

Dear all,

Thank you for your continued support to deliver the childcare entitlements, benefiting thousands of parents and children across England, especially as we approach the start of the new 15-hour entitlement for working parents of 2-year-olds.

Since applications opened on 2 January, tens of thousands of parents have applied for, and received, codes to access their new childcare entitlements.

The application system requires that parents reconfirm their eligibility for Tax-Free Childcare and working parent entitlements every 3 months, with a 4-week window before the end of the 3-month period when parents can reconfirm.

Due to the 3-month eligibility period, parents who reconfirmed their Tax-Free Childcare eligibility before 2 January 2024, cannot apply for a code to access the new 2-year-old entitlement until their reconfirmation window next opens.

For the minority of parents who last reconfirmed in late 2023, this may mean that their next reconfirmation window does not open until the second half of February or March. For example, if they reconfirmed on 29 December 2023, their reconfirmation deadline would be 29 March 2024. Their four-week reconfirmation window would therefore open on 1 March 2024.

We're conscious this may cause concern for the parents who have a later reconfirmation window and are keen to confirm their place before 1 April 2024. We have been working to ensure every parent can access the codes and confirm their childcare place in time and have set out below how we're going further to reassure parents affected by this issue.

If a parent's reconfirmation window opens on or after the 15th February, they will receive a letter from HMRC before this date with a code. The letter will provide a valid temporary code and instructions on how to use it to claim their entitlement.

We've also provided additional information on our website [Ed Hub article – text below in Annex A] which it may be helpful to link parents to.

How the system normally works.

Parents apply for their childcare code online (<https://www.gov.uk/apply-free-childcare-if-youre-working>), to do this they have to input information about:

- their national insurance number (or unique taxpayer reference if they are self-employed)
- the date they started or due to start work and;
- details of any government support or benefits they receive
- the UK birth certificate reference number (if they have one) for your child

If they have a partner, they may also need to provide their partner's details too. The application form usually takes around 20 minutes to complete. They may find out if they are eligible straight away, but it can take up to 7 days. Once their

application has been approved, they will get a code to give to their childcare provider.

What to do if a parent's reconfirmation date is after the 15th February;

If a parent is already claiming Tax-Free Childcare for a child who will be 2 years old on or before 31 March 2024 and their reconfirmation window opens on or after the 15th of February they will receive a letter from HMRC before this date with a valid temporary code.

This will be a single use code, which will start with 50x, it will be able to be validated in the same way as automatic codes.

We have informed parents that they should not contact HMRC before they receive their letter, as HMRC will be unable to provide them with a code before this time.

Once the parent has given you their manually issued (temporary) code, you should process it as normal, confirming their place for April. This code will be valid to confirm funding through the new entitlement.

Latterly, parents will still have to reconfirm through their Childcare Account when their reconfirmation window opens and will still receive a digital code, but they do *not* need to wait until this point to confirm their place with their provider. Parents will latterly need to take their digital code to their provider.

Some parents may want to reserve a place with you while they wait for their code, and we would encourage you to help them do this where possible. If they can provide evidence that they receive Tax Free Childcare, then they will automatically be eligible for the new entitlement as the eligibility the same (see Q 9 of the Annex B - FAQs)

Please make sure that parents know that they will lose the ability to take up a funded place if they do not give a code to their provider.

We also know that some providers are able to amend invoices if they have issued them before a parent has received their code. If this is possible for you to do, then we would encourage you to do so.

We are aware that a very small minority of parents may fall out of eligibility in the time between receiving a manually issued (temporary) code and reconfirming their eligibility using their Childcare Account. In this instance, the Department is committing to fund a grace period between 1 April and 31 August, which we will fund through the early years block of the DSG. This is a temporary alteration to the normal rules, to support the solution that we have put in place for this issue.

We thank you for your time and patience,
With thanks,

The Department for Education Entitlements Team

Annex A: Ed Hub article for Parents

How to claim 15 hours free childcare including where to get your code.

Applications are now open for eligible working parents of 2-year-olds to receive 15 hours free childcare, starting from April 2024.

