



**DARLINGTON**  
Borough Council

# **Childcare Sufficiency Assessment**

**2025**

## Introduction

The Department for Education's (DfE) Early Education and Childcare Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities [Early education and childcare - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/early-education-and-childcare) requires local authorities (LA) to 'secure sufficient childcare, so far as is reasonably practicable, for working parents, or parents who are studying or training for employment, for children aged 0 – 14 or up to 18 for disabled children'. In carrying out this requirement, local authorities should 'report annually to elected council members on how they are meeting their duty to secure sufficient childcare and to make this report available and accessible to parents. The report should include specific reference to how local authorities are ensuring there is sufficient childcare available to meet the needs of: children with special educational needs and disabilities, children from families in receipt of the childcare element of Working Tax Credit or Universal Credit, children with parents who work irregular hours, children taking up free early education and childcare places, school age children and children needing holiday care.'

This document supports the Council Plan [Darlington Council Plan 2024-2027](#), in particular the priority for children and young people: supporting the best start in life, realising potential and raising aspirations.

## Funded Early Education Entitlements

Some families are eligible for funded early education entitlements (FEEE). In the government's Spring Budget 2023, the chancellor announced reforms to childcare to help working families with their childcare costs. The introduction of the new entitlements from September 2024 is as follows:

- From September 2024, eligible working parents of children aged 9 months up to 3 years old can access 15 hours per week for 38 weeks per year
- From September 2025, eligible working parents of children aged 9 months up to 4 years old can access 30 hours free childcare per week for 38 weeks per year

These new entitlements are in addition to the following:

- Children aged 2 whose families receive additional forms of support (FRAS) may be eligible for 15 hours per week for 38 weeks per year
- All children aged 3 and 4 are entitled to up to 15 hours per week for 38 weeks per year until compulsory school age or when they start reception class
- Extended Entitlement – children aged 3 and 4 where both parents are working, or from lone parent families where that parent is working, are entitled to an additional 15 hours per week for 38 weeks per year until compulsory school age or they start reception class. In September 2025, this entitlement merged with the entitlement for eligible working parents of children aged 9 months up to 4 years old to access 30 hours free childcare per week for 38 weeks per year

**Table 1: Number of children accessing each entitlement in Darlington**

	Autumn 24					Spring 25					Summer 25				
	Working Parent Entitlements for 9m+ to 2 years	Children aged 2 (FRAS)	Universal Entitlement for 3 & 4-year-olds	Extended Entitlement for 3 & 4-year-olds	Termly totals	Working Parent Entitlement for 9m+ to 2-year-olds	Children aged 2 (FRAS)	Universal Entitlement for 3 & 4-year-olds	Extended Entitlement 3 & 4-year-olds	Termly totals	Working Parent Entitlement for 9m+ to 2-year-olds	Children aged 2 (FRAS)	Universal Entitlement for 3 & 4-year-olds	Extended Entitlement 3 & 4-year-olds	Termly totals
Private day nurseries	707	120	120	272	1219	747	100	168	400	1415	748	95	186	489	1518
Pre-schools	110	35	53	93	291	54	27	73	99	253	48	27	75	116	266
Childminders	121	4	3	22	150	127	10	7	39	183	128	9	9	41	187
Private & voluntary sector totals	938	159	176	387	1660	928	137	248	538	1851	924	131	270	646	1971
Maintained nursery schools	29	56	55	36	176	27	49	64	56	196	33	49	89	64	235
Nursery units	4	64	263	76	407	5	58	351	224	638	7	69	391	262	729
School totals	33	120	318	112	583	32	107	415	280	834	40	118	480	326	964
Childcare market totals	971	279	494	499	2243	960	244	663	818	2685	964	249	750	972	2935

The number of families who receive additional forms of support and are eligible for 2-year-old funding has decreased across the year. This may be because the criteria to qualify for this entitlement has remained unchanged for some time whilst incomes have risen.

### **Wraparound childcare (National Wraparound Childcare Programme)**

The National Wraparound Childcare Programme is part of the childcare reforms announced in the Spring Budget 2023. The government announced an investment of £289 million of start-up funding over two academic years to support the introduction or expansion of childcare provision, from Monday to Friday during term time, 8am to 6pm (or an equivalent time scale such as 7.45am to 5.45pm). The programme is focused on primary school-aged children from reception to year 6. The LA has worked with the DfE and schools and the work undertaken through 2024/25 is reported within both the demand and supply sections of this report.

### **Breakfast clubs (Early Adopters)**

The government is committed to offering a free breakfast club in every state-funded school with primary aged pupils in England. From April 2025 and throughout the academic year 2025/26, the government is working with up to 750 early adopter schools to test and learn how best to implement the new breakfast clubs ahead of national rollout. The LA has worked with the DfE and Darlington schools involved in the pilot.

