

Early learning and childcare

A guide for parents and carers



ACCOUNTS COMMISSION 

AUDITOR GENERAL 

Prepared by Audit Scotland
February 2018

Introduction

Audit Scotland published a report on [Early learning and childcare](#) which looks at how effectively the Scottish Government and councils are working together to expand funded early learning and childcare. We've produced this guide for parents and carers to answer some frequently asked questions about funded ELC and how to get a place, and we suggest some ways you can get more information and help. The guide also covers how we carried out our audit and what we found.

This guide has two parts:

- [Part 1. Frequently asked questions about funded early learning and childcare and how to get a place](#)
- [Part 2. How we carried out our audit and what we found](#)

Part 1

Frequently asked questions about funded early learning and childcare and how to get a place

What is funded early learning and childcare?

Funded early learning and childcare used to be called pre-school education, that is, education that children receive before they go to school.

But it's very difficult to separate learning from care for young children as they both happen at the same time. This change in name tries to reflect this.

The government and councils now use the term **Funded early learning and childcare** for where this type of care is paid for by councils. This is offered to some two-year-olds and three and four-year-olds.

Where are funded places available?

These vary by council, but can include:

- council-run nurseries (sometimes these are part of a primary school)
- private nurseries or nurseries run by voluntary groups or charities
- playgroups
- childminders.

Sometimes you may have to pay for this care first and then your local council, or the place where your child has a funded early learning and childcare place, will refund the money to you. See '[How do you apply for a funded early learning and childcare place?](#)' for more information.

How many hours are available?

From August 2014, the number of funded hours increased from 475 to 600 hours a year. Six hundred hours of funded early learning and childcare is the same as around 16 hours a week of funded early learning and childcare during school term-time. A school term is around 38 weeks a year.

If your child has a funded early learning and childcare place for 600 hours, this may be a part-time place each day during school term-time. Other options, such as longer places for fewer days, or places during school holidays are also available. These options vary by council.

From August 2020, the number of funded hours will increase from 600 to 1,140 hours per year for [children with a funded place](#). This is the same as around 30 hours each week during school term-time.

What are the benefits of early learning and childcare?

Research has found high quality early learning and childcare can have benefits for children's social, emotional and educational skills. Health Scotland recently reviewed the research on the different parts of early learning and childcare that can contribute to these benefits. You can find more information in [their report](#). Parents that we spoke to were very positive about the benefits of early learning and childcare to their child – see our [report](#) for more information on this.

Does your child qualify for funded early learning and childcare?

Working out when your child can get a funded place can be complicated and different councils have different rules.

This will depend on the month they were born and which council you want to use funded early learning and childcare in. [Our report](#) sets out when children should be able to start their funded place depending on their birthday, as a minimum. Exhibit 8 of our report shows this (see below). But some councils provide places earlier than this.

Exhibit 8

Statutory guidance on eligibility for funded ELC

Start of eligibility depends on the child's birthday.

Child's birthday



Source: Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, Early Learning and Childcare, Statutory Guidance, Scottish Government, August 2014.

For the most up-to-date information it's best to check directly with your council. Councils might include this information on their website: try searching for 'early learning', 'childcare' or 'education'. Or you can call your council's main switchboard and ask to be put through to the right service.

Can your two-year-old get a funded place?

Your child can get a funded early learning and childcare when they are two if their parent or carer receives one, or more, of the following:

- Income Support.
- Job Seeker's Allowance (income-based).
- any income related element of Employment and Support Allowance.

- Child Tax Credit but not Working Tax Credit (up to an income of £16,105. This figure is reviewed each year, so make sure you check with your local council).
- Both maximum Working Tax Credit and maximum Child Tax Credit (up to an income of £6,420. This figure is reviewed each year, so make sure you check with your local council).
- Incapacity Benefit or Severe Disablement Allowance.
- State Pension Credit.
- Support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999.
- Universal Credit (you can claim this if your income is less than £610 a month)

Your child can still continue to get a funded place if you receive one of these benefits and then your circumstances change. For example, if you were receiving Job Seekers Allowance and you started a new job, so stopped receiving Job Seekers Allowance, your child would still keep their funded place

If parents don't live together and one parent receives one of these benefits, but the other doesn't, your local council will decide if your child can get a funded place.

