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**Childcare Sufficiency Assessment**

**2024**

**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/publications/early-education-and-childcare--2/early-education-and-childcare-applies-from-1-april-2024) 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](https://www.darlington.gov.uk/media/21486/council-plan-2024-2027.pdf), 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 2023 Spring Budget, the chancellor announced reforms to childcare to help working families with their childcare costs. The introduction of the new entitlements is as follows:

* From April 2024, eligible working parents of 2-year-olds could access 15 hours per week for 38 weeks per year
* From September 2024, eligible working parents of children aged 9 months up to 3 years old could access 15 hours per week for 38 weeks per year
* From September 2025, eligible working parents of children aged 9 months up to 3 years old can access 30 hours free childcare per week for 38 weeks per year

These new entitlements are in addition to the following:

* Disadvantaged 2-year-olds – children aged 2 whose families receive certain benefits (including low-income families in receipt of in-work benefits), or those who meet additional non-economic criteria
* Universal – all children aged 3 and 4 are entitled to up to 15 hours per week 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 until compulsory school age or they start reception class

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Autumn 23 |  |  |  | Spring 24 |  |  |  |  | Summer 24 |  |  |  | |  |
|  | Disadvantaged 2-year- olds | Universal Entitlement for 3 & 4- year-olds | Extended Entitlement for 3 & 4- year-olds | Termly totals | Working Parent Entitlement for 2-year-olds | Disadvantaged 2- year-olds | Universal Entitlement for 3 & 4- year-olds | Extended Entitlement 3 & 4-year- olds | Termly totals | Working Parent Entitlement for 2-year-olds | Disadvantaged 2- year-olds | Universal Entitlement for 3 & 4- year-olds | Extended Entitlement 3 & 4-year- olds | Termly totals | |
| Private day nurseries | 180 | 151 | 292 | 623 | n/a | 174 | 180 | 365 | 719 | 300 | 166 | 214 | 434 | 1114 | |
| Pre-schools | 23 | 42 | 73 | 138 | n/a | 23 | 70 | 125 | 218 | 66 | 16\* | 78 | 151 | 311 | |
| Out of school clubs | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | n/a | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | |
| Childminders | 7 | 4 | 24 | 35 | n/a | 10 | 6 | 38 | 54 | 44 | 6 | 6 | 42 | 98 | |
| Private & voluntary sector totals | 210 | 197 | 389 | 796 |  | 207 | 256 | 528 | 991 | 410 | 188 | 298 | 627 | 1523 | |
| Nursery schools | 51 | 70 | 29 | 150 | n/a | 44 | 97 | 47 | 188 | 23 | 49 | 103 | 58 | 233 | |
| Nursery units | 67 | 253 | 166 | 486 | n/a | 54 | 342 | 213 | 609 | 1 | 61 | 369 | 231 | 662 | |
| School totals | 118 | 323 | 195 | 636 |  | 98 | 439 | 260 | 797 | 24 | 110 | 472 | 289 | 895 | |
| Childcare market totals | 328 | 520 | 584 | 1432 |  | 305 | 695 | 788 | 1788 | 434 | 298 | 770 | 916 | 2418 | |

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

The number of families eligible for disadvantaged 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.

Although this assessment is reporting on 2024, it is important to note that from September 2025, there will be an increase in FEEE as all eligible working parents of children aged 9 months up to 3 years old will be entitled to 30 hours free childcare per week for 38 weeks per year.

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

The national wraparound childcare programme is part of the childcare reforms announced in the 2023 Spring Budget. 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 2023/24 is reported within both the demand and supply sections.

**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 in Spring 2024, there has been an increase in the number of children accessing entitlements. In Summer 2023 the total number of children accessing entitlements was 2014; by Summer 2024 this had increased by 16% to 2418. The sector has been able to accommodate these places, partly because many 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 were female and 53,627 were male. The population had grown by 4% from 2011 to 2022. 81.6% of the female population were economically active and 86.4% of the male population were 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 at 31 August 2024**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Year of birth (Sep – Aug) | Year entering reception | Births | Annual difference | Age |
| 2019/2020 | 2024/2025 | 1171 |  | 4 |
| 2020/2021 | 2025/2026 | 1128 | -43 | 3 |
| 2021/2022 | 2026/2027 | 1119 | -9 | 2 |
| 2022/2023 | 2027/2028 | 1037 | -82 | 1 |
| 2023/2024 | 2028/2029 | 1058 | 28 | 0 |

*Source: GP registration data provided by NHS Digital from the NHS Primary Care Registration (Demographic) database. The report breaks down the number of children living in English postcodes and registered at a GP practice.*

Table 2 demonstrates that there has been a fall in birth rates in recent years; however, in 2023/24, there was a small increase, indicating 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, each 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**

During July 2024, 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, which days they use and how many hours they access over a week. The survey also asked if parents had heard of Tax-Free Childcare (TFC), the childcare element of Universal Credit and other entitlements. The return rate was high with 830 responses. 495 of those were from parents who use registered childcare provision.