### **School-based nurseries**

In autumn 2024, the government pledged £15 million in capital funding for primary schools in order to create school-based nurseries. In the first phase (2024/25), the government wanted to create 300 school-based nurseries across England. Schools were able to bid for up to £150,000 as part of the government's opportunity mission to give every child the best start. The LA has worked with the DfE and schools and the work undertaken through 2024/25 is reported within the supply section.

## **Demand for Childcare**

This section of the childcare sufficiency assessment will consider demand for childcare within Darlington. There are many factors that impact on demand for childcare including demographics, employment, housing and the views of parents and employers. In addition, the introduction of the new childcare entitlements to support working parents and young children has resulted in an increase in demand.

Since the introduction of the new entitlements, there has been an increase in the number of children accessing entitlements. In summer 2024, the total number of children accessing entitlements was 2418; by summer 2025 this had increased to 2935. The sector has been able to accommodate these places through some expansion and flexibility and because some of these children were already accessing childcare through parent-paid places. These may be further referred to as 'switched places'.

### **Demographics (source: Darlington Council Plan)**

At the time of writing of the council plan, Darlington's population was 109,469. 55,482 of the total population are female and 53,627 are male. The population grew by 4% between 2011 and 2022. 81.6% of the female population are economically active and 86.4% of the male

population are economically active. Between July 2023 and June 2024, 81.7% of the working age population were economically active, with 77.8% in employment. This is higher than the national average of 75.5% and the North East average of 71.1%.

**Table 2: A breakdown by age of under 5s**

Year of birth (Sep – Aug)	Year entering reception	Births	Annual difference	Age
2020/2021	2025/2026	1030		4
2021/2022	2026/2027	1058	28	3
2022/2023	2027/2028	1009	-49	2
2023/2024	2028/2029	1071	62	1
2024/2025	2029/2030	1066	-5	0

*Source: ONS Live Births, page 4 from Primary Pupil Projections – Darlington UA, Spring 2025, Edge Analytics*

Table 2 demonstrates that the birth rate may be beginning to stabilise in Darlington.

### **Housing (source: Local Plan – Housing Overall Requirement)**

The local area plan describes the housing market as follows:

*‘The housing market area covering Darlington Borough has links with North Yorkshire, Stockton-on-Tees and County Durham. Data and evidence, however, indicate that the Borough is generally a self-contained housing market area as outlined in the Darlington Strategic Housing Market Assessment (17). This is the geographical area within which a substantial majority of the employed population both live and work, and where those moving house choose to stay. It is for this area which the Local Plan will address the housing needs.’*

The implication of this, alongside the parental survey indication that location is key to choice of childcare, would be that residents in the Darlington area are likely to try to find childcare within the authority.

The local plan currently identifies that *‘to remain on target with the housing plan, the five-year requirement on 1 April 2021 based on the target of delivering 9,840 net additional dwellings between 2016 and 2036 (492 dwellings per year) was 546 dwellings per annum which includes a 5% buffer. Total expected completions: 2021/22 - 2025/26 was 2920’*. Using pupil projection information for new build homes within the LA, on average, every 100 new family homes are expected to generate approximately 20 additional primary school pupils. This is equivalent to 2.8 additional pupils per year group. Therefore, the ongoing building within the LA is expected to result in a small increase in demand for childcare over time.

### **The views of parents**

In autumn 2025, an online parental survey was carried out. The survey was primarily aimed at parents who are currently using registered childcare provision in Darlington. However, the views of parents who use family and friends for childcare and who do not use any form of childcare were also gathered. The survey asked questions about the cost of childcare, why parents access childcare, the type of registered provider they use, the factors they take into consideration when choosing childcare and questions about the expansion of FEEE. The

return rate was high with 434 responses. 328 of those were from parents who use registered childcare provision. 97.97% of respondents stated that they used childcare in Darlington.

**Table 3: Proportion of responses by ward**

Ward	Percentage %/(N° of responses)
Bank Top and Lascelles	4.84 (21)
Brinkburn and Faverdale	13.59 (59)
Cockerton	5.53 (24)
College	5.3 (23)
Eastbourne	10.37 (45)
Harrowgate Hill	6.68 (29)
Haughton and Springfield	5.76 (25)
Hummersknott	5.76 (25)
Mowden	8.76 (38)
North Road	3.23 (14)
Northgate	1.38 (6)
Park East	5.53 (24)
Park West	5.99 (26)
Pierremont	2.76 (12)
Red Hall and Lingfield	7.14 (31)
Stephenson	4.38 (19)
Whinfield	3 (13)

For those parents who do not use registered childcare, the main reasons were cost; because it was not required as family and friends provide childcare or because it was not required as they did not work.