It's the first step in our promise to expand the 30 hours free childcare scheme for working parents from when their child turns nine months until they start school.

(<https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2023/03/16/budget-2023-everything-you-need-to-know-about-childcare-support/>)

We're making the biggest investment by a UK government into childcare in history, doubling the amount we expect to spend over the next few years from around £4 billion to around £8 billion each year.

How do I apply?

You need to meet our eligibility criteria before you can claim 15 hours free childcare

(<https://www.gov.uk/check-eligible-free-childcare-if-youre-working>).

You apply online here on Gov.uk (<https://www.gov.uk/apply-free-childcare-if-youre-working>).

You'll need to make sure you have the following information to hand before starting the application:

- your national insurance number (or unique taxpayer reference if you are self-employed)
- the date you started or are due to start work
- details of any government support or benefits you receive
- the UK birth certificate reference number (if you have one) for your child.

You may find out if you're eligible straight away, but it can take up to 7 days. Once your application has been approved, you'll get a code for free childcare to give to your childcare provider. Applications are open from now until 31 March. If you miss the deadline, or don't receive your code by 31 March, you won't be able to start using the new entitlements from 1 April.

What if I'm already registered for Tax Free Childcare?

Parents must reconfirm that they are still eligible for Tax-Free Childcare every 3 months. As applications are now open for the new free hours entitlement, when eligible parents reconfirm they will receive a code which will also enable them to access the new offer.

To provide reassurance to parents with reconfirmation windows in late February and March, we're taking additional steps to ensure every parent is able to give their code to their provider in good time. If your reconfirmation window opens on or after the 15 February, HMRC will send you a letter with a temporary code before this date. The letter will also explain how to use your code to claim your free place in April. Where possible, please wait for your letter to arrive. You don't need to contact HMRC.

Before your letter arrives, you can speak to your provider and use your eligibility for Tax-Free Childcare to demonstrate your eligibility for the new free hours entitlement, as the eligibility criteria are the same. You can do this by showing your provider:

- Proof of your Tax-Free Childcare eligibility (this can be a screenshot from your childcare account, or simply showing your account to your provider)
- When your reconfirmation window is (you can get this from your childcare account)
- Your National Insurance number, and proof of your child's date of birth, for example your child's birth certificate, to show they turn 2 on or before 31 March 2024.
- <https://www.gov.uk/sign-in-childcare-account>

However, you must wait for your code (either via letter or through your regular childcare account) to formally confirm your free place.

Do I need to wait for my reconfirmation window to add another child to my account?

A parent who is already using the childcare service for another child can add a new child to their account at any time. Your reconfirmation cycle for your current Tax-Free Childcare will not affect this.

What happens once I receive my code?

You'll need to take the code to your childcare provider, along with your National Insurance Number and your child's date of birth.

Your childcare provider will process the code to provide your free place.

Your local authority can provide support for finding a free place in your area.

If I receive a code in a letter from HMRC, does this make my code on my childcare account invalid?

We're taking these additional steps as a small number of childcare providers are operating earlier deadlines to process codes.

If you are aware of your childcare provider's deadline, and your reconfirmation window opens before this deadline, you can continue to use the code accessed via your childcare account, even if you have received a letter with an alternative code. Both codes will be valid.

Do I still need to reconfirm if my window opens on or after 15 February?

If your reconfirmation window opens on or after 15 February, you will receive a letter with a temporary code which can be used straight away to claim your free place. However, once your reconfirmation window opens, you will still need to reconfirm via your Childcare Account and share this digital code with your provider. This is because you will need to continue to reconfirm via your Childcare Account to ensure your eligibility doesn't lapse.

What happens if I lose the letter with my code?

Your letter from HMRC should arrive by 15 February. If you haven't received a letter by 15 February, or if you lose the letter including your code after it has arrived, you should contact HMRC. Please wait for your letter to arrive before contacting HMRC.

My child turns 2 after 1 April. Why aren't I entitled to free childcare?

