

Free Early Learning

Free childcare for 3 and 4 year olds and some 2 year olds

Government funded childcare is available for all 3 and 4 year olds, and eligible 2 year olds.

All eligible children are entitled to up to 570 hours of funded childcare each year. In Sheffield we call this Free Early Learning or FEL.

FEL helps children learn language, physical and social skills through play activities. It also helps parents and carers access employment and training.

The hours must be taken over a minimum of 38 weeks (15 hours a week, or 30 if entitled to additional hours) but can be taken over more weeks: for example, your child could take 12 hours a week for 47½ weeks. Talk to your childcare provider about what options are available.

From September 2017, eligible 3 and 4 year olds will be entitled to an additional 570 hours a year (1,140 funded hours in total). This is commonly referred to as “30 Hours free Childcare”. You will need to meet the criteria for your child to be eligible (see below).

Is my 2 year old eligible for FEL?

2 year old children are eligible if they are old enough and if they meet any **one** of these criteria:

EITHER

The family is eligible for:

- income Support
- income-based Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA)
- income-related Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)
- Universal Credit
- tax credits and an annual income under £16,190 before tax
- the guaranteed element of State Pension Credit
- support through part 6 of the Immigration and Asylum Act
- the Working Tax Credit 4-week run on (the payment you get when you stop qualifying for Working Tax Credit)

OR

- they're looked after by a local council
- they have a current statement of special education needs (SEN) or an education health and care plan (ECH)
- they get Disability Living Allowance
- they've left care under a special guardianship order, child arrangements order or adoption order

How do I apply for 2 year old FEL?

Applications can be made online via a smartphone, tablet or computer. You can [apply for 2 Year FEL via the Citizen Portal](#). You will need an email address set up before you apply.

You can only apply for children who live with you and for whom you have parental responsibility.

You must let us know if the child stops living with you or you no longer have parental responsibility while they're still using a FEL place.

If you are having problems applying online you can request assistance from a local nursery or your childminder if they are registered to provide FEL. They may need to book a time to do this and you must be with them when the application is made. If a nursery assists with the application, you are not obliged to take a place at that nursery.

Occasionally the portal facility may be temporarily unavailable due to an upgrade or a fault. If this happens you should wait at least 24 hours before trying again to allow time for the completion of any remedial work.

When do I apply for 2 year old FEL?

You can apply at any time starting from 10 weeks before the end of the term in which your child's turns 2.

Date of 2 nd birthday	Apply from	Place funded from
Between 1 April and 31 August	23 June	1 September
Between 1 September and 31 December	23 October	1 January
Between 1 January and 31 March	22 January	1 April

If your child is already old enough to start, then the place will be funded as soon as you confirm you are eligible using the online portal. For example, if you haven't applied yet but your child's second birthday was in the previous school term, then the place can start as soon as you complete a successful application.

What if my circumstances change?

Once you have applied successfully, your child's funded place will be available until the term after they turn 3 (when they will be entitled to the universal FEL offer due to their age).

Even if the reason you qualified changes, your child's place is still funded. For example, if you qualified because you earned under £16,190 but your earnings go above that amount, your child's childcare is still funded.

How do I know if my 3 or 4 year old is eligible for FEL?

All children aged 3 and 4 are eligible for the universal hours of FEL from the term after their third birthday.

Date of 3rd birthday	Place funded from
Between 1 April and 31 August	1 September
Between 1 September and 31 December	1 January
Between 1 January and 31 March	1 April

The universal hours will be funded until your child takes a place in a school reception class or reaches compulsory school age. School reception classes are for 25 hours a week and provide a good stepping stone between nursery and school. Reception class places are available from the September after your child turns 4, but they can be deferred for one or two terms if you prefer.

Is my 3 or 4 year old eligible for the Extended FEL offer (30 Hours) ?

