

THE UNITED KINGDOM

of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

Key Contextual Data

Compiled by

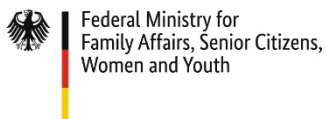
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Contents

- Early childhood education and care (ECEC) 4**
 - Historical milestones in ECEC in the UK4
 - ECEC system type and auspices.....6
 - England 6
 - Wales 7
 - Scotland 7
 - Northern Ireland 7
 - General objectives and legislative framework8
 - England 8
 - Wales 8
 - Scotland 9
 - Northern Ireland 9
 - ECEC entitlement and compulsory attendance10
 - Main types of provision11
 - England 11
 - Wales 11
 - Scotland 12
 - Northern Ireland 12
 - Provider structures13
 - England 13
 - Wales 14
 - Scotland 14
 - Northern Ireland 15
 - Participation rates in regulated provision15
 - England 15
 - Wales 16
 - Scotland 16
 - Northern Ireland 17
 - Financing and costs for parents17
 - Staff to child ratios in centre-based settings and group size18
 - England 18
 - Wales 19
 - Scotland 20



Northern Ireland	20
Curricular Frameworks	20
England	20
Wales	21
Scotland	22
Northern Ireland	22
Digital education.....	23
Monitoring – evaluation	23
England	23
Wales	24
Scotland	25
Northern Ireland.....	26
Inclusion agenda.....	26
Children with special educational needs and disabilities	26
England	26
Wales	26
Scotland	27
Northern Ireland.....	27
Children with a migration background, Roma and Traveller children	27
England	28
Wales	28
Scotland	28
Northern Ireland.....	28
Parental leave arrangements	28
Current challenges for the ECEC system in the United Kingdom.....	29
Demographic data.....	32
Population	32
Total fertility rate.....	32
Children under age 6	32
Single households with children under age 6	33
Employment rates of parents with children under age 6	33
Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion	35
References.....	35



Early childhood education and care (ECEC)

Please note

Terminology for the main forms of ECEC provision vary among the four UK nations. Descriptors used in this report for ECEC settings in the private, voluntary and independent sectors (0–4 years) and the state-maintained school sectors (2–4 years) reflect nation-specific usage.

Historical milestones in ECEC in the UK

1816	<i>Scotland:</i> Robert Owen opens the first “infant school” for the workers employed in his cotton mills in New Lanark, including children as young as 18 months.
1837	<i>England:</i> 20 years later there are roughly 150 infant schools in England, teaching morals, religion, reading, writing and arithmetic to poor children from 18 months to the age of 6–7.
1870/1872	<i>England:</i> Elementary Education Act: 5 years is established as the starting age for compulsory schooling.
1900	<i>England:</i> 40 years later, about 43% of 3 to 5 year-olds attend either a “baby class” (3-4) or an “infant class” (5-6) and early childhood education becomes an integral part of the school system. Enrolment rates fall to 23% by 1910 due to poor health environment and unsuitable teaching conditions (very large groups, rigid formal instruction).
1911	<i>England:</i> Rachel and Margaret Macmillan found an open day nursery school in London (Deptford), providing for physical, educational and social needs of 2 to 8 or 9 year-olds. Subsequent but limited expansion of nursery provision.
1914–1918	Expansion of day nurseries during WWI
1918	<i>England:</i> Fisher Education Act gives local authorities the power to establish “nursery schools” for 3 and 4 year-olds living in poverty; these receive state funding and are included in the schools inspection system, but expansion is slow in the following years.
1923	<i>England:</i> The Nursery School Association is founded.
1928	<i>Northern Ireland:</i> Arellian Nursery School opened in a church hall, based on the ideas of the McMillan sisters in London; re-opened in 1931 in new premises as the first purpose-built nursery school in N.I.
1939–1945	Further expansion of day nurseries in England and Wales during WWII, with numbers increasing from 194 (1941) to 1,559 (1944). <i>Wales:</i> It gradually became common practice, particularly in rural Wales, to include young children, from 3 years, in reception classes with children up to 7 years with no provision or curriculum specifically for these young children.
1944	<i>England:</i> Education Act requires that local authorities provide early education for 3 to 5 year-olds. After WW2 the requirement is changed to provide only for children in exceptional circumstances.
Post 1944	Gradual expansion of ECEC provision
1960s	Increasing admission of 4 year-olds into reception classes in primary schools; start of the parent-led and community-based voluntary pre-school playgroup movement across the UK
1970s	<i>England:</i> state maintained nursery schools and school-based nursery classes cover only 27% of children aged 3–4.
1980s	Rapid growth of private for-profit provision as maternal employment increases.
1989	<i>England:</i> Children Act (England) emphasises a targeted approach, i.e. ECEC provision only for families ‘in need’. <i>Scotland:</i> A duty is also placed on local authorities in 1995 to provide for families in need.

	<i>Northern Ireland:</i> Northern Ireland Nursery Guidelines [1989] issued
1997	<i>England:</i> The New Labour government initiates policy initiatives to increase equality of opportunity and reduce child poverty: early childhood education and care becomes a government priority for the first time. Early Excellence Centres are launched, to provide models of high-quality, integrated services. <i>Northern Ireland:</i> First <i>Pre-school Curricular Guidance</i> published
1998	<i>England:</i> <i>Sure Start</i> is introduced – a targeted intervention programme for children under age 4 and their families, aimed at better co-ordination of services; extended in 2000 to reach more children living in poverty; introduction of entitlement to free part-time early education for 4 year-olds. Responsibility for childcare moved to Department for Education and Employment. <i>Northern Ireland:</i> Pre-school Expansion Programme [PEEP] launched
2000	<i>England:</i> Introduction of first curricular framework for work with 3 to 5 year-olds (<i>Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage</i>) <i>Wales:</i> Post-devolution: the National Assembly for Wales sets out its own vision for the education and care of young children.
2003	<i>England:</i> First official recommendations for work with under 3 year-olds (<i>Birth to Three Matters</i>) issued. Early Excellence Centres are renamed as Children’s Centres. <i>Wales:</i> The <i>Foundation Phase</i> for 3 to 7 year-olds with a play based curriculum is introduced.
2004	<i>England:</i> Expansion of (Sure Start) Children’s Centres (initially 32 in the most disadvantaged wards, later target 2,500); entitlement to free part-time early education extended to 3 year-olds; introduction of 10-year childcare strategy <i>Every Child Matters</i>
2005– 2010	<i>England:</i> The number of places in full-time childcare for under 5 year-olds grew further by 40 per cent (from 511,000 to 716,700). Despite the New Labour reforms, ECEC continues to be characterised by a marked class structure, with a divide between those families using public settings and those who can afford to use private provision (with the support of tax subsidies).
2006	<i>England:</i> First-ever Childcare Act, setting out plans for a combined curricular framework for work with 0 to 5 year-olds
2007	<i>England:</i> Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) created. <i>Scotland:</i> Entitlement to ‘free early education’ increased to 475 hours a year for 3 and 4 year-olds
2008	<i>England:</i> Introduction of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) – curricular and structural standards for all approved settings for under 5 year-olds and the first (reception) year in primary schools <i>Scotland:</i> Introduction of a Common Framework with the local authorities (<i>Getting it Right for Every Child</i>) – a strategic 10-point programme to ensure all children the best start in life
2010	<i>Scotland:</i> Curriculum for Excellence for 3 to 18 year-olds introduced <i>England:</i> Target of 3,500 Children’s Centres reached. Entitlement to ‘free early education’ extended to 570 hours per year for 3 and 4 year-olds and extended to most disadvantaged 2 year-olds. Major cuts in public funding initiated by new Conservative-led coalition government.
2012	<i>England:</i> EYFS revised and shortened, mainly for providers (EYFS Statutory Framework), with fewer learning goals and a greater emphasis on school readiness
2013/2014	<i>England:</i> Entitlement to free part-time early education extended to 2 year-olds, first to 20% and then to 40% of the most disadvantaged families
2014	<i>Scotland:</i> Children and Young People Scotland Act includes ‘early education’ extended to 600 hours. <i>England:</i> Plans announced for a reception baseline assessment (RBA) to measure the abilities of 4 and 5 year-olds at the start of school (retracted in 2015 following widespread criticism)



2015	<i>England:</i> 250 Children’s Centres closed since 2010. <i>Scotland:</i> Review of Early Learning and Childcare Workforce and Out of School Workforce
2017	<i>England:</i> 15 hours of free provision per week extended to 30 hours for 3 and 4 year-olds whose parents work more than 16 hours. Revised EYFS introduced
2018	<i>England:</i> New Early Learning Goals introduced – revised EYFS piloted <i>Northern Ireland:</i> Revised <i>Curricular Guidance for Pre-school Education</i> published by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment
2019	<i>England:</i> New attempt to pilot an RBA Department for Education launches a public consultation on revising the EYFS, including proposed changes to the Early Learning Goals and the EYFS profile assessment.
2021	<i>Scotland:</i> As from August 2021: commitment to 1,140 hours free Early Learning and Childcare a year for all 3 and 4 year-olds and eligible 2 year-olds <i>England:</i> Another revised version of the <i>Statutory Guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage</i> , including 47 Early Learning Goals; Family Hubs are envisaged as part of easily accessible and coherent joined-up services in a policy document on “The best start for life: A vision for the 1,001 critical days” and are rolled out across Britain.
2023	<i>Scotland:</i> Proposal to reform the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) and Education Scotland: merging the curriculum and assessment function and removing inspection from Education Scotland. Care Inspectorate, which inspects early years settings, not included.
2024/2025	<i>England:</i> From April 2024: 15 hours of ‘free childcare’ to all children over 9 months with working parents From September 2025: Working parents with children under the age of 5 are entitled to 30 hours of ‘free childcare’.

Sources: Oberhuemer, Schreyer, and Neuman 2010; Naumann et al. 2013; Nawrotski 2015; Cohen et al. 2018; Siencyn 2019; Moss and Cameron 2020; Willekens and Scheiwe 2020; Scottish Government 2022; CCEA 2023a; DfE 2023a

ECEC system type and auspices

The systems of early childhood education and care in the constituent countries of The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland – England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland – traditionally varied in terms of detail, but overall they were essentially similar. However, in the context of devolution since the end of the 1990s and separate legislatures and executives in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland also responsible for education and family policies, growing divergence has become observable and this is increasing year on year.

