

# UK government's free childcare scheme in disarray, charities say

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Thousands of concerned parents reportedly struggling to sign up for flagship offering that starts in April

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## AVAILABILITY

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### Excerpts

A flagship government childcare scheme is at risk of “falling apart” with parents struggling to access new free hours and nurseries in the dark about if they can afford to provide care, according to charities.

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Early years providers say the £4bn scheme announced in last spring's budget is “ill-thought out” and that they still do not know how much money they will receive to provide new free places, leaving them unable to judge if they have the capacity and staffing they will need.

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From April, eligible working parents of two-year-olds in England will be able to apply for 15 free hours of childcare a week during term time, with a wider rollout providing 30 hours to all eligible children from nine months to five years by September 2025.

But some parents already using the tax-free childcare (TFC) scheme, which gives eligible working parents who do not qualify for current free hours a 20% saving on fees, report being unable to get the new code they need in time to access April's scheme.

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A flash survey of Pregnant Then Screwed followers attracted more than 4,500 responses in 29 hours. It found that only 10% of eligible respondents had got the required code, 69% said they had been unable to apply for it yet and 17% said they were unable to apply because they didn't understand the system.

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The Department for Education said there was no fault with the system and that it would share more information to alleviate concerns for parents reconfirming in March shortly.

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Other had greater concerns. Laura, a parent of a three-year-old and a nine-month-old said her nursery in Northamptonshire had not only decided not to provide government-funded hours for two year-olds from April, but it was also pulling the 30 free hours of childcare currently available for three- and four-year-olds.

“They said [it was] because of the uncertainty about fees and the fact they were so underfunded,” she said. “It has been incredibly stressful, because with two kids that is a big financial impact, and we had actually planned our second child around the new free hours.”

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