

**Plain text version of the West Sussex County Council leaflet:
A guide to Free Entitlement (From September 2017)**

What is Free Entitlement?

Free Entitlement (FE) is Government funding for free childcare for all eligible children regardless of their individual needs or their citizenship status. FE is up to 570 hours per year of flexible free childcare available to all 3 and 4 year olds and eligible 2 year olds. Some 3 and 4 year olds are eligible for an additional 570 (up to 1,140) hours per year, which we call Extended FE, if they meet the eligibility criteria.

There are three types of FE funding:

FE type:	Eligibility criteria?*	How do I apply?	FE hours per week:**	FE hours per year:**
2 year old FE	Yes, families must meet eligibility criteria	Apply online www.westsussex.gov.uk/freechildcare Once 2 year old FE funding has been awarded, it will not be removed, even if your circumstances change	Up to 15	Maximum of 570
3 and 4 year old Universal FE	Available to all 3 and 4 year olds (see date of birth table)	Once you've chosen a setting, they apply on your behalf.	Up to 15	Maximum of 570
3 and 4 year old Extended FE (30 hours)	Yes, families must meet eligibility criteria	Apply online a term before you wish your child to start www.childcarechoices.gov.uk You will need to re-confirm your eligibility every 12 weeks.	Up to 30 (15 Universal + 15 Extended)	Maximum of 1,140

*for eligibility criteria visit www.westsussex.gov.uk/freechildcare

**when accessing FE over the standard 38 weeks per year

Free places are available at eligible childminders, pre-schools and day nurseries (along with some out of school clubs and holiday playschemes meeting extra criteria). These childcare providers are known as 'settings'.

What are the benefits?

The work of childhood is play. Children naturally learn by playing, exploring their world, being creative and finding things out. The activities you do at home with your child are key to helping them develop.

In addition, research* has shown that children who also attend a high quality childcare setting enhance their all-round development and are predicted better grades as they progress through school. The longer they attend (in months and years) the greater the advantage they have.

Parents often say their children benefit by:

- having fun, improving social skills and making new friends
- experiencing new activities and learning new things
- building their confidence and independence
- encouraging their imagination and creativity
- developing skills that help them with writing later on
- learning to share, take turns and listen
- being ready for school

FE hours also enable parents to:

- start, go back to, or increase their hours at work
- undertake training and gain qualifications
- volunteer
- spend time with younger siblings
- continue with caring responsibilities
- know that they are giving their child a good start to their education

A high quality setting provides a wide range of opportunities for your child to learn as they play.

*Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education [EPPSE] and OECD (2017), Starting Strong 2017: Key OECD Indicators on Early Childhood Education and Care.

At what age is my child eligible?

- A child born between 1 April and 31 August will be eligible for the Free Entitlement from 1 September following their 3rd birthday (or 2nd birthday if eligible) until statutory school age
- A child born between 1 September and 31 December will be eligible for the Free Entitlement from 1 January following their 3rd birthday (or 2nd birthday if eligible) until statutory school age
- A child born between 1 January and 31 March will be eligible for the Free Entitlement from 1 April following their 3rd birthday (or 2nd birthday if eligible) until statutory school age

Most families will be always be better off claiming FE than paying for childcare using Tax Credits. If you are eligible for the Childcare Element of Working Tax Credit, you should contact Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) on 0845 300 3900 or online at www.hmrc.gov.uk/taxcredits to check if your claim is affected.

You can also check what help you may get with childcare costs at www.gov.uk/childcare-calculator

How do I find a place?

Once you know your child is eligible and funding has been awarded for either 2 Year Old FE or Extended FE, visit www.westsussex.gov.uk/fis to search for local settings that offer FE places. If you need any help, please contact us. The types of settings that may offer FE places must be eligible and registered with the West Sussex County Council scheme.*

Next, arrange to visit some settings to choose your preferred one. Please refer to our 'Discover...Childcare' leaflet for suggestions to help you find the best type of childcare for your child.

