Understanding Free Childcare Entitlements

An Advice Leaflet for Usdaw Members

USDAW EQUALITIES

Understanding Free Early Years Childcare Entitlements

Understanding free childcare in the UK can be difficult and confusing.

There are free state-funded childcare schemes for young children up to 4 years old in England, Scotland and Wales. But although the schemes are similar, they have different eligibility rules.

There is currently no scheme for free childcare in Northern Ireland but there is other support for working families.

This leaflet aims to give you more information about the support and eligibility in your area, how to apply and where to go if you have questions.

England

30 Hours' Free Childcare for Working Parents of Children Aged 9 Months to 4 Years

If you are working, you may be eligible to apply for 30 hours of free childcare per week for children from 9 months up to 4 years old.

This is usually taken as 30 hours a week for 38 weeks of the year (during school term time). You may be able to get free childcare for more than 38 weeks a year if you take fewer hours over more weeks (you need to check with your childcare provider to find out if this is something they offer).

To be eligible, you and your partner (if you have one) must each earn at least £195 per week, on average (less if you are under 21). This is the equivalent of working 16 hours a week at the national minimum wage.

You will still be treated as meeting this earnings requirement if you or your partner are on maternity, paternity, adoption, parental, parental bereavement or carer's leave, or if you are receiving statutory sick pay.

If you are making a claim as a couple, provided one partner meets the work and earnings requirements, you may still be eligible if the other partner:

- Has been assessed by the DWP as having limited capability for work (LCW).
- Has been assessed by the DWP as having limited capability for work and work-related activity (LCWRA).
- Is entitled to a 'specified benefit' (Universal Credit (with a carer element), Carer's Allowance, Carer's Assistance, Severe Disablement Grant or credits for incapacity or limited capability for work).

To apply, you need to set up an online childcare account. After registering, you get a code to take to your childcare provider. You need to apply before the term starts or you will have wait until the beginning of the next term. You need to reconfirm your eligibility every 3 months.

To apply or check if you're eligible, visit the website: **www.gov.uk/free-childcare-if-working**

There is a helpline if you need help with your application: **0300 123 4097**

15 Hours' Free Education and Childcare for 2-Year-Olds

This scheme is available to low-income families or where a child has additional needs. To be eligible, you must be in receipt of a qualifying benefit or your 2-year-old child must fit into one of the categories of children who have additional needs.

The qualifying benefits are:

- Income Support.
- Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA).
- Income-related Employment and Support Allowance (ESA).
- Universal Credit – for those on a low income from work (this usually means a combined income of no more than £15,400 a year after tax).
- The guaranteed element of State Pension Credit.
- Support through Part 6 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 (Support for Asylum Seekers).
- You may also qualify is you are subject to immigration control and on a low income.

If you don't receive any qualifying benefits, your 2-year-old can still get free childcare if:

- They're looked after by a local council.
- They have a statement of special educational needs (SEN) or an education, health and care (EHC) plan.
- They get Disability Living Allowance.
- They've left care under a special guardianship order, child arrangements order or adoption order.
- You can't claim benefits because of your asylum seeker status or a no recourse to public funds condition. This only applies in certain circumstances so check with your local council.

To check eligibility or make an application, contact your childcare provider or local council: **www.gov.uk/find-free-early-education**

15 Hours' Free Childcare for 3 and 4-Year-Olds

This scheme is open to all 3 and 4-year olds. There are no earnings or work requirements. You should be able to start receiving the childcare from 1 January, 1 April or 1 September following your child's 3rd birthday. Contact your childcare provider or local council if you need further guidance: **www.gov.uk/find-free-early-education**

Scotland

If Your Child Is Aged 2:

You can get 1,140 hours of free childcare a year (around 30 hours a week during term time) for your 2-year-old if you are in receipt of a qualifying benefit or you or your child have experience of care.

The qualifying benefits are:

- Income Support.
- Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance.
- Income-related Employment and Support Allowance (ESA).
- Incapacity Benefit.
- Severe Disablement Allowance.
- State Pension Credit.
- Universal Credit – if your household income from work is £660 (net) a month or less.
- Support through Part 6 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 (Support for Asylum Seekers).

Even if you are not receiving a qualifying benefit, your 2-year-old can still get free childcare if they are looked after by a local council, they are in kinship care or they have been appointed a guardian. If you as a parent have experience of care, your 2-year-old can also access free childcare.

Some local councils offer free childcare to children who do not meet the usual eligibility criteria, so it's always worth checking with your local council even if you don't meet the criteria.

Once your 2-year-old child qualifies for free childcare, you will continue to receive it even if you have a change of circumstances such as no longer qualifying for benefits.

To apply or check your eligibility, contact your local council: **www.mygov.scot/find-your-local-council**

If Your Child Is Aged 3-4:

All children aged 3-4 are entitled to 1,140 hours of free childcare a year (approximately 30 hours a week during term time). There are no earnings, work or other criteria required to be eligible.

Some councils may offer more than 30 hours. You need to speak to your local council to find out if this is something they offer.