England

Overall responsibility for the planning and monitoring of ECEC provision for children up to the start of compulsory schooling at age 5 (in reality usually age 4) lies with the Department for Education. Despite this unifying step, two sub-sectors of early childhood education and care still remain, each with differences in terms of access, service providers, funding conditions and staffing requirements: (1) the state-maintained sector and (2) the considerably larger private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector with a high proportion of private for-profit providers. “The childcare market has come to dominate the English ECEC system” (Lloyd 2020, 84). Responsibilities are shared between central government, local authorities and service providers in the non-state sector. The Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted), which is not officially affiliated to a specific government Department, is responsible for regulating and inspecting all types of ECEC provision, including home-based settings.



At the neighbourhood level, the local authorities have the duty to ensure that there are sufficient places in ECEC settings available to meet demand. They are also responsible for ensuring that providers comply with national standards.

Wales

Early childhood education and care in Wales is regulated by two ministerial departments, i.e. it functions primarily as a bi-sectoral system. The Minister for Health and Social Services is responsible for ECEC provision for children under 3 years of age and outside of the maintained education system. The *Care Inspectorate Wales* (CIW) supervises compliance to the National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare for Children up to the age of 12 years (2016 under review in 2023), which cover home-based ECEC settings and private centre-based settings. Any childcare setting which runs for more than 2 hours must register with the Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW). State-maintained and approved private pre-primary institutions for 3 and 4 year-olds come under the portfolio of the Minister of Education (*Department for Education and Skills – DfES.*) *Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales* (Estyn) is responsible for the inspection of preschool settings and for the initial and continuing professional development of ECEC staff.

Scotland

Early childhood education and care in Scotland (Early Learning and Childcare – ELC) comes under the auspices of different ministerial departments. Overall responsibility for education lies with the *Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills*, with a *Minister for Children, Young People and Keeping the Promise* responsible for early education and childcare (Scottish Government 2023a). It has been described as a 'hybrid unitary system' (Cohen et al. 2018).

The workforce remains divided, with the majority of staff in early learning and childcare continuing to have lower qualifications and pay than those of teachers providing 'early education' in schools, despite the requirement for early years settings to be managed by Childhood Practice degree-qualified staff.

ECEC provision for under 3 year-olds is run by a variety of agencies. These include local authorities (50.9%), private for profit services (29.2%) and voluntary and not for profit services (19.9%) (Care Inspectorate 2023, 13). The private and voluntary sector similarly provides for roughly half of the settings for 3 to 4 year-olds.

In 2008, *The Scottish Early Years Framework* was introduced to strengthen co-operation and partnerships between providers, local authorities and families. *Education Scotland* is the inspection agency responsible for supervising educational institutions and curriculum development. The Care Inspectorate inspects early years and childcare settings. Early years settings for children aged 3 and over can be inspected by both agencies. Local authorities are responsible for the organisation and staffing of preschool settings and receive subsidies from the government and tax authorities.

Northern Ireland

Responsibility for different aspects of early childhood education and care was traditionally shared among a number of government Departments (Education; Health; Employment and Social Affairs). Responsibility for the ECEC phase now comes under the Department of Education in the Northern Ireland Executive, although the Department of Health continues to have some responsibilities for provision for children under 3 (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019,



196). At the local level, The Education Authority (EA) supervises both centre-based and home-based private childcare facilities.

General objectives and legislative framework¹

The 1989 Children Act set out the regulatory framework for all ECEC settings in the UK. Additionally, more specific legislation relates to early childhood education and care in each nation.

England

The Government's overarching aim is for ECEC (usually referred to as "Early Years" or "Early Education and Childcare") to be available through a diverse range of high-quality providers to suit parents' and children's needs. Improving disadvantaged young children's life chances by 'closing the gap' between them and their peers is one of five core goals outlined in the Department for Education's social mobility plan (2017), with a specific focus on key early language and literacy skills (Eurydice 2020a – no longer accessible), as well as the 'levelling up' agenda (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities 2022).

State-maintained ECEC provision (nursery schools and nursery and reception classes in primary schools) is regulated by the Education Act 2011. The Department for Education provides statutory guidance for English local authorities on their duties pursuant to the *Childcare Act 2006 and 2016* (see DfE 2023c for all current guidance).

The *Childcare Act* (2006 with amendments) sets out the arrangements for the provision, regulation and inspection of childcare in England and Wales. It places a duty on local authorities to regulate 15 hours per week of free ECEC provision for all 3 and 4 year-olds and disadvantaged 2 year-olds. In 2017, free provision was extended to 30 hours for 3 and 4 year-olds with working parents and for the 'most disadvantaged' 2 year-olds. From April 2024, working parents of 2 year-olds will have access to 15 hours of free childcare; by September this will be extended to children aged 9 months to 3 years and by September 2025 the offer will increase to full 30 hours (Gov.Uk 2023a). Furthermore, the government will provide additional funding to facilitate the expansion of the new free hours, to change the staff to child ratio for 2 year-olds, and to provide grants for childminders (Gov.Uk 2023b).

The *Children Act* (2004 with amendments) provides a legislative framework for ECEC primarily at the local level and established the office of a Children's Commissioner in England and Wales. Reforms set out in the *Children and Families Act 2014* make provisions for families and also children with special educational needs or disabilities. All local authorities are required to report annually on how they are meeting the needs of working parents in terms of ECEC provision.

Wales

The Welsh Programme for Government 2016 to 2021 included the objective of increasing the offer of funded early years education and childcare from 10 to 30 hours per week, and from 38 to 48 weeks of the year for working parents of 3 and 4 year-olds. This offer began across the country in September 2020. Plans for a new model of 'Community Learning Centres' providing extended services such as childcare, parenting support, family learning, and community access

¹ The Eurydice reports on ECEC in the four nations of the United Kingdom initially provided orientation for legal and regulatory aspects of the ECEC system. However, the UK is currently no longer included in the Eurydice database, therefore the Eurydice sources from 2020 and 2021 can no longer be accessed. All other sources are clearly indicated within the text and in the *References* section.



to facilities built around the school day are also included in the Welsh government's strategy (Eurydice 2021b – no longer accessible).

The legal framework for placing a duty on local authorities to provide nursery education is set out in the *School Standards and Framework Act 1998*. Additionally, the *Childcare Act 2006* places a duty on local authorities to secure sufficient childcare places, including Welsh-medium provision, for working parents.

Under the Education Regulations (*Nursery Education and Early Years Development and Childcare Plans*) (Wales) (Amendment) issued in 2005, local authorities are obliged to offer free, part-time provision for children, starting in the term after their third birthday. Settings providing this early education entitlement are required to work according to the Foundation Phase Framework (see section on *Curricular frameworks*) and be inspected by Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales (Estyn) (Eurydice 2021b – no longer accessible).

Scotland

The Scottish Government's aims are: to give all children the best possible start in life through a high quality ECEC system which is flexible, accessible and affordable. ECEC is seen as a cornerstone for closing educational attainment gaps and eradicating child poverty. Expanding entitlement to ECEC is also viewed as an important tool to support long-term inclusive growth in Scotland's economy. Since August 2021, any setting delivering the Government's commitment to 1,140 funded ECEC hours for 3 and 4 year-olds is required to meet a new National Standard which includes a national set of quality criteria (Eurydice 2021a – no longer accessible).

In terms of childcare provision, *The Children (Scotland) Act 1995 (with amendments up to 2020)* marked a significant step in ECEC regulation, setting out the duties and powers available to local authorities to support children and their families and to intervene when the child's welfare requires it. Early education provision is guided by the *Education (Scotland) Act 1996, amended 2016* which regulates the funding of early education institutions. Alongside making provision for children's rights, *The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014* sets down further regulations for the provision of early years services. It also provides a framework for creating a more integrated approach towards (childcare) provision for under 3-year olds and (education) provision for 3 and 4 year-olds and eligible 2 year-olds.

Northern Ireland

The *Draft Childcare Strategy 2015 to 2025* sets out two sets of aims. One is developmental: to give all children the best start in life, prepare them for lifelong well-being and achievement, and to create the basis for "a better, more prosperous future". The second is employment-related: to enable parents to join the workforce "and so enhance prosperity", and to improve gender equality. The main aim of ECEC is to provide equal opportunities for all children to develop and achieve their potential through high quality education and care. This includes equitable access to high quality ECEC services for all, support of individual development, and the identification of risks and their reduction. Particular emphasis is placed on affirming parents in their role as first educators and cooperating with them, as well as supporting children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Relevant legislation includes the *Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995*, which sets out duties of the local authorities regarding childcare, and the *Education (Northern Ireland) Act 2014*, which was the basis for replacing the previous five regional Education and Library Boards through an Education Authority. The Education Authority (EA) is responsible and accountable for all pre-school education and learning services funded by the government, including the planning of places and the co-ordination of pre-school admissions. The *Education (Northern Ireland) Order*



1998 defines the length of a full-time pre-school place as at least four-and-a-half hours a day, and a part-time place as at least two-and-a-half hours a day.

ECEC entitlement and compulsory attendance

Legal entitlement is regulated differently in each of the four constituent countries. There is no universal ECEC entitlement for children younger than 3 years of age; however, targeted entitlement applies to 2 year-olds from disadvantaged families. 3 and 4 year-olds are entitled to between 10 and 30 hours of free ‘early education’, as are most disadvantaged 2 year-olds. These hours may be provided in a publicly funded setting (*school or nursery school*) or with a registered private or voluntary provider including home-based ECEC providers (termed *childminders*). In England and Wales, from the September following their 4th birthday, all children are entitled to a full-time (approx. 32 hours) place in a *reception class* in primary school (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 50).