*refer to West Sussex County Council's Provider Declaration at www.westsussex.gov.uk/ecsfreeentitlement

Ensure you fully understand and agree to any terms and conditions **before** you accept a place. Please note, not all settings will be able to deliver your preferred days/hours, but the flexibility you need may be achieved by using more than one setting, however not on more than two sites in one day.

In order for your chosen setting to claim the funding for your child's place, you will be asked to:

- complete and sign a Parent Declaration form,

- show proof of date of birth for your child, and
- provide eligibility codes and National Insurance number as part of either your 2 Year Old FE or Extended FE application.

You must let the setting know if you intend to split the FE across more than one setting.

Is it really free?

If you are planning to only access your child's free hours, settings must ensure that no fees or conditions of access are charged, including:

- no registration/administration fees or non-refundable deposits;
- no requirement for a child to access additional hours on top of the free hours;
- no requirement for the child to access additional weeks on top of the funded weeks.

Additional services must be optional, for example providing your own healthy packed lunch, rather than paying for a lunch provided by the setting. Other additional services include items such as nappies, baby wipes, sun cream and snacks. You can pay for the setting to provide these for you or you can provide your own. The FE does not have a monetary value and is not a voucher or parental subsidy. Therefore, settings must not simply deduct the amount of funding they receive from your invoice (top-ups).

If your child will be attending a setting that is open more than 38 weeks per year you should discuss with the setting how they claim FE so you are aware of any potential loss in free hours.

If a setting has any planned closures during FE time (for example, due to holiday, In-Service Training (INSET) days, or bank holidays) then your FE hours should be made available at another time.

The amount of FE hours that can be taken in a day will depend on the admissions policy of your chosen setting. However, the setting is required to work within the following national guidelines:

- No minimum session length
- Maximum of 10 hours in one day
- Between the hours of 6am and 8pm
- 15 hours over a minimum of 2 days
- Maximum of two sites in a single day
- Where reasonably practicable, ensure children are able to take up their FE in continuous blocks of time and avoid artificial breaks in the day.

As a parent, you know your child best and should discuss your child's needs with the setting to help you decide how often your child should attend. A regular pattern of attendance is important to ensure your child's continued development. Practitioners who really know the children are able to judge when they are ready to be taught new skills.

It can be hard to balance your own needs, especially for working parents, with those of your child. However, you should aim to use your chosen setting for as long as possible, avoiding the need to move your child every few months or term.

Legally all children must start full-time education (usually in school) no later than the term after they become 5. Whenever your child starts in a school Reception Class, whether on a full or part-time basis, they can no longer receive funding for free childcare. For further information about applying for a school place please visit www.westsussex.gov.uk/admissions.

Childcare settings can set their own rates for additional hours or services but they must let you know in advance if you will be expected to pay for anything extra. Details should be included within the setting's admissions/pricing policy. For example, if you're accessing more than just the free hours you may be charged a registration fee. Any voluntary contributions asked for do not have to be paid.

What else do I need to know?

Think of the entitlement as 570 hours (1,140 with Extended FE) per year and this cannot be exceeded. These hours can be stretched (see table below) across the whole year dependent on your chosen setting's availability and pattern of delivery. For example, not all settings will be able to stretch the FE over more than 38 weeks if they are open term-time only. It is important to discuss the pattern of delivery with your chosen setting(s).

Weeks per year	Hours per week (2 year old FE/ Universal FE)	Total hours across the year (2 year old FE/ Universal FE)	Hours per week (Universal + Extended FE)	Total hours across the year (Universal + Extended FE)
38	15	570	30	1140
45	12.5	562.5*	25	1125*
51	11	561*	22	1122*

*potential loss in free hours as FE is claimed in half-hourly increments.

What are grace periods?

Grace periods only apply for the Extended FE hours (free hours over and above the universal FE if you are eligible). HMRC is responsible for checking whether you are eligible and issuing an eligibility code with validity start/end dates, and identifying grace periods. You will need to re-confirm eligibility every 12 weeks.

The grace period enables you to retain your childcare place until the end of term if you become ineligible for the Extended FE. You will still be eligible for Universal FE.

