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HOW THE PLATFORM ECONOMY CAN IMPEDE HIGH-QUALITY CARE

MIRANDA HALL, DUNCAN MCCANN, AND DANIEL BUTTON

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Most of the media and policy attention on gig economy platforms has focused on companies such as Uber and Deliveroo, while those largely represented by women, such as cleaning and caring platforms, get little airtime. Despite the picture that a reference to the gig economy might conjure up, platform work is not just men on wheels.

This paper focuses on the rise of childcare platforms, the impact of those platforms, and what should be done about it.

THE RISE OF CHILDCARE PLATFORMS

High-quality childcare has a range of benefits for individuals, families, and society as a whole, but it is inaccessible for many. Parents often have to pay several hundreds of pounds per month for care. The way care is organised, via an under-regulated market of private providers, has resulted in a system whereby poor-quality care delivered by a workforce on low pay and poor conditions is the norm. In this context, the last decade has seen the emergence and growth of global corporate nurseries. In addition to expanding geographically, and buying up nurseries, several chain companies are expanding their portfolios into digital services and providing platforms for in-home childcare, which seek to disrupt the childcare market by linking and mediating between parents and carers.

THE IMPACT OF CHILDCARE PLATFORMS

Childcare platforms in their current form risk accelerating childcare provision trends over the past ten years by exacerbating poor working conditions and further driving down the quality of care.

The erosion of worker protections enabled by these platforms, through how workers are so often defined as 'independent contractors', is well documented. Likewise, care workers on platforms tend not to be treated as employees, and rates paid tend to be low. This is a problem in its own right, but it also impacts care quality, since wages and working conditions are major predictors of quality in childcare.

Platforms may have a further, negative impact on care quality in that they offer 'on-demand' or 'emergency' backup care by a pool of workers at short notice, despite numerous studies showing the importance of continuity of care. Concerns have also been raised about a lack of effective safeguarding practices.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

In our view, it is not platforms per se that are the problem, but the way they are currently configured. Childcare is too important both to families and society to be left to poor-quality private provision. If childcare platforms operated on a different model of ownership, they could play a useful role in the future of childcare. Around the world, co-operative platforms are beginning to emerge, with the potential to expand into the childcare sector.

To curb the negative impacts of childcare platforms in their current guise, we recommend the following set of measures:

- **Supply-side funding and regulation of care**. Investment in childcare should be shifted to subsidise supply rather than demand. To access public funds under this system of supply-led subsidies, providers should have to demonstrate that they are compliant with a 'charter for childcare'. This charter would set out minimum specifications that providers would have to meet, including quality of service, operation and governance model, workforce pay and conditions, and union recognition.

- **Unionisation and collective bargaining**. Recognising that there will always be a diverse and distributed workforce, we also recommend developing sectoral bargaining for employees in the childcare sector. To ensure that employment law and the provisions for employment quality in the charter for childcare extend to workers on childcare platforms, a new 'worker' definition should cover all existing employees and workers, including agency workers, dependent contractors, and people on zero-hours contracts.

Directly funding providers to deliver childcare, expanding the regulatory framework, and increasing the collective power and rights of the workforce would curb a number of the worst impacts of private childcare provision, including private childcare platforms, and create an environment in which the worst offenders would struggle to survive.

To concurrently grow alternative forms of childcare provision, including platforms operating under co-operative principles, several measures could be introduced to support these providers: (1) introduce a worker buy-out option at the point of sale; (2) provide patient forms of capital for alternative forms of provider ownership; and (3) create an umbrella organisation to support innovative models of childcare provision.

1. PLATFORMS IN CONTEXT

Platforms loom large in our daily lives and in our economy. More and more businesses are adopting a platform model, and the size and power of some platform businesses are beginning to dominate sectors.[1]

There are several different types of platforms. What defines them, according to King's College London's Nick Srnicek,[2] is their role in enabling "customers, advertisers, service providers, producers, suppliers and even physical objects" to interact.[3] The type of platform that gets some of the most attention is the lean – or gig economy – platforms, which coordinate labour activities while avoiding ownership of any significant assets.[4]

Gig economy platforms and gig economy work have taken off faster in the UK than elsewhere. A survey of 14 EU countries by the Joint Research Centre in 2018 suggested that the UK had the highest incidence of platform work.[5] By 2021, 3 in 20 (15%) working adults surveyed worked via gig economy platforms at least once a week, compared to around 1 in 20 (6%) in 2016 and just over 2 in 20 (12%) in 2019.[6] This amounts to 4.4 million people clocking up platform work each week.[7]

Many have linked the proliferation of labour platforms to the global financial crash and its aftermath.[8] A decade or more of stagnant wages, increasing housing costs, cuts to public services, and cuts to working-age benefits meant that there was a ready pool of people who were unemployed or underemployed in need of additional work to generate income simply to cover basic living expenses.[9] As the Trades Union Congress (TUC) notes, "The overwhelming majority of workers use platform work to supplement other forms of income, reflecting that gig workers are increasingly likely to patch together a living from multiple different sources."[10]

Much of the media and policy attention on the gig economy is due to the employment conditions of those working in the sector. Many platforms make a concerted effort to avoid employment obligations, from minimum wages, sick pay, and annual leave to trade union recognition and rights.[11] Workers in the gig economy tend to have unpredictable scheduling and low, inconsistent earnings.[12] While the platform economy was enabled by a crisis of work and wages after the financial crisis, its rise further contributed to this crisis, advancing the trajectory of the economy and labour market towards insecurity and low pay.