Table 1

United Kingdom: Legal entitlement to a ‘funded childcare’ place in ECEC provision, 2023

England	Universal free early education entitlement of 15 hours per week for 3 and 4 year-olds for 38 weeks a year. Children with working parents entitled to an extra 15 hours per week, i.e. 30 hours in total. 2 year-olds whose parents are in receipt of benefits, or children who are disabled or looked after, are also entitled to 15 hours a week for 38 weeks a year. From April 2024 , working parents of 2 year-olds will have access to 15 hours of free childcare, by September to be extended to children aged 9 months to 3 years and by September 2025 the offer will increase to full 30 hours.
Wales	12½ free hours per week for 39 weeks a year for 2 to 3 year-olds in deprived areas. 10 hours a week for all 3 and 4 year-olds, increased to 12½ hours for 3 year-olds in deprived areas. 3 and 4 year-olds with working parents entitled to 30 hours per week to 48 weeks a year.
Scotland	From August 2021, all 3 and 4 year-olds and eligible 2 year-olds receive 1,140 hours annually of funded early learning and childcare (30 hours a week during term-time, or 22 hours spread across the year).
N. Ireland	12½ free hours/week during school terms in the year preceding school entry (i.e. for 3 year-olds). Pre-school education in all settings is accessible to children from all backgrounds, unlike the school system, which is organised along denominational lines.

Source: Coram Family and Childcare 2022 for England, Wales and Scotland; Gov.UK 2023a

Attending an ECEC setting is not compulsory in the UK. Statutory schooling begins at 5 in England, Wales and Scotland and at 4 in Northern Ireland.

In England, admission authorities have a duty to provide a full-time place for all children in the September following their fourth birthday. Children reach **compulsory school age** on three prescribed days following their fifth birthday (31 December, 31 March, and 31 August) (DfE 2021a, 25).

In Scotland, children can start school in August between the ages of 4.5 and 5.5. From August 2023 children who are eligible to start school but who are still aged 4 (with their 5th birthday between August and end of February) can defer entry to have an additional year of funded early learning and childcare (Scottish Government 2021b).

Main types of provision

England

Nurseries/day nurseries accept children from the age of 3 months up to 5 years. They may be run by local authorities, but the majority are private, voluntary or independent nurseries run by private (for-profit) companies, voluntary organisations such as charities, or independent schools. They are generally open for at least six hours a day, and most are open all day and all the year round.

'**Preschools**', originally called playgroups, are more informal not-for-profit childcare groups for 2 to 4 year-olds. They may be run by churches or community organisations and usually offer half-day sessions.

Nursery schools and **nursery classes/units** in primary schools (also in private schools) provide for 3 and 4 year-olds (and disadvantaged 2 year-olds). They are usually open for 38 weeks per year and for six hours daily, but where there are wrap-around facilities, opening hours may be extended to ten hours (8:00 to 18:00 hours).

Reception classes in primary schools are the first class of compulsory schooling. By law, children must start statutory education full-time at the beginning of the term following their 5th birthday. However, a large number of children are admitted to primary school in the September after their fourth birthday and spend a full year in reception class. As part of the school system, they follow the school year and are therefore open for only 38 weeks annually.

Children's centres were introduced in 1997/1998 within the Sure Start initiative as an integrated service model combining education for young children and a variety of support facilities for parents. Most are organised by both public and private, non-profit organisations. This innovative form of provision, which has inspired several other European countries to establish similar centres (e.g. Germany, particularly in North-Rhine Westphalia), has been suffering under radical cuts to the social budget, particularly since the Conservative government came to power in 2015.

Childminders (home-based child carers) are mostly registered with Ofsted, some with a childminder agency. They are subject to the same regulatory and inspection framework as centre-based providers. All childminders in England must be suitable to work with children, have first aid training (renewed every 3 years), undertake a safeguarding / child protection course and regular professional development.

Wales

As in England, a variety of settings are available which differ according to age and provider. For the youngest these are **day nurseries** (age-range varies) in the voluntary, private and independent sector or **registered childminders**. Some of the day nurseries (mostly privately run) are Welsh medium settings. The **Flying Start** programme is offered to parents of all eligible (disadvantaged) 2 to 3 year-olds for 2½ hours a day on 5 days/week for 39 weeks/year. An additional 15 sessions are provided during school holidays. 3 and 4 year-olds may attend a publicly funded or private-independent **nursery school** or **nursery class**. From age 4, children may attend a full time **reception class** in primary school before statutory schooling begins at age 5. Most of the state-maintained settings are accessible during school term-times only, i.e. 38 weeks/year, and are open for roughly six hours daily, whereas day nurseries are mostly open full day and around the year.

Scotland

ECEC provision for under 3 year-olds (e.g. **nurseries, playgroups, family centres, childminders**) is mainly run by private organisations; publicly funded places for the early education of 3 and 4 year-olds may also be offered in a private setting. **Nursery classes** for 3 and 4 year-olds are usually located in primary schools, and there are some stand-alone **nursery schools**. Most of the private sector settings align opening times to the needs of families. **Family/children's centres** are multi-purpose service centres for children and their families, including ECEC.

At the end of 2022, there were a total of 7,044 services, 3,530 of them offered by childminders, 3,514 in centre-based settings: 108 child and family centres, 33 nurseries and 33 holiday play-scheme, 2,538 nursery classes, 682 out-of-school services and 120 playgroups (Care Inspectorate 2023, 12).

Northern Ireland

As in Scotland, ECEC provision for under 3 year-olds (**day nurseries, preschools/playgroups, childminders** – including Irish-medium settings) is run by private agencies. Disadvantaged 2 year-olds have the possibility of attending an ECEC setting attached to the government funded *Sure Start* programme, which provides a range of support services for parents and children under the age of four who live in disadvantaged areas across Northern Ireland (Eurydice 2020b – no longer accessible).

In the year preceding statutory schooling, which for all children except the 'summer born' begins at age 4, children can be enrolled in public or private **nursery schools, nursery units in primary schools, private nurseries** or **voluntary community playgroups**. Nursery schools are open for 38 weeks/year for at least 2½ hours daily. Privately-run provision is usually open full day all the year round. Some nursery units in primary schools have an opening hours' option of 4½ hours per day.

Three categories of childcare setting are defined and required to register with Health and Social Care Trusts:

1. **Childminders** are self-employed and work in their own homes to provide care and play for other people's children in a family setting. They may offer this service all year round for the full working day. Childminders are required to register when they look after one or more children aged under 12 for reward on domestic premises.
2. **Full-day care** is provided for children aged 0–12 years for a continuous period of four hours or more in any day in premises which are not domestic. The children do not necessarily have to attend for more than four hours, and the setting may provide for part-day care, but if the facility is open for longer than four hours, it is defined as a full-day care setting.
3. **Sessional day care** covers less than a continuous period of four hours in any day and covers crèches, pre-school sessional care (playgroups), out of school clubs (school-age childcare including breakfast clubs, also referred to as wrap around care). **Sure Start** also comes under the category of "sessional day care" and targets children aged 4 and under and their families in areas of social disadvantage to promote the physical, intellectual and social development of children. There are currently 39 Sure Start projects across Northern Ireland, covering a wide geographic spread. The Minimum Standards guidance also applies to early years and childcare staff within Sure Start projects providing the 2- to 3-year programme and crèche provision to support programme delivery.

Provider structures

England

Publicly funded nursery schools and nursery classes in primary schools, which now also accept (disadvantaged) 2 year-olds, provide only a minority of places for 2 and 3 year-olds in England. The majority of providers of ECEC for children below the age of 4 in England are located in the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector (see *Table 2*).

Following the introduction of the early education entitlement (see section on *ECEC entitlement and compulsory attendance*), the PVI sector expanded exponentially. Private-for-profit and not-for-profit childcare businesses became eligible – alongside the state-maintained nursery provision – for direct public subsidies to provide this entitlement as long as specified quality and safeguarding criteria were met. This increase in the partial public funding of the private sector helped to fuel a rapid rise in private-for-profit childcare businesses, including corporate childcare chains with stock market listed shares (Lloyd 2020).

Table 2

England: Number and proportion of ECEC places (0 to 4 years) by provider type, 2023

Provider type		Number of places	Proportion in %*
Non-school centre-based ECEC settings (group based providers)	Private (mostly for-profit with state funding for specific number of early education hours)	764,200	67.0
	Voluntary (not-for-profit)	225,400	
	Others	54,000	
	All group based providers	1,043,600	
School ECEC settings (school based providers)	State-maintained and independent schools offering nursery provision	314,900	22.4
	State-maintained nursery schools	34,700	
	All school based providers	349,600	
Home-based ECEC settings (childminders)		164,900	10.6
Total		1,558,100	

Source: Gov.UK 2023e, *own calculation

Table 3 shows the spread of children with 15 and 30-hour entitlements registered with different provider types. Eligible 2 year-olds have a 15-hour funded entitlement to childcare, the greater majority (98,953) of which are enrolled in the PVI sector compared with 18,660 enrolments in maintained nursery schools and state-funded primary schools. This contrasts with the main providers for 3 and 4 year-olds, the majority of whom are enrolled in state-run primary schools (in nursery units/classes and reception classes), although the numbers in the PVI sector remain high.

Table 3

England: Number of providers and children, 15 and 30-hour entitlements, 2023

Provider type	Age group	15-hour funded entitlement		30-hour funded entitlement*	
		Providers	Children	Providers	Children
All providers	2 year-olds	20,991	124,211	0	0
	3+4 year-olds	46,187	1,196,031	35,258	362,982

Provider type	Age group	15-hour funded entitlement		30-hour funded entitlement*	
		Providers	Children	Providers	Children
Private and voluntary	2 year-olds	15,188	98,953	0	0
	3+4 year-olds	18,808	473,531	17,719	256,576
Independent schools	2 year-olds	130	667	0	0
	3+4 year-olds	815	25,722	442	5,823
Local authority day nurseries	2 year-olds	206	1,510	0	0
	3+4 year-olds	400	9,806	316	3,426
Maintained nursery schools	2 year-olds	316	6,604	0	0
	3+4 year-olds	383	28,347	373	9,565
State-funded primary schools (including governor-run schools)	2 year-olds	1,546	12,056	0	0
	3+4 year-olds	15,737	635,856	6,333	75,762
Childminders	2 year-olds	3,768	5,733	0	0
	3+4 year-olds	9,770	20,828	10,328	20,330

Source: Gov.UK 2023d, *own calculations

Wales

As in England, the majority of ECEC providers for children under age 4 in Wales are in the private, voluntary and independent sector, including home-based childminding services. Publicly funded provision (nursery schools, nursery classes and reception classes in schools) provide places for 3 to 4 year-olds and 4 to 5 year-olds; non-maintained settings can also provide funded provision for 3 to 4 year-olds. Welsh medium provision of childcare is delivered across all types of providers. Mudiad Meithrin is the lead organisation in Wales for supporting Welsh language immersion settings. Expansion of the Flying Start childcare programme (free childcare for 2–3 year-olds in areas of deprivation) and the Childcare offer (30 hours funded provision for 3–4 year-olds of working parents) is taking place from 2022–2025, placing an increased demand for and on the childcare sector in Wales.