You can only apply for the first phase of the new working parent entitlement if your child is already 2-years-old or will have had their 2nd birthday on or before 31 March 2024.

Children who are born on or after 1 April will become eligible later in the year:

Your child's birthday / When they can get their hours from:

1 January to 31 March 2024 - Term starting on or after 1 April.

1 April to 31 August 2024 - Term starting on or after 1 September.

1 September to 31 December 2024 - Term starting on or after 1 January.

Parents are only able to claim the entitlements from the term after because this gives local authorities and childcare providers enough time to prepare.

How are you making sure there will be enough childcare places for eligible parents?

To make sure there are enough places available, we're investing over £400 million in 2024-25 to increase the hourly rates paid to local authorities.

Start-up grants will also be available for new or returning childminders who have:

- completed their registration on or after 15 March 2023;
- [for returning childminders] registered at least 12 months after the cancellation of a previous registration.

Childminders will receive grants of:

- £600 for those who choose to register with Ofsted.
- £1,200 for those who choose to register with a childminder agency.

Annex B: Frequently Asked Questions for parents

1. How do I know if I'm eligible?

You need to meet our eligibility criteria before you can claim 15 hours free childcare.

(<https://www.gov.uk/check-eligible-free-childcare-if-youre-working>)

Working parents in England who each earn more than £8,670 - equivalent to at least £167 per week or 16 hours at the National Minimum Wage - but less than £100,000 adjusted net income per year, will be eligible. (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/adjusted-net-income>)

Eligibility is calculated on an individual basis rather than by household. This means if you have a partner, you must both individually earn between these two amounts.

If you, or your partner, are on maternity, paternity, or adoption leave, or one of you is unable to work because you are disabled or have caring responsibilities, you could still be eligible.

You (and your partner if you have one) must have a national insurance number, and at least one parent (the one who is making the application) must have at least one of the following:

- British or Irish citizenship
- settled or pre-settled status, or you have applied and you're waiting for a decision. (<https://www.gov.uk/settled-status-eu-citizens-families>)
- permission to access public funds - your UK residence card will tell you if you can't do this.

Parents already receiving some additional forms of government support, such as Universal Credit, working tax credits or child tax credits, can also receive 15 hours of fully funded early education, including childcare, for 2-year-olds, separate from the new entitlement for working parents. (https://www.gov.uk/help-with-childcare-costs/free-childcare-2-year-olds?utm_source=childcarechoices&utm_medium=microsite)

2. How do I apply?

You apply online here on Gov.uk. (<https://www.gov.uk/apply-free-childcare-if-youre-working>) You'll need to make sure you have the following information to hand before starting the application:

- your national insurance number (or unique taxpayer reference if you are self-employed)
- the date you started or are due to start work
- details of any government support or benefits you receive
- the UK birth certificate reference number (if you have one) for your child.

You may find out if you're eligible straight away, but it can take up to 7 days.

Once your application has been approved, you'll get a code for free childcare to give to your childcare provider.

Parents will be asked to reconfirm that they are still eligible for the support every 3 months and will be reissued their code.

3. What happens if I'm already registered for Tax-Free Childcare and my reconfirmation window doesn't open until late February or March?

If you already have a Tax-Free Childcare account for your 2-year-old you will be given your free childcare code when you next reconfirm eligibility for that scheme.

Applications are open from now until 31 March. If you miss the deadline, or don't receive your code by 31 March, you won't be able to start using the new entitlements from 1 April.

We are aware that some parents with a late February / early March confirmation window may be anxious about confirming a place in time. For those parents whose reconfirmation window opens on or after the 15th February and who wish to give their provider a code earlier, we are setting out the following steps:

1. HMRC will send out letters before the middle of February with a valid temporary code which you can use to confirm your child's place with their provider for April (with hours funded by the entitlement).

2. After this you will still need to reconfirm your eligibility through your online childcare account in the usual way when your reconfirmation window opens.
(<https://www.gov.uk/sign-in-childcare-account>)
3. You will then receive a new digital code via your childcare account that you can then use for as long as you stay eligible and reconfirm when prompted to. You will need to provide this to your childcare provider, though you will not need to wait for this digital code to confirm your free place (the temporary code can be used for this).

