

Early years childcare entitlement

Frequently Asked Questions

January 2024



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January 2024

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This paper summarises the current position in Wales and points to further sources of information.

This document sets out information in response to some of the most frequently asked questions. **It is not intended as advice nor a comprehensive guide to entitlement.**

Each local authority has a **Family Information Service** whose role is to provide free impartial information and advice for all parents and carers.



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1. A variety of early years childcare entitlement

This document highlights the childcare support currently offered in Wales, depending on eligibility. It includes the Childcare Offer for Wales, Flying Start and 'early years education'. In response to enquiries we receive it also sets out some information about the position in England.

Some families receive free childcare funded by the Welsh Government and in many cases administered and delivered via the local authority.

Various free or subsidised provision aims to support parental employment and economic outcomes. Other free provision, such as Flying Start, originally had a focus of supporting children's developmental needs.

This 2019 **[Senedd Research briefing](#)** on early years childhood and care sets out that there is 'significant variation' in childcare in Wales, and that access to childcare funding can depend on factors such as:

- income,
- working status,
- economic circumstances,
- the age of the child,
- where families live,
- what services are accessible, and
- marriage or partnership status,

2. Provision in Wales

Childcare Offer for Wales

The Welsh Government's **Childcare Offer for Wales** gives an **entitlement** of 30 hours a week for 48 weeks per year to children of some working parents and some parents in education or training. The 30 hours a week is made up of:

- at least 10 hours of early years education (see below); and
- up to 20 hours of childcare.

Depending on the providers, parents can use funded childcare hours at any time during holiday weeks, night or day, including at weekends.

Ten hours early years education

All local authorities have a **legal duty** to offer and provide free 'sufficient nursery education for all children in their area from the first term after their third birthday until the September after their fourth birthday'. To deliver this duty, local authorities **must offer** a minimum of 10 hours for 39 weeks for all children regardless of their parents' employment status. If children are entitled to the Childcare Offer (see above) then this early years entitlement is topped up to make 30 hours.

Flying Start

Flying Start is a Welsh Government early years programme delivered in the areas assessed as being the most deprived:

- It is delivered by local authorities in targeted geographical areas that are estimated to have the highest number of 0-3-year-olds living in low income households.
- There is some limited flexibility to deliver Flying Start services to families outside these areas but that is for the local authority to decide in line with the Welsh Government's **Flying Start outreach: guidance for local authorities**.
- In its **Co-operation Agreement** with Plaid Cymru, the Welsh Government announced its intention to extend Flying Start to 'deliver a phased expansion of early years provision to include all 2-year-olds.

Flying Start has four core delivery elements:

- Flying Start childcare: funded part-time childcare for 2–3-year-olds (12.5 hours free childcare to children aged 2-3, for 39 weeks of the year).
- An enhanced health visiting service.
- Access to parenting support.
- Support for Speech, Language and Communication development.

3. UK Government childcare support

The UK Government also provides some financial support that parents in Wales can access.

Childcare support offered	Further information
<p><u>Tax-free childcare scheme</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <u>Tax Free Childcare</u> provides help with the cost of childcare. ▪ Under the Tax-Free Childcare (TFC) scheme, a parent or carer pays funds for childcare into a TFC account. The Government then tops up each £8 paid in with an extra £2, up to a maximum of £2,000 per child, per year (or £4,000 per year for a disabled child). ▪ Parents can use TFC at the same time as using 15 or 30 hours free childcare entitlements in England and Wales respectively. ▪ Money in the TFC account can then be used to pay for <u>approved childcare</u> for any child under 12 years of age, or under 17 if they are disabled. ▪ A parent/carer can usually only qualify for TFC if they, and their partner if they have one, earn at least the <u>National Minimum Wage or Living Wage</u> for 16 hours a week. ▪ Find out if you are eligible for TFC on <u>GOV.UK</u>. <p>Some of the <u>Tax-Free Childcare eligibility criteria include:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <u>Earning an average of £167 per week</u> (equal to 16 hours at the National Minimum or Living Wage) each over three months, ▪ Who are not receiving Tax Credits, Universal Credit or childcare vouchers, ▪ With children aged 0-11 (or 0-16 if disabled).

<p>Universal credit covering childcare costs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Parents / carers claiming universal credit who are not using the tax-free childcare scheme can claim up to 85% of childcare costs to be paid with their Universal Credit. ▪ Find out if you are eligible for Universal Credit on GOV.UK.
<p>Flexible Support Fund for working parents</p>	<p>Families Parents / carers who claim Universal Credit and are starting work or increasing their work hours can “get help from the Flexible Support Fund”, supporting those who cannot pay upfront childcare costs.</p>

4. Childcare support for students

Some students are eligible for the Childcare Offer for Wales. Depending on where a student lives, their child may also be eligible for Flying Start. In addition to this there may other sources of support as set out below.