Some councils only accept applications at certain points in the year, which could be up to a year in advance. It is worth checking with your local council when you should apply to give you a higher chance of securing childcare with your preferred provider.

If you miss the deadline, your child will still be eligible, but you may not be able to get the childcare from your preferred provider.

If your child is eligible, the free childcare will start at the beginning of a school term.

To apply for free childcare, or check the offer in your area, contact your local council: **www.mygov.scot/find-your-local-council**

Wales

The Flying Start Scheme (for Children Aged 2-3)

You can get 12.5 hours of free childcare a week for children aged 2 under the scheme. To be eligible, you must live in a Flying Start area. Only some parts of Wales are currently covered, but the scheme is gradually being rolled out.

If you live in a Flying Start area, you can get 2.5 hours of childcare per day over 5 days a week during term time (39 weeks of the year) following your child's 2nd birthday until the term in which they turn 3.

In addition to free childcare, the Flying Start Scheme also offers additional support services for children aged 0-3 and their families through an intensive health visiting service, parenting support and support for speech, language and communication development.

To find out if your area is covered, or to apply for the scheme visit: **www.gov.wales/get-help-flying-start**

The Childcare Offer for Wales (for Children Aged 3-4)

You can get up to 30 hours of free childcare a week for children aged 3 and 4 under the childcare offer for Wales. The 30 hours is made up of 10 hours a week of early education and a maximum of 20 hours a week of childcare. The amount of childcare you can get depends on what your local council offers.

The types of childcare that are available under the offer are nurseries, childminders, playgroups, crèches and out of school childcare.

To be eligible, you and your partner (if you have one) must each earn at least £195 per week, on average (less if you are under 21). This is the equivalent of working 16 hours a week at the national minimum wage.

If you or your partner are on maternity, paternity or adoption leave, you will still be treated as meeting the earnings requirement – this applies whether you are single or a couple.

You may also be eligible if your partner is unable to work because they are disabled or caring for a disabled person (and claiming relevant benefits), if you are a foster parent or kinship carer, newly self-employed or if you are subject to immigration control and meet the eligibility criteria.

The earliest you can apply is the term in which your child turns 3. Childcare will not start until the beginning of the term after you apply, and will continue until the September after your child reaches the age of 4.

To check your eligibility or make an application, visit the website: **www.gov.wales/check-eligibility-childcare-offer**

Using the Childcare Offer Entitlement

The free childcare offer is available for 48 weeks of the year. This includes 39 weeks during term time and 9 weeks during non-term time which is treated as 'holiday provision'.

The Welsh Government has not specified which of the non-term time 13 weeks of the year are designated as the 9 weeks of 'holiday provision' to allow parents to choose the weeks that they most need free childcare.

You can use the 30 hours of free childcare however you choose (for example, 10 hours per day over a period of 3 days a week), but you cannot stretch your entitlement over more than one week or transfer unused hours across weeks.

You must report any changes in your circumstances that may affect your entitlement to the childcare to both your childcare provider and local council.

Northern Ireland

Government funding of childcare in Northern Ireland is different to the rest of the UK, and schemes such as the '30 hours' free childcare' scheme are not currently available.

Funded Pre-School Education for 3 and 4-Year-Olds

All parents of 3 and 4-year-olds can apply for at least 12.5 hours per week of funded pre-school education. Some providers offer up to 22.5 hours per week. This applies during term time for the year immediately before starting primary school.

Information on how to apply can be found here: **www.eani.org.uk/parents/admissions/pre-school-admissions-guide**

You can also find information about childcare options through NI Direct: **www.nidirect.gov.uk/information-and-services/parenting-and-childcare/childcare**

UK-Wide Support with Childcare Costs

Working parents can also benefit from UK-wide financial support schemes that pay some of their registered childcare costs, making them more affordable, including:

- Tax-Free Childcare.
- Universal Credit – Childcare Element.

Check what help you could get with childcare costs: **www.gov.uk/childcare-calculator**

Help and advice with childcare entitlements

Childcare Choices

Government website to check what childcare support you may be eligible for (for everyone living in England, Wales, Scotland and NI).

www.childcarechoices.gov.uk

Working Families

UK national charity supporting working parents and carers.

workingfamilies.org.uk

Helpline: **0300 012 0312**
(weekdays 11am - 2pm)

Gingerbread

Advice and support for single parent families.

www.gingerbread.org.uk

Citizens Advice

Independent and confidential advice on benefits and entitlements and other issues in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

www.citizensadvice.org.uk

More Information

Usdaw Nationwide

Wherever you work, an Usdaw rep or official (Area Organiser) is not far away. For further information or assistance, contact your Usdaw rep or local Usdaw office. Alternatively, you can phone our Freephone Helpline **0800 030 80 30** to connect you to your regional office or visit our website: **www.usdaw.org.uk**
You can also write to the Union's Head Office. Just write **FREEPOST USDAW** on the envelope and put it in the post.

Join Usdaw

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www.usdaw.org.uk/JoinUs

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What Happens Next

Once we process your application, you will receive a membership card with our Helpline telephone number and a New Member's Pack giving details of all the benefits and professional services available to you.

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