Two-year-olds can also get a funded early learning and childcare place if they are (or ever have been since turning two):

- Looked after. This is where a child is placed in the care of their local council, through a voluntary agreement with their parents or a compulsory process such as a children's hearing or the court service.
- Under a kinship care order. This is where a child is living full-time, or most of the time, with a relative or family friend because they are not able to live with their birth parents. The arrangement is made by:
 - social work,
 - the court or children's panel (or both).

The kinship carer will have some or all parental responsibilities, but the child is not looked after.

- Under a guardianship order. This is where a child's parent has died and had made arrangements in their will or other written documents for another adult to become the child's guardian.

The date two-year-olds can start a funded place depends on their birthday and their local council. [Our report](#) sets out when children should be able to start their funded place depending on their birthday, as a minimum. But some councils provide places earlier than this. For the most up-to-date information it's best to check directly with your council. Councils might include this information on their website: try searching for 'early learning', 'childcare' or 'education'. Or you can call your council's main switchboard and ask to be put through to the right service.

If your two-year-old gets a funded place, they will continue to be able to have a funded place until they are able to start school (see ['Can your five-year-old get a funded place?'](#) for more information). However, this might not always be a place in the same setting, as some councils offer different services for two-year-olds and three and four-year-olds. See our question on ['Can you choose where your child goes?'](#) for more information.

Can your three-year-old get a funded place?

All three-year-olds can get a funded early learning and childcare place. When children start their funded place depends on their birthday and your local council. [Our report](#) sets out when children should be able to start their funded place depending on their birthday, as a minimum. But some councils provide places earlier than this.

For the most up-to-date information it's best to check directly with your council. Councils might include this information on their website: try searching for 'early learning', 'childcare' or 'education'. Or you can call your council's main switchboard and ask to be put through to the right service.

Can your four-year-old get a funded place?

All four-year-olds should be able to get a funded early learning and childcare place. Once your child is at an age when they can start primary school they won't automatically get a funded early learning and childcare place. If you decide to defer your child's school start date, for example, because of the date of their birthday, you'll need to talk to your council. Some children in these circumstances are able to get an extra year's funded place. [This table gives you more information](#).

Can your five-year-old get a funded place?

Most children stop being eligible for a funded early learning and childcare place when they start school. The age that children start school depends on when their birthday falls in the year. The table below shows you the options for children starting school and how that affects their funded early learning and childcare place, depending on their birthday.

| Child's birthday | Start at school |
|---------------------------|---|
| 1 March – 31 August | Start of autumn term (sometime in August) in the year they turn five. |
| 1 September – 31 December | Start of autumn term (sometime in August) in the year they turn five. You can choose to defer your child from starting school until the following August. If you do this, your child will not normally get an extra year of funded early learning and childcare. Some councils may choose to offer this in some circumstances. |
| 1 January – 29 February | Start of the autumn term (sometime in August) in the year before they turn five. You can choose to defer your child from starting school until the following August. Your child automatically gets an extra year of funded early learning and childcare. |

How does funded early learning and childcare work?

What can you expect your child to receive?

Our guide outlines [when your child can get a funded place](#)

If your child can get a funded place, they can receive 600 hours of funded early learning and childcare each year. This works out at around 16 hours a week in school term-time. But the way in which local councils offer these 600 hours varies by area. Find out some of the ways in which [600 hours is offered where you live](#).

The options available vary across the country but may include:

- part-day places in a morning or afternoon
- full-day places

- places split across more than one setting, for example a school nursery and a private nursery, and other different options.

Councils are continuing to change the way in which services work. So it's always best to check with your local council for the most up-to-date information.

Councils might include this information on their website: try searching for 'early learning', 'childcare' or 'education'. Or you can call your council's main switchboard and ask to be put through to the right service.

Some councils are bringing in 1,140 hours of funded early learning and childcare in small areas, before the deadline for doing this by August 2020. Other councils are still thinking through how they will gradually bring in the extra hours before this deadline.

