



SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE  
Education Department

# Insight 9

## **The Sitter Service in Scotland: A Study of the Costs and Benefits**

## Welcome to *Insight*

*Insight* is a publication of the Research, Economic and Corporate Strategy (RECS) Unit, one of four units in the Information, Analysis and Communication Division, which is responsible for providing analytical services within the Scottish Executive Education Department (SEED). RECS is a multidisciplinary unit (consisting of researchers and economists) which undertakes and funds economic analysis and social research in the fields of: school education; children, young people and social work; architecture; and tourism, culture and sport.

The Scottish Executive is committed to the use of sound evidence in the development of policy and practice as well as in the evaluation of policy and its implementation. We therefore want to disseminate the results of research that SEED has undertaken and funded, in a manner that is accessible, interesting and attractive.

*Insight* aims to present the essence of research projects in a format that will be useful and informative for practitioners, policy makers, parents, academics, and anyone else who has an interest in economic and social research in these areas.

The views expressed in this *Insight* are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Scottish Executive or any other organisation(s) by whom the author(s) is or are employed.

Copyright © October 2003, Scottish Executive Education Department

ISSN 1478-6788 (Print)  
ISSN 1478-6796 (Online)

*Insight* may be photocopied for use within your own institution.

A limited number of additional copies can be obtained from the Dissemination Officer, Research, Economic and Corporate Strategy Unit, Scottish Executive Education Department, Victoria Quay, Edinburgh EH6 6QQ (telephone 0131-244 0092). Copies of *Insight* and our other publications can also be downloaded from our website: [www.scotland.gov.uk/insight/](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/insight/)

## The Sitter Service in Scotland: A Study of the Costs and Benefits

Valerie Wilson, Stuart Hall, Nicola Rankin, Julia Davidson and Dominic Schad  
(SCRE Centre, Glasgow University)

### Introduction

Many parents, including public sector employees, low paid workers, students and lone parents, now work atypical hours (Daycare Trust, 2001). Some also care for children with special educational needs who may make additional childcare demands on parents. Unfortunately, despite the need for childcare to cover weekends and the hours outside 8:00 am to 6:00 pm on weekdays, few providers offer these extended services.

One Parent Families Scotland (OPFS) has been particularly active in promoting developments to fill this identifiable gap. The resulting Sitter Services offer childcare from early morning to late in the evening seven days per week in the child's home. This service is complementary to that provided by other childcare centres, pre-school establishments, after-school-clubs and child minders.

An added incentive to the development of home-based childcare was provided by the Chancellor, who announced in the 2002 budget that the Childcare Element of the Working Tax Credit (WTC) would be extended to provide financial assistance for parents who wished to arrange for their children to be looked after within the family home through registered childcare.

The Scottish Executive also promised that it would explore the development and promotion of Sitter Services in Scotland, all of which would have to be registered with the Care Commission from April 2003. By March 2003, the Executive had funded OPFS to appoint a National Development Officer, whose role is to provide information and assistance to those who wish to establish home-based childcare projects throughout Scotland.

### The Study's Aims

The main aim of this study was to identify the principal costs and benefits of providing the Sitter Service in Scotland. Specifically, the project sought to:

- identify existing Sitter Services
- examine the characteristics, strengths and weaknesses of different ways of delivering the service
- determine the costs for users and providers
- establish the benefits for users, their children and the wider community.

The project also explored users' and providers' knowledge of the Childcare Element of the Working Tax Credit (WTC), as a means of paying for child care.

### Methods

Information was collected by conducting:

- a literature review of examples of ways in which home-based childcare is delivered in the UK and abroad
- discussions with the Sitter Service National Development Officer to 'map' existing sitter services in Scotland

- research visits to seven case study Sitter Services to identify providers' costs, organisation and management structures
- interviews with a sample of users
- interviews with a sample of sitters
- a comparison of the principal costs and benefits of the Sitter Services.

There were some problems in obtaining information and the study highlights the difficulties inherent in exploring costs and benefits with providers and users of social care facilities. Seven of the eight Sitter Services in Scotland agreed to participate in the study. However, not only did it prove difficult to identify users willing to be interviewed, but some were understandably reluctant to discuss their financial circumstances with researchers, and only two providers made available copies of their organisation's audited accounts. Eventually, by using Sitter Services as mediators, 31 users and 13 sitters in six services were interviewed (Sitter Service G was unable to provide the names of any users willing to be interviewed and Service E did not identify any sitters within the research timescale).

