form of care. Some went so far as to comment that the cost was especially prohibitive given that they would not be able to access the child care rebate for this expense.

Some had looked into (or had past experience of) the “in-home care” program, but were not receiving care through this program at the time of their interview, having been advised that there were no appropriate carers available.

While some parents expressed worries about having a stranger in the home, others were comfortable with this as an option, assuming such carers were appropriately vetted.

More flexible care, including occasional care

Parents contributing to the evaluation generally wanted access to more “flexible” care. At times this meant care during non-standard hours (discussed above), but at other times this meant having access to care with some flexibility in bookings. This was a significant issue for families of parents who worked rotating or irregular rosters, who found the need to make permanent and regular bookings with child care did not fit well with the nature of their work schedules. Some found the only way they could manage was to have set bookings in child care that covered all their possible needs, given that was the only option available to them, but this meant they paid for more child care than they used (or wanted to use).

Families who had access to flexible care, largely through the FDC they had accessed through the trials, found this helped them enormously in managing their work and family commitments. This was especially so compared to families who juggled a number of different care providers in order to meet their care needs.

Parents without the ability to access “flexible” bookings of care often expressed a wish for access to care that could accommodate changes to bookings without significant financial penalty. This included having access to care with some capacity to add days of care, if needed. For example:

Having the flexibility to add casual days when I need it for work. I have three children, and it is difficult to get a spot for them all. And it is difficult to send them to a friend's house, as there are too many children to fit into the friend's car to get all the children to school. So care is my best option. (Mother, partnered, school-aged children only)

A little more flexibility would be great, when you might require an extra morning or afternoon due to work requirements, on short-term basis. Also, occasional Saturday care would assist with Saturday work roster. (Mother, partnered, school-aged child only)

Flexi days to work around rosters. I want my child home when I'm home, but can't get casual days, so have to pay for care even when it's not required. (Mother, partnered, under-school-aged child only)

Parents often could not access additional care, especially if they relied upon care through an LDC centre or through OSHC, due to those services being unable to take on more children. One father in the evaluation, a police officer, wanted this flexibility, but understood that meeting such a demand for child care might be challenging for providers. When asked what he wants in child care, he said:

More flexibility in terms of holding your spot, but then also having the ability to either add a couple of days or drop a couple of days. I don't know how that would work as a business model, but that'll definitely be more convenient. (Father, partnered, under-school-aged children only)

Some parents avoided using formal care altogether, relying on only themselves to care for their children, getting help from informal carers, or limiting their paid work involvement, because they could not access formal care to match their variable roster. For example:

We don't use any child care at the moment because we can't. Because the only way that I would be able to use child care is if I had somewhere with flexible occasional days ... I don't want to book in for a permanent booking at day care every Monday and not use it every Monday but still have to pay for it. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

Further, a commonly expressed wish by families was for more access to child care that could be booked on a casual basis for short sessions of use. This was often discussed in the shift-working families, who sometimes faced just short periods in the day when the overlap of their shifts meant neither parent was able to care for their children. Some parents used informal carers to fill this gap, while others had to use and pay for whole days of care (or sessions, for OSHC), regardless of how much time their children were in that care. Some parents talked about the

benefits of FDC in this regard, in being able to pay for the number of hours required, rather than having to pay for a full day. For example, one police officer talked about what he would like to have access to:

Maybe drop them off at 6 am and then they get picked up at 8.30 in the morning. It's just somewhere where they can hang out basically while we're doing a transition. Mum's going to work and I'm coming home, and whatever. (Father, partnered, under-school-aged children only)

Many families talked about this change-over of shifts as being a really difficult and stressful time for them. For some, this was made worse if one parents' finish time was somewhat unreliable (as could happen with some emergency service and health workers).

Affordable flexible care

Some parents felt the cost of formal child care needed addressing. Parents often talked about how little they gained financially from working once their child care costs were taken into account. When we asked parents what the government should know about child care for shift-working families, it was commonly expressed that the cost was too high.

There were some specific issues related to costs that parents raised. One concerned the effects of accruing too many absences, and thus being ineligible for Child Care Benefit for all their child care costs. This came about for families who had set bookings for child care to ensure they had care in place to cover different possibilities with shift rosters, but who then did not use all those set days in care. Another issue raised was parents' dissatisfaction with having to pay for child care for public holidays, when that care was not actually available. This was a problem for shift workers who might actually be working those public holidays.

Related to this are parents' views about paying for care when it was not used, for example because of children's sickness or because of a change in a shift roster. Several parents understood, however, that these circumstances could not be simply addressed by expecting to pay nothing on these days. For example, this police officer said:

Because, you know, it's not cheap. So it's one thing that I would love to see. And I also understand that the educators need a reliable income, but it'd be great to see at least something like a reduced amount that we have to pay when the kids actually aren't there. (Father, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

Parents did also express appreciation of government assistance that is currently available, and those with high levels of assistance tended to consider their child care costs to be quite affordable. Clearly, the perception of affordability is a relative one for parents, with some parents saying that while child care costs are high, they are manageable for their family, given their income. Some families we spoke with had, however, reduced their involvement in paid work or delayed return to paid work, in order to minimise the costs associated with formal child care.