Currently (2023) there are 3,434 childcare settings (including 1,589 childminders, 1,044 all-day settings, 418 sessional services and 330 out-of-school programmes) registered with Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) providing 79,191 childcare spaces for children aged 0–12 years (Welsh Government 2023c).

Scotland

ELC in Scotland is provided both by local authority settings as well as private and voluntary providers working in partnership with local authorities. The main providers of ECEC settings for under 3 year-olds are private/voluntary, whereas funded ECEC for 3 and 4 year-olds is delivered by a wide range of providers from across the public, private and voluntary sectors as well as by childminders.

A number of nurseries are attached to private-independent schools. Employers may also provide a company nursery/kindergarten for the children of employees.

A National Standard ('Funding follows the child') is to help increase choice and flexibility for parents and carers whilst ensuring children benefit from high quality provision. It means that parents and carers – including those of eligible 2 year-olds – will be able to choose to use their

child’s entitlement at any ECEC provider that meets the National Standard, has a place available, and is willing to enter into a contract with the local authority (Scottish Government 2018a).

Northern Ireland

There is no publicly funded ECEC provision for under 3 year-olds in Northern Ireland. Nurseries and childminders (or nannies) in the private sector have to be registered and are inspected annually by one of the five regional *Health and Social Care Trusts*. Free provision for 3 year-olds may be provided in the complete range of privately-run and publicly funded ECEC settings (see section on *Main forms of provision*). 4 year-olds are in statutory schooling.

Participation rates in regulated provision

Note: The most recent data from Eurostat on enrolment rates are from 2018 - no further data are currently available.

Between 2005 and 2018, the proportion of under 3 year-olds attending centre-based settings increased from 29% to 38.6%, while the proportion of children between 3 years and compulsory school decreased from 88% to 78,1%.

Table 4

United Kingdom: Enrolment rates by age and weekly hours of attendance, 2005-2018, in %

Year	Weekly hours of attendance	Under 3 year-olds, in %	3 years to minimum compulsory school age, in %
2005	1 to 29	24.0	64.0
	Over 30	5.0	24.0
	No enrolment in ECEC	71.0	12.0
2010	1 to 29	31.0	67.0
	Over 30	4.0	22.0
	No enrolment in ECEC	66.0	11.0
2015	1 to 29	26.1	48.8
	Over 30	4.3	24.0
	No enrolment in ECEC	69.6	27.2
2018	1 to 29	31.6	29.2
	Over 30	7.0	48.9
	No enrolment in ECEC	61.4	21.9

Source: Eurostat 2023b

England

Almost three quarters (74%) of eligible 2 year-olds benefitted from the 15-hour entitlement in 2023 and 94% of 3 and 4 year-olds. In 2023, the number of 3 and 4 year-olds registered for the 30-hour entitlement (362,982) was the highest on record, although significantly lower than the number registered for the 15-hour programme (1,196,031) (Gov.UK 2023d).

The greater majority of eligible 2 year olds and most 3 year-olds registered for 15-hour funded programmes in 2023 attended settings in the PVI sector, whereas the greater majority of 4 year-olds were registered in maintained nursery and state funded primary schools. However, the overall number of PVI providers delivering the 15-hour entitlements (31,500) was down 3% from 2022 (Gov.UK 2023d), possibly reflecting the closure problems that nurseries are having in the face of staff shortages and the general rise in the cost of living.



Table 5

England: Number of children registered for state funded and expanded programmes by age and provider type, 2023

Setting		State funded entitlement (15 hours)	Expanded entitlement (30 hours) for eligible 3 and 4 year-olds	Total
All providers	2 year-olds	124,211	0	124,211
	3 year-olds	576,886	260,586	837,472
	4 year-olds	619,145	102,396	721,541
Private/voluntary/independent providers (PVI)	2 year-olds	98,953	0	98,953
	3 year-olds	352,811	184,139	536,950
	4 year-olds	120,720	66,614	187,334
Childminders	2 year-olds	5,733	0	5,733
	3 year-olds	16,537	15,747	32,284
	4 year-olds	4,291	4,583	8,874
State funded schools (including maintained nursery schools and special schools)	2 year-olds	18,660	0	18,660
	3 year-olds	192,661	57,090	249,751
	4 year-olds	471,542	28,237	499,779

Source: Gov.UK 2023d, and own calculations

Wales

The number of children accessing Flying Start childcare in 2021-2022 was 34,121 out of an expected 36,215 (Welsh Government 2022a). The Childcare Offer for 3 to 4 year-olds in Wales was accessed by 17,824 children in 2020–2021 and delivered by 2,252 providers – these included childminders, full day care and sessional care providers (Welsh Government 2022b).

A first phase of expansion started in September 2022, a second one from April 2023 and a third will follow in April 2025, aiming to provide high quality childcare to all 2 year-olds. By the end of March 2023, 3,178 children – 600 more than planned – could be reached. In the next two years it is envisaged that a further 9,500 2 year-olds could be supported (Welsh Government 2023b).

Table 6

Wales: Number of settings and places in non-maintained ECEC, 2023

	Settings	Places
Childminders	1,589	1,2820
Creches/nurseries	16	474
Full day care	1,044	40,510

Source: Welsh Government 2023c

Scotland

97% of eligible 3 or 4 year-olds and 13% of all 2 year-olds were registered in ELC settings in 2023, as well as 33% of those eligible for deferred entry to school.

Table 7

Scotland: Early learning and childcare registrations at local authority and partnership centres, by age, 2023

Under twos		2 year-olds		3 year-olds		4 year-olds		Deferred		Total
No.	%*	No.	%*	No.	%**	No.	%**	No.	%**	
556	1	6,636	13	25,859	97	50,577	97	8,554	33	92,182

*of age group; **of those eligible

Source: Scottish Government 2023b, Table 6

Northern Ireland

In 2022/23, the share of 91% of 3 year-olds who were in funded pre-school education remained stable although their numbers in the population decreased (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency 2023, 5). As *Table 8* illustrates, 22,715 children attended funded ECEC, mostly in publicly funded nursery provision (15,495). Just under half that number (7,043) were enrolled in voluntary and private settings and 177 children attended a primary school reception class.

Table 8

Northern Ireland: Number of settings and children in funded centre-based care, 2022/23

	Number of settings	Number of children
Voluntary and private pre-school centres	349	7,043
Nursery schools	93	5,796
Primary school with funded places in nursery units	255	9,699
Primary school with funded places in reception classes	45	177
Total	742	22,715

Source: Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency 2023, 19, 21, and own calculation

Financing and costs for parents

According to OECD data, total public expenditure in the UK on early childhood education and care amounted to 0.52% of GDP in 2020 (OECD 2023).

The UK central government has a *Statement of Funding Policy* for all policy areas in England and for the regional parliaments in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Funding is transferred as a block grant and the national parliaments decide on their own budget priorities. In terms of early childhood education and care, the local authorities have a duty to fund the weekly hours of free entitlement set down by law. Otherwise, parents have to pay a heavy price in terms of childcare costs, particularly for under 3 year-olds (see *Table 9*). A survey of local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales from November 2022 to February 2023 showed that childcare costs (25 hours per week) for under 2 year-olds have increased by 5.6% per year – the increase was highest in England (5.9%), lowest in Scotland (1.6%) (Coram Family and Childcare 2023, 17). The childcare costs for an all-day place are above the thresholds of Universal Credit supports in 97% of local authorities (Coram Family and Childcare 2023, 13).

Table 9

Great Britain: Average weekly parental fees for under 3 year-olds in centre-based ECEC settings, 2023

Age	Great Britain	England	Wales	Scotland
	Full-time place (50 hours)			
Under 2 years	£ 285.31 € 325.99 ²	£ 289.98 € 331.33	£ 250.95 € 286.73	£ 227.17 € 259.56
2 year-olds	£ 279.60 € 319.47	£ 283.95 € 324.44	£ 249.24 € 284.78	£ 225.44 € 257.58
	Part-time place (25 hours)			
Under 2 years	£ 148.63 € 269.82	£ 150.89 € 172.40	£ 135.67 € 155.01	£ 118.14 € 134.98
2 year-olds	£ 144.01 € 164.54	£ 146.00 € 166.82	£ 134.92 € 154.16	£ 114.81 € 131.18

Source: Coram Family and Childcare 2023, 11, 13

Across Great Britain, nursery costs for under 2 year-olds are on average higher than the equivalent costs for a childminder (£285,31 and £247,19– €325,99and €282,44) for a full-time place respectively). Nursery costs in Wales are lower than in England and Scotland.

In all nations and regions, families pay considerably less for nursery childcare for **3 and 4 year-olds** compared to younger children. The main reasons for this are: (1) families receive a certain amount of free hours, resulting in lower fees; and (2) childcare providers are able to operate at lower staff to child ratios for older children, which often means that childcare costs less to provide (Coram Family and Childcare 2023, 14).

Since 2018, a scheme of Tax-Free Childcare for parents of children up to age 11 is available across the UK in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in which the government pays 20 per cent of childcare costs up to a set amount. Eligibility for the scheme depends on household income and circumstances.

In 2022, a couple with two children spent about 16% of net household income on childcare costs³ (OECD.Stat 2023).