## Main Findings

### Definition of a 'Sitter Service'

A Sitter Service is defined as a service which offers home-based childcare from early morning to late evening, seven days a week. One Parent Families Scotland (2002) suggests that there are two basic types of service:

- one which meets the childcare needs of working parents; and
- a second, which offers respite for families under stress.

Which groups need this type of childcare most?

Although this is a useful typology, in this study we identify three basic models. These are the two identified above plus:

- a third, which offers both a childcare service to working parents and respite care.

### Evidence from the literature

A search of the published literature in five electronic databases – the British Education Index (BEI), Educational Resources Information Centre (ERIC), Educational Research in Scotland Database (ERSDAT), PsychInfo and the Citations Index – revealed many references to 'childcare' but very few to the key words: 'home-based', '24 hour', 'atypical hours' or 'wrap-around' childcare in either the UK or abroad. Examples from the literature are discussed below.

#### *Childcare to cover atypical work hours*

Three reports highlight the needs of parents who work atypical hours. A guide prepared by the Daycare Trust on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills (Daycare Trust, 2001) points out that almost a quarter of employees report that they sometimes work at night and 15% work shifts. In addition, 22% of lone parent mothers regularly work Saturdays and 14% on Sundays. Scottish evidence from an unpublished feasibility study of 1000 parents conducted by One Parent Families Scotland (2002) reports that 20% of the sampled parents worked shifts, 29% worked evenings, 30% worked on Saturdays and 17% on Sundays. There is, however, little evidence that the demand for childcare to meet

these atypical working hours is being met. An analysis of the 2000/01 plans of 40 Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships (EYDCP) in England (Daycare Trust, 2001) revealed that fewer than half could identify childcare services that met the needs of families working atypical hours: no home-based sitter services to meet the needs of parents working atypical hours were identified. A later study (Stratham & Mooney, 2003) found that fewer than a third of the EYDCPs in England were actively trying to develop childcare at atypical hours, although most thought that some parents needed such a service.

#### *Respite care for children with special educational needs*

In contrast to atypical hours childcare, respite care is defined as 'programmes that provide temporary childcare support and referral services to families of children with developmental disabilities' (Cowen *et al*, 2002). It is perceived to be essential to help families with children with disabilities to function healthily and to prevent child maltreatment (Guralnick & Bennet, 1987, Cowen *et al*, 2002). Abelson (1999) also found that lack of respite care can lead to parents becoming stressed, missing work or passing up job opportunities.

### **The location of Sitter Services in Scotland**

In this current study, we identified nine Sitter Services in Scotland (eight existing services and one in Fife Region which ceased to operate three years ago and for which no further information was available). The eight Sitter Services were located in:

- Aberdeen
- Dundee
- Edinburgh
- Glasgow (2)
- Kilmarnock
- North Lanarkshire; and
- Inverclyde.

Of these, seven agreed to be case studies. One Parent Families Scotland (2002) identified an additional service – Diamond Childcare Services in Bearsden – which was in the process of recruiting sitters and is not included in our research.

### **A typology of services provided**

We found that four Sitter Services offer childcare at atypical hours to working families:

- Childcare Choices in Glasgow
- Dundee Sitters
- North Lanarkshire Sitters
- Peace Sitters in Kilmarnock.

Three provide respite care:

- Barnardo's Sitter Service in Inverclyde
- Edinburgh Sitters
- 'Geez a Break' in Glasgow.

Are there any examples of home-based atypical hours childcare or respite care provision in your area?

Is there a demand for home-based childcare at weekends and atypical hours on week days in your area of Scotland?

This classification is not exclusive as some of the above either had no stated priority group or were willing to provide services for both working parents and those in need of respite. In order to protect the anonymity of informants, we report our findings as Case Studies A-G. Specifically the seven services provided the following services:

*Families helped:* During the past year, a total of 428 families in Scotland were supported by the seven Sitter Services. (The number of families helped per service ranged from 12 to 200 families.) The seven Sitter Services provided 2466 sessions per month, an average of 352 sessions per service. It should, however, be noted that session lengths varied from one to ten hours: the longest was provided for respite care by Sitter Service E.