School holiday care

Many parents discussed school holiday care. Parents sought access to more school holiday care, to more affordable school holiday care, and to more variety in the programs offered.

In the online survey, parents were asked what arrangements they used for children in school holidays. Almost all of these families used formal OSHC services during the week, but some of these services did not offer school holiday programs. Also, some parents who were interviewed reported experiencing considerable difficulties in school holidays, sometimes with the logistics and sometimes with costs. For example, this nurse, a mother with three children, said:

Holidays, that's really, really hard. Trying to get time off, like everyone wants their time off because they've got children to look after in the holidays. So something more for children during the holidays. Again, it's very expensive to put three children into care all day. Yes, occasionally [we have used vacation care] when I've not been able to get children off to friends or family or hubby or I couldn't get time off. I've had to use it. Yes, but it's way too expensive ... But yes, it's a one-off thing. I can't afford to do it everyday

so it's, you know, it's a desperation I guess, when you've got no one else to look after them. The other comment that I would make would be during school holidays, vacation care for my children is extremely expensive. During the school holidays I pay \$65 each for [child 1] and [child 2] to go to vacation care. So that's \$130 a day, plus [child 3]'s \$115. That's, you know, \$245 a day, when I'm only going to work to earn \$125. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

Availability of places at a particular OSHC service was the most common of the issues raised by parents, as illustrated by the following example:

We currently put our kids in a school holiday program at a different school to the one our children attend. While they enjoy the program, they are not familiar with any of the other children at that school. It would be great for [service] to offer a vacation program. Also would suit us better in terms of location and travel time to go to the local school. (Mother, partnered, school-aged and under-school-aged children)

However, parents also often noted that they get through somehow, even if there are difficulties. In the online survey, respondents were asked to score their satisfaction with their school holiday arrangements on a scale from 1, “extremely dissatisfied”, to 4 “mixed feelings”, to 7 “extremely satisfied”. Overall, 58% of families were very satisfied (scoring 6 or 7) with their school holiday arrangements, and 36% had mixed feelings (scoring 3 to 5), leaving 6% who were dissatisfied (scoring 1 or 2).

Additional services or improved quality within child care

Putting aside issues of availability of care, most parents who had access to child care considered their options to be high quality. As a result, there were not many comments from parents concerning the ways in which their service could be improved. Issues of availability of care were relevant, however, in that some parents felt constrained in their child care choices, and as a result felt their only option was to use a child care service that in some way did not meet the standard of care they wished to use. This did not apply to many parents taking part in this evaluation, and usually parents were unhappy just with a particular aspect of the service, but were happy with other aspects, such as the flexibility offered.

Thinking specifically about flexibility, beyond hours and costs of care, there were some suggestions by parents who said that it would be helpful if the services provided meals, and for school-aged children, some structure for ensuring the children did their homework. However, others were concerned that such additional services would mean higher costs.

One of the trialled projects involved the introduction of some extra services that provided opportunities for parents to meet each other, and to spend more time with staff. The availability of a coffee van and a pizza van at different services were seen to be positive in providing opportunities to build these connections.

Special awareness of emergency service workers

Some evaluation participants who worked in emergency services strongly expressed a wish that the government consider the importance of the work that they were doing, and provide adequate child care services to enable them to fulfil their employment requirements, free of worry over how their child care needs would be met.

Better flexibility in the workplace

Despite parents talking of complex “juggling” of work and child care, there were some parents in who sought no changes to their current arrangements for child care. Instead, they wanted more flexibility in the workplace. We heard this especially from parents with less say over their shifts, inflexible work hours, or particular constraints at home, such as being a single parent, or having a partner who also works shifts.

4 Summary and concluding comments

In summary, this evaluation highlighted that parents sought various dimensions of “flexibility” in child care. For some, this meant greater availability of existing care arrangements, while others wanted access to options they did not currently see as being available to them, including more occasional or in-home care, or care at different hours. Some parents expressed a wish for the types or features of care that were explored in the trials (such as weekend care).

Clearly an important question taking this forward is in regard to the likely take-up of those forms of care. Provision of flexibility “just in case” it is needed is not likely to be financially sustainable, as seen in the trials from those services that experienced low take-up of trialled “flexible” approaches.

Learning from both parent and service provider perspectives in this evaluation, we can see that there are complexities in identifying the demand for care, especially given the diversity of families’ needs and wishes for care solutions. Further, there are significant challenges in being able to deliver care that does meet parents’ needs for flexible care.

Despite these challenges, many families participating in the evaluation had found a solution that worked for them. For some, this involved informal or family-based solutions. For others, the care offered through LDC, OSHC or FDC met their needs for flexible care. Clearly, some of these services were more flexible than others in the options they offered to families.

While this evaluation has provided valuable insights about the supply of and demand for flexible child care, we do not have perspectives on this from a representative sample of Australian parents, and this would be needed in order to better understand the needs for different flexible care solutions across the Australian population.