**Table 4: Proportion of parents and carers using childcare provider by type**

Type of provision	Percentage (%)
Registered breakfast and/or after school provision	46.78
Private day nursery	32.2
Registered holiday club	23.05
Maintained nursery school	15.93
Nursery in a primary school	11.53
Pre-school	9.49
Childminder	8.47

**Table 5: Proportion of children accessing childcare by age**

Age	Percentage (%)
Under 1	4.25
1 to 2 years old	22.17
3 to 4 years old	37.03
5 to 8 years old	46.93
9 to 11 years old	28.77
12 to 14 years old	7.08
15 to 17 years old with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities	1.42

Parents and carers were asked to share the reason(s) why they use childcare. 89.84% of parents use childcare to enable them to work; 44.13% said they use childcare to enable their children to access opportunities to develop and grow; 40.95% to enable their children to make friends; 34.6% said childcare is used to enable their children to get ready to go to school; 4.76% of parents used childcare to enable them to access training opportunities and 5.71% use childcare to give them a break from caring.

Over the course of a week, 17.36% of parents said that their child accessed between 11 and 15 hours of childcare; 18.75% accessed between 26 and 30 hours; 14.24% accessed 6 to 10 hours; 15.63% accessed 1 to 5 hours; 6.6% accessed 21 to 25 hours and 20.49% accessed over 30 hours. A larger proportion of parents are accessing 30 hours or more compared to last year.

**Table 6: Factors which parents and carers look for when choosing childcare**

Factor	Percentage (%)
Proximity of childcare to home, school or work	87.46
Atmosphere and available facilities	56.95
Safety and security of the provider	52.2
Flexibility of opening and closing times	50.17
Quality of the provider	48.14
The provider meets child's needs	40.68
Costs or charges	38.98
Recommendation from family or friends	33.9
Ofsted grade	27.12
Previous child attended	26.78
Qualifications of staff	12.54
Other	3.39

Parents were asked how they pay for childcare. 37.78% of parents paid for all or some of the childcare they used; 13.65% accessed 15 government funded hours a week; 46.67% accessed 30 government funded hours a week. 34.6% of respondents said they accessed Tax-Free Childcare (TFC); 8.89 accessed universal credit childcare and 0.95% of parents said that they

accessed study support. A larger proportion of parents are accessing 30 government funded hours compared to last year.

Parents were asked how much of their family income they spent on childcare compared to last year. 25.33% said they spent a larger proportion of their income on childcare; 42.76% said they spent a smaller proportion; 31.91% said they spent about the same proportion on childcare. A larger number of parents are spending a smaller proportion of their family income on childcare compared to last year.

94.31% said that the childcare they use suits their needs and 96.8% said it was of good quality. Parents were asked if the number of childcare hours was sufficient for their needs. 78.47% answered yes and 21.53% answered no. Themes emerging from the no responses to this question were around cost and shift work.

### **Increase in government funded childcare**

Parents were asked if the increase in government funded childcare had impacted their working patterns. 4.86% said that they had been able to start work; 28.47% said that they had been able to increase their working hours and 66.67% said that there had been no change to their working pattern. Parents were asked if government funded childcare being available for children under 2 years old had encouraged them to use childcare for their children from an earlier age. 43.75% said yes, they had been encouraged to use childcare earlier; 18.06% said no and 38.19% said that it was not applicable. For parents who were eligible for 30 hours of government funded childcare, 82.14% stated that they had not found it difficult to find a government funded childcare place; 12.14% said they had and 5.71% said it was not applicable. Emerging themes were the lack of places available at their chosen provider; unsuitable days available or unsuitable start and finish times.

**Table 7: Barriers to accessing childcare experienced by parents and carers**

<b>Barrier</b>	<b>Yes (%)</b>	<b>No (%)</b>
No place available at a provider	20.92	79.08
Unsuitable start time	20.92	79.08
Unsuitable finish time	21.63	78.37
Unsuitable days	16.67	83.33
Location	10.28	89.72

The main barriers were identified as cost and times to suit working patterns. There were some comments relating to unmet demand, which related to finding childcare in specific areas of Darlington. The results from the parental survey would indicate childcare supply across Darlington is broadly sufficient to meet need.

### **Wraparound childcare**

Parents were asked if they use before and/or after school childcare. Out of the 282 responses to this question, 58.16% said that they did use before and/or after school childcare and 41.84% said that they did not.