*Sitters:* The seven Sitter Services employed a total of 146 sitters. (The number per service ranged from eight to 25 sitters.) Six of the seven services were able to offer families a choice of either female or male sitters: however, overall most sitters were female (89%) and employed on either a part-time or sessional basis. Some Sitter Services used volunteers who received no payment for sitting.

*Operating hours:* All of the services operated seven days per week and all but one (Service D) offered a service over an extended day, typically 7:00 am to 10:30 pm. Service D provided sitters until 11:00 pm but only operated in the evenings. Those offering predominantly respite care (Services A, D and E) typically offered one block of time for each user, e.g. one session per week, fortnight or month. However parents using services which levied charges were able to secure more hours of childcare.

*Age:* Six services provided childcare for children aged from birth to 16 years. One imposed an upper age limit at 14 years, and two extended the age range for those with a disability (18 years for Service E and 25 for Service D).

*Special Educational Needs:* Service A offered services exclusively to families of children with special educational needs. All except Service B included some users with special educational needs. Only one, Service D, offered its services to adults with special needs up to 25 years of age.

*Sitting with parents:* None of the services currently sits with parents alongside their children in order to improve their parenting skills or to support parents recovering from mental illness. Some lone parents reported that they appreciated the presence of another adult in their family home, with whom they could share their childcare concerns. However, we formed the impression that contact between parents and sitters was currently restricted to 'handover' periods. Service E may consider developing an additional service to parents in the future.

## Organisation of Sitter Services

Sitter Services vary in location, size, experience and the way they are organised and managed. Service D was established ten years ago, while Services F and G have only been operating for one year (the average is four years). Two (Services D and E) were established by One Parent Families Scotland in 1999 and 2002 respectively. Service A is run by a national children's charity and two others (Services B and E) are community run projects. Three (Services B, E and G) are located within Social Inclusion Partnership areas, from which they receive some support. As from April 2003, all must be registered with the Care Commission. Three services (Services A, F and G) operated with one managerial or co-ordinating member of staff. Service B had two, Service C four and Services D and E had five. All but one service also had an administrator (in Service F, the manager also undertakes administrative duties). The number of staff (managerial, administrative and sitters) per service ranged from 11 to 31 across the seven services. Managers worked from 24 to 35 hours per week, mostly on fixed-term contracts, and in some cases also

provided 'relief' cover for sitters who were ill or on holiday. Services had established a variety of policies and procedures to guarantee the quality of the service they offered. These included:

- induction and continuing training for all staff in health and safety, child protection, developmental play and first aid
- recruitment of staff with childcare qualifications, e.g. SVQ in childcare
- matching sitters to family needs and use of 'tester' sessions to establish the suitability of the match
- spot checks during sits
- maintenance of daily activity logs
- supervision of staff
- appraisal sessions (mainly for fixed-term contract staff as opposed to sessional workers)
- encouraging feedback from users.

All of these have direct cost implications for providers of services.

## The costs of the services

We identified a range of costs being met by either providers or users.

### *Providers' costs*

Providers' incomes ranged from £20,000 to £275,500. All services were heavily dependent upon grant income from a variety of funders. They were supported variously by Local Authorities, Social Inclusion Partnerships, the New Opportunities Fund, the Community Fund, children's charities and private donations, and indirectly by tax allowances made available to parents under the Childcare Element of the Working Tax Credit scheme. In parallel to providing Sitter Services, some providers were also funded under the SureStart Programme to deliver services for pre-school-aged children and their families. Costs also varied widely across the services, but staff costs were the major item in all seven. Sitters' pay ranged from £4.50 to £7.98 per hour and administrators were paid from £6.50 to £9.26. Training was another significant item of expenditure for most services. Costs ranged from zero (Service C, in which case it was offered free from the Early Years and Childcare Partnership) to £10,000 for Service B in the first year of its operation. In the main, premises were owned by local authorities and most services paid rent, which ranged from £1,200 to £7,000 per annum. Other costs included equipment (£645-4,000), health and safety, marketing and start-up costs for new services, such as recruitment costs, initial marketing, initial purchase of equipment. The costs of registering the service have now been set at either £1,059 or £2,559 depending on the size of the provider.

