Halton Virtual School

Early Years Funding Policy for Children in Care

2026-2027

Policy Date:	January 2026 (Updated August 2026)
Policy Review Cycle:	Annual
Next Review Date:	August 2027



Promoting the Education of Children in Foster Care in the Early Years

The positive impact of education in the early years of a child's life on their long term educational achievement and life outcomes is now widely recognised and supported by a growing body of research, both in the UK and in other countries. The importance of early education is recognised by Government, with all children aged 9months+ in England who are eligible having the opportunity to access free early education. Funding for Early Years provision comes into effect the term after the child turns the appropriate age.

When a child becomes looked-after, Halton Borough Council Social Care team, will arrange a suitable care placement. In doing so, the child's allocated social worker should do everything possible to minimise disruption to the child's education, whatever the child's age. Any educational moves must be discussed with and approved by the Virtual School before they happen. Decisions about accessing early education must be part of the child's care plan and be agreed by the Social Worker.

Early Education & Funding

Children's Foster Carers and Social Workers are responsible for ensuring that children are registered for their free early education. The Virtual School are available for support and guidance.

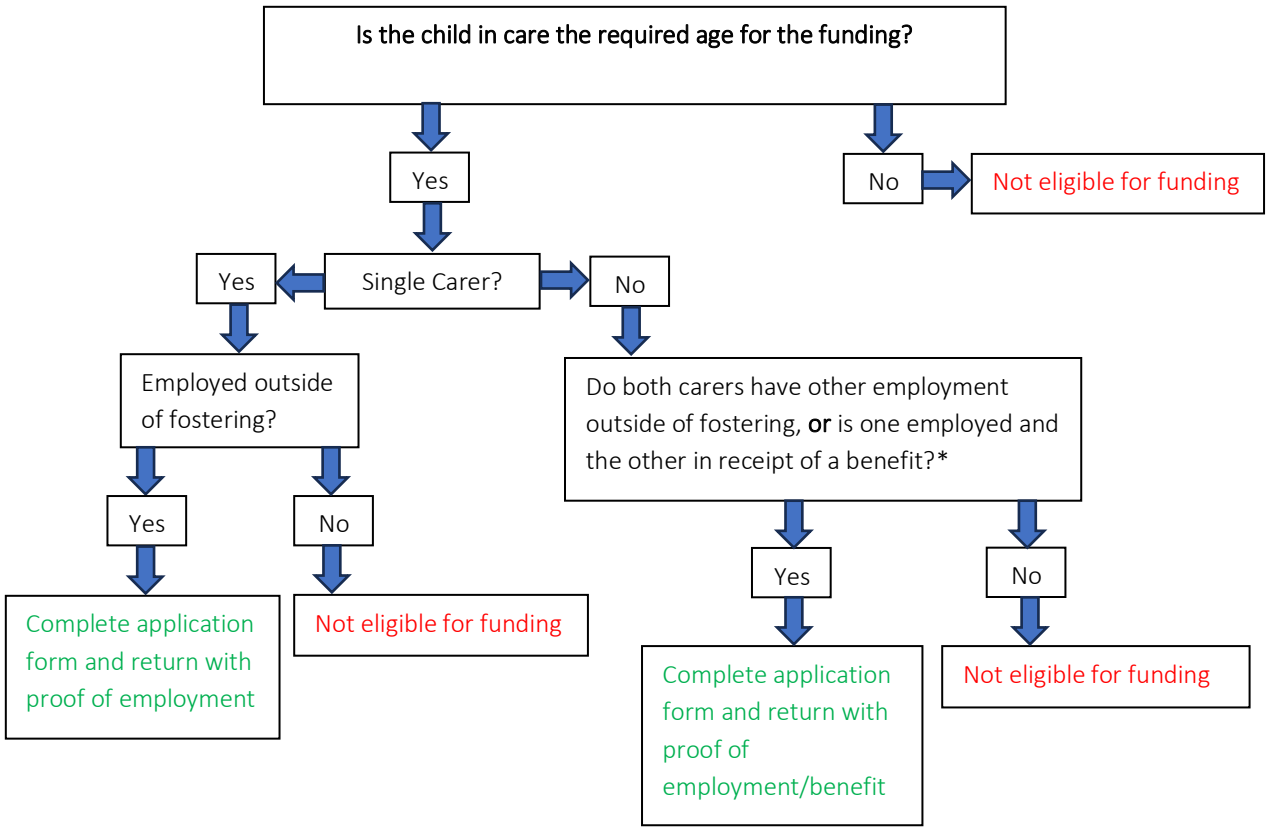
Children in foster care will be eligible for the extension of the free childcare, where the foster carers meet certain eligibility criteria; carer is in paid work outside their fostering role and does not expect their adjusted net income to exceed £100,000. This provides foster families with the same support as other families where it is right for the child and supports their care plan.