For those parents who do not use registered childcare, the main reasons were because it was not required as family and friends provide childcare or because it was not required as they did not work. There were other themes such as the age of the children, patterns of work covering childcare needs, and cost.

**Table 3: Proportion of parents and carers using childcare provider by type**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Type of provision | Percentage (%) |
| Registered breakfast and/or after school provision | 42.76 |
| Private day nursery | 28.97 |
| Registered holiday club | 23.13 |
| Childminder | 15.89 |
| Nursery school | 14.95 |
| Preschool | 11.45 |
| Nursery unit (attached to a primary school) | 6.07 |

**Table 4: Proportion of children accessing childcare by age**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Age | Percentage (%) |
| Under 1 | 3.19 |
| 1 to 2 years old | 25.51 |
| 3 to 4 years old | 35.76 |
| 5 to 8 years old | 41.69 |
| 9 to 11 years old | 25.97 |
| 12 to 14 years old | 5.92 |
| 15 to 17 years old with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities | 0.91 |

Parents and carers were asked to tell us the reason(s) why they use childcare. 86.94% of parents use childcare to enable them to work; 44.37% said they use childcare to enable their children to access opportunities to develop and grow; 39.86% to enable their children to make friends; 36.71% said childcare is used to enable their children to get ready to go in to school; 6.98% of parents used childcare to enable them to access training opportunities and 5.86% use childcare to give them a break from caring.

Parents were also asked when they use childcare: 95.44% of parents use childcare during term-time and 50.6% during school holidays. Parents were asked which days they access childcare. Tuesday was the most popular day of the week, followed by Thursday, Wednesday, Monday and then Friday was the least popular day. Over the course of a week, 24.22% of parents said that their child accessed between 11 and 15 hours of childcare; 17.51% accessed between 26 and 30 hours; 16.59% accessed 6 to 10 hours; 15.11% accessed 1 to 5 hours; 7.19% accessed 21 to 25 hours and 9.83% accessed over 30 hours.

**Table 5: Factors which parents and carers look for when choosing childcare**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Factor | Percentage (%) |
| Proximity of childcare to home, school or work | 84.11 |
| Safety and security of the provider | 56.78 |
| Atmosphere and available facilities | 54.44 |
| The provider meets child’s needs | 51.40 |
| Quality of the provider | 50.23 |
| Flexibility of opening and closing times | 50.00 |
| Costs or charges | 46.73 |
| Recommendation from family or friends | 36.92 |
| Previous child attended | 27.57 |
| Ofsted grade | 26.64 |
| Qualifications of staff | 16.12 |
| Other | 6.31 |

Parents were asked how they pay for childcare. 49.1% of parents paid for all or some of the childcare they used; 29.5% accessed 15 funded hours a week; 19.82% accessed 30 funded hours a week. 27.7% of respondents said they accessed TFC. 7.21% used childcare vouchers and 2.7% of parents said that they accessed an employer support/childcare scheme.

Parents were asked whether they had heard of TFC and the childcare element of Universal Credit. 71.93% said that they had heard of TFC and 89.23% had heard of Universal Credit. Parents were asked how they had heard of them. 64.14% said by word of mouth; 27.71% said that their childcare provider had told them about them; 16.60% had found out about them on social media and 15.19% had heard about them on T.V. or the radio.

Parents were asked how much of their family income they spent on childcare compared to last year. 42.2% said they spent a larger proportion of their income on childcare; 30.73% said this was a smaller proportion; 27.06% said they spent about the same proportion on childcare.

Parents were also asked which holidays they required childcare for. 100% of respondents said that they needed childcare in the summer holidays, 83.33% said the Easter holidays, 77.08% said October half term, 75% said February half term, 70.83% said May half term and 56.25% said the Christmas holidays.

Parents were asked whether, if childcare was available at weekends, they would use it. 81.69% said no to Saturday and 86.49% said no to Sunday.