**Table 8: Before and after school childcare used by type**

Type of before and/or after school childcare	Percentage (%)
Childminder	11.18
Childcare provided by the school onsite	55.90
Childcare provided by a private provider onsite	29.19
Childcare provided by a private provider offsite	9.94
Other	3.11

86.96% of respondents said that the before and/or after school childcare was suitable for their needs. Opening times and cost were the main reasons as to why before and/or after school childcare was not suitable.

**Tax-Free Childcare (source: Tax-Free Childcare Statistics Commentary August 2025)**

Tax-Free Childcare enables working families, including the self-employed, to claim up to 20% of their childcare costs from the government (up to £2,000 per child per year or up to £4,000 per child per year for a child with a disability). Childcare costs can be claimed for children aged 0 – 11 years or up to 16 years for young people with a disability where families are not in receipt of Tax Credits, Universal Credit or childcare vouchers. Childcare must be accessed via Ofsted registered providers and childminders who have activated their TFC accounts. A key policy change affecting the use of Tax-Free Childcare is the expansion of the Department for Education 15 or 30 government funded hours scheme in England. In 2024, 15 hours funded childcare became available for the first time for children of working parents aged under 3. This was rolled out to children aged 2 in April 2024 and children aged over 9 months in September 2024.

Table 9 shows that Darlington has engaged in a successful campaign of awareness raising that has resulted in an increase in the number of families that have accessed Tax-Free Childcare.

**Table 9: Tax-Free Childcare accounts in Darlington**

	2018 - 19	2019 - 20	2020 - 21	2021 - 22	2022 - 23	2023 - 24	2024- 25
Number of children with used Tax-Free Childcare accounts for Darlington by tax year	275	615	780	1110	1440	1705	1880
Number of families with used Tax-Free Childcare accounts for Darlington by tax year	220	485	630	895	1135	1325	1440

*Information from Official Statistics, Tax-Free Childcare Statistics, June 2025, HM Revenue & Customs Published, 27 August 2025.*

## The views of employers

Previous employer surveys have investigated the use of family-friendly employment practices and explored the extent to which childcare supply meets the needs of businesses. These surveys reported that the number of businesses frequently experiencing problems due to childcare issues is relatively low.

### Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)

75 respondents to the online parental survey indicated that their child had additional needs. 49 of those were currently accessing childcare through either a nursery, childminder, breakfast or after school club, pre-school or holiday club. The themes of the parent responses from the parents of children with SEND followed a similar pattern to all the other responses.

38 responses stated that they access childcare to enable them to work; 21 stated that they use childcare to enable their child to access opportunities to develop and grow; 18 stated that they access childcare to enable their child to make friends; 12 stated that they access childcare to enable their child to get ready for school; 5 stated that they use childcare to give them a break from childcare; 5 stated that they use childcare to access training and 3 stated that they use childcare to enable them to take care of other family members.

26 respondents stated they did not use childcare; 4 do not require childcare as they are not working; 6 do not require childcare as they use family and friends; 13 stated that they do not use childcare due to the cost; 8 stated that they cannot find childcare that suits their needs and 9 stated that they cannot find childcare suitable for their child's needs.

From the parental survey, it was identified that parents of children with SEND mainly choose their childcare based on location (82.93%) which mirrored the responses of all parents. They then choose childcare based on the setting's ability to meet the needs of the child (53.66%) and then the atmosphere and available facilities (51.22%).

45.24% of respondents advised that they are paying a smaller proportion of their wages into childcare compared to last year.

**Table 10: Proportion of children with SEND accessing childcare by type**

Type of provision	Percentage (%)
Registered breakfast or after school provision	53.66
Registered holiday club	34.15
Private day nursery	17.07
Maintained nursery school	14.63
Childminder	9.76
Nursery in a primary school	7.32
Pre-school	4.88

**Table 11: Proportion of children with SEND accessing childcare by age**

Age	Percentage (%)
Under 1 year	2.67
1-2 years	12.00
3 – 4 years	25.33
5 – 8 years	58.67
9 – 11 years	44.00
12 – 14 years	13.33
15 – 17 years (young people with SEND)	6.67

82.5% identified that they felt that the number of hours was sufficient for them, with cost being the main reason respondents stated they did not use more childcare hours. For respondents who experienced barriers to accessing childcare, the main reason was an unsuitable finish time (17.95%). 94.87% agreed that childcare suited their needs and 100% answered that it is of good quality.

#### **Increase in government funded childcare**

Parents of children with additional needs were asked if the increase in government funded childcare had impacted their working patterns. 92.86% said that there had been no change to their working pattern and 7.14% said they had enabled them to increase their working hours. Parents were asked if government funded childcare being available for children under 2 years old had encouraged them to use childcare for their child from an earlier age. 16.67% said yes, they had been encouraged to use childcare earlier; 14.29% said no and 69.05% said that it was not applicable. For parents who were eligible for 30 hours of government funded childcare, only 4.88% (2 respondents) said they had found it difficult to find a government funded childcare place.