What questions should I ask about FE when visiting settings?

What and when is Headcount Day?

It is important to know when Headcount Day is, as your child may need to be in attendance by this date to access the free hours that term. Headcount days are usually in January, April and September and are when the setting confirms to us how many FE children are attending. All children claiming FE during that term should be in attendance at the setting by the Headcount Day. If your child starts after this date, FE cannot be claimed for 3 and 4 year olds until the following term (unless in exceptional circumstances). Funded 2 year olds are able to start at any point during a term. Settings can work in partnership to share funding over a term, including school holidays, and should have a formal agreement in place. For example, if you want to access stretched funding during term-time and also access a separate holiday provision, the setting where your child is in attendance during Headcount Day will claim the funding and be responsible for forwarding funds directly to the holiday setting through an agreement between themselves. This must not exceed the overall number of hours you are claiming (e.g. 15 hours for Universal FE or 30 hours including Extended FE) over the standard 38 weeks.

How long is the notice period if I want to move my child?

These should be laid out in the setting's Admissions Policy. It is important you adhere to their notice periods to avoid any additional or unexpected charges. Following the notice period the setting will forward any unused funding to your new setting within West Sussex.

Can I see your setting's policies? (including admissions, behaviour management/social development, equal opportunities, safeguarding, sickness, insurance cover, registration certificate, etc.)

The admissions policy is particularly important as it should show clearly how they offer the FE and any potential obligations, financial or otherwise, over and above the FE. You should understand all the policies of a setting before agreeing to the terms and conditions and signing a contract. If you have any queries regarding the policy, discuss this with the setting **before** signing a contract. For further help and support contact us.

Can I see a sample invoice so that I can understand your charges?

Settings should be able to show you a sample invoice and explain how charges are calculated and displayed. However, the invoice should never show your free hours as having a monetary value. If, having discussed your query with the setting, you are still unclear please contact us for further assistance.

Can I increase FE hours part way through a term once my child has settled?

Talk to the setting about the best approach to settling in your child. If you choose not to take the full entitlement each week then you will only be able to increase this at the beginning of the following term. Settings should offer a settling in period at the beginning of your child's attendance.

Do the FE hours include lunch time?

If the FE hours do include lunch time, then the setting can charge you for the actual meal, not the time. However, if you are only accessing free hours you must be given the option to provide a packed lunch instead. You can discuss with them any specific food policies the setting may have.

When does your setting offer FE?

It is important you know exactly when free hours are available so you can decide if this meets your needs. Please note accessing optional additional services outside of these free hours may incur additional costs.

Are you registered for Tax-Free Childcare?

If you are accessing more than just the free hours and not accessing childcare vouchers, tax credits or universal credit, you may be eligible for Tax-Free Childcare. You can set up an online childcare account to pay your setting directly. For every £8 you pay in, the Government will add £2 up to a maximum of £2,000 per child, per year (£4,000 per year for a child with a disability). To qualify, parents must be in work and each earning at least £120 (on average) a week and not more than £100,000 per year, including self-employed and people on zero hours contracts. For more information on how to apply and the full eligibility go to www.westsussex.gov.uk/childcarecosts

Where can I go for extra help and support?

For further information and frequently asked questions please visit www.westsussex.gov.uk/freechildcare.

You can contact the Family Information Service for further Information and guidance about your family's needs.

Internet

www.westsussex.gov.uk/freechildcare

Email

family.info.service@westsussex.gov.uk

Telephone

01243 777807

Post

Integrated Prevention and Earliest Help
Early Childhood Service
1st Floor, The Grange
County Hall, Chichester
West Sussex, PO19 1RG

Find us on Facebook [@FISWESTSUSSEX](https://www.facebook.com/FISWESTSUSSEX)

Opening hours

Monday – Friday 8.00am to 6.00pm

If you have any difficulties or feedback regarding this leaflet please call the Family Information Service on 01243 777807. We are able to supply you with a copy of this leaflet in a version most appropriate to your needs, for example audio, braille, large print or in another language.