The next steps will be set out clearly in the letter you will receive. You should not contact HMRC before you've received your letter as they won't be able to provide you with a code.

4. Why is the limit per parent? Wouldn't per household make more sense?

The income eligibility criteria are applied on a per parent basis as tax is calculated on an individual basis rather than a household basis. Working parents who individually earn more than £8,670 (equivalent to at least £167 per week or 16 hours at the National Minimum Wage) but less than £100,000 adjusted net income per year, will be eligible.

(<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/adjusted-net-income>)

5. I'm a student. Why can I not access the entitlements?

Students who work in addition to studying are eligible if you meet the income requirements. Students who do not work are not eligible, but we recognise the value of parents continuing in education and provide a range of support for those in further or higher education.

6. Am I eligible if I'm on maternity leave?

If your partner works and meets the eligibility criteria, and you are on maternity leave, paternity leave, or adoption leave, you may still be eligible. Please see this article for more information; (<https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2024/01/02/how-to-apply-for-30-hours-free-childcare-and-find-out-if-youre-eligible/>)

7. Why are parents who earn more than £100k not eligible for the entitlements?

The £100,000 adjusted net income level was chosen to correspond with income tax thresholds. The universal 15 hours of free childcare offer remains in place for all parents of 3- and 4-year-olds, regardless of parental circumstances, including those who earn over £100,000. (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/adjusted-net-income>)

8. I'm on Universal Credit (UC). Will applying for 15 hours make me lose my UC?

You can apply for the 15 hours, and this will not affect your UC.

(If 30 hours is mentioned, then the answer changes to the following): If you are taking up more than 15 hours, you can claim UC childcare which can support you with up to 85% of the cost of the remaining hours.

9. I haven't received a letter from HMRC on what to do yet.

Letters will only be sent to parents who are already registered for Tax-Free Childcare and whose reconfirmation windows opens on or after 15th February and before 1 April 2024.

Please make sure that all your contact details on your childcare account are up to date, so that we can contact you if we need to about your childcare. HMRC are working to send letters to you before the middle of February. Before your letter arrives, you can speak to your provider and show them that you are eligible for Tax-Free Childcare and ask them to reserve a place for you.

That is because the eligibility criteria for Tax-Free Childcare and the new free hours are the same. You can do this by showing your provider:

- Proof of your Tax-Free Childcare eligibility (this can be a screenshot from your [childcare account](#), or simply showing your account to your provider)
- When your reconfirmation window is (you can get this from your [childcare account](#))
- Your National Insurance number, and
- Proof of your child's date of birth, for example your child's birth certificate, to show they turn 2 on or before 31 March 2024.

However, you must wait for your code in order to confirm your free place.

10. What happens once I receive my code?

You'll need to take the code to your childcare provider, along with your National Insurance Number and your child's date of birth.

Your childcare provider will check the code and then allocate your child a place if available.

We recommend parents speak with their chosen provider about when they will be able to offer them a place.

If your chosen provider doesn't have a place available, we advise that you explore other providers in your local area.

Your local authority can provide support for finding a free place in your area.

11. My child turns two after 1 April. Why aren't I entitled to free childcare?

You can only apply for the first phase of the new working parent entitlement for 2-year-olds if your child is already 2 years old or will have had their 2nd birthday on or before 31 March 2024.

This is because children become eligible for a free childcare place at different points in the year, depending on when they were born. They may have to wait until the next academic term before they are eligible.

Your Child's Birthday / When they can get their hours from

1 January to 31 March 2024 - Term starting on or after 1 April 2024

1 April to 31 August 2024 - Term starting on or after 1 September 2024

1 September to 31 December 2024 - Term starting on or after 1 January 2025

Parents are only able to claim the entitlements from the term after their child's birthday because this gives local authorities and childcare providers enough time to prepare.

12. How will I know when to reconfirm my eligibility?

You will receive a reminder:

- when your reconfirmation window opens
- a week before your reconfirmation deadline
- on your reconfirmation deadline.