Your local council will be able to give you the most up-to-date information on when 1,140 hours will be available in your area. This should be August 2020 at the latest.

What if you don't want to send your child?

Unlike school, funded early learning and childcare places are not compulsory, so you don't need to send your child if you don't want to.

What if you don't want to use all the hours?

Unlike school, funded early learning and childcare is not compulsory so you can choose to send your child for fewer than 600 hours.

We found that some councils gave different priority to children who were applying for fewer hours when making decisions about places. Contact your local council to find out more about how it works in your area. Some councils list this information on their website: try searching for 'early learning', 'childcare' or 'education'. Or you can call the main switchboard and ask to be put through to the right service.

What if you want more than the 600 hours the council offers?

Some places that offer funded early learning and childcare will let you buy extra hours of early learning and childcare beyond your 600 hour place. Sometimes this is called wraparound care.

For example, if your child has a place from 8am until 4pm two days a week, some settings will offer childcare up to 6pm, if you pay for it. Other settings might let you buy a place for another day of the week.

The nursery or other early learning and childcare setting, for example a childminder or playgroup, you're considering will be able to give you more information on whether they provide this service.

You can contact your local council to find out how it works in your area. Some councils list this information on their website: try searching for 'early learning', 'childcare' or 'education'. Or you can call the main switchboard and ask to be put through to the right service.

What if you want your child to get their early learning and childcare in a different council to where you live?

Councils can arrange with other neighbouring councils to offer funded early learning and childcare places to children who live in a different council area. For example, some parents who work in a different council area to where they live prefer their child to have a funded early learning and childcare place near their work.

Contact your council to find out more about how this works in your area. Some councils list this information on their website: try searching for 'early learning', 'childcare' or 'education'. Or you can call the main switchboard and ask to be put through to the right service.

Does an early learning and childcare place cost anything?

This depends on local arrangements. For example, if you have a place in a council nursery you'll only be asked to pay for any additional hours that you use over the 600 hours, if these are available and you're using this service. Some council nurseries also make a small charge for the costs of snacks provided to children.

If you have a funded place in another setting – for example, a private nursery, a nursery run by a charity or voluntary group or a playgroup – you might have to pay additional fees, for example for snacks or lunches, depending on local arrangements.

Your local council, or the particular funded early learning and childcare setting you're considering, will be able to give you more information on this.

In some councils, playgroups, private nurseries or nurseries run by charities or voluntary groups, you may need to pay for your early learning and childcare place upfront (including your 600 funded hours). But you then get a refund for your funded hours from the council or the funded early learning and childcare setting later on.

How do you apply for a funded early learning and childcare place?

The process for applying for places is different in each council. But most councils either ask you to:

- apply directly to the place where you want your child to go, or
- list the places you would prefer on one application form in the order you prefer.

Your local council can give you more information on which system it uses.

Some councils include this information on their website: try searching for 'early learning', 'childcare' or 'education'. Or you can call your council's main switchboard and ask to be put through to the right service.

Can you choose where your child goes?

You should get some choice over where your child is offered a place, but you don't have a right to choose exactly where the council offers your child a place. Councils should consider your preferences when deciding where to offer your child a place. However, this doesn't guarantee you'll get the place you want.

From August 2020, a new system will be in place called **funding follows the child**. The Scottish Government and councils are still deciding exactly how this will work. But it's likely to mean you have more choice about where you'd like to send your child for funded early learning and childcare.

You can choose to apply for a funded early learning and childcare place for your child in different types of places. These vary by council, but can include:

- council-run nurseries (sometimes these are part of a primary school)
- private nurseries or nurseries run by voluntary groups or charities
- playgroups
- childminders.

There may be some differences in places you can choose from, depending on the age of your child. For example, not all council nurseries take eligible two-year-olds

and some councils offer places for two-year-olds with childminders, but not places for older children.

You might want to consider which type of funded early learning and childcare would best suit you and your child when you're thinking about applying.

How do you decide where to apply for a place?

Your local council should be able to provide you with information on the options in your local area. Some councils list this information on their website: try searching for 'early learning', 'childcare' or 'education'. Or you can call the main switchboard and ask to be put through to the right service.

