

Luton Council childcare sufficiency assessment 2023

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About this report

The [Childcare Act 2006](#) places a duty on all local authorities to secure sufficient childcare, so far as it is reasonably practicable, for working parents, or parents who are studying or training for employment, for children aged 0 to 14 (or up to 25 for disabled children). The [Childcare Act 2016](#) places a further duty to secure funded childcare for qualifying children of working parents following the introduction of the 30 hours extended entitlement.

Luton Council has a statutory duty to work with providers from the private, voluntary, independent and maintained sector to create sustainable, accessible, affordable and high quality childcare, sufficient to meet the needs of all parents and carers.

Methodology

This report provides an overview of childcare sufficiency using qualitative and quantitative data from a number of sources:

- Department for Education (DfE) [statistical data of childcare providers and inspections](#)
- Luton Council two, three and four year old funding data 2023
- funding and childcare provision data from the [Early Years Census January 2023](#)
- The Coram Family and Childcare Trust – [Childcare Survey 2023](#)
- analysis of 55 responses to the Provider Sustainability Survey June 2023

Limitations

The number of registered places and the percentage take-up is based on January 2023 published data and may not reflect take-up across the whole academic year.

DfE data calculates the number of part time equivalent places (PTE), therefore this may be slightly lower than the actual number of children accessing all or part of their entitlement.

Executive summary

At the early years January 2023 census, the percentage of eligible two year old children in Luton registered for a funded place, increased to 69.4 per cent. This is lower than national, but the gap has narrowed.

The take-up of universal three and four year old funding, including reception class children, has increased to 96.6 per cent. This is now higher than national and the second highest of statistical neighbours. The number of families accessing the 30 hours extended funding increased in 2023 by 7.3 per cent.

The early years' sector faces major challenges in the next few years with the expansion of the extended 30 hour entitlement for working parents to include parents with children aged from nine months.

Phase 1: April 2024 - 15 hours of childcare over 38 weeks of the year made available to eligible working parents of two year olds

Phase 2: September 2024 - 15 hours of childcare over 38 weeks of the year made available to eligible working parents of 9 month to 36 month olds

Phase 3: September 2025 - 30 hours of childcare over 38 weeks of the year made available to eligible working parents of 9 month to 36 month olds

The impact on the sufficiency of childcare spaces in Luton will depend on how many children already attend formal childcare (these children will switch from parent paid childcare to entitlement funded childcare), and how many are new to formal childcare. At this stage it is difficult to predict the number of new families, which have not previously used formal childcare, who will take up the entitlements, or to know exactly how many families access paid childcare.

In July 2023 Luton Council responded to the DfE self-assessment of readiness to deliver the proposed extensions to the funded childcare offer, which showed that the council was in the initial stages of preparation. DfE data for Luton suggests that there may be a demand for an estimated additional 200 childcare places in April 2024, and a further 400 in September 2024.

Local data in summer 2023 suggests that most of the new demand in April 2024 may be met by existing vacancies, although this may vary between wards. However the demand in September 2024 will require a significant increase of childcare spaces in Luton.

In Luton, there are some early years providers that currently have the space to offer additional places, however factors such as the recruitment of qualified practitioners, current funding rates and the financial costs involved, may present challenges and affect business decisions.

A sustainability questionnaire in June 2023 indicated that 60 per cent of providers were feeling positive about the sustainability of their business. This is a fall from 78 per cent in 2022 and reflects the providers' current concerns.

Luton Council will closely monitor the supply and demand of childcare places and work with providers from the private, voluntary, independent and maintained sector to ensure there are sufficient places to meet the needs of parents.

Previously Luton saw a fall in the number of early years providers registered as good and outstanding after the pandemic. The early years team have been working with providers to ensure a high quality of education and safeguarding, and to support those that have been judged as less than good.

In March 2023, 94 per cent of Ofsted inspected childcare providers in Luton were judged to be good or outstanding. This is below the national and regional average, but is a 2 per cent increase since March 2022.

The January census reported that 94 per cent of children in Luton were attending Ofsted graded good or outstanding early years childcare.