Parents or carers of 3 and 4 year olds need to meet the following criteria in order to be eligible:

- Earn or expect to earn the equivalent of 16 hours pay at National Minimum Wage or National Living Wage over the next three months.
 - For 25 years old and over this is £120 a week
 - For parents under 25 years old this is £112.80 a week
- This threshold applies whether you are in paid employment, self-employed or on a zero hours contract.
- One or both parents can be absent from the work place due to maternity, paternity, shared parental or adoption leave, or on statutory sick pay.
- If one parent meets the income criteria above and the other is unable to work because they are disabled, have caring responsibilities or have been assessed as having limited capability to work.
- Parents who are newly self-employed and are in a “start-up period” do not need to meet the income criteria for 12 months.
- If you are a non-EEA national you must have recourse to public funds – i.e. you must have a National Insurance Number or National Asylum Seeker Number.
- Earnings of any one parent must not exceed £100,000 per year.

The eligibility criteria must be met by both parents/carers in a couple, or the lone parent in a single parent family.

HMRC will determine who is eligible. Neither the Local Authority nor the childcare provider can influence this decision.

How do I apply for the Extended FEL offer (30 Hours) ?

Applications can be made online via a smartphone, tablet or computer. You can [apply via the GOV.UK website](#). You will need a Government Gateway account set up before you apply – the application will take you through this, but allow approximately 30 minutes to complete the whole process.

You can also apply for the Tax Free Childcare scheme at the same time. The two applications are linked, so if you want to opt out of this part (for example if you already receive tax credits or belong to a childcare voucher scheme) then you can do so.

You will need your latest pay slip, your national insurance number, your partner's national insurance number and the date you both started your current place of employment.

At the end of the process you will be set up with a government childcare account, which will show your eligibility details.

Go to the GOV.UK website: <https://childcare-support.tax.service.gov.uk/>

When do I apply for the Extended FEL offer (30 Hours) ?

It is important that you apply as soon as you meet the criteria as a delay may mean delaying the extended hours until the following term.

Children can start the extended hours from the term **after** they turn three **and** approval is received from HMRC. If you don't apply until after the start of term, your child will only be funded for the universal element (up to 15 hours a week) until the next term.

Date of 3 rd birthday	Eligibility code received by no later than	Place funded from
Between 1 April and 31 August	31 August	1 September
Between 1 September and 31 December	31 December	1 January
Between 1 January and 31 March	31 March	1 April

The earliest you can apply is 12 weeks before your child's third birthday.

The latest you can apply is when your child reaches compulsory school age. As with the universal FEL hours, you cannot use these extended hours at the same time as a school reception class.

Remember to apply during the term before your child starts their place in order to secure government funding for the additional hours.

Sign up for a reminder at Childcare Choices website:

<https://www.childcarechoices.gov.uk/>

What happens after being told that I'm eligible ?

If your application is approved you will receive a reference number to take to your childcare provider when you book a place. **This number is valid for three months.**

GOV.UK will send you a reminder 4 weeks before the number expires asking you to confirm you are still eligible.

It is important you continue your claim when contacted. **If you don't confirm that you're still eligible your extended hours entitlement will cease.**

What if I stop being eligible for the Extended FEL offer (30 hours) ?

If your circumstances change and you no longer meet the criteria, or if you fail to reconfirm your eligibility, GOV.UK will inform you that you are no longer eligible. Your child's place will **not** stop immediately as it will still be funded for a grace period.

The length of the grace period varies according to when you stop being eligible.

Date of ineligible decision on reconfirmation:	Grace Period end date (child funded until):
1 January – 10 February	31 March
11 February – 31 March	31 August
1 April – 26 May	31 August
27 May – 31 August	31 December
1 September – 21 October	31 December
22 October – 31 December	31 March

We will inform your childcare provider(s) that you are no longer eligible and the end date for the grace period. Your child will still be entitled to the universal FEL hours (up to 15 hours a week).

If you are using more than one provider to deliver all the hours your child is entitled to, then you should use the grace period to discuss where and when you want to use the reduced hours.

How do I find a FEL place?

To offer a FEL place, childcare providers have to be registered with the Local Authority and they have to agree to our Code of Practice and Funding Agreement.

All providers offering FEL should be on [our Sheffield Directory listings](#).

FEL providers include:

- Nursery classes in schools
- Day nurseries
- Childminders
- Playgroups and pre-schools
- Maintained nursery schools

Childcare providers should be happy for you to visit them to look around and ask any questions you may have before you make a decision on who will look after your child.

