

# Petitions Briefing:

## Free Childcare

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 23 Hydref 2023  
Petitions Committee | 23 October 2023

Reference: SR237014-1

**Petition Number:** P-06-1362

**Petition title:** Match the new childcare offer in England of 15 hours for 2 year olds from April 2024.

**Text of petition:** The UK Government have announced that from April 2024 all working parents of two-year-olds will be able to access 15 hours of free childcare.

However, this benefit will not apply to all working families in Wales, as the equivalent "flying start" program will not expand to all areas. This leaves Welsh families thousands of pounds worse off than English counterparts, despite claims from the first minister that the welsh offer is "better" as its 48 weeks instead of 38 for 3 and 4 year olds.



# 1. Summary

There are different offers for free childcare in Wales and England for 2 (and 3) year olds, and 3 and 4 year olds.

Both countries have some provision for certain groups of **two year olds**, but this provision is delivered in different ways.

Whilst the information below is not intended as a guide to any individual eligibility, broadly, the current policy position can be summarized as below. (Note it is a changing policy area):

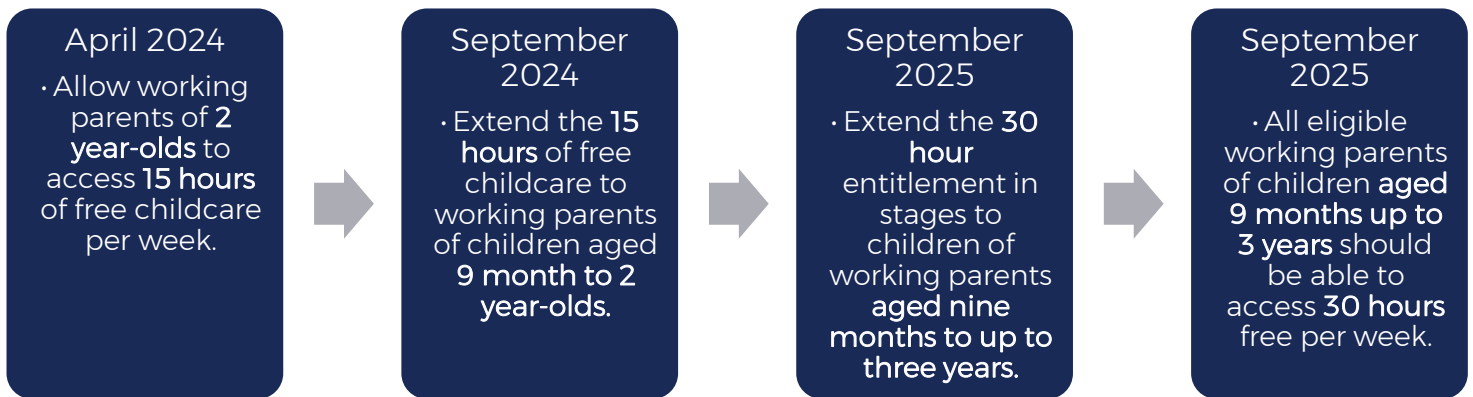
- **2 year olds (Table 1):**
  - **Wales:** Parents of all **2 and 3-year olds living in Flying Start areas** are **currently** entitled to **12.5 hours a week** for **39 weeks** per year and a minimum school holiday offer. This has expanded outside the Flying Start areas with an aim to introduce eligibility to all two year olds (see below).
  - **England:** Eligible working parents of **2-year olds** entitled to **15 hours a week** for **38 weeks** per year.
- **All 3 and 4 year olds:**
  - **Wales:** Entitled to minimum 10 hours a week early education, but many authorities offer more.
  - **England:** Entitled to roughly 15 hours a week early education.
- **3 and 4 year olds of eligible working parents:**
  - **Wales:** Entitled to **30 hours** a week, **48 weeks** per year. From September 2022, this entitlement expanded to include some parents in education and training in Wales.
  - **England:** Entitled to **30 hours** a week, **38 weeks** per year.

## 1.1. Expansion plans

There are also plans for expansion of provision for two year olds in both countries, including:

- In **Wales**, the Welsh Government say that it is focused on the next phase of expansion of early years provision to include **all two year olds**, with a particular emphasis on strengthening Welsh medium provision (further information in *Table 1* below).

- In England, the UK Government announced in the Spring Budget 2023 that it would expand free childcare in stages, aiming to:



## 2. Ministerial responses

The Deputy Minister for Social Services responded to this petition, saying:

*“...we are **currently providing support for childcare costs** under the **Childcare Offer** and the **Flying Start programme**. By progressing the expansion of Flying Start, we will be ensuring that all parents of 2-year-olds served by this programme have access to funded childcare, not just those parents who are working or in education and training as is the case with the Childcare Offer... Unfortunately, as you will know, due to the significant financial pressures we are currently facing, **we are not in a position to confirm any new financial developments** to support with childcare costs.”.*

The Deputy Minister also said:

*“You will be aware of the written statement which the First Minister issued in August, about the significant pressures Welsh Government is currently facing, consequently we are not currently in a position to confirm any new developments to childcare and how we will support families with childcare costs in the future.”*

### 3. Comparing childcare support in Wales and England: 2 year olds

Wales and England have different provision, registration and inspection processes for free childcare. *Table 1* broadly compares the current childcare support offered to parents of children in **Wales (eligible 2 and 3 year olds)** and in **England (eligible 2 year olds)**.