Recommendations

Promotional activities and partner working must continue to ensure that the increase in the number of children accessing the existing early years entitlements is maintained. Particular focus will be on the number of children accessing two year funding, and ensuring that the availability of spaces for vulnerable children is not impacted by the new demand from working families from April 2024.

An action plan outlining the work required over the coming months to prepare for the changes to the entitlements is being developed. The early years team will continue to engage with the DfE, regional partners and other national organisations to keep up to date with developments and share best practice.

Further analysis of data will take place following DfE estimates of the current supply of childcare places in Luton and the potential demand.

Additional early years spaces are likely to be needed in Luton, which will require the expansion of some existing providers and the recruitment of more childminders. Lowering the age ranges in school based nurseries will also be an option.

The early years team will continue to work with early years providers in Luton to ensure that children are able to access high quality childcare throughout Luton and that the proportion of good and outstanding settings continues to increase.

Summary of the previous 2022 CSA

Main findings

The percentage of children registered for early years entitlements in 2022 had returned close to pre COVID levels, however the percentage was still below the national level and therefore strategies to increase the take up were needed.

Advice and support was required to maintain the quality of childcare in Luton following the changes to the Early Years Foundation Stage in September 2021.

Some early years providers required business support to remain sustainable.

Monitoring of the out of school childcare sector and holiday care was needed to ensure that adequate provision remained available for working parents.

The promotion of Tax Free Childcare to parents, carers and providers was needed to support families with the cost of childcare.

Responses

The one-step application process for families with two year old children has been further supported by the use of DWP issued texts and emails to contact potentially eligible families.

As a result of activities, including displaying funding banners, flyers in different languages and an increase in social media posts and sharing with partners, the take up of the entitlements has increased to the highest recorded levels for all age groups.

Early Years Consultants and Childcare Advice and Support Officers have provided valuable support to settings to improve overall quality which has resulted in a 2 per cent rise in good or outstanding settings since March 2022.

Luton Council has continued to support providers by providing advice on available financial support and how to maximise funding opportunities and reduce costs.

Luton's Family Information Service (FIS) is aware of over 80 holiday schemes for summer 2023, as well as 3,000 places being available as part of [the Holiday activities and food programme](#). The list of available sessions has been shared with over 1,140 families this summer. FIS have not received any calls from parents unable to find suitable care.

Flyers promoting Tax Free Childcare (TFC) have been shared with providers and social media messages have been posted regularly on community and partner social media sites. Luton has also taken part in a [HM Revenue and Customs project](#), working with Hempsalls, to promote TFC. There has been a 22 per cent increase in TFC accounts in Luton since 2022.

Introduction

This report provides an analysis and evaluation of the childcare sector and childcare sufficiency in Luton during the 2022/2023 academic year. Take up of the early years entitlements use the January census 2023 published data.

Luton summary

Population of Luton – 225,300

Childcare type in Luton

Childminders	Day Nurseries	Pre schools	Maintained Nursery	Nurseries in a school
89	47	29	6*	16

*over 7 sites

Early education funding

Early education funding is currently available to eligible two, three and four year olds and is paid directly to approved childcare providers by Luton Council.

Currently all three and four year olds in England can get 15 hours a week of early education for 38 weeks of the year. Some three and four year olds from working families are eligible for 30 hours a week.

Two year olds from families that receive certain benefits, or who meet additional criteria, can also currently get 15 hours a week for 38 weeks of the year.

Parents do not have to use all the hours of their child’s funded entitlement, and can choose to split the hours between providers. With the agreement of their provider, parents may also spread them across the year; for example, rather than taking 15 hours for 38 weeks a year they could take just under 12 hours for 48 weeks a year.

The early years entitlements are being extended to include:

- from April 2024 15 hours of childcare over 38 weeks of the year will be made available to eligible working parents of two year olds
- from September 2024 15 hours of childcare over 38 weeks of the year will be made available to eligible working parents of 9 month to 36 month olds
- from September 2025 30 hours of childcare over 38 weeks of the year will be made available to eligible parents of nine month to 36 month olds

Funded two year old places

Children aged two whose families receive certain benefits (including low income families in receipt of in work benefits), or those who meet additional non-economic criteria, are entitled to [15 hours funded early education per week](#).