Higher education (HE) students:

- Relevant University hardship funds or the **Financial Contingency Fund**,
- The **Parents’ Learning Allowance** for eligible full-time students in Wales,
- Full-time undergraduate students with children under 15, or under 17 if the child has special educational needs, may be eligible for a **Childcare Grant** towards their childcare costs.
- Students who have children or adult dependents might be able to apply for an Adult Dependent’s Allowance or a **Childcare Allowance**.
- Students in receipt of a Social Work Bursary might be eligible for a **Childcare Grant and additional funding towards study costs**.

Further education (FE) students

Welsh Government’s information for **Further Education (FE) students in Wales** says: “You may be able to receive help with the cost of childcare while you are studying. Contact your school or college for more information.”

Students and benefits

- Most full-time students are not eligible to claim Universal Credit (UC), but **there are some exceptions, including students who are responsible for a child.**
- UC includes a **childcare costs element**, but many students who are able to claim UC will not be eligible for reimbursement of childcare costs. This is because the UC childcare element only covers childcare to allow the claimant to undertake paid work (for couples, both partners must normally be in paid work).
- Students who want to check if they are entitled to benefits should seek professional welfare rights advice. Welfare rights advisers can be found using the **postcode finder on the Advice Local website.**

5. Sources of advice and information

Each local authority has a **Family Information Service (FIS)** that provides free advice on childcare. Parents and carers may find it useful to contact their **local family information service** to see what provision is available in their local authority and get advice on eligibility for free provision.

The UK Government's **childcare calculator** is a simple tool for parents to check what help they could get with childcare costs. Parents will need information about them and their partner (if they have one), including:

- how much they spend on childcare;
- any benefits they or their child get; and
- their income.

Other sources of information include:

- **Check what help you could get with childcare costs - GOV.UK**
- **Other help with paying for childcare**
- **Benefits and financial support for families**
- The UK Government's **webpage** for financial help if you have children.
- The **Money and Pensions Service** gives further advice for parents on this **website.**

6. Different entitlements in Wales and England

There are **different offers of free childcare** in Wales and England. Wales and England also have different regulation and inspection systems for childcare.

Comparisons are often made between the free childcare offers in Wales and England. These comparisons have increased **following a commitment by the UK Government** earlier in 2023 to provide free childcare to children of eligible working parents from the age of 9 months by 2025.

However, the First Minister has **rejected this comparison**, saying: "...what we see is an attempt in England to catch up with services that are already available here in Wales. It's quite certainly not the other way around."

Summary of the current position in England and Wales

Two year olds

Wales: two and three-year olds entitled to **12.5 hours** a week for 39 weeks per year (**Flying Start**) in some geographical areas, and entitlement is being expanded.

England: eligible working parents of **two year olds** entitled to **15 hours a week** for **38 weeks per year**.

All three and four year olds

Wales: entitled to a minimum of **10 hours a week** of early education, but many offer more

England: entitled to roughly **15 hours a week** for 38 weeks (up to 570 hours per year that you can use flexibly with one or more providers. Some providers will allow you to stretch the hours over 52 weeks using fewer hours per week).

Three and four year olds of eligible working parents

Wales: entitled to **30 hours a week** 48 weeks per year (Childcare Offer Wales), made up of 10 hours of early education and 20 hours of childcare.

England: entitled to **30 hours** a week **38 weeks** per year.

Existing provision for 2 and 3-year-olds of eligible parents

	Wales	England
Offered by:	Flying Start is a Welsh Government early years programme delivered by local authorities.	2-year-olds in England can get free childcare if they are in receipt of certain benefits or live in certain circumstances.
Target population:	All 2 and 3-year-old children living in Flying Start areas .	2-year-olds of eligible parents on low incomes.
Support offered:	Flying Start childcare is available for 12.5 hours a week for 39 weeks per year. At least 15 sessions of childcare provision must be made available during school holidays	Entitled to 15 hours a week for 38 weeks per year.
Eligibility criteria:	Flying Start targets the most disadvantaged areas in Wales. The programme has been targeted to areas according to measures of relative deprivation including the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation.	If parents are in receipt of certain income-related benefits . Some other 2-year-olds are also eligible for example if they have an Education Health and Care plan, receive disability living allowance, are looked after by a local authority, or have left care under an adoption, special guardianship, or child arrangements order.
Future plans:	The Welsh Government say that it is focused on the next phase of expansion of Flying Start early years provision to eventually include all 2-year-olds, with a particular emphasis on strengthening Welsh medium provision.	From April 2024, the aim is to extend this to all parents of children aged 2 years in England.