The overall situation has been described by Polly Toynbee (2023) as follows:

“Costing an unaffordable average of just under £15,000 a year for a full-time place for a child under two, nurseries are closing in droves, unable to finance the government’s so-called 30 free hours, with pay so low that childcare assistants flee elsewhere. The fact is, the sum the government pays to supposedly cover these hours is far too little, so nurseries struggle unless they can charge parents significant extras.”

Staff to child ratios in centre-based settings and group size

England

From September 2023, one member of staff can look after five children (Gov.UK 2023c) which – regarding quality issues – is a deterioration from the current regulation of four children per staff.

² Conversion rate November 2023

³ The calculation is based on: full-time working parents (average wage); two children aged 2 and 3 years in full-time childcare; childcare benefits included.

Binding staff-child ratios are included in the *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage 2021*. Up to September 2023, these were:

Table 10

England: Staff to child ratios

Age range	Staff to child ratios
Under 2 year-olds	1:3** At least one member of staff must hold an approved NQF* level 3 qualification, and must be suitably experienced in working with children under two; at least half of all other staff must hold an approved level 2 qualification
2 year-olds	1:4 At least one member of staff must hold an approved NQF level 3 qualification; at least half of all other staff must hold an approved level 2 qualification
3 year-olds and over	1:8 In registered early years provision where a person <i>without</i> an NQF level 6 qualification works directly with the children: at least one member of staff must hold an approved level 3 qualification; at least half of all other staff must hold an approved level 2 qualification
	1:13 In registered early years provision where a person <i>with</i> an NQF level 6 qualification works directly with the children: at least one other member of staff must hold an approved level 3 qualification
	1:13 In maintained nursery schools and nursery classes in maintained schools where at least one member of staff must be a qualified school teacher: at least one other member of staff must hold an approved level 3 qualification
4 and 5 year-olds	1 qualified teacher to 30 children Legislation on reception classes in maintained schools and academies limits the size of infant classes to 30 pupils per school teacher. Additional staff may include teaching assistants, higher level teaching assistants or other support staff.

*National Qualifications Framework; ** Up to September 2023

Source: DfE 2021b

Wales

Table 11

Wales: Statutory staff to child ratios in regulated childcare settings

Age range	Adult to child ratio
Under 2 years	1:3
2 year-olds	1:4
3 to 7 year-olds	1:8

Source: Welsh Government 2016

These ratios include any children of staff or volunteers and apply to any activity including escorting and transporting children. Regular volunteers can be taken into account in the normal staffing ratios (Welsh Government 2016). However, there is also a requirement in Wales – in line with September 2018 guidance – for all publicly funded settings providing for 4 year-olds in the Foundation Phase – including *reception classes* – to work towards a 1:8 ratio (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 89).

Scotland

The Scottish Care Inspectorate provides guidance about adult to child ratios in Early Learning and Care (ELC) settings.

There are no specifications about the number of qualified staff that should make up these ratios.

Table 12

Scotland: Staff to child ratios in registered ELC settings

Age range	Adult to child ratio
Under 2 years	1:3
2 to under 3 year-olds	1:5
3 year-olds and over*	1:8

Where children aged 3 and over attend facilities providing a session which is less than a continuous period of four hours in any day the adult to child ratio may be 1 : 10, providing individual children do not attend more than one session per day.

Source: Care Inspectorate (Scotland) 2018

Northern Ireland

In PVI settings the Registered Person ensures that a minimum ratio of staff to children is followed (0–2 years 1:3; 2–3 years 1:4; 3–12 years 1:8). Minimum ratios of staff to children must be met and at least two members of staff must be on duty in each room within a setting at all times.

The recommended staff to child ratio in full-time *state-maintained* provision (nursery schools and nursery classes or units attached to primary schools) is two members of staff to 26 children. One of these must be a qualified teacher, the other a qualified nursery assistant.

Private and voluntary provision has to comply with the following legal requirements:

Table 13

Northern Ireland: Required staff to child ratios in private and voluntary ECEC settings

Age range	Staff to child ratios
2 to 3 year-olds	1:4
3 to 5 year-olds	1:8

A 'suitably qualified person' must be in charge at all times.

Source: Eurydice 2020b (no longer accessible)

Curricular Frameworks

England

There is one statutory framework for the entire ECEC phase in England. Both public and private ECEC settings are obliged to work according to the *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage* which most recently became effective in September 2021 (DfE 2021b). Three sections refer to (1) the learning and development requirements, (2) assessment, and (3) the safeguarding and welfare requirements. The learning and development requirements focus on seven areas of learning:

- Communication and language (listening, attention and understanding; speaking)
- Personal, social and emotional development (self-regulation; managing self; building relationships)
- Physical development (gross motor skills; fine motor skills)
- Literacy (comprehension; word reading; writing)

- Mathematics (number; numerical patterns)
- Understanding the world (past and present; people, culture and communities; the natural world)
- Expressive arts and design (creating with materials; being imaginative and expressive).

In each of the seven learning areas, Learning Goals are specified, 47 in all.

Recommended modes of learning are both adult-led and child-initiated. Particular emphasis is placed on play and exploration, active learning, and creative and critical thinking. There is no mention of children’s rights, democratic practices or children’s participation in decision-making.

Wales

There is no integrated curricular framework for the entire ECEC phase in Wales. The previous statutory curricular framework for work with 3 to 7 year-olds, the Foundation Phase Framework, applied to all ECEC settings serving children of that age group, whether maintained or non-maintained (Welsh Government 2015).

However, Wales is currently in the midst of fundamental changes to its statutory curriculum in the form of ‘Curriculum for Wales’, set out in the *Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021*, replacing the national curriculum set out in the *Education Act 2002* (Part 7). A duty is placed on funded non-maintained settings as well as schools to implement Curriculum for Wales and appropriate assessment arrangements (Gov.UK 2021).

From September 2022, the new statutory framework *Curriculum for Wales* replaced the Foundation Phase framework and applies through the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021 for all learners aged 3–16 (Welsh Government n.d.). The new curriculum arrangements allow for schools to design their own curriculum around four core purposes:

- Ambitious, capable learners
- Enterprising, creative contributors
- Ethical, informed citizens
- Healthy, confident individuals

Within and across these four purposes are seven areas of learning and experience: Expressive Arts; Health and Wellbeing; Humanities; Language, Literacy and Communication; Mathematics and Numeracy; Science and Technology. The *Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021* includes a statutory duty for non-maintained settings delivering funded childcare to implement Curriculum for Wales. In response to this, a Curriculum for Funded Non-maintained Settings (Welsh Government 2022c) and Assessment Arrangements for funded non-maintained settings (Welsh Government 2022e) have been developed through a co-construction process within the sector. The Curriculum for funded non-maintained settings has embedded the four purposes and seven areas of learning into five developmental pathways:

- Belonging
- Communication
- Exploration
- Physical Development
- Wellbeing.

The curriculum for funded non-maintained settings has a focus on child-centred practice and authentic and purposeful learning for children. *Cynefin* features heavily placing emphasis on a sense of place and belonging for children in Wales.

Guidance for approaches to supporting learning and development in ECEC and delivery of provision within non-maintained settings and schools sit around three key enablers (Welsh Government 2023a):

- Enabling adults
- Engaging experiences
- Effective environments.

A suite of professional learning and development support is in development to support the ECEC sector with curriculum framework changes across Wales.

The Flying Start initiative in Wales aims to provide under 4 year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds with a “flying start” to life. Flying Start focuses not only on educational aspects but also on supporting parents and health issues. Flying Start provision is expanding across 2022-2025 to provide childcare and services to more children aged 2–3 across Wales in areas of multiple deprivation.

Scotland

The Scottish *Curriculum for Excellence* is the statutory educational framework for children aged 3 to 18 years, regardless of the setting. The first stage of the Curriculum for 3 to 5 year-olds encompasses pre-primary education and the first stage of primary school (Scottish Government 2021a).

Principles for early education emphasise active learning through: spontaneous and purposeful play; investigating and exploring; events and life experiences; focused learning and teaching. Experiences and outcomes in eight curricular areas are emphasised for the age range 3-15: expressive arts; health and well-being; languages (including literacy, English and a foreign language); mathematics (including numeracy); religious and moral education; sciences; social studies; technologies.

Realising the Ambition: Being Me is refreshed early years national practice guidance for Scotland (Education Scotland – National Improvement Hub 2020). It builds upon the original principles and philosophy of *Pre-Birth to 3* and *Building the Ambition*. It retains the relevant content from the previous guidance which it replaces, extending and strengthening it in line with current research and evidence about how children develop and learn. It is published by Education Scotland for anyone working in early learning and childcare and in early primary school.

Northern Ireland

The *Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education* (CCEA 2023a) applies to the preschool ECEC phase in Northern Ireland. All ECEC settings, both statutory as well as voluntary and private settings with funded places are obliged to follow this guidance (Department of Education 2021). An emphasis is placed on each child having the opportunity to develop his or her individual potential. A holistic approach serves towards promoting all aspects of children’s development; developing self-esteem, self-control and positive attitudes towards others; developing language and communication skills to encourage the sharing of thoughts and feelings; and creating confident, independent and curious learners with a positive and problem-solving attitude to learning (CCEA 2023a). Six areas of learning are foregrounded: personal, social and emotional development; physical development; creative/aesthetic development; language development; early mathematical experiences; early experiences in science and technology; knowledge and appreciation of the environment (Department of Education 2021). There is no mention of children’s rights, democratic practices or participation in decision-making.



The *Curricular Guidance* is the basis for the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) when evaluating the quality of provision and the outcomes for learners in all pre-school settings. The Foundation Stage (age 4–6) is the statutory curriculum framework for the first two years at primary school (CCEA 2023b).

Digital education

The term ‘digital education’ does not appear in the statutory ECEC curricular frameworks in England, Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland. The preferred term is ICT which is seen as a cross-curricular domain to be implemented in an age-appropriate way. However, there is little or no specific reference to digital practices before entering compulsory schooling except in the case of the Northern Ireland curricular guidance.

In **England**, there is no mention of digital literacy or digital learning in the *Statutory Foundation Stage Framework* (see section on *Curricular frameworks*) for work with children from birth to five.