### *Users' costs*

Three Sitter Services made no direct charge to users. These were the three services which focused on respite care: for families with children with disabilities; respite for lone parents, carers of children with disabilities; and support for vulnerable families and to help reduce the number of children required to be accommodated by the local authority. The remaining four all levied charges directly from users. These ranged from £0.75 per hour to £10 per hour depending on the family income. However, no user reported paying more than £6 per hour.

Are Childcare Partnerships in Scotland encouraging the development of this type of provision? What else can be done?

How do you think Sitter Services should be funded?

### *Sitters' costs*

In a few cases sitters were unpaid volunteers, in which cases their opportunity costs, i.e. the time they could have engaged in paid employment if they had not been sitting, should be recorded as a cost to them. We have not estimated this as we do not know how realistic it would be to assume that these sitters would be able to gain paid employment locally.

## **The benefits of Sitter Services**

We identified a range of both direct and indirect benefits to users, their families, sitters and the wider community.

### *Parents and families*

Those users receiving respite care were able to escape, albeit for a short time, from the excessive care demands placed upon them. This directly benefited them, but the literature also indicates that such relief has an indirect effect on vulnerable children, who are less likely to be maltreated if parents receive some respite (Cowen *et al*, 2002). Other parents were able to work or undertake further education, which again was of direct benefit to them and also contributed to the family income or had the potential to do so. Sitters pointed out that the children for whom they sat were offered quality time with another adult which would help their social and educational development.

### *Sitters*

Most sitters were paid, which directly benefited them and also benefited the communities in which they lived by increasing the supply of money available locally. For some sitters, employment by Sitter Services was the first step for them into paid employment or a career in childcare; while for others it was a means of supplementing a low paid day job.

### *Communities*

Providers and sitters believed that communities benefited from the Sitter Services. Not only were some parents and sitters able to engage in paid employment, and hence spend more locally, but the presence of fewer 'latch key children' may eventually impact on local juvenile crime rates and children taken into local authority care. The Services also contribute to the Government's wider social inclusion agenda by supporting families who might otherwise be marginalized in their communities. All Services were also contributing to the pool of trained childcare workers in Scotland by offering sitters on-the-job training and encouraging them to undertake SVQs in childcare.

Have you identified any other benefits for users, their families or their communities accruing from home-based atypical hours care or respite?

## **Policy implications**

This current research has implications for the Scottish Executive's Childcare Strategy (SOEID, 1998) which seeks to encourage the development of good quality, affordable and accessible childcare to help both parents and children.

*Demand for atypical hours childcare:* Although the research did not set out to quantify the demand for atypical hours childcare, there is some evidence that the supply of such services does not match the demand. Previous studies (Daycare Trust, 2001 and One Parent Families Scotland, 2002) both indicate that the percentage of parents now working shift work or at weekends is considerable. As a measure of the demand for such services in Scotland, six of our seven case study Sitter Services had waiting lists. While all accepted that demand was difficult to quantify, services estimated that waiting lists currently ranged from 34% to 88% of the total number of families which they had helped in the previous year.

*Supply of atypical hours childcare:* The exact number of organisations which provide atypical hours home-based care in Scotland was difficult for us to identify during this research project. (It will be considerably easier now that all such services must register with the Care Commission.) Drawing on information from One Parent Families Scotland, discussions with the National Sitter Service Development Officer and personal contacts, we identified nine Sitter Services, which jointly catered for 428 families. In addition, home-based care may be provided by family friends or relatives. Previous research (Davidson & Barry, 2003) found that only 3% of childminders provided weekend care. Research from the DfES (Daycare Trust, 2001) suggests that many families rely on informal services such as families or friends in their homes to fill the gap. It is, therefore, reasonable to conclude that both actual and latent demand for atypical hours childcare far outstrips existing supply.

*Costs:* In this study, users were charged from zero (by the three providers of respite care) to £6 per hour depending on their family income. The majority of users who were interviewed thought that the cost of the service was affordable. However, the majority who paid fees were also in receipt of the Childcare Element of the Working Tax Credit, and we think that it is unlikely that they would be able to afford such fees without it. The seven Sitter Services neither targeted nor attracted high income families, which as DfES (Daycare Trust, 2001) points out, can afford to pay for childcare to ameliorate the strains imposed by new work patterns.