The [Scottish Families Information Service](#) also has information about some of the options available in local areas.

You might also want to consider the following when you're deciding where to apply.

- [The Care Inspectorate](#) and [Education Scotland](#) report on the quality of early learning and childcare in different settings. So you might want to look at these reports for places you're interested in applying to.
- You may find it helpful to visit the places you're considering. This gives you the chance to find out what the facilities are like and meet the staff. Try to make an appointment before you go to make sure staff have enough time to talk to you.
- Speaking to other parents in your neighbourhood to find out about the different options available to you.
- Different places may have different opening times and lengths of session. It might be helpful to think about what you need and consider this when you're deciding where to apply.
- Where your child might go to primary school. If there's a nursery attached to your child's future school, you may want to consider applying for a place there.
- Your current childcare arrangements. If you're already using childcare, and your current provider offers funded places, you may want to consider whether you want to change this, or whether you'd prefer to keep things the same as they are now.

When do you need to apply?

This varies by council and when your child's birthday is. To find out the most up-to-date information on this, contact your local council.

Some councils list this information on their website: try searching for 'early learning', 'childcare' or 'education'. Or you can call the main switchboard and ask to be put through to the right service.

When will you find out about your application?

This varies by council and when you submit your form. To find out the most up-to-date information on this contact your local council. Some councils list this information on their website: try searching for 'early learning', 'childcare' or 'education'. Or you can call the main switchboard and ask to be put through to the right service.

Who decides where your child gets a place?

This varies by area. In some councils a central admissions team decides; in others the local nursery or other early learning and childcare setting, for example a playgroup, decides.

Contact your local council to find out more about how it works in your area. Some councils list this information on their website: try searching for 'early learning', 'childcare' or 'education'. Or you can call the main switchboard and ask to be put through to the right service.

What if you're not happy about the decision?

Normally there's not an appeals process for funded early learning and childcare places, unlike applications for school. If you're unhappy with the decision, you should contact your council.

How can you let your council know your thoughts on this?

Councils regularly consult with parents on funded early learning and childcare and what they and their children need. This should help councils decide how to plan their services.

They often use online surveys, but sometimes hold focus groups or meetings with parents. Your local council will be able to give you more information on any planned consultation in your area.

When does your child get 1,140 hours?

Some councils are now bringing in 1,140 hours of funded early learning and childcare in small areas, before the deadline for doing this by August 2020. Other councils are still thinking through how they'll gradually bring in more hours before this deadline.

Your local council will be able to give you the most up-to-date information on when 1,140 hours will be available in your area. This should be August 2020 at the latest.

Some councils list this information on their website: try searching for 'early learning', 'childcare' or 'education'. Or you can call the main switchboard and ask to be put through to the right service.

Who can get 1,140 hours?

[Three-year-olds](#), [four-year-olds](#) and [some two-year-olds](#) will be able to get 1,140 hours of funded early learning and childcare from August 2020.

What does funding follows the child mean?

From August 2020, a new system will start called **funding follows the child**. The Scottish Government and councils are still deciding on the details of exactly how this will work, but it's likely to mean you'll have more choice about where you'd like to send your child for funded early learning and childcare. The Scottish Government is due to publish more information on how this will work in March 2018.

Apart from more hours available, what else will change by 2020?

Councils are still confirming their plans for 1,140 hours of funded early learning and childcare, so it's too early to provide details of the full changes expected.

From August 2020, a new system will start called **funding follows the child**. The Scottish Government and councils are still deciding on the details of exactly how this will work. But it's likely to mean you'll have more choice about where you'd like to send your child for funded early learning and childcare. The Scottish Government is due to publish more information on how this will work in March 2018.

The Scottish Government is developing a new standard for quality. All settings will need to meet this standard to offer funded early learning and childcare. More information on this should be available in March 2018.

From August 2020, all children in funded early learning and childcare will be able to get free lunches as part of their 1,140 hours of funded early learning and childcare.

