

Parents' Guide to free early education and parental declarations

Free early education for three and four year olds is at the heart of the Government's vision for all children to have access to high-quality early years education that helps them reach their full potential. It offers universal free provision from the start of the 1 April, 1 September or 1 January following the child's third birthday up until they reach compulsory school age. From the term following their third birthday, every child will be entitled to 15 hours free early education during term time (38 weeks of the year).

When taking up your free early education with a provider (i.e. Local authority nursery, private day nursery, pre-school, playgroup or accredited childminder) you will be asked to sign a parental declaration form and asked for the following information:

1. Child's details – First name, surname, full address with postcode, child's date of birth, contact telephone number and ethnicity code
2. You will also be asked for the child's birth certificate or passport (all local authorities will ask the providers to declare that proof of age has been verified)
3. The parental agreement will ask you to specify the number of hours per week and the number of weeks in the term when your child will access a free place
4. Some providers may ask for further detailed information about any special needs the child may have
5. Providers may also request information about the parent/carer(s)
6. You will also be asked if the child is attending any other providers. If yes
 - a. You will be asked for the days, hours at the other provider
 - b. You will need to confirm how many hours of free early education you are taking up at the other provider.

Some providers may ask for the parental declaration form to be completed every term, others may ask you to initialise the original one each term to confirm the details are the same.

Using your free early education

The parental declaration form will clearly explain what you are entitled to in relation to maximum number of hours which can be accessed in one day or over 2/3 days (this may vary in different local authority areas).

For example:

Please note the number of hours you can access in one day is 10, over two days the maximum is 12 hours and over three days the maximum is 15 hours. The minimum you can access in one day is two and a half hours.

Using more than one provider

If you decide to place your child at one or more providers using your free early education, you will need to ensure that you do not exceed the 15 hours per week, collectively across the two providers that the child attends. It is your responsibility to ensure that both providers are aware of how many hours of free early education you are taking up at each provider each term.

Additional hours

Many parents choose to purchase additional hours at the same provider where they access their free early education. The rates which providers charge for their privately funded hours are a matter for them to decide and agree with you.

You will be provided with an invoice, which should clearly show how many hours of free early education you have accessed, fees for any additional hours you have purchased and the cost of meals.

Parents should not be charged any fee for their free early education place nor should providers request payment from parents in advance to be refunded at a later date.

If you choose to only access 15 hours with a provider then you are entitled to do so, providing they have a space available on the days you request. You will however, have to ensure that you take the hours over the minimum days/hours as specified on the parental agreement i.e. *The maximum hours to be taken over one day is 10 hours, the maximum over 2 days is 12 hours and the maximum over 3 days is 15 hours. Minimum of 2 and a 1/2 hours in one day, for a period of 38 weeks.*

Charges for meals

Providers are able to make a reasonable charge for meals provided to children during the day. However, this should not be a condition of free early education and you should be offered the option of providing a packed lunch if you would prefer.

Payments for meals or any other additional services from the provider should be discussed prior to signing the parental agreement.

Any additional charges will be clearly shown on your invoice and listed as separate items.