In **Wales**, a non-statutory *Skills framework for 3 to 19-year-olds in Wales* (2008) states that ICT is a cross-curricular domain and that children’s ICT skills, knowledge and understanding should be developed through a range of experiences that involve finding and developing information and ideas and creating and presenting information and ideas (Welsh Government 2016). However, there is no specific reference to digital practices with 3 to 5 year-olds. Digital competence is embedded within and across the new *Curriculum for Wales* from September 2022 as part of the cross curricula skills – this elevates the importance of digital competence to align with literacy and numeracy within the Welsh curriculum.

In the *Curriculum for Excellence* for 3 to 18 year-olds in **Scotland**, ‘ICT to enhance learning’ is one of six areas listed in the Technologies section. Across the curriculum, skills in ICT are to be developed in the context of the learning and teaching as appropriate to the child or young person’s maturity.

Realising the Ambition includes a section on ‘Digital technology and the young child’ which emphasises the importance of learning ‘with and through digital technology rather than about it, and recognises its presence within everyday lives, including the pedagogical documentation systems of early years settings (Education Scotland 2020, 78).

The *Curricular Guidance for Pre-school Education* in **Northern Ireland** has a section on ICT, emphasising that it can enhance educational opportunities when it is integrated and embedded in an age-appropriate way. It states that children need to see ICT used in meaningful contexts and for real purposes, with a firm emphasis on exploration. The children should have opportunities to “use digital resources, for example a camera, to enhance their own learning, deepen and consolidate observational skills and creativity; and explore and investigate a range of ICT resources safely, naturally and at their own pace” (CCEA 2023a).

Monitoring – evaluation

England

Child-related assessment

Assessments of individual children are recorded according to the seven learning areas (Early Learning Goals – ELGs) in the *Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)* curricular framework. Three assessments are obligatory: one for 2 year-olds in ECEC settings (*Progress Check at age two*), one during the child’s first six weeks in the reception class in primary school (*Reception Baseline*

Assessment – RBA, Gov.UK 2022) and one at the end of the school year in reception class (*Early Years Foundation Stage Profile*) (DfE 2022a).

The ‘progress check’ made between the ages of 2 and 3 and is seen as a way of noticing potential developmental needs in order to provide additional support. ECEC providers are obliged to inform parents in a short written report about the progress of their 2 to 3 year-old children (particularly in the areas communication and language; physical development; and personal, social and emotional development). The report may also be passed on to the reception class teacher when the child starts school. Ongoing (formative) assessments by practitioners are considered to be an integral part of the learning and development process (DfE 2021b, 18).

The RBA, to be administered during the first weeks of reception class, “...is a short, interactive assessment...designed to take around 20 minutes. The assessment can be carried out by a teacher, teaching assistant, early years practitioner or any other trained education professional who should be familiar with the child taking the assessment” (DfE 2021b, 48).

The assessment instrument *Early Years Foundation Stage Profile* (EYFSP, DfE 2022b), that follows the regulations of the Standards and Testing Agency, must be completed at the latest at the end of June of the year in which the child turns 5. It provides an overview of the child’s abilities and skills, his or her progress related to specific learning goals and an assessment of his or her ‘school readiness’. All providers who receive state subsidies are obliged to complete the EYFSP. According to the Education Act 1996, the assessments should be sent to the local authorities who then pass them on to the Department for Education.

Centre-level internal evaluation

Self-assessments by ECEC staff are recommended, but are not mandatory (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 126).

External evaluation

External assessments of providers and staff are carried out at regular intervals by Ofsted (*Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills*) and include both structural and process quality. Providers are assessed according to four ratings: ‘outstanding’, ‘good’, ‘requires improvement’, ‘inadequate’. As at 31 August 2022, 96% of childcare providers had been judged good or outstanding, remaining stable since August 2019. The proportion of providers judged outstanding had decreased from 20% to 15% since 31 August 2019 (Ofsted 2023).

Wales

Child-related assessment

Since 2015, the National Curriculum requires a baseline assessment of children within six weeks of starting school, and again at the end of the first year in school.

Since 2022 and the introduction of the *Curriculum for Wales* and the *Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Settings* (Welsh Government 2022d), a new set of assessment arrangements are in development – particularly for children aged 3–16 who fall under the remit of *Curriculum for Wales*. Under the *Curriculum for Wales* assessment progresses from 1–5, with principles of progression and descriptors of learning under the seven areas of learning and experience. The progression steps are on a continuum not associated with specific age ranges to support individual progress and continuity within the curriculum from 3–16.

Settings in funded non-maintained settings and schools have a statutory duty to follow assessment arrangements for children, including initial and ongoing assessment. This duty is set out

within the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021 (Gov.UK 2021). Draft Assessment Arrangements for funded non-maintained settings were published for consultation in 2022 (Welsh Government 2022c) with rollout expected for September 2023. The Draft Assessment Arrangements align to the principles of progression set out in *Curriculum for Wales* (Welsh Government, n.d.), supporting transition into and alignment with assessment arrangements in Curriculum for Wales in schools.

Centre-level internal evaluation

As in England, centre-level assessments by ECEC staff are recommended, but are not mandatory (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, 126).

External evaluation

External inspections are carried out by Estyn, *Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales* for funded maintained settings, and include publicly funded nurseries. For the private non-maintained sector, the inspection framework of the *Care Inspectorate Wales* (CIW) places an emphasis on improving child development and wellbeing outcomes and has four core themes: well-being; care and development; environment; leadership and management (Welsh Government 2022b). Funded settings delivering the Curriculum for Wales for 3 to 4 year-olds are subject to a joint inspection by both Estyn and CIW. Many non-maintained settings align to external quality assurance programmes linked to umbrella support organisations including *PACEY Cymru* (Childminder's), National Day Nursery Association Wales (NDNA), Early Years Wales (sessional care) and *Mudiad Meithrin* (Welsh Medium nursery settings).

Scotland

Child-related assessment

Within the *Curriculum for Excellence* children's progress is continuously assessed, discussed with parents, and used in planning the next steps in their learning and development. Increasingly, early learning and childcare practitioners provide summative written reports for parents and the primary school to which the child transfers. Many local authorities have developed their own assessment procedures, including the children themselves reflecting on their own learning (Eurydice 2021a – no longer accessible).

Centre-level internal evaluation

There is no mandatory framework for centre-level assessment procedures.

External evaluation

External inspections of ELC settings are conducted by *Education Scotland*, which expects children to experience an appropriate balance across the eight areas of the *Curriculum for Excellence* (Scottish Government 2021a), and the Care Inspectorate, which focuses on national care standards, including learning environments and which has four key questions guiding inspections: 1: How good is our care, play and learning? 2: How good is our setting? 3: How good is our leadership? 4: How good is our staff team? (Care Inspectorate 2022). The 2022 review of Education Scotland and SQA noted: "As a matter of urgency the new independent Inspectorate should re-engage with the Care Inspectorate to agree a shared inspection framework designed to reduce the burden on early learning and childcare (ELC) practitioners and centres" (Scottish Government 2022).

Northern Ireland

Child-related assessment

There is no obligation for staff to assess children's progress during their time in ECEC provision before entering statutory schooling. However, both ongoing observations of and interactions with children in a range of situations over time and informing parents of progress are included as recommendations in the *Curricular Guidance*.

Centre-level internal evaluation

Self-evaluation procedures in ECEC settings are not obligatory.

External evaluation

External inspections of ECEC providers are carried out by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) with the expectation that provision is in line with the *Curricular Guidance*. ETI also inspect preschool provision with funded places in the private and voluntary sector.

Health and Social Care Trust (HSCT) Early Years Social Services Team use Minimum Standards for Childminding and Day Care for Children Under Age 12 (Department of Health, Social Security and Public Safety 2018) to register new facilities and carry out inspections. National Minimum Standards describe the minimum requirements for regulated early years and childcare settings.

Inclusion agenda

Children with special educational needs and disabilities

In the UK, children with special educational needs and disability (SEND) have traditionally been included in mainstream provision as far as possible. Special education institutions exist for those children who cannot be given the necessary support in regular provision.

England

According to the *Children and Families Act 2014*, local authorities (education and health departments) have a duty to ensure that each child with SEND can attend maintained provision, i.e. in the case of children below school age, maintained nursery provision. Each setting must provide each child the special educational provision which his or her particular needs demand and ensure that the child can engage in the general activities of the setting together with children who do not have special educational needs. Guidance published by the Department for Education and the Department of Health in 2015 (*Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years*) recommends a four-step procedure: assessing, planning, acting and evaluating. Each maintained setting has a *Special Educational Needs Coordinator, SENCO*) whose task is to sensitise and support the centre staff for this work and to co-operate closely with parents and external specialists.

However, government subsidies for ECEC providers calculated at a flat rate according to the Early Years National Funding Formula (ESFA 2021) fail to take into account the additional costs needed for appropriate provision for children with SEND. Local authorities are not always able to take over these costs within their austerity budgets, resulting in lack of access to publicly funded ECEC for 3 and 4 year-old children with SEND (Lloyd 2020, 87f).

Wales

In 2018, a new statutory framework was issued for supporting children and young people aged 0-25 with additional learning needs, the *Additional Learning Needs and Educational Tribunal*

(Wales) Act 2018. It has been introduced in a phased approach since September 2020. The term 'additional learning needs (ALN)' replaces the existing terms 'special educational needs' (SEN) and 'learning difficulties and/or disabilities' (LDD). Under this legislation, maintained nursery schools are required to have a designated Additional Learning Needs Co-ordinator (ALNCo). For children under compulsory school age not yet in a maintained setting, local authorities are required to appoint an Early Years ALN Lead Officer to help facilitate effective multi-agency collaboration (Welsh Government 2018). An Individual Development Plan will be created for each child with additional learning needs.

There is currently one special education nursery (up to 3 years) and pre-preparatory unit (4–7 years) in the same co-educational school in Cardiff.⁴

Scotland

Under the *Education Act (Additional Support for Learning), Scotland, Act 2004, amended 2009*, local authorities have a duty to identify, meet and keep under review the additional support needs of pupils for whose education they are responsible and to tailor provision according to their individual needs.

