

Frequently Asked Questions by Parents on Free Early Education Places for 2, 3 and 4 Year Olds

Introduction

Free Early Education for any individual child is governed by three factors:

1. What the DfE Statutory Guidance allows and how this is administered in West Berkshire
2. What the provider is offering
3. What parents want

1. What is Free Early Education?

Your child is entitled to a maximum of 570 hours of Free Early Education per year. This can be taken in a pattern of up to 15 hours per week for 38 weeks a year. This can be taken over a minimum of 2 days with no session being shorter than 2.5 hours per day or longer than 10 hours per day. It can be taken between the hours of 7am and 7pm. Currently in West Berkshire, the 38 weeks are in line with West Berkshire Council's school term dates.

2. How will I know what is being offered?

The provider will set out how and when they will offer their Free Early Education. There will be many different patterns of offers and you will need to check with each provider that their offer suits your needs.

The scheme is optional for parents and providers, but providers who choose to deliver Free Early Education must be registered with West Berkshire Council.

3. When is my child eligible to receive Free Early Education?

A child is eligible for Free Early Education in line with the Department for Education (DfE) table below:

Please be aware that 2 year old children must meet additional criteria, as the offer is not universal for 2 year olds. Full details of the criteria are available from: -

<https://www.westberks.gov.uk/index.aspx?articleid=28010>

A child born on or between

1 April and 31 August

1 September and 31 December

1 January and 31 March

Will become eligible for a free place from

Start of term 1 (Autumn), in September, following their second or third birthday

Start of term 2 (Spring), in January, following their second or third birthday

Start of term 3 (Summer), in April, following their second or third birthday

Three and four year old children must attend during the West Berkshire designated headcount week to be able to claim Free Early Education for that academic term, (Autumn, Spring, Summer). Late joiners may only claim their Free Early Education providing they meet one of the two following criteria.

1. A child moving to West Berkshire from another local authority after head count week
2. A child has not claimed at another setting in West Berkshire during that academic term
- 3 A setting attended by a funded child has been closed mid term.

Eligible 2 year old children can currently take up their free place at any time during the term.

4. Is Free Early Education available all year?

No – in West Berkshire, Free Early Education can be claimed over 38 weeks during West Berkshire Council’s term time.

Currently, Free Early Education operates within the context of three terms a year:

Terms 1	September to December	Autumn
Terms 2	January to March	Spring
Terms 3	April to July	Summer

Where a child attends a setting for more weeks than those funded, the additional hours will attract a charge.

5. Who is the funding paid to and how?

Payment is made directly by West Berkshire Council into the provider’s bank account for the hours claimed by that provider for each child. There is no monetary value to you – the entitlement is up to 570 hours free per year. The year starts when your child first becomes eligible for funding.

6. Can I be charged any fee for my child’s Free Early Education?

No – you cannot be charged any kind of “top up” fee for any part of Free Early Education – it must be free at the point of delivery and providers should not impose any fee or charge for these hours

Fees for any additional time are a private matter between you and a provider, although your provider must let you know the cost **before** you take up the additional time.

7. Can I choose when my child attends their Free Early Education?

No – you need to take your Free Early Education in line with the patterns offered by the providers. Any additional time that you may require will need to be arranged with the provider.

8. I use a childminder. Will I be able to claim my Free Early Education?

Yes – but only if your childminder is registered for funding directly with West Berkshire Council.. This information is available from the West Berkshire’s Family Information Service www.westberks.gov.uk/fis

9. Can providers charge what they like for any additional time after the free hours and/or for any optional services?

Yes – but you must ask your provider what these charges are *before* you accept additional time/optional services. Any additional time/optional services provided can only be charged for outside of Free Early Education – any additional services provided during the Free Early Education period may not be charged to you on a compulsory basis.

10. What do I do if I think I am being charged “top up” fees?

If you believe that you are not receiving your full Free Early Education and a top up fee is being charged, you will need to provide evidence to the Early Years Service (preferably in writing) to support your concern. West Berkshire’s Early Years Service will carry out an investigation and ask providers to explain their fee structure in order to determine whether a top up fee has been charged. If your concerns are upheld, the provider will be given the opportunity to rectify the situation before any action is taken.

11. Can Free Early Education cover the lunch period?

A provider may choose to include lunch as part of Free Early Education, where this is delivered as part of a learning experience. In these circumstances you cannot be charged for the lunch period, although providers can ask for payment for meals.

However you should be allowed to provide your own meals where appropriate storage is available. You will need to check this facility is available from your provider prior to taking up your place.