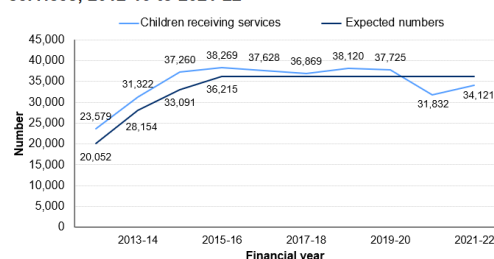
*Table 1: Eligible parents of 2 (and 3) year olds.*

	Wales	England
Offered by:	<u>Flying Start</u> : a Welsh Government early years programme introduced in 2007, and delivered by local authorities.	The UK Government.
Target population:	All 2 and 3-year-old children living in <u>Flying Start areas</u> .	<u>2-year-olds</u> of eligible parents on low incomes.
Support offered:	Entitled to free childcare for 2.5 hours per day, 5 days a week ( <b>12.5 hours a week</b> ) for <b>39</b> weeks per year. At least 15 sessions of childcare provision must be made available during school holidays.  Children can also receive services from a range of different professionals, including health visitors; wider health professionals such as dieticians, midwives and social workers; and other staff such as assistants to fully qualified health staff.	Entitled to <b>15 hours a week</b> for <b>38</b> weeks per year.
Eligibility criteria:	<u>Flying Start targets</u> the most disadvantaged areas in Wales. The programme has been targeted to areas according to measures of relative deprivation including the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD), free school meals and the proportions of children aged under 4 years living in households in receipt of income related benefits.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- if parents are in receipt of certain income-related benefits.</li> <li>- 2-year-olds are also eligible for non-economic reasons including if they have an Education Health and Care (EHC) plan, receive disability living allowance, are looked after by a local authority, or have left care under an adoption, special guardianship, or child arrangements order.</li> </ul>
Evaluation:	Welsh Government <u>says</u> that over 3,100 additional children have benefitted from	

the first phase of expansion in September 2022.

However, from 2015-16 to 2021-22, the number of children receiving Flying Start services remains unchanged. In 2021-22, just over 34,000 children received Flying Start services, including a contact with a health visitor. This was 6% lower than the expected number, but an increase of 7% since 2020-21.

**Figure 1: Number of children in receipt of Flying Start services, 2012-13 to 2021-22**



Source: Welsh Government Flying Start Data Monitoring Returns

Nonetheless, as the eligibility for Flying Start services is area-based, the total number of children in receipt of Flying Start services is affected by the number of children aged under four years living in Flying Start areas in each year. This is in turn affected by changes to population demographics. The number of 0 to 4 year olds in Wales has decreased by between 1.2% and 2.5% each year since 2016. As children may move in or out of Flying Start areas during the year, the total number of children counted as receiving Flying Start services, may not actually receive services for the duration of a whole year.

#### Future plans:

Welsh Government say that it is focused on the next phase of expansion of early years provision to include **all two year olds**, with a particular emphasis on strengthening Welsh medium provision.

In **March 2022**, the Welsh Government highlighted that they would aim for the Flying Start programme **“to be expanded to reach up to 2,500 more children aged 0 to 4 by increasing the Flying Start target areas in every local authority in Wales.”** Also, that **“Once the Flying Start scheme has been fully rolled out, all**

From April 2024, the aim is to extend this to all parents of children aged 2 years in England.

	<p><i>families in Wales with children aged 2 to 3 years will be eligible for 12.5 hours of funded, high-quality childcare for 39 weeks of the year."</i></p> <p>Additionally, in March 2022, <u>the Welsh Government</u> also highlighted that they <i>"will focus on investing £26m to deliver the high-quality childcare element of Flying Start to even more two-year-olds during 2023-24 and 2024-25".</i></p> <p>Moreover, that from September 2023, <i>"an additional £20 million in funding has been allocated over the next 3 years to support the expansion."</i> The aim is for this to support over 9,500 more two-year-olds to access quality Flying Start childcare.</p> <p>Further, that <i>"Plans for the larger expansion of childcare via Flying Start will be <b>announced in the autumn</b>. To meet this target, existing Flying Start childcare providers will be supported to expand their reach, with work ongoing to encourage new providers, including those who specialise in Welsh-medium provision, to offer the programme."</i></p>	
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Further information can be found here:

- [Research Briefings House of Commons Library](#)
- [Help with childcare costs in England: House of Commons Library](#)

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or amended to reflect subsequent changes.