Part 2

How we carried out our audit and what we found

About Audit Scotland

We're independent of the Scottish Government. We check that public organisations such as local councils and the Scottish Government spend their money properly and effectively. To do this, we audit them and publish reports on what we find.

The [Scottish Parliament](#) or the [Accounts Commission](#) – or both – consider our reports. We make recommendations to the organisations we audit to help them improve.

Find out more about what we do on [our website](#).

About our audit of early learning and childcare in Scotland

This audit looked at the following:

- How the Scottish Government and councils worked together to expand funded early learning and childcare to 600 hours a year for eligible two, three and four-year-olds from August 2014. Six hundred hours of funded early learning and childcare is the same as around 16 hours a week of funded early learning and childcare during school term-time. A school term is around 38 weeks a year. We explain funded early learning and childcare [here](#).
- How well they're planning for an increase to 1,140 hours of funded early learning and childcare each year by 2020. This is the same as around 30 hours each week during school term-time.

How did we collect our information?

During our audit we gathered information from many sources including:

- a survey of all 32 councils in Scotland
- interviews with senior staff in the Scottish Government, Care Inspectorate, Education Scotland, Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and other national bodies
- staff working in nurseries
- staff in some councils

We also spoke to parents and carers and asked them to complete an online survey.

What did our audit find?

- Councils and the Scottish Government worked well together to bring in 600 hours of funded early learning and childcare from August 2014. It's still most common for three and four-year-olds to get a part-day place in a nursery run by the council, but there are more options available.
- What the Scottish Government hopes to achieve by spending money on increasing early learning and childcare is in line with its other policies on helping children and their families. However, there is not strong research

evidence on the expected benefits to children of increasing the number of hours of funded early learning and childcare that they get in a year.

- The Scottish Government has given councils about £648 million between 2014/15 and 2017/18 to increase funded early learning and childcare to 600 hours a year. But there's a lack of information on whether this is helping children and their parents.
- Councils could improve the information available to parents to make it clearer how funded early learning and childcare works in their local area.
- The Scottish Government and councils will have to deal with some big challenges to bring in 1,140 hours of funded early learning and childcare by August 2020.

You can get more detailed information on our findings in our full [audit report](#).

What did parents tell us during our audit?

We collected information from parents through an online survey before we started our work to get information on the big issues that they were concerned about.

We also gathered detailed stories from a small number of parents to understand their experiences of early learning and childcare.

- These parents were all very positive about the impact that funded early learning and childcare was having on their child.
- They were less positive about the funded early learning and childcare available allowing them to work. This is because of how many hours of funded early learning and childcare are available to them and when these hours were available. So, for example, parents told us that only getting a place for three hours and ten minutes a day for five mornings a week did not help them to work. You can find more about what parents told us in our report, [Early Learning and Childcare: The experiences of parents and carers](#).

If you have other questions, how can you find out more?

- [The Scottish Families Information Service](#) has advice for families including information on early learning and childcare for the whole of Scotland, as well as how services work locally.
- [The Scottish Government](#) publishes information about how early learning and childcare works nationally and future changes to 1,140 hours.
- Your local council can give you information on how services work in your area. Some councils list this information on their website: try searching for 'early learning', 'childcare' or 'education'. Or you can call the main switchboard and ask to be put through to the right service.
- [mygov.scot](#) has a guide on help paying for childcare that includes information on funded early learning and childcare and links to local council websites.
- [The Scottish Childminding Association](#) has advice for parents on choosing a childminder and has a helpline for parents with childminding queries.
- [The National Day Nursery Association](#) has information for parents, including a fact sheet on choosing a nursery in Scotland.

Early learning and childcare

A guide for parents and carers

This report is available in PDF and RTF formats,
along with a podcast summary at:

www.audit-scotland.gov.uk 

If you require this publication in an alternative
format and/or language, please contact us to
discuss your needs: 0131 625 1500

or info@audit-scotland.gov.uk 

For the latest news, reports
and updates, follow us on:



Audit Scotland, 4th Floor, 102 West Port, Edinburgh EH3 9DN

T: 0131 625 1500 E: info@audit-scotland.gov.uk 

www.audit-scotland.gov.uk 