Existing provision for all 3 and 4-year-olds

	Wales	England
Target population:	All 3 and 4-year-old children from the term after their 3rd birthday until they enter education full-time.	All 3-4-year-olds and eligible disadvantaged 2-year-olds
Support offered:	Entitled to a minimum of 10 hours a week early years education also known as Foundation Phase Nursery provision. Some local authorities offer more.	Entitled to 570 hours of free early education or childcare a year. This is often taken as 15 hours each week for 38 weeks of the year.
Future plans:	Plans in Wales are focused on all two year olds as detailed in the table above.	From April 2024, working parents of 2-year-olds will be able to access 15 hours of free childcare per week. From September 2024, the intention is to extend this to working parents of children aged 9 month to 2-year-olds (announced by the Government in their Spring Budget 2023).

Existing provision for 3 and 4-year-olds of eligible parents

	Wales	England
Offered by:	The Welsh Government, Childcare Offer for Wales.	Free Childcare scheme for eligible children in England.
Target population:	3 and 4-year-olds of eligible parents.	3 and 4-year-olds of eligible parents.
Support offered:	Entitled to 30 hours a week of childcare for up to 48 weeks of the year. This is made up of up to 20 hours of childcare and at least 10 hours per week of early years education.	Entitled to 30 hours a week of free childcare, for 38 weeks of the year (during school term time).
Eligibility criteria:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Living in Wales, ▪ The child’s age, ▪ Each parent’s gross income must be £100,000 or less per year. <p>In addition, meeting one of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Employed and earn at least, on average, the equivalent to working 16 hours a week at National Minimum Wage or Living Wage, ▪ On Statutory Pay and Leave (Sick, Maternity, Paternity, Parental, Bereavement or Adoption Leave), 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Living in England, ▪ The child’s age, ▪ If you’re working (employed, self-employed, or both) and earn at least, on average, the equivalent to working 16 hours a week at National Minimum Wage or Living Wage (which is expecting to earn approximately at least £1,098-£2,167 over the next 3 months depending on your age), ▪ Your income (and if you have a partner, your partner’s income),

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enrolled on a further or higher education course that is at least 10 weeks in length (A 2021 Co-operation Agreement commitment expanded the eligibility criteria to also include these groups). <p>If you have a partner who lives with you, they must also meet one of these employment or education criteria.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Your child’s circumstances (you will not be eligible if your child does not usually live with you), and Your immigration status. <p>From September 2025, the 30 hours entitlement aims to be extended in stages to children aged 9 months to up to 3 years (announced by the Government in their Spring Budget 2023).</p>
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Expansion plans in both countries

Both countries have some existing provision for certain groups of 2-year-olds, but this provision is delivered in different ways. There are also plans for expansion for this provision in both countries, including:

- In Wales, the Welsh Government say that it is focused on the **next phase of expansion** of Flying Start early years provision of 12.5 hours a week to eventually include all 2-year-olds, with a particular emphasis on strengthening Welsh medium provision.
- In England, the UK Government announced in the **Spring Budget 2023** that it would expand free childcare as set out in the stages below, culminating in 30 hours for some children aged 9 months upwards:

April 2024

Allow working parents of **2 year-olds** to access **15 hours** of free child-care per week.



September 2024

Extend the **15 hours** of free childcare to working parents aged **9 month to 2 year-olds**.



September 2025

Extend the **30 hour** entitlement in stages to children of working parents **aged 9 months to 3 years**.



September 2025

All eligible working parents of children **aged 9 months up to 3 years** should be able to access **30 hours** per week.

7. Welsh Government's childcare commitments

The Welsh Government Programme for Government: update (2021 to 2026) is a 'refreshed version of the Programme for Government' that incorporates the Co-operation Agreement with Plaid Cymru.

The childcare commitments within it are to:

- Fund childcare for more families where parents are in education and training or on the edge of work.
- Deliver a phased expansion of early years provision to include all 2-year-olds, with a particular emphasis on strengthening Welsh medium provision.
- Continue to support our flagship Flying Start programmes.

The Welsh Government Annual Report 2023 sets out the progress made towards delivering these commitments, stating that:

"In September 2022, we expanded the Childcare Offer to parents of three and four-year-olds in education and training, making an estimated 3,000 families eligible for funded childcare. Since its launch, 438 families have accessed funded childcare. We have expanded access to all four elements of the early years Flying Start programme, benefitting over 3,100 children and we have provided £46m to support the expansion of Flying Start childcare. We have also provided £70m to make improvements and undertake essential maintenance of childcare settings and £3.8m to support more childcare providers to improve their Welsh-language provision."

A Senedd Research article in September 2023, **Supporting 'vulnerable' people: what is the Welsh Government delivering?** also provides more information.