A government funded *Early Learning and Childcare Inclusion Fund* aimed to help children with additional support needs (ASN) to access their funded ELC entitlement. The Fund was managed by Children in Scotland. Staff working in ELC settings could apply for funding for training, resources, equipment and adaptations to support children with ASN within their setting that was not provided by statutory services. From 2018–2021, up to £2 million was distributed to selected registered ELC providers (Children in Scotland 2021).

In 2023, a total 1,620 children (2%) were registered as having a disability (Scottish Government 2023b, Table 7).

Northern Ireland

Primary legislation, The Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (NI) (2016), secondary legislation and a Code of Practice provide the legislative base for delivery of a SEN framework (Department of Education 2021).

The Special Educational Needs and Disability Order 2005, SENDO emphasises that these children should be included in mainstream schools wherever possible. Each child receives an annually reviewed *Statement of special educational needs*, which entitles him or her to the appropriate support. However, there is no specific reference to SEND in ECEC provision. The Department of Education has issued an Extended Early Years Special Educational Needs (SEN) Supplement as guidance for practitioners (Department of Education 2014).

Children with a migration background, Roma and Traveller children

In 2020/21, the five most common countries of birth of the non-British population living in Britain were India (896,000), Poland (682,000), Pakistan (456,000), Ireland (412,000) and Germany (347,000) (Statista 2023a).

In 2019, 9.3% of the population were of non-British origin. More than half (59.7%) of these came from EU28 countries. In the age group under 5 years, these shares were 7.6% and 64.5% respectively (Eurostat 2023c).

⁴ www.specialneedsguide.co.uk

England

For children whose home language is not English, the Statutory Framework for the EYFS (2021) requires providers to “take reasonable steps to provide opportunities for children to develop and use their home language in play and learning, supporting their language development at home” (DfE 2021b). Providers are also expected to ensure that children have opportunities to reach a good standard in the English language during the EYFS. Practitioners are expected to assess children’s skills in English.

Wales

In 2018, the Welsh Government published a strategy called “Enabling Gypsies, Roma and Travellers” which intends to raise awareness of the Foundation Phase free entitlement through improved communication between local authorities, ECEC providers and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller parents (Eurydice 2021b – no longer accessible).

Scotland

English as an additional language is specifically identified as a potential additional support need within the *Additional Support for Learning Statutory Guidance* (Scottish Government 2017).

In 2018, the Scottish Government published: *Improving educational outcomes for children and young people from travelling cultures*. Its purpose is to provide guidance about supporting Traveller children and young people and their families to engage in education so as to improve their life outcomes (Scottish Government 2018b).

In 2023, a total of 9,930 (11%) of children in local authority and partnership settings were registered as having a family language other than English. The local authorities provide English courses for children with a background of migration (Scottish Government 2023b, Table 7).

Northern Ireland

Settings which include Traveller children or children from Roma families are provided with additional subsidies from the Department of Education.

Parental leave arrangements⁵

Maternity leave is granted for 52 weeks and may start 11 weeks before the expected birth date. Two weeks after birth are compulsory. Six weeks are paid at 90% of the mother’s average earnings, and either a weekly lump sum of £172,48 (€202,18) is paid for an additional 33 weeks or 90% of the weekly gross income, whichever is the lower. The remaining 13 weeks are unpaid. The requirement for payment of allowances is a 26-week period of continuous employment before the 15th week preceding the expected birth date and a minimum weekly salary of £123 (€142,26).

Since April 2015, employed mothers are entitled to transfer all Maternity leave to the father, except for the two weeks of obligatory leave, i.e. up to 50 weeks. This period of leave is termed ‘**Shared parental leave**’ (SPL). SPL can only be taken in one-week (seven-day) blocks of time.

⁵ The information in this section is primarily based on the country report by Margaret O'Brien, Jamie Atkinson and Alison Koslowski in the *International Review of Leave Policies and Research 2023* (see *References*).

Fathers may take one or two weeks of **Paternity leave** paid with a weekly lump sum of £172,48 (€202,18) or 90% of average weekly income if this is lower. These two weeks must be taken in one part within 56 days of the child's birth.

Each parent is entitled to 18 weeks of unpaid and non-transferable **Parental leave** per child. However, these cannot be taken in one block. Not more than four weeks may be taken in any one year unless the parent's employer agrees to an alternative arrangement. This leave can be taken up to the child's 18th birthday.

Currently, no systematic statistical information about leave uptake is available.

Current challenges for the ECEC system in the United Kingdom

Country experts' assessment

The introduction to this section was written by **Liz Brooker** (†) in 2017 and continues to be relevant. **Eunice Lumsden** contributed updates in 2023 about the UK in general and the situation in England, with **Natalie MacDonald** adding Welsh perspectives and **Sarah Burton** Scottish perspectives.

Liz Brooker (†) (2017)

As this synopsis of key contextual data has shown, the four nations of the UK now find themselves differently positioned with regard to ECEC, as well as with regard to political, economic, social and cultural matters in general. Nevertheless, it remains the case that England, with over 55 million of the UK's total population of 65 million, faces the most complex and significant challenges, which are reported in this section. Whereas all four nations are struggling to meet the issues arising from funding constraints and rapidly changing professional roles and training, English ECEC finds itself in particularly challenging circumstances as a result of fundamental changes in ideology and policy on the part of successive governments.

1. Early childhood policy in the years from 1997-2010 was a key priority of the then Labour government, which invested in long-term and large-scale research projects (e.g. Sylva 2010, Mathers et al 2014) aimed at identifying the most 'effective' forms of provision in terms of young children's experiences and outcomes. The focus of these research projects became one of 'quality' and their findings were clear: children under 5 years of age benefited most from properly funded provision which combined education and care, which was led by trained teachers and which offered a balance of free play and adult-led activities. Legislation during these years resulted in a steady increase in teacher-led provision and a steady focus on children's experience. In the years since 2010, Conservative-led governments have reversed the focus on ECEC as a benefit for children, and have aimed instead to create services which allow parents to work. This change of direction is described in research reports, notably from the Sutton Trust (Waldfogel and Stewart 2017) as a shift from quality to quantity: children aged 3 and 4 whose parents are working are now entitled to 30 hours of free 'childcare' a week, to enable their parents to move into employment (children with a non-working parent are offered only 15 hours). But the nature of this 'childcare' no longer resembles the high-quality education and care standards set during the previous regime. The requirement for a teacher to be present in a non-school setting has been removed, and there is a move to allow nursery and reception classes in schools to be led by non-teachers. The Sutton Trust concludes that these moves are sharply increasing the inequality between more and less privileged groups of children, as the children of poorer working parents increasingly spend longer hours in poor-quality provision.

2. Government funding for the 30-hours free provision has been independently evaluated as well below the level required to create new places in existing settings, or to encourage the creation of new (PVI) settings. With the launch of the scheme in September 2017, it was reported that many existing settings had chosen not to offer the expanded provision, and in consequence that many parents were unable to find a place for their child.
3. Frequent changes to the IPE of those working in ECEC have failed to remedy the failings and shortages they were designed to address. The latest shift, from Early Years Professional Status to Early Years Teacher Status (without QTS) was intended to supply more 'teachers' without providing them with the same pay and conditions as Primary Teachers with an Early Years specialism. The intention was to expand the well-qualified workforce, but more cheaply than with a qualified-teacher workforce. However, the take-up of training for the new EYT status was slow, and has declined year on year, so that currently only 600 of the planned 2,500 training places have been taken up, and many HEI providers are closing their courses. ECEC in England is set to fall way below the proposed standards of qualification in the next few years.

Eunice Lumsden (2023)

Early Childhood Education and Care continues to be positioned differently in the four nations - as documented in the accompanying ECEC Workforce Profile (Lumsden 2024). In England, the three areas presented by Liz Brooker in 2017 continue to be dominant discourses, with the challenges they present exacerbated by the COVID pandemic (La Valle et al. 2022).

Research evidence on the importance of investing in early childhood has been recognised by policy makers in the UK. Since the pioneer investment era of the Labour Government (1997–2010), ECEC has continued to be a policy focus, with the 2023 Budget pledging to expand the 'free' childcare offer in stages by introducing as from April 2024-15 hours to all children over 9 months with working parents, rising to 30 hours for all children under five with working parents earning under £100,000 (€116,310) net income (DfE 2023a). While this direction must be welcomed, it does little to address the challenges for families unable to work or find employment that works around family life. This is despite the compelling evidence about the importance of high quality ECEC for child development and the fact that those children who would benefit most are less able to access it – a situation reinforced by the pandemic (see La Valle et al. 2022). As Moss and Cameron (2020) articulate, despite policy attention the fragmented nature of ECEC in England continues to drive a flawed system – a system, they argue, that has failed to pause and reflect on the purpose of ECEC and how it operates. Moreover, they suggest that the emphasis on 'school readiness', as well as the EYFS, and the focus on 'childcare' for parents, has arguably exacerbated the challenges for ECEC in England.

Investment in workforce development continues, with the Level 3 Early Educator (or equivalent) continuing as the mandated qualification in **England**. Investment in graduate leadership continues, but the transition from Early Years Professional Status to Early Years Teacher Status in 2013, without ensuring that employment conditions mirrored those of colleagues with Qualified Teacher Status, presents challenges to the recruitment and retention of those with EYTS. The number of providers of the EYTS qualification route continues to decline year on year. In 2022, 21% of the workforce held a Level 6 qualification (DfE 2022a) and in 2023, only 17 training providers were offering EYTS, 12 of which were HEIs (DfE 2023b) – a situation that compounds the fragmented nature of ECEC and the divide with Education (Moss and Cameron 2020).

In **Scotland**, the situation in relation to graduate leadership is different and the Childhood Practice degree is being taken up by the early years workforce such that Scottish Government data



shows an overall increase in staff who are degree qualified or undertaking a degree increasing by 17.8% between 2020 (5,015) and 2023 (5,906) (Scottish Government 2023b, 26).