91.91% said that the childcare they use suits their needs and 95.1% said it was of good quality. Parents were asked if the number of childcare hours was sufficient for their needs. 78.9% answered yes and 21.1% answered no. Themes emerging from the no responses to this question were around cost, eligibility for funded childcare and shift work.

**Table 6: Barriers to accessing childcare experienced by parents and carers**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Barrier | Yes (%) | No (%) |
| No place available at a provider | 26.23 | 73.77 |
| Unsuitable start time | 25.98 | 74.02 |
| Unsuitable finish time | 25.25 | 74.25 |
| Unsuitable days | 17.16 | 82.84 |
| Location | 11.03 | 88.97 |

The main barriers were identified as cost, shift work and providers unable to provide a specific day. There were some comments relating to unmet demand, specifically about a childminder retiring, the number of childminders falling and finding childcare in specific areas of Darlington. There were also unmet demand comments regarding wraparound and a more detailed parental survey about wraparound is referenced below. The results from the parental survey would indicate childcare supply across Darlington is broadly sufficient to meet need.

**Wraparound childcare**

To better understand the wraparound needs of families in Darlington, parental surveys were sent to each school in spring 2024. The LA also had individual conversations with each school about their wraparound offer. There were over 500 responses from 25 schools to the wraparound survey. 51% of respondents indicated that they used wraparound and 49% of respondents indicated that they did not. Those that did used both before and after school, either 3 to 4 times a week or daily. The main reason for using wraparound was to support work commitments. The respondents who did not currently use wraparound were asked the question about whether they might use wraparound in the future: 66% indicated that they would consider using wraparound. Three themes emerged from the survey:

• It can be difficult for parents to book onto the wraparound available at their school

• Earlier start and later finish times are required by some parents

• The price of wraparound can vary across schools

**Views of providers**

A provider survey was circulated in spring 2024 to collect local information about confidence in meeting any anticipated demand resulting from the expansion of childcare entitlements from September 2024. 12 providers completed the survey.

Providers were asked how many of their children whose parents currently pay for their childcare would ‘switch’ to a LA funded place from September 2024: a third answered that none would switch, a third stated that between 1-10 children would switch and a third stated that over 10 would switch. Three quarters of respondents stated that they thought parents would want to pay for additional hours. Just over one half of respondents stated that additional children would want to attend their setting.

When asked whether the expansion of childcare entitlements from September 2024 would affect the delivery of disadvantaged places for 2-year-olds, no providers said yes, 5 said maybe and 7 said no. Providers were asked whether the expansion of childcare entitlements from September 2024 would have any effect on the delivery of places for children with SEND. 2 providers said yes and 10 said no.

Providers were asked whether they were planning to make any changes to their businesses to meet demand for the expansion of childcare entitlements from September 2024. 6 said yes and 6 said no. Examples of changes to businesses included employing more staff, installing facilities and extending physical space.

Providers were also asked whether they had any plans to change their fee structures: 4 said yes and 8 said no. Providers were asked whether there are any barriers to their childcare businesses engaging fully with the expansion of childcare entitlements from September 2024. 10 said yes and 2 said no. The barriers included a lack of physical space, having the correct facilities and the ability to recruit staff.

**Tax-Free Childcare (source:** **Tax-Free Childcare Statistics Commentary September 2024)**

TFC 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.

Table 7 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 7: Tax-Free Childcare accounts in Darlington**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 2017 -18 | 2018 - 19 | 2019 - 20 | 2020 -21 | 2021 - 22 | 2022 - 23 | 2023 - 24 |
| Number of children with used Tax-Free Childcare accounts for Darlington by tax year | 110 | 275 | 615 | 780 | 1110 | 1440 | 1705 |
| Number of families with used Tax-Free Childcare accounts for Darlington by tax year | 85 | 220 | 485 | 630 | 895 | 1135 | 1325 |

*Information from Official Statistics, Tax-Free Childcare Statistics, June 2024, HM Revenue & Customs Published, 21 August 2024.*

**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)**

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

56 responses stated that they access childcare to enable them to work, 41 stated that they use childcare to enable their child to access opportunities to develop and grow, 37 stated that they access childcare to enable their child to make friends, 34 stated that they access childcare to enable their child to get ready for school, 10 stated that they use childcare to give them a break from childcare, 7 stated that they use childcare to access training and 6 stated that they use childcare to enable them to take care of other family members.

2 respondents stated they did not use childcare for other reasons.