12. Can a child claim 10 hours Free Early Education in one day?

Yes – but you will need to check with your provider the pattern they are offering.

13. Will receiving Free Early Education affect my working tax credits or the childcare element of working tax credit?

No – it does not affect working tax credit and it does not affect the childcare element of working tax credit, although you cannot claim for the hours your child receives the Free Early Education. These hours must be deducted from the total amount of childcare hours claimed.

14. I am currently paying for childcare for my 2 year old and claiming tax credits as a result. However, I now meet the new September 2014 criteria. What should I do?

Families who are in receipt of child tax credits, who then become eligible for a free 2 year old place, must inform HMRC. Families must tell the Tax Credit Office within one month if:

- They normally pay fixed weekly childcare costs and the actual costs go down by £10 a week or more – and the change applies in each week for 4 weeks in a row.
- They pay the same amount every month or different amounts for childcare at different times, for example, you pay more in the school holidays than you do during term time and your new average weekly costs go down by £10 or more.
- They stop paying childcare costs.
- It is important that families advise HMRC/Tax Credits within one month. If they do not, they may build up an overpayment which they have to pay back. They might also have to pay a penalty of up to £300.

15. As a parent of a 2 year old, what happens if my financial circumstances change after I have been confirmed eligible for a free place?

Once you have been confirmed eligible, the funding will remain in place until your child takes up their 3 year old funding.

16. What happens when a provider cannot open for 38 weeks per year?

Providers must explain to you that they will not be able to offer Free Early Education for 38 weeks per year. If you wish your child to attend a provider that is open for, say, only 36 weeks, that is entirely your choice.

If you choose to use a provider who is open for less than 38 weeks, the local authority is not under any obligation to offer the rest of your child's Free Early Education elsewhere.

17. I want to use two providers – can Free Early Education be divided?

Yes – to the maximum of 15 hours per week between the two providers.

18. Can I access just the 15 hours Free Early Education?

Yes –but the provider will explain their availability of a totally free place and their pattern of offer to you, as this may not suit your needs. A provider who is open for 15 hours must offer 15 hours of Free Early Education per week, subject to availability, but how and when this offer is available will be explained in the provider's offer pattern. However where a provider cannot open the full 15 hours per week, they are still able to register to offer Free Early Education, as parents can access their remaining hours at another provision.

19. Can I choose my Free Early Education pattern with a provider?

No – providers will explain their pattern on offer and availability to you. If a particular provider's pattern of offer and availability does not suit your needs, please contact our Family Information Service www.westberks.gov.uk/fis for assistance.

20. Will I have to complete and sign paperwork when requesting my Free Early Education hours?

Yes – a provider must ask you to sign a record of the number of weekly hours you wish to claim. Additionally, parents of 2 year olds will need to have completed an online application form at www.westberks.gov.uk to find out if their child is eligible for the 2 year old funding.

21. Can funded sessions be increased after headcount week?

No – for 3 & 4 year olds, claims are based for the term (Autumn, Spring, Summer) on headcount week. Your provider should be able to provide you with these dates.

Yes – for 2 year olds

22. Can I increase my Free Early Education hours in the middle of an academic term, if I have not claimed the maximum 15 hours?

No - for 3 & 4 year olds. Free hours for the term are set in the headcount week and parent/carers would have to pay for any increase prior to the start of the next academic term (Autumn, Spring, Summer).

Yes – for 2 year olds.

23. Can I change my provider part way through a term and continue to receive Free Early Education?

No – funding is paid to a provider for the whole of the term (Autumn, Spring, Summer). If you choose to change provider during the course of the term you will have to pay your new provider until the start of the next term. In “exceptional circumstances” an appeals process is in place for parents, and all enquiries should be directed to West Berkshire's Early Years Service.

24. My child is due to start a maintained school reception class but will not be full time straight away. Can I still claim Free Early Education?

No – if a child is registered in a maintained school reception class, the child is funded through the main schools budget and would not be able to claim Free Early Education.

25. What do I do now?

- Contact the West Berkshire Family Information Service if you require a list of West Berkshire registered providers who offer Free Early Education in your area.

- Contact / visit some providers who you are interested in to discuss their pattern of offer and availability.
- When you go to the provider to complete your paperwork please ensure you take your child's birth certificate, and if you are applying for a free two year old place you will also need to take the letter issued by the Local Authority once your child has been proved as eligible.. This is to confirm your eligibility and will state your child's unique reference number for this funding..

For further information and to find out details of childcare providers who are registered to offer Free Early Education please contact:

West Berkshire's Family Information Service
www.westberks.gov.uk/fis