## Supply of Childcare

This section of the childcare sufficiency assessment will consider supply for childcare within Darlington. The first part of this section looks at Darlington’s childcare market and the type of provider supplying both FEEE and wraparound and the number of registered places, as well as looking at the quality of childcare available. In addition, the section reports on the views of providers and the ability of the sector to increase supply since the introduction of the new entitlements.

### Darlington’s childcare market (providing both FEEE and wraparound)

In July 2025, there were 25 primary schools in Darlington. There were also 2 infant and 2 junior schools, 1 all-through school, 1 special school and 1 special free school. There were 26 private providers, 2 maintained nursery schools and 3 private providers who run out of school club provision only. The locations of these are displayed on the map below. There were also 40 registered childminders operating in Darlington.

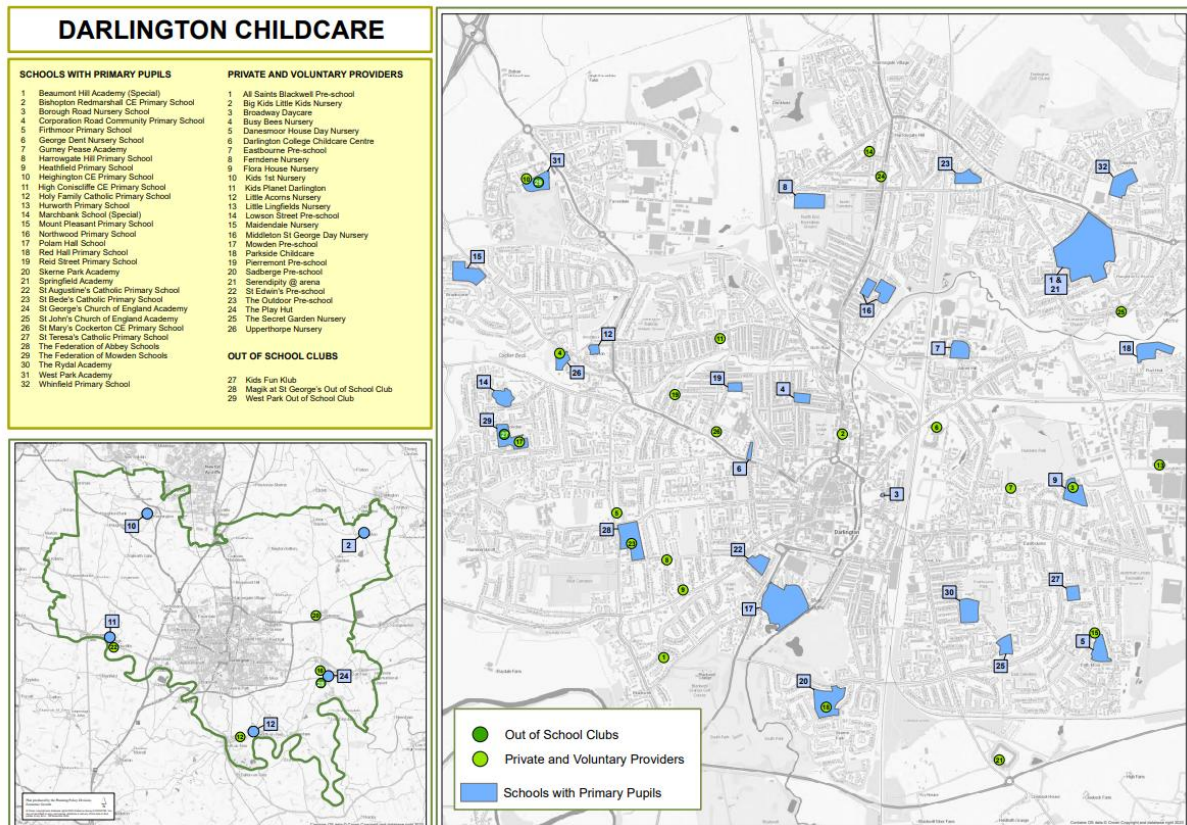


Figure 1: Location of childcare in Darlington

## Early years providers

**Table 12: Types of providers and number of registered early years places in July 2025**

Type of provider	Number of providers	Ofsted registered early years places
Childminder	40	264
Private nursery	18	1184
Maintained nursery school	2	260
Nursery unit attached to a school	19	675
Pre-school	8	199

The number of registered places represents the overall number of children who can attend a setting at any one time. This is a measure of supply, but there are limitations in using this information as each registered place does not constitute a full-time place for an individual child as children take up hours over different days and in different formats and each age range will have differing childcare ratio requirements. Other factors such as staffing levels also affect operational capacity.