Insecure work like this is neither new nor limited to the platform economy; however, the proliferation of gig economy platforms has extended insecure work into industries where it was not previously common.[13] Online platforms have offered a way for employers to break up work into smaller tasks and contract out work on a piece-rate basis, enabling them to offset the risk of demand for a product or service onto the employee.[14]

Uber and Deliveroo have cemented themselves in the popular psyche, as well as in the eyes of many researchers and policymakers, as the paradigm for the gig economy platform and gig economy work. But several academics have now highlighted how 'Uberization' is an insufficient framework for explaining the different contexts and practices of platform work.[15] The social effects of platform technologies and their impact on workers, as with everything else, vary according to gender, race, and class. The gig economy industries that are largely represented by women, particularly migrant women, such as cleaning and caring, get little policy or media airtime. Yet the proportion of the population performing platform work involving the provision of household services rose from 3.2% in 2016 to 6.5% in 2019 to 7.9% in 2021.[16] This is broadly comparable to driving and delivery work, which reached 8.9% in the same year. Despite the picture that a reference to the gig economy might conjure up, platform work is not just men on wheels. The University of Amsterdam's Niels van Doorn calls for "a more differentiated and granular approach to studying platform-based gig work that focuses on particular economies, markets and/or industries which platforms have sought to 'disrupt'".[17]

To begin to redress the gaps in the research, this paper focuses on childcare platforms, which seek to disrupt the childcare market by linking and mediating between parents and carers. We start by describing the rise of childcare platforms and the childcare context that enabled this. We then go on to argue that childcare platforms, in their current form, are likely to further the current trajectory of expensive, poor-quality childcare delivered by low-paid childcare workers, negatively impacting children, parents, and the childcare workforce. We finish by considering the role that platforms could play in improving childcare if reconfigured for different ends.

2. THE CRISIS OF CARE AND THE RISE OF CHILDCARE PLATFORMS

Feminist academics, such as Nancy Fraser, have described a crisis of care and social reproduction facing contemporary societies, referring to "the pressures from several directions that are currently squeezing a key set of social capacities: those available for birthing and raising children, caring for friends and family members, maintaining households and broader communities, and sustaining connections more generally".[18]

As these activities are given no monetary value, they are "taken for granted, treated as free and infinitely available "gifts", which require no attention or replenishment".[19] It is assumed that there will always be sufficient energy to sustain the care upon which societies and economies depend. Consequentially, as more women have entered the labour force, and more people are working longer hours, we have largely assumed that families, especially women, will continue to carry out unpaid care work while simultaneously earning a full-time wage in the formal economy, more or less unsupported. Rather than considering how to share caring responsibilities within families, achieve an appropriate balance between paid and unpaid work, and supplement family care with care services, we have largely left women to juggle the need to work to make ends meet with unpaid care or to organise a private alternative.

Like other necessary activities traditionally carried out unpaid by women, care, including childcare, has partially moved into the paid economy. Parents currently use a variety of different types of childcare support. Some make use of local preschools and pregroups, while some employ nannies or child carers in their homes. More formal childcare options include childminders – professional day carers working in their own home to provide care and education; day nurseries – providing year-round care and education for children from six weeks to five years old; and nursery schools – offering full and part-time early years education places, typically during school hours.

Access to high-quality childcare has several benefits for individuals, families, and society as a whole. It can reduce inequality, by helping to close the attainment gap between children from low-income families and their more advantaged peers, creating benefits that last throughout their time in school and impacting life chances beyond this via "better educational outcomes, better employment prospects and a reduced chance of remaining or becoming poor".[20] It can also increase opportunities, and remove barriers for parents, especially mothers, to take on and sustain employment, without expecting them to juggle full-time caring responsibilities. Access to quality childcare is a key part of the answer to the crisis of care.

The problem is that childcare is inaccessible for many. Even though the state currently subsidises the cost of childcare for some, this subsidy isn't available to the most disadvantaged as parents must work and earn above a given threshold. The subsidy is paid at a rate that can be substantially less than the actual cost of provision (Box A). Accounting for current free entitlements, research by Loughborough University shows that the cost of meeting essential childcare to be as much as £219.42 a week for a couple with two children.[21]

BOX A: GOVERNMENT SUPPORT FOR CHILDCARE

Free hours entitlement: Parents can access in-kind support through the free entitlement to early education. This is available for three- and four-year-olds and the most disadvantaged two-year-olds. All eligible families can access 15 hours per week for 38 weeks per year. Working families in which all adults are in employment and earn above a given threshold are entitled to a further 15 hours per week since 2017.