For 2 year old FEL, the provider will need to confirm your eligibility code is valid before they can confirm the place. You will also need your National Insurance number, your child's birth certificate and proof of residency.

For the universal FEL for 3&4 year olds the provider will need to see your child's birth certificate and proof of residency.

The provider may also ask to see your National Insurance Number so they can apply for additional funding called Early Years Pupil Premium. **Pupil Premium will benefit your child directly and if you are eligible it is important you allow your provider to apply.** Applying for Pupil Premium does not affect any Tax Credits or means tested benefits and is paid directly to the provider.

For the Extended FEL (30 Hours) the provider will need to confirm your eligibility code before they can confirm the place (see **How do I apply** section). They will also need to see your National Insurance Number(s), your child's birth certificate and proof of residency.

You may want to consider using more than one childcare provider, especially if you are entitled to the Extended FEL offer (30 Hours).

You should also read our [advice on how to choose a childcare provider](#).

Can I use more than one childcare provider?

Yes, your child can use up to two different settings a day. You can also use different providers on different days – which may be useful if you need childcare at weekends or during school holidays.

All FEL places should be formally agreed between the parent and provider on a Parent/Carer Agreement form. If you are using more than one provider, you should use this form to document how many hours you are using in total. This will help you to avoid going over your entitlement of 570 or 1,140 hours a year. If you exceed your entitlement, your provider cannot be paid for the excess hours and you may be charged.

While it is permitted to use more than one provider, you should carefully consider if this is best for your child. One of the aims of FEL is to prepare children for the routine of a school day and they will benefit from stability. Changing between providers will naturally cause a disruption in that routine.

If you are using more than one childcare provider, you should ask the providers

- How they will manage the transition from one provider to the other?
- Do they have an information sharing agreement?
- Have they planned how Early Learning will be delivered between them?
- Have they worked out that the total hours do not exceed your entitlement?

Can my provider charge me for a Government funded place?

Government funding is intended to cover the cost of providing 570 or 1,140 hours of high quality, flexible childcare per year, but many providers offer services that go beyond the scope of Free Early Learning.

Providers are allowed to ask parents to pay for the following, but they cannot make it a condition of accessing the funded place:

- Any hours in addition to the funded entitlement.
- Consumables: e.g. food, drink, sun cream, nappies, wipes.
- Additional services: e.g. drama, music, foreign languages, yoga, outings.
- Deposits: these should be fully refundable – see below.
- On-call charges for childminders – see below.
- Transportation: e.g. picking up at a nursery outside of the funded hours.

Deposits can be charged for reserving a funded place, but it should be repaid in full if your child takes up the place. If the deposit is for privately paid for childcare it may be deducted from future charges rather than returned. The provider should not charge you an admin fee as a condition of accessing a funded place.

Childminders are allowed to apply a charge for being on-call. For example, if your child is at a nursery in the morning and with a childminder in the afternoon, the childminder may charge for being available in the morning should your child need picking up due to an emergency.

You should not be charged for more flexible hours, or to guarantee your child's funded place. Government funding should not be used as a subsidy against the provider's hourly rate – any privately paid for hours should be billed separately. If your child is at a setting morning and afternoon, there should not be a paid for break in the middle of the day. Providers can charge for the food at lunch but not the time. You should also have the option of supplying a packed lunch for your child.

When choosing your childcare provider, you should be aware of any additional charges and consider whether they add to the quality of the experience you want your child to have while in their care.

Any charges should be agreed and recorded in your Parent/Carer Agreement with the provider.

When can I use the FEL hours?

Childcare providers can choose the times when they offer the FEL hours, so talk to them first to ensure that the time you use is available. They are not obliged to offer FEL for all their opening hours.

FEL can be taken on any day of the week but you will not be able to have:

- More than 15 hours a week (30 if eligible for the extended entitlement)
- More than 10 hours in one day
- More than two settings in one day
- Any time before 6am or after 8pm

If you work shifts, ask your provider if they can be flexible about the hours they make available.

