

FLEXIBLE CHILDCARE FOR MODERN FAMILIES

The number of people working non-standard and irregular hours is increasing, and there is a growing demand for flexible childcare that meets the needs of these families. In response to this trend, the 2013–2015 Productivity Commission Inquiry into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning recommended that the Australian Government increase families' access to subsidies for flexible childcare in the family home, which was limited to capped places for families who met strict eligibility criteria within the In Home Care (IHC) program. The Australian Department of Education and Training introduced a pilot spanning 2016–2017, the Nanny Pilot Programme (NPP), to determine the extent to which participating families considered their workforce participation was enhanced by having access to a nanny, and ascertain the conditions under which nanny care is a viable and desirable childcare solution for families.

ISSR was commissioned to evaluate the existing NPP and IHC programs that provided subsidised childcare in the family home. The evaluation used a mixed-method approach, including interviews with families, nannies/educators and stakeholders, surveys of families and nannies/educators, and analyses of administrative data. The findings provided important new insights into the extent of demand for long hours of care during non-standard hours, and the experiences of those who needed or used this type of care, such as:

- non-standard work hours or work schedules that change from week to week were major factors driving the need for in-home care of children,
- many families use a combination of in-home and out-of-home care to fulfill childcare requirements,
- dual earner couples, those with three or more children and employed single parents were most likely to use in-home care for childcare needs,
- most families were satisfied with the quality of the in-home care provided by the NPP,
- the most common reason for not using in-home care was cost factors, and
- subsidised in-home care supports some families to increase their workforce and study participation, workplace productivity and work–life balance.

The results of the evaluation were used to develop new childcare policies, factoring in recommendations from the ISSR report (see Table 4 opposite), and to create a new program, *Care in the Home*, which aims to address families' needs for flexible childcare.

EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The NPP attracted families who worked non-standard or variable work patterns, and did not have access to other care. As a whole, NPP families perceived that the program improved their workforce and study participation.

- Provide subsidised care in the family home for those needing care during non-standard or variable work hours, who do not have access to other care.
- Target the subsidy based on need, such as only for those who can not access any other form of care or a higher subsidy for this group.

Families did not understand the NPP's associated out-of-pocket costs, and affordability was a major barrier, especially for one and two child homes.

- Communicate the out-of-pocket cost to families up front, such as through a cost calculator.
- Revise subsidy measures to meet the greatest need, such as by providing a higher subsidy for the first child and proportional subsidies for subsequent children.

The NPP was successful in providing flexible care, and for many families, it supplemented other forms of child care.

- Accommodate families who will combine in-home care with other formal care including long day care and outside school hours care.

Nanny recruitment was a major challenge for service providers and families, particularly those in regional and remote areas, and nannies found background checks to be time-consuming.

- Streamline nanny recruitment and registration processes, such as by developing a recruitment database that facilitates background checks prior to allowing nannies to post their profiles for family perusal.

Not all nannies have minimum childcare qualifications, and many need or want extra training and support, such as for behaviour and conflict management, child development, administration, and health and nutrition training.

- Require a minimum Certificate III childcare qualification from all nannies, and ensure service providers give them training and regular support, such as quarterly home visits and monthly phone calls to discuss support needs.