It is not only graduate recruitment that is an issue, significant challenges of recruitment, qualification levels and staff shortages that have been a constant concern across the UK for employers, membership organisations and researchers, are materialising. The current situation for the ECEC workforce is extremely challenging and further exacerbated by the mixed economy of provision and, in England particularly, the marketisation and commercialisation of ECEC (Lloyd 2020). In the UK there are disparities in pay, working conditions and status between those with Qualified Teacher Status and the remainder of the ECEC workforce, disparities which have been sharpened by the current cost of living crisis across the country. In Scotland, for example, where most children attend publicly funded ECEC provision, the employment conditions and pay of practitioners and support workers who make up the largest proportion of staff in settings do not have qualifications or pay or career routes comparable to teachers. The dissatisfaction with pay levels led to potential strike action in September 2022 which was only cancelled when the pay rise offered was substantially increased.

In **England**, the number of settings closing or being acquired by larger companies has increased (DfE 2021c; Simon et al. 2021). While the Government promised several measures to support the sector in England, the 2023 Budget (HM Treasury 2023) gave ECEC providers the option of relaxing staff to child ratios (aligning England to Scottish requirements), a highly contested issue in the sector, particularly since the requirements for graduate leadership differ between the two nations.

In **Wales**, the expansion of the 30 free hours scheme and expansion of the Flying Start provision will see a significant increase in nationwide demand for spaces. In an already struggling workforce due to the impact of the pandemic, this is a real concern.

The ten-year Childcare, Play and Early Years Workforce Plan is under review (2023) and the pandemic has impacted on the number of students being able to complete placement hours for the Childcare qualifications. Additionally, the number of practitioners able to deliver through the medium of Welsh is concerning and part of the Welsh Government's *2050 One Million Welsh Speakers* campaign which aims to increase the number of Welsh speakers across Wales. For early years this includes investment in Welsh-medium provision with a target of an additional 150 settings by 2028 and providing training to develop the Welsh language skills of the existing workforce (Welsh Government 2020).

Plans for workforce registration are in discussion, similar to those in Scotland, in a move to support the recognition of the workforce as a significant and important profession. Ongoing feelings of being undervalued and poorly paid are impacting on sector recruitment and retention similar to issues outlined across the other three nations. A key priority is the continued drive for recognition and upskilling across the sector, the value of graduate level practice qualifications and ongoing support for the ECEC agenda in Wales is essential to meet increased demand for quality provision (Welsh Government 2019b).

Despite the divergence in ECEC policy approaches across the four nations of the UK it is evident that there is instability and that – beyond those with Qualified Teacher Status – the workforce is undervalued and poorly recompensed, making it difficult to forecast the future. In England there is an urgent need for strong and committed leadership in Government, alongside substantial and sustained investment, to ensure that *all* our youngest children have access to high quality ECEC provision. A key cornerstone is a qualified, graduate-led workforce that is valued and invested in; this does not currently appear to be a high priority for the incumbent Government.

Demographic data

Please note: For reasons of comparability, data on children are always reported up to 6 years of age, even if compulsory schooling starts earlier or later in some countries.

Population

In the year 2021 there were 67,026,300 persons resident in the United Kingdom. Over the past 20 years, the total population has risen continuously. The following national statistics of the total population shows the population of the constituent countries over time:

Table 14

United Kingdom: Overall population and population of constituent countries 2000-2021

	2000	2005	2015	2021
England	49,233,300	50,606,000	54,786,300	56,536,400
Wales	2,906,900	2,969,300	3,099,100	3,105,400
Scotland	5,062,900	5,110,200	5,373,000	5,479,900
Northern Ireland	1,682,900	1,727,700	1,851,600	1,904,600
United Kingdom	58,886,000	60,413,300	65,110,000	67,026,300

Source: ONS 2022b

Total fertility rate

In 2021, the average total fertility rate in the EU27 (from 2020) was 1.53. The highest total fertility rate of the 33 SEEPRO-3 countries was in France (1.84), the lowest in Malta (1.13). At 1.75, the UK is well above the EU27 average (Eurostat 2023d)⁶.

Children under age 6

Table 15

United Kingdom: Number of children according to age, 2021

	Number of children
Under 1 year-olds	675,477
1 year-olds	701,987
2 year-olds	719,130
3 year-olds	732,469
4 year-olds	751,206
5 year-olds	774,709
Total 0 to under 6 year-olds	4,354,978

Source: ONS 2022a

⁶ Data for **Ukraine** and the **UK** (2021) are from Statista (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/296567/fertility-rate-in-ukraine/> and <https://www.statista.com/statistics/284042/fertility-rate-in-the-united-kingdom-uk/>). Data for the **Russian Federation** (2021) are from WorldBankData (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?locations=RU>).

In 2021, 3.1% of the total population in the UK were children under 3 years of age. Children up to school entry age accounted for 6.5%. This represents a higher proportion of young children than the respective EU average, and has done for the past 20 years.

Table 16

United Kingdom: Relative share of children under 6 years of age in total population compared with EU averages from 2000 to 2021, in %*

Year	Comparison UK/EU	Under 3 year-olds	3 to under 6 year-olds	0 to under 6 year-olds
2000	UK	3.6	3.7	7.3
	Ø EU15 ⁷	3.2	3.2	6.4
2005	UK	3.4	3.4	6.9
	Ø EU25	3.1	3.1	6.2
2015	UK	3.7	3.8	7.4
	Ø EU28	3.0	3.2	6.2
2021	UK**	3.1	3.4	6.5
	Ø EU27 (2021)	2.8	3.0	5.7

Source: Eurostat 2023a, **ONS 2022a, * Own calculations, deviations due to rounding

Single households with children under age 6

In 2019, more than three-quarters (77.3%) of households with children under age 6 in the United Kingdom were couple households. Single households with under 6 year-olds accounted for 9.8% of all households. These were almost exclusively single mother households (9.1%).

Table 17

United Kingdom: Households with children under age 6, 2019

Household type	Total households	Total households, in per cent*
All households	7,208,800	
Couple households	5,572,900	77.3
Other household type	924,400	12.8
Single households, total	708,200	9.8
Single households, women	652,600	9.1
Single households, men	55,600	0.7

Source: Eurostat 2023i (data beyond 2019 not available), * Own calculations

Employment rates of parents with children under age 6

In the United Kingdom, in 2023, the overall employment rate for men (15-64 years) was 79.4% and for women 72.1% (Statista 2023b).

In 2021, 70.7% of women and 95% of men (18-64 years) with children between 3 and 4 years were employed. Although an exact comparison is difficult because the dependent children's ages are different, the share of employed fathers was significantly above the EU-average (87.5%)

⁷ The data for 2000 include the EU15-Länder at that time (AT, BE, DK, DE, IE, EL, ES, F, FI, IT, LU, NL, PT, SE, UK). The 2005 data (EU25) include CY, CZ, EE, HU, LV, LT, MT, PL, SI, SK. Data for 2015 include the additional EU28 countries BG, RO und HR. Data for EU27 (from 2020) comprise the countries of the EU28 without the UK.

as was that of mothers (EU-average 64%). This also applies for employed mothers and fathers with children under age 2 (72.4% and 93.1% respectively) (Eurostat 2023e, ONS 2022c).

Table 18a

United Kingdom: Employment rates of parents with children under 6 compared with other EU countries, 2010 und 2021

	2010	
	Mothers, in %	Fathers, in %
United Kingdom	58.2	87.6
Highest rate of employment in 27 EU countries ⁸	Denmark: 82.7	Netherlands: 93.4
Lowest rate of employment in 27 EU countries	Hungary: 31.7	Latvia: 72.7
	2021	
	Mothers, in %	Fathers, in %
United Kingdom (with children 3–4 years)*	70.7	95.0
Highest rate of employment in 27 (2020) EU countries ⁹	Luxembourg: 81.9	Sweden: 95.1
Lowest rate of employment in 27 (2020) EU countries	Czech Republic: 42.5	Romania: 78.5

Source: Eurostat 2023e, *ONS 2022c

For the SEEPRO-3 countries that were not part of the EU27(2020) in 2021/2022, like the United Kingdom, data are displayed in Table 18b

Table 18b

Employment rates in non-EU SEEPRO-3 countries, 2021/2022/2023

Countries	Parents with children under 6 years		Overall employment rate	
	Mothers in %	Fathers in %	Women in %	Men in %
*Norway (2022)	82.9	94.3	75.4	80.1
***Russia (2021/2022)	67.1 (2021)	k.A.	55.6 (2022)	70.4 (2022)
*Serbia (2022)	64.4	78.3	57.9	71.0
**Switzerland (2022/2023)	46.9	95.3	60.0 61.1 (2023)	83.5 84.2 (2023)
*Ukraine (2021)	n.d.	n.d.	60.7	69.9

*Eurostat 2023e, 2023f

**[BFS] Bundesamt für Statistik. 2023. *Erwerbsquoten in Vollzeitäquivalenten nach Geschlecht, Nationalität, Altersgruppen, Familientyp* [Full-time equivalent employment rates by gender, nationality, age groups, family type]. <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/asset/de/je-d-03.02.00.01.03>

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⁸ AT, BE, BG, CY, CZ, DK, DE, EE, EL, ES, F, FI, IE, IT, HU, LV, LT, LU, MT, NL, PL, PT, RO, SE, SI, SK, UK

⁹ AT, BE, BG, CY, CZ, DK, DE, EE, EL, ES, F, FI, IE, IT, HR, HU, LV, LT, LU, MT, NL, PL, PT, RO, SE, SI, SK

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion¹⁰

In 2018, 28.1% of children under 6 were at risk of poverty or social exclusion. This proportion was above the then EU28 average (22.7%). The share of all persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the total population was 22.8% compared to the EU average of 21.8%. 3.1% of children under 6 and 1.9% of the total population suffered from severe material deprivation (EU28-average 5.3% and 4.0% respectively) (Eurostat 2023g, h – data after 2018 not available).

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¹⁰ ‘At risk of poverty or social exclusion’ refers to the situation of people either at risk of poverty (threshold set at 60% of the national median equivalised disposable income after social transfers), or severely materially deprived or living in a household with a very low work intensity (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Material_deprivation)

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