Foster carers cannot use the online childcare service application to apply for free childcare. Speak to your social worker and your local council if you want to apply. Children in Foster Care will be able to receive free early years education hours, if the following criteria are met:

- Agreement from the responsible local authority that the foster carer engaging in paid work outside their role of fostering is consistent with the child's care plan. The agreement that the foster carers can take up the free early years education entitlement should be recorded, and the care plan for the child should be updated as appropriate.
- That, in single parent foster families, the foster carer engages in paid work outside their role as a foster parent, although there is no minimum income requirement.
- In 2 parent foster families, either both partners engage in paid work outside their roles in fostering, (although there is no minimum income requirement for either carer), or one partner engages in paid work and the other partner receives certain qualifying benefits*

*Eligible benefits (already in receipt of): Universal Credit (assessed as having limited capability for work); National Insurance credits because of incapacity or limited capability for work; Carer's Allowance; Employment and Support Allowance; Incapacity Benefit; Severe Disablement Allowance

Eligibility flow chart for working Foster Carers:



Application process:

Virtual School to send **one** reminder email to Social Workers/Fostering team with an application form and guidance for eligible carers each term.

If eligible, Carers to complete, sign and return to the Social Worker/Virtual School

Proof of eligibility also needs to be sent with the application form.

Principal Fostering Manager will check and sign to confirm eligibility has been met.

Information shared with the Local Authority Early Years Team for an 11-digit eligibility code to be generated. Social Worker will be informed of this code to share with Carers along with the reconfirmation date.

The code will need reconfirming each term (every 12 weeks).

Children aged 9 months to 2 years – 30 hours working carer funding

From September 2025, children from 9 months old who are living with working foster carers may be eligible to access 30 hours of early years education funding. The eligibility flow chart outlines whether or not carers would be able to make an application and discussions should take place with the Social Worker prior to an application being made. Foster Carers, like all other parents accessing funded hours, are required to reconfirm their eligibility every three months. Foster carers will be asked to check and sign to reconfirm that their circumstances remain the same. Failure to reconfirm could mean that a child in foster care is no longer eligible for the funded early years education. If your child in foster care has started a 30 hours place and you stop working outside fostering, you can continue to access the hours for a short period of time: this is called a 'grace period'. Please inform the Social Worker of any changes to circumstances that may affect funding.

Children aged 2 years – 15 hours vulnerable funding (30 hours working carers)

It is best practice for all 2 year old children who are looked after to be registered for the free 15 hours early education. The child's Social Worker and Virtual School, alongside the families, will decide if it is appropriate for the child to take-up the free early education entitlement in full or part. Where it is not appropriate for the child to take-up the full entitlement the child's Social Worker, Virtual School and foster family will agree the amount of free early education the child should take up. If the child does not take-up their full entitlement this decision should be reviewed at least every term as part of the Care Planning process, and communicated to the Independent Reviewing Officer. No child should start a new provision, or move provisions without the approval of the Virtual School.

Where carers are also in employment, they would be able to access the working carers funding too, which would provide the full 30 hours early education if appropriate.

Children aged 3 and 4 years – 15 hours universal funding

All children who are 3 and 4 years old will continue to qualify for the universal 15 hours regardless of the working status of their foster carers. It is best practice for all 3 and 4 year old children looked after by Halton Borough Council to take-up their full entitlement of early education, unless the child's Social Worker and Virtual School, alongside the families, agree that there are specific reasons why this is not appropriate and for the entitlement to be only partially accessed. If the child does not take-up their full entitlement of the universal 15 hours, this decision should be reviewed at least every term as part of the PEP process, and communicated to the Independent Reviewing Officer. No child should start a new provision, or move provisions without the approval of the Virtual School.