While the extension of the free entitlement is a welcome move, and early evidence suggests a positive impact on working hours for parents,[22] there are significant concerns about equity. The stricter eligibility requirements for the additional 15 hours exclude around half of the poorest families that access the free 15 hours.[23] The regressive nature of this policy, with the poorest families excluded from additional hours, is likely to widen the achievement gap.[24] Furthermore, this subsidy is paid at a rate that can be substantially less than the actual cost of provision. This means that nearly half of parents who get 30 free hours have been asked to pay additional fees for things like lunches, nappies, and trips.

Universal credit (UC): Families in receipt of UC where one or both parents are in paid work can receive support for childcare costs for their first two children. The childcare element of UC covers up to 85% of the childcare costs, up to a monthly maximum of £646 for one child or £1,108 for two or more children. Note that some households receiving the childcare element may also be impacted by the Benefit Cap, meaning they might not receive the full amount of support for childcare provided by UC. This will happen to households earning less than £658 per month – 16 hours per week at the National Living Wage. The childcare element of UC is paid in arrears through a single UC monthly payment, which means parents have to pay for childcare upfront. This payment method is particularly difficult for families whose childcare provider requires upfront payments per term, yet the costs will be covered across separate UC payments.

UC may undermine low-income parents' ability to work. It is tapered as earnings rise, which means reduced gains to employment or to increasing the number of hours worked since families will be faced with higher childcare costs not covered by UC. The disincentives are particularly strong for 'second earners' – mostly women – who also face employment disincentives due to a single work allowance for the couple before UC starts to taper.[25]

Tax-free childcare: Cash transfers that act as a discount on the cost of childcare are available through the recently introduced tax-free childcare scheme. This entitles some families (both resident adults need to be in employment and earn above a specified amount) to 20p of support for every 80p they spend on childcare. Despite the name, this is independent of the tax system and all parents who are not eligible for childcare support under UC can use it. Parents pay into an online childcare account, which is then topped by the government with 20p for every 80p deposited. This scheme replaces the similar but much less widely available employer-based childcare vouchers.

Subsidised nurseries: Another important form of in-kind support is directly provided services via local authorities, such as Sure Start Children's Centres and free or subsidised nursery schools. However, many centres have been closed in the last decade as funding has fallen sharply.[26]

The way care is organised, via an under-regulated market of private providers, leads to poor quality care delivered by a childcare workforce on low pay and with poor conditions.

England is exceptional within Europe in that it has deliberately shaped the childcare market to promote the provision of services by for-profit companies. There were an estimated 15,624 children's day-care nurseries in the UK in 2017/18. Most nurseries, an estimated 12,733 (81%), are for-profit nurseries, privately owned by individuals, partnerships, or companies. [27]

Local authorities have been discouraged from providing childcare with legislation that explicitly states that they:

> *"May not provide childcare for a particular child or group of children unless the local authority are satisfied (a) that no other person is willing to provide the childcare or (b) if another person is willing to do so, that in the circumstances it is appropriate for the local authority to provide the childcare".*[28]

Meanwhile, the regulatory framework within which these private operators are allowed to operate by Ofsted remains unusually narrow in scope and does not require operators to have regard for issues such as equal access, working conditions, financial regulation, or accountability.[29]

The rapid marketisation of childcare has taken place without any meaningful discussion of the potential risks, especially concerning its impact on the quality and accessibility of childcare. This underregulated market-based approach leaves public authorities with little control over quality, price, or where services are provided. Whereas state-provided or coordinated childcare can be based on need, profit-driven providers cluster their nurseries in wealthier areas where income from fees is more reliable.[30] This results in inequalities of access. Children from poorer backgrounds are a third less likely to take up free places in pre-school education due to a lack of availability in their local area.[31]

While there are owner-operators who work hard for the children and parents they serve, the private ownership model operating within a market system makes it difficult to deliver decent care. Since most of the cost of providing care is labour, private providers operating in a market are incentivised to squeeze wages and conditions to stay competitive, win business, and make a profit. The childcare workforce earned a mean gross hourly pay of £8.20 in 2018. This is £5.00 less than the mean hourly pay of the female working population.[32] For the 84% of childcare workers now employed in the private sector, there are no negotiated agreements between employers and unions.[33] Pay, conditions, and work tasks are determined by individual nursery owners or companies, and they vary wildly.