As of September 2025, there are 26 private or voluntary providers (nurseries and pre-schools) offering FEEE in Darlington, with provision between 7am and 6pm (opening hours vary). In addition, there are 3 private out of school clubs that can provide FEEE. 21 primary schools have a nursery unit for 3 and 4-year-olds and 8 of these primary schools also have 2-year-old provision. There are 2 LA maintained nursery schools and 40 childminders offering FEEE.

Provision has been relatively stable during this period, although the first phase of the government's school-based nursery expansion plan has meant that there has been some growth in Darlington's school-based nursery sector. Three new school nurseries opened in September 2025 (as a result of government capital funding), providing an extra 72 early years places. Outside of the school-based nursery programme, one school also opened a 2-year-old provision, providing an extra 20 early years places. Childminder numbers fluctuate and have risen from 38 childminders to 40 over the past year. There are currently 5 potential childminders interested in registering to provide early years childcare.

### Wraparound and out of school childcare providers

In total, there are 32 schools with the potential to offer wraparound for primary school pupils in Darlington. The National Wraparound Childcare Programme defines wraparound as childcare provision, available Monday to Friday during term time from 8am to 6pm (or an equivalent time scale such as 7.45am to 5.45pm). The programme is focused on primary school-aged children from reception to year 6. The 2 special schools offer no wraparound provision either before or after school. All other schools offer before school provision, with starting times ranging from 7am to 8.30am. With respect to after school provision, 2 of the

30 mainstream schools have no provision. 16 primary schools offer some form of provision until 6pm, either through their own wraparound or through a private provider. The remaining 12 either have an offer which sits slightly outside the DfE definition above (i.e. 7.45am to 5.45pm) or which finishes between 4.20pm and 5.45pm. The majority of Darlington's childminders provide wraparound to schools. Some childminders also provide holiday childcare.

In early 2024, schools were offered the opportunity to express interest in revenue funding through the National Wraparound Childcare Programme. To date, 14 schools have been awarded grants to expand the number of places available or create new places. The total number of places expected to be made available through the programme is approximately 400.

### **Holiday provision**

Within Darlington, there are 18 providers registered for holiday childcare provision. This is delivered to children between the ages of 2 and 18 years, with further specialist provision from Darlington Association on Disability (DAD) for those aged 18 – 25. Holiday provision is delivered in a variety of different formats from 7 nursery providers, 5 private providers based in schools, 1 school, 1 private provider and 4 DAD schemes. 14 of the providers have start times between 7.30am and 8.30am and finish times between 4.30pm and 6pm.

In 2021, the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme was established by the DfE. The programme is for children aged 5 – 16 years who receive benefit-related free school meals. In Darlington this is provided by the Move More team and details of the programme are sent to eligible parents and carers via schools along with a unique code which they use to book a place for a child. This meets the 'robust requirements' guidance given by the DfE to ensure that the programme is delivered to the target audience.

DASH (Darlington Association on Disability's playscheme provision) provides inclusive play and leisure schemes throughout the school holidays to all disabled and non-disabled children aged between 3 and 17 years old and a further club for those with disabilities and aged between 18 and 25 years old.

### **Ofsted judgements**

The overall quality of childcare in Darlington remains high. During the academic year 2024/25, 8 PV settings and 13 childminders received an Ofsted inspection and all received either a good or outstanding judgement. 6 schools were also inspected, with their early years provision inspected as part of the whole school.

Childcare providers who only work with children from the end of the early years foundation stage are registered on the childcare register. They are expected to meet the Ofsted requirements relating to people, premises and provision and make a declaration that they will do so. They are inspected to ensure they are still complying with these requirements and are judged as either meeting the requirements of the register or not meeting the requirements i.e. met or not met.

A significant change to the way Ofsted inspects schools and settings takes effect from November 2025. Ofsted will no longer provide an overall effectiveness grade for any provider inspected under the framework.

### **Views of providers**

In autumn 2025, a provider survey was sent out with a focus on childcare and staff vacancies. In total there were 15 responses: 6 from private day nurseries, 3 from pre-schools, 3 from nurseries attached to a primary school, 2 from maintained nursery schools and 1 from a breakfast or after school club. There were no responses from holiday clubs.

### **Childcare vacancies**

From the responses received 66.67% of providers stated that they had childcare vacancies and 33.33% stated that they had no childcare vacancies. Providers were then asked if they thought they would have childcare vacancies in January 2026. 26.67% said yes, they would have vacancies, 20% said no and 53.33% were unsure. Providers were then asked if they thought they would have childcare vacancies in April 2026. 13.33% said yes, they would have vacancies, 33.33% said no and 53.33% were unsure.