*Benefits:* A range of benefits for users, their families and the community were associated with all the seven Sitter Services. Those which provided respite care did so to their clients' satisfaction, and those which provided atypical hours home-based childcare allowed users, particularly lone parents and low wage earners, to engage in work or education. We are unable to determine whether more benefits were delivered by one type of service as opposed to another type of service and, therefore, have not recommended one model of good practice. We believe that there is a demand for both services and that it is inappropriate to compare what are essentially two different services.

*Displacement or additionality:* This study did not try to identify the extent to which Sitter Services displaced other childcare providers. However, it does shed some light on whether displacement was occurring. In most cases, users reported that they were using other childcare services in addition to the Sitter Service and providers thought that there were no comparable services in their locality. Therefore, it is appropriate to view Sitter Services as an additional or complementary form of childcare.

*Problems:* Although all providers and users were positive and enthusiastic about the concept of a Sitter Service, there are problems inherent in the current organisation of the service. Eight providers appears to us to be an inadequate number to cover both the actual and latent demand for atypical hours and respite care. As the service has developed on a 'piecemeal' basis, there is a dichotomy in service provision between those that provide respite and those which cater for working parents. From the waiting lists of the seven Sitter Services and the feedback from users, who would like more hours of sitters' time, we believe there is a demand for both. However, long-term funding is clearly an issue for all services. Organisers report spending considerable amounts of time applying for and managing funding from different funders, all of whom impose different restrictions. We are also not convinced that, if expansion of the Sitter Services were to occur, there would be sufficient qualified childcare workers to staff the services. MVA (2003) estimates that there are currently 32,100 childcare workers in Scotland looking after around 319,000 children – a ratio of 1:10.

Should provision of home-based atypical hours childcare be delivered by different providers from those who offer respite care?

In conclusion, we believe that the direct and indirect benefits of the Sitter Service to users, their families and their communities far outweigh the costs of the service, but that further developments to meet demand are hindered by the lack of guaranteed funding.

## References

- Abelson, A.G. (1999) Economic consequences and lack of respite care. *Psychological Reports*, 85 (3) 880-882.
- Cowen, P.S. et al (2002) Effects of Respite Care for Children with Developmental Disabilities: Evaluation of an Intervention for At Risk Families. *Public Health Nursing*, 19 (4) 272-283.
- Davidson, G. & Barry, A.M. (2003) Assessment of Benefits and Costs of Out of School Care. *Insight 5*. Edinburgh: SEED.
- Daycare Trust (2001) *Childcare and Atypical Work*. London: DFES.
- Guralnick, M.J. & Bennett, F.C. (1987) *The Effectiveness of Early Intervention for At-Risk and Handicapped Children*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace.
- MVA (2003) Early Education and Childcare Workforce Survey. *Interchange 73*. Edinburgh: SEED.
- One Parent Families Scotland (2002) *Aberdeenshire Sitter Services Feasibility Study*. (unpublished report) Edinburgh: One Parent Families Scotland.
- Scottish Office Education and Industry Department (1998) *Meeting the Childcare Challenge: A Childcare Strategy for Scotland*. (Cm. 3958) Edinburgh: HMSO.
- Stratham, J. & Mooney, A. (2003) *Childcare Services at Atypical Times*. York: The Policy Press.

## **The *Insight* Series**

1. *Classroom Assistants: Key Issues from the National Evaluation*
2. *The Impact of ICT Initiatives in Scottish Schools*
3. *Moving On to Primary 1: An Exploratory Study of the Experience of Transition from Pre-School to Primary*
4. *Accelerating Reading and Spelling with Synthetic Phonics: A Five Year Follow Up*
5. *Assessment of Benefits and Costs of Out of School Care*
6. *Meeting the Needs of Children from Birth to Three: Research Evidence and Implications for Out-of-Home Provision*
7. *Key Findings from the National Evaluation of the New Community Schools Pilot Programme in Scotland*
8. *Scottish Qualification for Headship: Key Issues from the Evaluation*
9. *The Sitter Service in Scotland: A Study of the Costs and Benefits*

If you have views on *Insight* or wish to find out more about SEED's research and economics programme, please contact the Research, Economic and Corporate Strategy Unit, Scottish Executive Education Department, Victoria Quay, Edinburgh EH6 6QQ.

**Astron** 208484 10/03

This document is produced from 100% Elemental Chlorine-free material, environmentally preferred material and is 100% recyclable.



ISSN 1478-6788 (Print)  
ISSN 1478-6796 (Online)