Numerous studies of early year's provision around the world have shown that non-profit settings offer better quality care because resources in private settings are likely "siphoned off for shareholders rather than invested in staff wages and other quality input".[34] Amongst Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, the UK now has the most expensive childcare, but the quality of childcare provision is only ranked at 34 out of 50.[35]

An emerging structural trend in the childcare market is likely to make things worse. The last decade has seen the emergence and growth of global corporate nursery chains engaged in actively consolidating and increasing their market share. One of the UK's fastest-growing nursery mega-chains is Busy Bees, which is responsible for 50,000 children in over 500 nurseries globally.[36] With a Canadian pension firm as their majority shareholder, the chain recently expanded beyond the UK to China, Singapore, Malaysia, and Canada.[37] England's other super chain, Bright Horizons, has 900 nurseries worldwide, including 292 in the UK. Models like these have several deep flaws. Financialised structures can encourage aggressive expansion and becoming 'too big to fail'.[38] Aggressive expansion may be good for business, but it can be disastrous for communities, children, parents, and workers, as the needs of a global business, focused on growth and profit, are not conditions that are necessarily conducive to building sustainable social infrastructures, like nurseries. When Australian company ABC Learning Centres (who previously owned Busy Bees) had similar ambitions to go global in 2008, it got into so much debt that it collapsed.[39]

In addition to expanding geographically and buying up nurseries and smaller nursery chains in different countries, mega-chains such as Busy Bees and Bright Horizons are looking to expand their portfolios into digital services. Last year, for instance, Bright Horizons acquired Sittercity, one of the largest platforms for in-home childcare in the USA.[40] In the same way that Uber's business model has exploited gaps in underfunded public transport infrastructure across the world, care platforms seek to plug the care crisis.

2.1 THE CHILDCARE PLATFORM

Evidence of the size of the market for platform-mediated childcare services or household services is lacking. Platforms do not regularly publish figures and many offer childcare among a range of other services, in particular household services such as cleaning, social care, maintenance, and beauty services.

While there have been no large-scale quantitative studies focused on platform-mediated care work in recent years, one study, by the University of Hertfordshire in 2017, listed 16 different platforms for household services and found that the proportion of the UK population purchasing household services through online platforms was higher than any other category, at 36%.[41] This can be contrasted with just 19% having bought taxi or delivery services, via services such as Uber or Deliveroo, and 17% renting accommodation, via services like Airbnb.[42] We can assume that the market for platform-mediated childcare, along with other platform-mediated labour, has grown significantly in the four years since this study was done and that it will continue to grow in the future. Analysis by PwC of different sectors of the gig economy in the EU forecasts that on-demand household services will be the fastest-growing sector, with revenues projected to expand by roughly 50% yearly through 2025.[43] A study by BIA/Kelsey in the US estimates platforms could generate transactions worth $3.1 trillion by 2030 if on-demand services substitute the unpaid care work of women.[44]

So far, we have seen two different types of childcare platforms emerge: marketplace and on-demand childcare platforms.

2.1.1 Marketplace platforms

Marketplace platforms provide a ranked and sorted pool of candidates. Care workers seeking employment can be searched, ordered, and browsed by prospective employers. Care.com has been running since 2007 and claims to be the biggest. They "connect families and caregivers" and "give families tools to help make more informed hiring decisions".[45] The basic membership is free, but users have to pay for premium membership to view full profiles and reviews, contact caregivers, and purchase background checks. Publicly available data provided by the platform shows the site currently has 32.9 million members across 20 countries.[46] IAC, the holding company that owns Care.com, has reported a triple-digit percentage increase in demand on Care.com since the pandemic hit, driven by more families looking for in-home childcare and remote schooling support.[47] Another marketplace platform, Childcare.co.uk, provides childcare services including babysitters, registered childminders, nannies, and nurseries to over 2 million people in the UK.

2.1.2 On-demand platforms

On-demand platforms, by contrast, facilitate the matching of client and worker. One example of this is Bubble, a childcare and babysitting marketplace founded by Ari Last in 2016. Whereas Care.com's business model is focused on charging a membership fee to access their pool of workers, platforms like Bubble function more like Uber or Deliveroo, by charging a specific transaction fee when automatically matching the parent with a carer. Bubble also mediates the employment relationship beyond the point of matching parents and providers. The app monitors workers throughout the job through a function that tracks the time spent working to the minute. Their business model is based on taking a percentage of payments via a transaction fee. The fee is currently 10% for the first sit and goes down to 5% after 6 sits with the same family. Bubble have reported a 50% jump in new sitters joining its platform last year. They now have 20,000 sitters on their books. They raised £500,000 in 2018 from angel investors and another £2 million from Ada Ventures last year.[48],[49] They have signed up 100,000 users and aim to become "the destination site for flexible, accessible and trusted childcare".[50]

Brett Wigdortz, the founder of the charity Teach First, has also set up an on-demand platform called Tiney, aimed at childminders. The platform finds potential childminders, supports them with training and admin, deals with the parents, and runs Ofsted inspections. In exchange, they take a joining fee and a percentage of the childminder's revenue. The model has been dubbed 'carebnb'.