### **Staff vacancies**

66.67% of providers stated that they are fully staffed and 33.33% have staff vacancies. The type of vacancies currently being advertised are for both permanent and casual vacancies, with a range of hours from zero to full time.

When asked about recruitment, 10 of respondents stated that they had experienced difficulties with the recruitment of staff. 60% stated that the number of applicants applying for vacancies had decreased; 30% stated that the number of applicants had remained the same and 10% stated that they had increased. Providers stated that 70% of applicants did not have the correct qualifications; 70% stated that applicants did not have the required experience; 50% stated that the quality of applicants at interview was poor; 20% of vacancies did not get any applications and 20% stated that applicants had poor interview skills. 60% stated that recruiting staff with a level 3 qualification was particularly difficult.

80% stated that they had no difficulties with staff retention over the past couple of years. 20% stated that they have had difficulties with staff retention.

The main difficulty which providers experience regarding staff retention is that staff leave for a job in another sector.

The main theme emerging from the survey is that whilst recruitment of high-quality early years practitioners is becoming more problematic, there is less concern around retention.

Providers were asked what they thought were the 3 main reasons why staff leave their roles. The main reason stated was that staff leave the early years sector. There were 2 reasons which were joint second which were that the working hours are too long and that there are unrealistic expectations of the job role.

Providers were then asked about the general wellbeing of the childcare workforce and whether they felt it had changed over the past couple of years. 6 responded that wellbeing was about the same, 6 felt wellbeing had got worse and 3 responded that wellbeing had improved.

Providers were asked if there was anything which could be done locally to improve the recruitment and retention of staff. 60% of responses stated that a central point of advertising would be beneficial. 26.67% stated that recruitment training for providers would be beneficial and 20% of responses stated that marketing of the sector would be beneficial.

## Support for the Childcare Sector

The Education and Inclusion department within the LA provides a range of support for the childcare sector.

### Strategic

The Early Years Education Strategy Group (EYESG) meets twice a term and is made up of representatives from all provider types. The aim is to provide a strategic overview of childcare in Darlington. The group considers national and local developments, shapes national and local initiatives and has a focus on the most vulnerable children.

Providers also have a dedicated link officer as a point of contact, as well as a generic e-mail address for queries. The link officer provides bespoke support and challenge to suit the needs of the setting either through an in-person visit, by phone or by e-mail. A half termly early years newsletter is distributed to the early years sector, and regular updates on regional and national issues are distributed through FIS. Officers meet with the regional DfE representative every 6 weeks and attend regional and national DfE events where the concerns of the local childcare sector are reported back to the DfE. Officers also meet with a local Ofsted representative termly. Ofsted is the regulatory body for quality in the early years sector.

### Quality

There are termly briefings for private and voluntary providers (PV), childminders, early years leads and early years SENCOs. These briefings include regular updates from the education safeguarding officer. In addition, a range of face-to-face networks for practitioners are facilitated. There is a baby network for practitioners working within the 0 – 2 age range, a 2-year-old network for practitioners working with 2 to 3 year-olds and good practice meetings for practitioners working across the early years. This year, a wraparound network has been introduced for staff who lead wraparound provision in schools. The networks provide opportunities for practitioners to come together and share teaching and learning ideas and challenges.

Transition into school is supported in a variety of ways. A transition event is held in May which is attended by both PV and school colleagues. Feedback from this event indicates that

colleagues value the opportunity to get together and discuss the needs of individual children. Child voice is also gathered from both nursery and reception aged children and is central to the bespoke support on offer. This informs a transition programme document which is published annually. The early years inclusion coordinators continue to support enhanced transition for children with additional needs and have facilitated input by a range of professionals, including headteachers and health professionals.

A range of training sessions is available for the sector to support staff. These are offered as whole training sessions and as bespoke sessions at staff meetings within the provider's setting. The Early Talk Boost programme supports speech and language in the early years across the sector. Each private provider and school with a nursery has a set of resources and access to ongoing training and support for the programme. Providers have also had access to training for First Words Together which many settings now run to support families with early speech and language for 0 – 2s.

Providers are encouraged to participate in the Healthy Early Years (HEY) programme and apply for the HEY award, an award which gives parents and families the confidence that the setting adheres to high standards of nutrition and education around healthy eating and healthy lifestyles. This year, the award has been expanded to include physical exercise and oral health.