From the parental survey, it was identified that parents of children with SEND mainly choose their childcare based on location (79.73%) which mirrored the responses of all parents. They then choose childcare based on the setting’s ability to meet the needs of the child (70.27%) and then the quality of the provider (52.70%).

Respondents had heard of the different entitlements: 79.54% had heard of TFC, 96% had heard of Universal Credit and 78.08% had heard of universal hours for 3 and 4-year-olds, with word of mouth being the most common form of information sharing.

56.76% of respondents advised that they are paying a greater proportion of their wages into childcare compared to last year.

**Table 8: Proportion of children with SEND accessing childcare by type**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Type of provision | Percentage (%) |
| Registered breakfast or after school provision | 39.19 |
| Private day nursery | 25.68 |
| Nursery school | 16.22 |

**Table 9: Proportion of children with SEND accessing childcare by age**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Age | Percentage (%) |
| 3 – 4 years | 47.37 |
| 5 – 8 years | 48.68 |
| 9 – 11 years | 31.58 |

While 93.06% of respondents access childcare in term time, this reduces to 45.83% during school holidays. The most popular day is again Tuesday, with Monday and Wednesday following, then Thursday then Friday. Less than 20% wished for childcare on a Saturday or Sunday. Most children access childcare after 8am and 26.39% identified this as the earliest time. 27.78% identified that 6pm would be the latest pick-up time. Parents reported that 33.33% of children accessed some form of childcare for between 11 and 15 hours a week.

70.83% 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 reasons were the location (87.14%) and being offered unsuitable days (84.29%). 88.57% agreed that childcare suited their needs and 92.86% answered that it is of good quality.

**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 (using Ofsted judgements). 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 2024, 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 4 private providers who run out of school club provision. The locations of these are displayed on the map below. There were also 38 registered childminders operating in Darlington.

*A map of a city

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*Figure 2: Location of childcare in Darlington*

**Early years providers**

**Table 10: Types of providers and number of registered early years places in July 2024**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Type of provider | Number of providers | Ofsted registered early years places |
| Childminder | 38 | 252 |
| Private nursery | 18 | 1184 |
| Maintained nursery school | 2 | 260 |
| Nursery unit attached to a school | 18 | 649 |
| Preschool | 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.

There are 26 private or voluntary providers (nurseries and preschools) 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. 20 primary schools have a nursery unit for 3 and 4-year-olds and 5 of these primary schools also have 2-year-old provision. There are 2 LA maintained nursery schools and 38 childminders offering FEEE.

Provision has been relatively stable during this period. One new school nursery opened in September 2024 providing an extra 26 early years places. Childminder numbers fluctuate and numbers overall have reduced in recent years, falling from 51 in November 2022 to 38. There are currently 5 potential childminders interested in registering to provide early years childcare.

In early 2023, funding was made available by the Department for Education for capital projects in schools and settings to deliver expansion of entitlement and/or wraparound places. 5 projects have been funded in Darlington schools and settings. These projects will deliver up to an additional 20 entitlement places for 2-year-olds and 60 mixed age entitlement places.

**Wraparound and out of school childcare providers**

In total, there are 32 schools with the potential to offer wraparound for primary pupils in Darlington. During the year, one private provider of out of school care closed but the school introduced their own wraparound offer resulting in no loss of places.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 afterschool 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. The current strengths are that nearly half of schools already have a full wraparound offer, with others that offer a similar time frame (i.e. 7.45am to 5.45pm).

In early 2023, funding was made available by the Department for Education for capital projects in schools and settings to deliver expansion of entitlement and/or wraparound places. 5 projects have been funded in Darlington schools and settings. These projects will deliver up to an additional 65 wraparound places. In early 2024, schools were offered the opportunity to express interest in revenue funding through the National Wraparound Childcare Programme. To date, 11 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 380.

**Holiday provision**

Within Darlington, there are 20 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, 2 private providers and 5 DAD schemes. Of those providers, 1 is graded as outstanding by Ofsted, 9 are good, and 5 are met.

13 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 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.

Some Darlington childminders also provide holiday childcare and they report to FIS after each holiday period. For the year 2023/24, in September 2023 they reported that 22 children had been looked after by 10 childminders with some vacancies. In November 2023, 5 childminders provided care for 14 children and further vacancies were reported. In February 2024, 10 children had childcare from 4 childminders, with vacancies reported.

**Ofsted judgements**

The overall quality of childcare in Darlington remains high.