Children aged 3 and 4 years – 30 hours working Carer funding

From September 2024, children aged 3-4 years old who are living with working foster carers may be eligible to access 30 hours of early years education funding. The eligibility flow chart outlines whether or not carers would be able to make an application and discussions should take place with the Social Worker prior to an application being made. Foster Carers, like all other parents accessing funded hours, are required to reconfirm their eligibility every three months. Foster carers will be asked to check and sign to reconfirm that their circumstances remain the same. Failure to reconfirm could mean that a child in foster care is no longer eligible for the funded early years

education. If your child in foster care has started a 30 hours place and you stop working outside fostering, you can continue to access the hours for a short period of time: this is called a 'grace period'. Please inform the Social Worker of any changes to circumstances that may affect funding.

Reception Year

By law children do not have to start school until they reach statutory school age, which is the term after their fifth birthday. However, children are generally admitted to school in the September following their fourth birthday, which is at the start of Reception Year. Applications for primary school places must be submitted to the local authority in which the child is placed by the middle of January in the same calendar year that the new school place is sought (e.g. applications for a place in September 2026 must have been received by 15th January 2026). School places will then be allocated mid-April of that year. The child's Social Worker is responsible for ensuring that an application for a primary school place (or first school or infant school place) is completed and submitted in accordance with the admission procedures of the local authority in which the child is placed. The child's Social Worker must liaise with the Virtual School in arranging the school place and the school must be approved by the Virtual School as appropriate and suitable to meet the child's needs. If the child has a special educational need or disability, the SEND Team may also be required to ensure that the school can meet the child's needs. The Virtual School will also support with transitions from Nursery to Reception through the Summer PEP's and transition documents.

Personal Education Plans (PEPs)

It is statutory for all children aged 3 and above who are looked after, or in Reception to have an Early Years PEP recorded on Welfare Call. Where it has been agreed that a child does not take-up their full entitlement to free early education, the PEP must record the reasons for this and next date that this decision will be reviewed. PEP guidance is available from the Virtual School. Once a child is discharged form care, PEP's do not continue.

Pupil Premium Plus (PP+)

Through the PEPs, the looked after children pupil premium plus, is allocated through a needs led basis in accordance with Halton Borough Council's PP+ strategy (January 2024) which is available on Halton Virtual School website.

Early Years Pupil Premium

The Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP) is additional funding for early years settings to improve the education they provide for disadvantaged 3 and 4 year olds. Children aged 3 and 4 years who are looked after by Halton Borough Council and who receive free early education will qualify for EYPP funding, even if they do not take-up the full free early education entitlement. This funding is paid directly to the setting the child is attending by the relevant local authority.

Previously looked after - Adoption

When a previously looked-after child has been placed with the prospective adoptive parent(s) but the formal adoption order has not yet been granted by the courts, the parent(s) are no longer

considered to be the child's foster carers. The adoption agency (i.e., the relevant local authority) must notify the prospective adopter(s) in writing of the date on which the child is placed for adoption with them (this is the adoption placement order). If they wish to apply for the working parent entitlement, these prospective adopter(s) must then apply through the 'best start in life' website rather than via the local authority as they can no longer apply via the working foster carer route. If they do not hold the child's birth certificate, they can provide HMRC with the adoption placement order from the adoption agency during the application process. As with other parents, they must meet the eligibility criteria for the working parent entitlement, including the minimum income requirement and the requirement to reconfirm via the childcare service every 3 months. This remains the same when the adoption order is granted by the court.

Carers on adoption Leave

Date of starting or returning to work	When you can apply from	When you can access your entitlement from
1 October to 31 January	1 September to 31 December	1 January
1 February to 30 April	1 January to 31 March	1 April
1 May to 30 September	1 April to 31 August	1 September

Family and Friends Carers

For family and friends carers to be eligible to apply, they would need to be registered as a foster carer. Family and friends carers on a Reg.24 should apply using the online childcare application through 'the best start in life'.

Additional Information

- The DfE deadlines to access funding are 31st March, 31st August and 31st December. Applications need to be submitted in advance of these date to ensure eligibility can be checked, and to enable the Early Years Officer to generate the code. There are no negotiations with these dates as they are set by the Government.
- If the application is not received within the timescales stated, a code would not be generated, funding would not be granted, and the foster carer would be liable for fees.
- Eligibility codes must be obtained the term before the child starts childcare. A child cannot start to claim funded hours in the same term that the eligibility code is issued.
- Early years education funding is not intended to cover the costs of meals, other consumables (such as nappies or sun cream), additional hours or additional activities (such as trips). Providers may charge a fee for these additions. This is an arrangement to be made between foster carers and the childcare provider.
- Early years education funding is a Government Scheme, not a Virtual School/Local Authority Scheme.