2.1.3 Back-up care

Many of these childcare platforms have expanded into services referred to as 'back-up care' where they form partnerships with corporate clients to provide childcare for their parent employees, taking the form of both in-home childcare and nursery settings. Bright Horizons has an emergency care platform called My Family Care. The platform "combines innovative technology and practical solutions for the modern workplace with clients including government agencies, corporations and service firms, as well as the Met Policy and the NHS". [51] They work with 1,100 employers globally and provide over 80,000 days of back-up care for clients' employees every year.[52] They also own the parent matching website Nannyshare.co.uk.

Another major provider of back-up care for employers is Care@Work, which is owned by Care.com. The platform has seen a 140% increase in bookings and expanded its client base by nearly a third since the start of the pandemic.[53] In the private sector, some employers have addressed the pandemic by offering expanded workplace benefits to their employees and enrolling in Care.com's corporate benefits programme, Care@Work. Amazon announced that it would use Care.com to offer subsidised, back-up childcare to all its full-time and part-time permanent employees throughout the pandemic.[54]

What is striking is how these childcare platforms explicitly promote themselves as a solution to the crisis of care. The Care@Work website, for instance, describes the challenges faced by families across the UK when caring arrangements break down and there is no state-sponsored safety net: "School is closed. A child is sick. A parent breaks a hip. The nanny goes on vacation. A spouse has surgery. Life happens." The pitch is that unexpected caring responsibilities damage productivity and profit: "productivity wants up, absenteeism wants down and top talent wants in".

3. THE IMPACT OF PLATFORMS ON CHILDCARE

The UK childcare sector is vast and extremely fragmented. Within this, online platforms perform a range of different functions in different parts of the sector. Within childcare, therefore, the effects of online platforms vary according to a particular business. Nonetheless, specific patterns can be identified, whereby childcare platforms risk accelerating existing trends that have emerged in the provision of childcare over the past ten years by exacerbating poor working conditions and further driving down the quality of care.

3.1 WORKING CONDITIONS

3.1.1 Pay and protection

The erosion of workers' protection enabled by platforms, in particular by how workers are so often defined as 'independent contractors' or 'self-employed', is well documented.[55] While there have been advances towards better employment rights in the gig economy in recent years, there have also been setbacks.

In February 2021, the Supreme Court confirmed that Uber drivers should be considered workers and therefore receive holiday pay, sick pay, and the national living wage.[56] This was followed by a similar ruling regarding Addison Lee, another ride-hail platform.[57] The limits of existing law, however, were exposed by the ruling in a case against Deliveroo, which ruled riders to be independent contractors. The judgement, confirmed by the Court of Appeal, found that because Deliveroo riders could sub-contract the job to another person, something not possible for an Uber or Addison Lee driver to do, they did not constitute employees.[58] This has created a loophole that other platforms may now try to jump through.

The rise of the gig economy can be seen as a continuation of labour market deregulation since the late 1980s. Arrangements like zero-hours contracts free employers from basic responsibilities that come with employment contracts, such as sick pay and paid annual leave. The risk of low demand falls entirely on employees. As independent contractors, workers are denied the rights of collective representation, whether that be through unions or legal processes, such as class actions.

In the childcare sector, platforms are likely to continue and deepen the current trend of poor workforce pay and conditions. As with most platforms, care workers are not treated as employees, but as self-employed contractors. Bubble, for instance, states, "We do not provide employment services. We do not employ sitters. We do not seek to find employment for sitters."[59] The same is true of Childcare.co.uk. In the childcare workers section of their terms and conditions, they state "We only provide a platform."[60]

Workers on online marketplaces like Care.com and on-demand apps like Bubble can set their own rates, but the price-based competition element of the platform can result in a race to the bottom with workers incentivised to lower their rates to access jobs. Bubble's data shows that average babysitting rates per hour are £10 in London and £8 across the rest of the country.[61] For the first job gained, the platform charges a 10% fee, which reduces to 3.5% after several jobs. Combined with the amount of time spent seeking work and travel to and from jobs, hourly pay will be even lower, and likely to be significantly lower than the living wage. Parents can pay carers for travel costs through the app, but this is optional.

While these platforms pitch themselves as a silver bullet to the crisis of care, they too frequently fail to pay carers sufficiently, and bypass costs such as social security contributions, sick pay, or parental leave. The result is some better-off women and families can access employment and earn a decent quality of living by leaning on low-paid care workers who don't. As a result, childcare workers are likely to be cut off from accessing childcare support themselves. The crisis is averted for some, but on the backs of others.

3.1.2 Discrimination

One claim often made by these platforms is that they are safer and more accountable because communication is monitored, and it is possible to report abusive behaviour to the platform. However, research by Data & Society, based on interviews with 43 care workers, revealed that these technologies can "amplify abuse, behind the scenes of the data".[62] This is because workers who experience abuse or harassment sometimes avoid making a complaint in case a retaliatory bad rating jeopardises the number of jobs they can access. Workers who get flagged for inappropriate behaviour on the site can lose access to their accounts.