The table below shows the Ofsted judgements for the different types of early years provider across Darlington, including a school with nursery provision which opened in September 2024.

**Table 11: Ofsted judgements (source: FIS as at 30/09/2024)**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Outstanding | Good | Requires improvement | Inadequate | Met | Not met | Awaiting first inspection | Total |
| Schools with nursery provision | 1 | 17 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 20 |
| Private nurseries | 3 | 15 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 18 |
| Preschools | 2 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 8 |
| Out of school clubs (school registered) | 0 | 10 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 12 |
| Out of school clubs | 1 | 12 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 14 |
| Breakfast clubs | 0 | 10 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 10 |
| Breakfast clubs (school registered) | 1 | 18 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 22 |
| Maintained nursery schools | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Childminders | 2 | 30 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 3 | 38 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

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 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.

**Views of providers**

In July 2024, a provider survey was sent out with a particular focus on staff recruitment and retention and the impact this can have on the supply of places. In total there were 20 responses: 9 from private day nurseries, 4 from pre-schools, 4 from nursery units (attached to a primary school), 2 from nursery schools and 1 from a breakfast or after school club. There were no responses from holiday clubs.

75% of providers stated that they are fully staffed and 25% currently have 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. The required level of qualification is level 3.

When asked about recruitment, 9 of the respondents stated that they had experienced difficulties with the recruitment of staff. 52.94% stated that the number of applicants applying for vacancies had decreased, 35.29% stated that the number of applicants had remained the same and 11.76% stated that they had increased. Providers stated that 64.71% of applicants did not having the correct qualifications, 58.82% stated that applicants did not have the required experience, 41.18% stated that the quality of applicants at interview was poor, 29.41% of vacancies did not get any applications and 11.76% stated that applicants had poor interview skills. 70.59% stated that recruiting staff with a level 3 qualification was particularly difficult.

72.22% stated that they had no difficulties with staff retention over the past couple of years. 27.78% stated that they have had difficulties with staff retention.

Some of the difficulties providers experience regarding staff retention are that staff leave for a job in another sector, staff leave for another job within childcare and some leave the workforce altogether.

The main themes from the survey results appear to highlight that whilst recruitment 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. The second reason was that staff are dissatisfied with pay and conditions. There were 2 reasons which were joint third which were that the working hours are too long and that there are unrealistic expectations of the job role.

Potentially the biggest risk area is in finding staff with the right level of skills, as providers have struggled most to recruit level 3 practitioners.

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. 9 responded that wellbeing was about the same, 5 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. 46.67% of responses stated that a central point of advertising would be beneficial. 26.67% of responses stated that marketing of the sector and recruitment training for providers would be beneficial.

**Support for the Childcare Sector**

The Education and Inclusion department within the LA provide 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 produced, 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.

**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. This year a baby network has been introduced for practitioners working within the 0 to 2 age range, 2-year-old networks for practitioners working with 2 to 3-year-olds and good practice meetings for practitioners working across the early years. These 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 and informs a transition programme document which is published annually. The early years inclusion coordinators have continued 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, as well as bespoke sessions at staff meetings within the provider’s setting. During the academic year 2023/24, Early Talk Boost was rolled out across the sector with the aim of supporting speech and language in the early years. Each private provider and school with a nursery was allocated a set of resources and two training places. Providers have also had access to training for First Words Together which many settings have now run to support families with early speech and language for 0 to 2s. The DfE Experts and Mentors support programme was promoted widely and has supported 11 PV settings in Darlington over the duration of the scheme.

Providers are encouraged to participate in the Healthy Early Years (HEY) programme and apply for the HEY catering 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.

**SEND**

In 2023/24, the early years inclusion panel continued to meet termly, awarding funding for children with emerging and significant special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

Following a consultation with the early years sector in the summer term of 2024, it has been agreed that there will be a new funding model for the allocation of SEN inclusion funding and a new panel process that will bring more frequent panels (moving from termly to 4 weekly), so that settings can be supported to meet the needs of children with SEND in a more timely manner. The new panel arrangements include a new set of 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 have been warmly received by the early years sector and will be implemented in the autumn term 2024.

The early years inclusion coordinators offer EarlyBird and EarlyBird+ training, a termly programme to support parents of children aged up to 5 years 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 has also been provided. During autumn 2023, early years providers were given the opportunity to be involved in a pilot called Valuing SEND. Valuing SEND is an online tool which helps settings to identify their current strengths and areas for development at both a whole setting level and for individual children.