Many settings offer FEL over 38 weeks of the year as standard, but it can be delivered over up to 52 weeks. If you want a service that covers school holidays, ask your provider about a "stretched offer". For example:

- 570 hours a year could be 12 hours a week for 47½ weeks.

- 1,140 hours a year could be 23 hours a week for 49½ weeks.

If you want to use less than the full entitlement (for example, only 10 hours a week), this is allowed, but you should agree it with your childcare provider so they know what hours they will be funded for.

If you want to take holidays, your provider will still be funded for 4 weeks per year. For holidays over 4 weeks your provider may charge you to keep the place open.

Absences should be discussed with your provider in advance.

What if I want to change my childcare provider?

The Parent/Carer Agreement you will sign with your provider should stipulate a 4 week notice period. You will have to serve this notice period before you can move or transfer your child to a different provider. You can move to a different provider at the start of a new term without serving the notice period, but you should let your provider know as a courtesy.

You MUST give your new provider the details of your previous provider. Your new provider will be able to confirm that your child's funding has been transferred properly and check that you are not at risk of exceeding your annual hours. If you do not provide this information you may be liable for charges by your new providers for the 4 week notice period.

Only in very exceptional circumstance will the 4 week noticed period be waived.

Examples of exceptional circumstances are:

- Unexpected relocation in Sheffield (e.g. fleeing domestic abuse, interim accommodation in another area of the city following homelessness).
- As a result of child protection the child is placed in the care of others such as foster care.
- If the family circumstances change (e.g. due to job change and it's too far to travel to your current childcare provider).
- To accommodate changing shift/work pattern.

What if I want to complain about my childcare provider?

We understand a common concern is that the provider's relationship with you and your child will be affected if you express dissatisfaction, however in the first instance you should attempt to resolve any concerns with them and discuss a reasonable solution.

Your provider should have a clear complaints procedure to follow.

Disputes involving invoices and billing should be resolved based on the terms and conditions of the parental agreement/contract and not referred to the Local Authority.

The Local Authority will only become involved where there is a clear breach of the current FEL Code of Practice.

You can contact us on: childcareplanning@sheffield.gov.uk

What do I have to sign?

When you join a provider you will be asked to complete a Parent/Carer agreement/contract. This will consist of the following information:

- Your child's birth certificate or passport as proof of identity and eligibility.
- Any eligibility reference number required for 2 year old FEL and the Extended FEL for 3&4 year olds.
- Your National Insurance Number or National Asylum Seeker Number.
- Termly Pattern of Attendance, which sets out the number of hours your child attends.
- Parent/Carer and Provider declaration of the information provided.

Accessing FEL or EYPP does not affect tax credits or any means tested benefits.

You should read and fully understand all of the information. Once the details have been understood and agreed by everyone involved, it should then be signed and dated by all parties and each party should keep a copy.

Once signed it is a legally binding contract that is enforceable by law. If you have any concerns about signing your Parent/Carer Agreement you can contact your nearest Citizen Advice Bureau. We cannot advise on legal matters.

Privacy Notice

In processing your personal information and any other information you provide about your family to us or your childcare provider, we must comply with the Data Protection Act 1998. Further information is available from the Information Commissioner.

To ensure the privacy of your information and to let you know about your information rights as well as how your information may be used, we have produced some documents called Privacy Notices which you can download so you can find out more.

Is there any other help towards childcare fees?

For childcare costs in addition to the Government funded hours there are a number of schemes available:

- Tax Free Childcare: for every £8 you pay in, the Government pays in £2.
- Childcare vouchers: available through participating employers.
- Tax Credits or Universal Credit.
- Disability Living Allowance if eligible.

You cannot access all of these programmes at the same time, so you should research which one is best for you. A Childcare Calculator is available online to help work out what's available. <https://www.gov.uk/childcare-calculator>

More information on the different options is available at:

<https://www.childcarechoices.gov.uk/>

You can get advice regarding FEL from the childcare planning team at Sheffield City Council. See contact

Childcare Planning:

Email – childcareplanning@sheffield.gov.uk

Tel: 0114 2813785

<https://www.sheffield.gov.uk/freeearlylearning>

Or contact your local children's centre