Studies have also highlighted various ways in which discrimination can operate on care platforms. Rating systems often reflect or amplify racial biases and workers are forced to participate in what Mateescu and Ticona refer to as "self-branding" to construct a profile that will appeal to prospective employers.[63] Workers who do not speak fluent English and those who are unwilling to share their social media profiles are penalised.

Care.com says it provides "the tools and resources to evaluate risk", and encourages parents "do their digital homework" through wider internet and social media services on workers.[64] Bubble also promotes a "trust-based" approach to hiring, whereby consumers and workers are encouraged to sync their profiles with their social media accounts. Parents are advised to "hire without discrimination" but also to trust their "gut".[65] As numerous implicit bias studies have shown, falling back on "gut" judgements often leads to discriminatory hiring.[66]

3.2 CARE QUALITY

3.2.1 Workforce issues

Wages and working conditions are major predictors of quality in childcare.[67] Where there is better pay and conditions, there is more stability and continuity of care due to lower staff turnover rates. There is often a larger pool of workers to choose from, meaning high qualifications, skills, and motivation to work in the sector. The workforce issues discussed, therefore, are also likely to have a knock-on implication for quality.

3.2.2 Lack of consistent relationships

One of the main advantages of childcare platforms is they offer flexible childcare at very short notice. The rise of atypical working hours has resulted in an increased demand for childcare provision outside standard opening hours. The UK has the highest rates of atypical working in Europe, which is now more common in the general working population than having a standard 9 to 5. Current public childcare provision has not adapted to this new reality and currently only a fifth of local authorities have enough childcare for parents working atypical hours.[68]

Digital platforms for childcare are therefore able to meet the needs of some parents in ways that traditional models of public-centre-based provision are currently not. However, numerous studies have shown that continuity of care is a key driver of quality care.[69] Child development depends on secure, meaningful relationships and consistent quality learning experiences. Digitally enabled forms of on-demand, emergency, or back-up care, however, rely on a broad pool of flexible workers able to accept shifts at short notice. While this might meet a parent's need in moments where there is a childcare emergency, relying on an inconsistent stream of childcare workers, with whom the child has no existing relationship, is not consistent with the crucial functions of childcare and early education that more stable provision offers. Nor does this do anything about the root of the issue – the rise of atypical working hours and the culture of having to be 'always on'.

3.2.3 Safeguarding issues

There are also concerns around safeguarding. Regulatory standards are important for ensuring quality services but also for protecting the wellbeing and safety of children. These standards range from health and safety procedures to background checks. In the UK, it is predominantly the role of Ofsted to carry out inspections and ensure that these standards are met. As with all home childcare workers, in-home services available through digital platforms do not have to be registered with Ofsted. In addition, while many traditional nanny or babysitting agencies require particular qualifications and background checks for all the workers on their books, platforms generally place the onus entirely on parents to do these checks themselves.

In 2019, Care.com faced serious reputational damage because of a scandal concerning safeguarding. An investigation by the *Wall Street Journal* found that the website put the burden on families to evaluate their caregivers, it didn't conduct full background checks or vet the day-care centres listed on the site, and in some cases, providers were unlicensed.[70] The report found that there were "about 9 instances" in the last six years where a provider listed on the site had a criminal record, and then committed a crime against someone they were caring for, ranging from "theft, child abuse, sexual assault, and murder".[71] Three years later, another journalist tested the site by setting up a profile himself as Harvey Weinstein (a movie producer facing allegations of sexual assault). The profile was approved and his claims to be certified in CPR and first aid were also accepted without any requests for verification.[72]

Care.com has since removed thousands of unverified profiles. IAC, the new owner, has committed to making safety "a top priority" for the platform. However, platforms in the UK including Bubble still do not require that workers have Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks and do not verify claims that workers have DBS checks on their profiles. Bubble's terms and conditions state that they "accept no responsibility for the accuracy or completeness of any profile on the App as [they] do not check them" and encourage parents to "rely on [their] own judgement and common sense".[73]

4. THE ROLE OF PLATFORMS IN THE FUTURE OF CHILDCARE

In our *Quality childcare for all* report, we argue that childcare is too important both to families and society to be left to self-funding and market forces.[74] Instead, policymakers should position childcare and early education as a universal service. Here, increased government funding would ensure that childcare is accessible to all parents and children according to need rather than geographical location or the ability to pay. It would be designed with the explicit aim of improving the quality of childcare and childcare jobs.

To achieve universal, quality childcare, the system must be reshaped so that, over time, there is a genuine alternative to private, market-based childcare. However, this does not have to mean ushering in top-down publicly delivered childcare services. Quality childcare depends on parents and carers working together and having a genuine say over how services work. They know what needs to change and have a strong interest in changes being effective; they should have power and control over the services provided. Accordingly, what the childcare system needs are providers that are accountable to those who work in and use the services.