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 disadvantaged 2-year-olds, and from April 2024, 15 hours working parent entitlement for 9 months to 2 years old. This has been given to settings for 24 children in autumn 2023, 9 children in spring 2024 and 39 children in summer 2024. Numbers of children receiving DAF are increasing as more children are identified with SEND needs within settings.

**Table 12: Early years inclusion caseload figures**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Academic year** | **Number of new referrals** | **Total number of children supported** |
| 2020-2021 | 110 | 138 |
| 2021-2022 | 110 | 166 |
| 2022-2023 | 156 | 195 |
| 2023-2024 | 119 | 211 |

The caseload figures for the early years inclusion service show the large increase in children being identified with SEN in settings across Darlington. This increase is replicated across other areas of the system, such as an increase in children being referred for neurodevelopmental assessments before the age of 5. There has also been an increase in EHCP requests in recent years, illustrated in table 13, indicating that early identification of needs is well established in early years settings. Parental responses indicate that the demand for childcare for children with SEND is broadly being met.

**Table 13: Numbers of children with SEND requesting an Education and Health Care plan**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Age Range | Year 2022 | Multiple requests1 | Year 2023 | Multiple requests1 | Year 2024 | Multiple requests1 |
| 0 – 5 | 12 | 0 | 49 | 0 | 68 | 0 |
| 6 -11 | 81 | 2 | 85 | 0 | 80 | 4 |
| 12 – 16 | 62 | 3 | 57 | 0 | 44 | 1 |
| 17 - 25 | 8 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 3 | 0 |

1This indicates the number of children with more than one EHCP request

The Darlington system for identification of needs is well established and good relationships between local authority officers and staff in settings mean that a high level of structured support is in place to identify early indicators of needs.

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 working well.

**Table 14: Early years caseload figures by areas of need**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Academic Year** | **Communication & Interaction** | | **Sensory & Physical** | | **Cognition & Learning** | | **SEMH** | |
| **number** | **%** | **number** | **%** | **number** | **%** | **number** | **%** |
| 2020-2021 | 89 | 64 | 11 | 8 | 26 | 19 | 12 | 9 |
| 2021-2022 | 118 | 71 | 8 | 5 | 24 | 14 | 16 | 10 |
| 2022-2023 | 134 | 69 | 11 | 6 | 29 | 15 | 21 | 11 |
| 2023-2024 | 156 | 74 | 13 | 6 | 27 | 13 | 15 | 7 |

The largest area of need for children in the early years continues to be communication and interaction. This data had previously informed the commissioning of the Early Talk Boost programme for all 3 and 4-year-olds in Darlington, as well as the Tots Talking programme, which will be implemented within the early help team from the autumn term 2024. The early years local authority services continue to support settings with individual children, training and staff support needs.

**Business sustainability**

To support business sustainability the LA offers support to providers through events, assigning a link officer and childcare sufficiency officer support on a bespoke basis or during routine entitlement audit meetings. From this they can have further signposting to business management tools, events and training opportunities.

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 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 242 children in autumn 2023, 263 children in spring 2024 and 398 children in summer 2024. 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 (usually twice a year)

• 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 Family Information Service (FIS) who receive parent and carer enquiries and request monthly feedback from childcare settings and childminders. Settings also give informal feedback during visits and conversations. FIS has reported that they had 6 enquiries from parents regarding unmet demand in the period September 2023 to September 2024 which were related to parental area preference and hours required. These were all resolved satisfactorily.

Informal feedback from providers indicates that while some are receiving more interest and have waiting lists for different times, they still have some flexibility to increase their number of children, particularly on different days and at different times.

**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 2024, Darlington’s validation rate for residents was 96.95% which was above the national rate.

The codes apply to Darlington residents only. Therefore, they do not consider places taken up in neighbouring local authorities. The high validation rate indicates 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 April 2024 and September 2024 which has resulted in working parents being able to access 15 hours of funded childcare has been absorbed into supply. The national wraparound programme has led to an increase in wraparound places available to parents and carers.

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. In September 2025, eligible working parents of children aged 9 months plus will be entitled to 30 hours of funded childcare per week; this will represent a further expansion of the funded entitlements. The DfE capital and wraparound funding programmes referenced above will facilitate an increase in supply of both early years entitlement places and wraparound places through the next academic year. This will help to address the anticipated increase in demand.

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 children who are eligible for a disadvantaged 2-year-old place. 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.