## **SEND**

Following a consultation with the early years sector in the summer term of 2024, it was agreed that there would be a new model for the allocation of SEN inclusion funding and a new panel process that would bring more frequent panels (moving from termly to 4 weekly), so that settings could be supported to meet the needs of children with SEND in a more timely manner. The new panel arrangements include revised paperwork that aims to support settings with simpler support plans and referral forms, meaning a reduction in time spent on administrative tasks. These new arrangements were implemented from the autumn term in 2024. Following the rollout of the expansion of childcare, the SEN Inclusion Fund has similarly expanded to include those children in receipt of the funded hours from 9 months.

The early years inclusion coordinators offer EarlyBird and EarlyBird+ training, a termly programme to support parents of children aged up to 5 years who are on the pathway to receiving a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). This has been made available to early years practitioners to help them to support the families of children receiving a diagnosis of ASD and to improve practice in the setting.

To support children with SEND, specific training is offered which supports new SEND managers and new SENCOs in childminder, PV and school early years settings. Bespoke SEND support for individual settings is also provided. All early years settings have a link officer who is their first point of contact.

The Disability Access Fund (DAF) is a yearly payment to support childcare settings where a child is in receipt of Disability Living Allowance and is also in receipt of the 15 hours 3 and 4 year-old Universal Entitlement, 15 hours for 2-year-olds whose families are in receipt of

additional support, and since September 2025, 15 hours working parent entitlement for 9 months to 2 years old. This has been given to settings for 33 children in autumn 2024, 41 children in spring 2025 and 46 children in summer 2025.

The early notification system, whereby health visitors identify children with SEN through the progress check at age 2 and then notify the local authority, is established. Requests for Education, Health and Care Plan Assessments continue to be high: a trend that is matched regionally and nationally.

### **Business sustainability**

To support business sustainability, the LA offers support to providers through events, on a bespoke basis or during routine entitlement audit meetings.

Encouragement is made during provider audits for settings to discuss Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP) with parents as this can be given yearly to settings to help to support those children in the following circumstances: parents who are in receipt of Income Support, Jobseekers Allowance, Employment and Support Allowance, the guaranteed element of the State Pension Credit, Child Tax Credit, Working Tax Credit run on, Universal Credit or support under part six of the immigration and asylum act 1999, where a child is being looked after by the local authority, where a child has left care in England through adoption, special guardianship order or child arrangements order.

EYPP has been given to 210 children in autumn 2024, 395 children in spring 2025 and 466 children in summer 2025. The additional funding contributes to sufficiency and sustainability.

The LA's childcare development officers support the development of careers in childcare by:

- attending Darlington Jobs Fair
- working with DWP to deliver information sessions to job seekers
- taking part in the North East's Enrichment Partnership Pilot
- supporting Darlington Connect
- attending the support for work hub at the Job Centre
- engaging and working with secondary schools for careers events and masterclasses

## **Overall Sufficiency**

### **Unmet demand**

Unmet demand for childcare is monitored by Darlington Families Information Service (FIS), which receives parent and carer enquiries and requests monthly feedback from childcare settings and childminders. Settings also give informal feedback during visits and conversations. Darlington Families Information Service received 1 enquiry from parents

regarding unmet demand in the period September 2024 to September 2025, which was related to wraparound care.

### **Eligibility checking service (ECS) codes**

For a child to access funded childcare, the person with parental responsibility will have been issued with an ECS code from DfE which is then taken to the provider and verified to be used. For summer 2025, Darlington's validation rate for residents was 95% which was in line with the national average.

The codes apply to Darlington residents only. Therefore, they do not take into account places taken up in neighbouring local authorities. The high validation rate suggests that there is no unmet demand for Darlington residents.

## **Conclusion**

Indicators have shown that overall, there is currently sufficient capacity for early years childcare and wraparound to meet demand. The national expansion of the early years entitlements in September 2024 which resulted in working parents being able to access 15 hours of funded childcare was absorbed into supply.

In September 2025, eligible working parents of children aged 9 months plus became entitled to 30 hours of government funded childcare per week. The school-based nursery and wraparound funding programmes referenced within this document, as well as DfE capital funding, have facilitated an increase in supply of both early years entitlement places and wraparound places. This has helped to address the anticipated increase in demand.

Consultations with parents have demonstrated the need for local childcare to be affordable and flexible, to be available to meet existing or new working patterns and where required, the need for accessible, affordable, inclusive holiday childcare.

The LA will continue to monitor the market position and sufficiency over the course of the expansion, paying regard to access to places for children with special educational needs and disabilities and families receiving additional forms of support. The LA is engaging with providers to promote sufficiency of places. The LA will continue to support the sector in areas such as recruitment and retention, special educational needs and quality to ensure that childcare in Darlington meets the needs of our children and families.