Co-operative, not-for-profit childcare models could play role in achieving this as could democratic models of public provision. What they share is a commitment to increasing the power of families and frontline staff to shape services. This sits in contrast with private nursery chains, where their organisational structure prevents accountability, with control over decision-making resting with owners or shareholders and head offices distant from the day-to-day operations of nurseries. Unlike in markets for consumer goods, it is harder for parents to vote with their wallets, since childcare is relational. The quality of a relationship is hard to access without first-hand experience, and consumers will not have the requisite information to make informed market choices. Rectifying a mistake – by switching providers – comes with a cost, since a new relationship needs to be built.[75]

If childcare platforms operated on a different model of ownership, they could play a role in universal, quality childcare. It is not platforms per se that are the problem, but rather the way they are currently configured.

Around the world, co-operative platforms are beginning to emerge, with the potential to expand into the childcare sector. In New York, for instance, Up and Go is a web app through which users can book cleaners with worker-owners from three different New-York-based co-ops: Brightly Cleaning, EcoMundo, and Cooperative Cleaning of New York. It works very similarly to regular booking platforms backed by venture capital, such as Handy.com, as it aggregates the schedules of workers across the three participating co-operatives, and users can either select to book from a particular co-op, or all three. Unlike other home-services apps that keep between 20% and 50% of the service price, however, Up & Go workers take home 95% of the cost and the remaining 5% is funnelled back towards app maintenance.[76] Worker-owners, most of whom are migrants or women of colour, also remain in control of their scheduling preferences and terms and decide the pricing. As a result, workers on Up & Go earn around $22.25 per hour, as opposed to the average price of $17.27 for other industry workers in the area.[77] Its organisers see the potential for the platform to scale up, both in New York and other cities across the country, and to reach other industries like childcare, where co-operative models are prevalent.[78] As Co-operatives UK notes, "The UK [already] has a number of childcare co-ops, including independent parent-led organisations, and a network of 48 centres run by Midlandcounties Co-op.".[79]

There are also examples of care-based platform co-operatives emerging in the UK. Equal Care Co-op, for instance, is the UK's first platform-based social care and support co-operative. It matches those seeking care with local care and support workers and professionally trained volunteers in the Upper Calder Valley in Calderdale, West Yorkshire. People wanting care can choose who supports them and how, and they have control over their data and who sees it. Care and support workers can choose when and where they work. They arrived at the platform co-op model as a response to systemic inequities within the social care system, seeing it as a way to put power and ownership for those who are giving and receiving care at the centre.[80] The model ensures that frontline care workers are paid as much as possible. They have set a target minimum wage of £20,000 per annum for new care workers (equivalent to 25% above the general industry average), achieved via platform efficiencies and the co-operative approach. [81]

Another model with the potential to transform childcare – and play an important role in the mix of providers delivering universal quality childcare – is the parent-led childcare co-operative. Platforms could support this model of provision.

In a parent-led co-operative, parents are expected to contribute time and skills to the management and administration of the childcare setting, as well as be involved directly in the classroom, working alongside professionals to look after the children.[82] The setting is owned and run by parents in their own interest, rather than by a distant hedge fund with an interest in profit extraction. One prominent example is Grasshoppers in Hackney, North East London.[83] It was started by a group of parents who looked after each other's children in their own homes for several years. They decided to formalise the arrangement by setting up in a separate space. Fourteen years later, Grasshoppers serves 25 families with children between the ages of two and five, offering full-time day care between 8am and 6pm, five days a week. Costs for parents are determined by household income, and by how many hours their child attends. Parents who take on a role in the nursey get a discount rate. Alongside parents, Grasshoppers employs five permanent staff.

Meanwhile, Kidoop, a platform prototype, supports parents to form co-ops, like Grasshoppers, by providing practical advice on setting up and matching families with similar childcare needs locally.[84] It plans and coordinates a timetable of parents and workers for childcare sessions throughout the week, ensuring the correct ratio of staff to parents. It allows parents to search for childcare workers in the area and match their availability with their own. It guides parents through the legal requirements to becoming a co-operative and what they'll need to get set up, including registering with Ofsted.

4.1 HOW TO GET THERE

How do we get from where we are today – where private companies, including chain-operated platforms, too often deliver poor quality care using an underpaid workforce – to a system delivered by democratic childcare providers, including platform co-ops, providing quality care by a workforce with quality jobs? We argue that better regulation, enforced through supply-side funding and a charter for childcare, alongside increased power and rights for the workforce would curb the worse aspects of chain-operated platforms, and make the sector less attractive to those seeking to extract profit at the expense of quality.

4.1.1 Supply-side funding and regulation

At the very least, the state should be driving a much harder regulatory bargain with providers to ensure that childcare providers deliver quality care and employment, rather than profit alone. Yet the current model of public subsidy for childcare leaves the state with little control over the childcare sector. Parents are given vouchers or cash transfers to buy childcare in the market. Treating parents as consumers like this leaves few levers for the state to shape the sort of childcare provision on offer.