You will not be able to reconfirm your eligibility before your reconfirmation window begins.

13. My reconfirmation window isn't until the second half of February or March. Is this too late to secure a childcare place?

If you are already claiming Tax-Free Childcare and your reconfirmation window doesn't open before the 15th February, and you do not yet have a code for this reason, HMRC will send you a letter before the 15th of February with a valid temporary code.

This code can be used to confirm your place with a provider for April, but after this you will still need to reconfirm through your online childcare account in the usual way when your reconfirmation window opens. The next steps will be set out clearly in the letter you will receive. (<https://www.gov.uk/sign-in-childcare-account>)

You should not contact HMRC before you receive your letter as they will be unable to provide you with a code.

If you haven't received a letter by the 15th February, or if you lose the letter including your code, you will be able to contact HMRC who will be able to remind you of your code.

Where possible, please wait for your letter to arrive and refrain from contacting HMRC before this time.

Before your letter arrives, you have the option to speak to your provider, explain that you are waiting for your HMRC letter, and ask if they can reserve a place for you.

You can show that you are eligible for Tax-Free Childcare if your provider asks for proof of eligibility. This is evidence that you are eligible for the new working parents entitlements as these forms of support have the same eligibility criteria. You can show them:

- Proof of your Tax-Free Childcare eligibility (this can be a screenshot from your childcare account, or showing them your account on your phone)
- When your reconfirmation window is (you can get this from your childcare account)
- Your National Insurance number, and
- Proof of your child's date of birth, for example your child's birth certificate, to show that your child turns 2 on or before 31 March 2024.
- <https://www.gov.uk/sign-in-childcare-account>

You will need to show your provider the code that you will receive in your letter from HMRC. You must do this to formally secure your place. If you do not give your provider a code, you won't be able to take up a funded place.

We also know that some providers are able to amend invoices if they have issued them before a parent has received their code, so we recommend you speak to your provider if you are in this situation.

14. How do I reconfirm?

To confirm your details are up to date and that you remain eligible for Tax-Free Childcare and/or the childcare entitlements, you will need to log into your childcare account every 3 months.

In most cases reconfirmation should only take a few minutes.

You need to log into your childcare account using your Government Gateway ID to reconfirm: Sign in to your childcare account – GOV.UK (<https://www.gov.uk/sign-in-childcare-account>)

The dates between which you should reconfirm will be displayed when you log in.

Even if you have received a letter from HMRC with a temporary code (for those with reconfirmation windows that open on or after the 15th February 2024), then you still need to reconfirm through your childcare account when your reconfirmation window opens and given this digital code to your provider. You do not need to wait until this point to confirm your place with your provider, which you can do with the temporary code.

15. Do I need to apply for new entitlements if I already claim Tax-Free Childcare or 30 hours for my older child?

If you get Tax-Free Childcare or 30 hours for another child (i.e. not your 2-year-old) then you will need to add your 2-year-old to the account and apply for the new entitlement.

16. Do I need to wait for my reconfirmation window to add another child to my account?

A parent who is already using the childcare service for another child can add a new child to their account at any time.

Your reconfirmation cycle for your current Tax-Free Childcare will not affect this.

17. What happens if I miss the reconfirmation deadline?

Your eligibility for Tax-Free Childcare and/or your childcare entitlements will lapse if you miss the reconfirmation deadline.

If you do miss it, and your child is attending a childcare provider, a grace period for your free childcare will apply.

This means your child can continue in their place for the time being, but you need to submit another application as soon as you can to keep getting Tax-Free Childcare and/or the childcare entitlements.

You can submit such an application any time you meet the eligibility criteria for childcare entitlements or Tax-Free Childcare.

You must then present your code to your provider to confirm your place can continue.

18. Can we get a rebate (if you're not eligible but would have been if it had been rolled out earlier)

This is not something we are able to offer, as you would have received the support that was available to you at that time. However, if you are eligible but were unable to take up a free place due to a technical issue, you may be eligible for compensation.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/childcare-service-compensation>