As a first step towards counteracting this, investment in childcare should be shifted to subsidise supply rather than demand. As in almost every other European country, subsidies should be given directly to childcare providers on a per capita basis and councils should be responsible for allocating this direct funding locally. To access public funds under this system of supply-led subsidy, providers should have to demonstrate that they are compliant with a charter for childcare. This charter would set out minimum specifications that providers would have to meet, including the quality of service, operation and governance model, workforce pay and conditions, and union recognition.

4.1.2 Employment rights, unionisation, and collective bargaining

To drive up employment rights in the childcare sector, ensuring all childcare providers, including platforms, recognise a union for childcare workers to join through the childcare charter is an obvious first step. Recognising that there will always be a diverse and distributed workforce, however, we also recommend developing sectoral bargaining for employees in the childcare sector.

Sectoral collective bargaining is when trade unions reach a collective agreement that covers all workers in a sector of the economy. It is a way of giving people a voice in their workplace that must be listened to by their employer. As part of their Fair Work Action Plan, the Scottish government and the Scottish Trades Union Council (STUC) have developed a forum in Early Learning and Childcare to explore sectoral bargaining that will include government, employers, and trade unions.[85] The Trades Union Congress (TUC) has developed a policy on sectoral bargaining with staff in social care and hospitality. This approach should be extended to childcare, including childcare platforms, as a priority.

To ensure that employment law and the provisions for employment quality in the charter for childcare extend to workers on childcare platforms, following recommendations by the TUC, a new 'worker' definition should cover all existing employees and workers, including agency workers, dependent contractors, and people on zero-hours contracts.[86] This would help end bogus self-employment.

Despite claims to the contrary, there is no reason why traditional forms of labour protection, such as employment rights and collective bargaining, cannot be applied to platform work. One of the most significant developments to debunk this myth concerned a platform for domestic work in Denmark. In 2018, the Danish trade union, 3F, signed a collective bargaining agreement with Hilfr.dk, a platform providing domestic work, such as cleaning services, in private households. Workers who completed 100 hours of work on the platform are recognised as employees of the platform, a status that means they are covered by the collective agreement unless they choose to opt out.

The agreement gives cleaners on the platform employment benefits such as holidays, sick pay, and pension contributions. Cleaners covered by the agreement get a minimum wage of €19 an hour, compared to around €15 previously. The agreement also provides rules on the cancellation of shifts, a pivotal protection for casual and platform workers. If a job is cancelled less than 36 hours before the start, the customer is bound to pay 50% of the agreed wage. The agreement has had rapid take-up, with more than a third of the cleaning jobs on Hilfr provided by cleaners with proper employee status, referred to as 'Super Hilfrs'.

4.1.3 Growing alternative providers and increasing their share of investment

Directly funding providers to deliver childcare, expanding the regulatory framework, and increasing the collective power and rights of the workforce would curb a number of the worst impacts of private childcare provision, including private childcare platforms, and create an environment in which the worst offenders would struggle to survive.

To concurrently grow alternative forms of childcare provision, including platforms operating under co-operative principles, several measures could be introduced to support these providers:

(1) Introducing a worker buy-out option for childcare providers at the point of sale, with a variety of financing mechanisms available, including advances of up to three years of cash-transfer-based and employer portions of unemployment insurance benefits, as is available in Italy for worker buy-outs.[87] This would support providers transferring hands to remain focused on serving their local communities, rather than assimilating into country-wide chains.

(2) Providing more patient forms of capital that do not come with an expectation of quick or high returns. For example, by establishing a co-operative fund within a national investment bank, to help capitalise cooperatives.[88]

(3) Creating an umbrella organisation to support alternative models of ownership by providing a forum to share best practices and to advocate for supportive policies. Co-operative Development Scotland and the Welsh Co-operative Centre have proven successful in building the capacity of the co-operative movement in their countries and, above all, in promoting employee takeovers of companies in transition. In our *Co-operatives Unleashed* report, we recommend establishing a new Co-operative Development Agency in England.[89]

5. CONCLUSION

Behind the focus on gig economy platforms like Uber and Deliveroo, childcare platforms have been growing under the surface, seeking to disrupt the childcare market by linking and mediating between parents and carers.

While these platforms pitch themselves as a silver bullet to the crisis of care, they risk exacerbating current trends in care, whereby the quality is poor, and the workforce gets a raw deal. Measures must be put in place to ensure that childcare workers are paid a decent rate and to improve the quality of care. In our view, this means shifting away from the private, market-based provision, including current forms of childcare platforms.

Childcare is an essential service. It is too important to be left to platforms in their current guise.

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WWW.NEWECONOMICS.ORG
info@neweconomics.org
+44 (0)20 7820 6300 @NEF
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