Non-economic criteria include if the child:

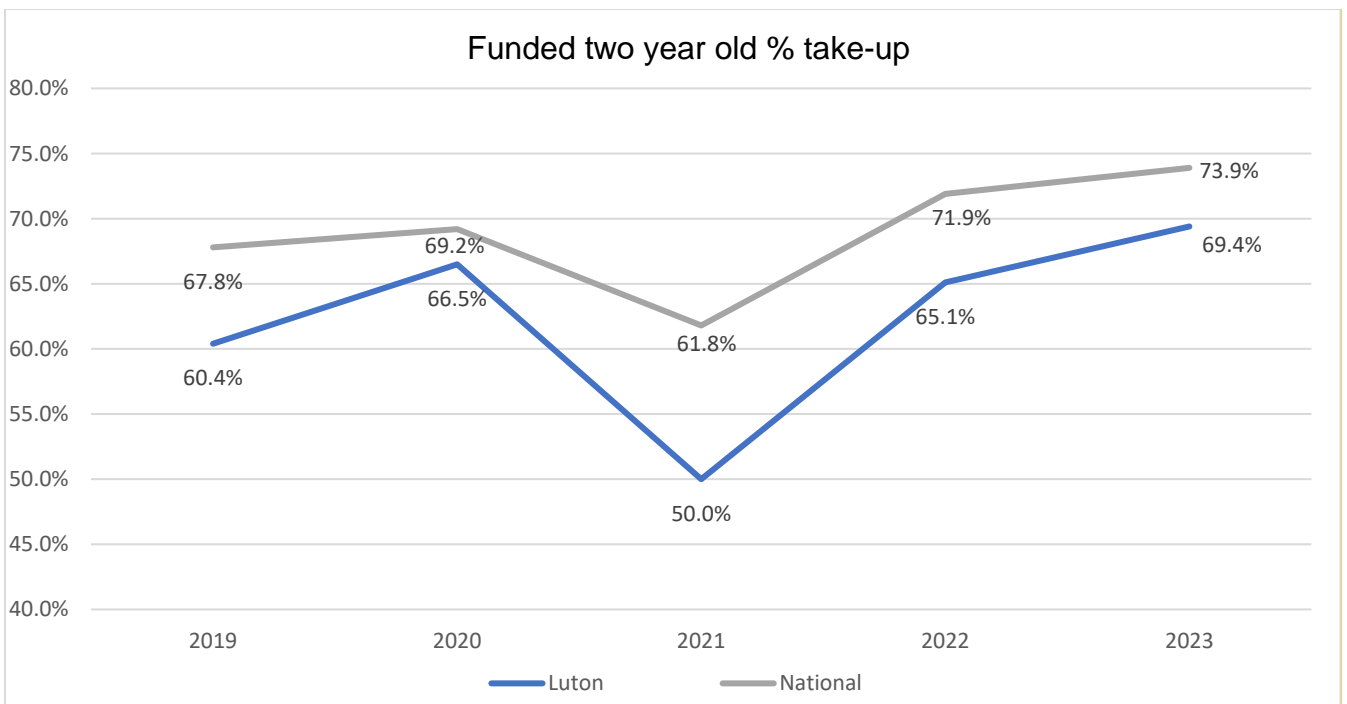
- is a looked after child
- has an adoption, residence order or special guardianship order
- has a special educational need or disability (SEND)
- is in receipt of Disability Living Allowance (DLA)
- is from a family with no recourse to public funds who meet income thresholds

[Eligible children taking up their two year funded place](#) (for at least some of the available hours) in Luton and nationally as at January 2023.

Two year old funding	% of eligible children in Luton	% of eligible children nationally
Take up	69.4%	73.9%

The number of estimated eligible two year olds on the list provided by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) in Luton has fallen from 1,516 in 2019 to 1,103 in 2023.

The percentage of children taking up the entitlement is lower than national, however the gap has narrowed.



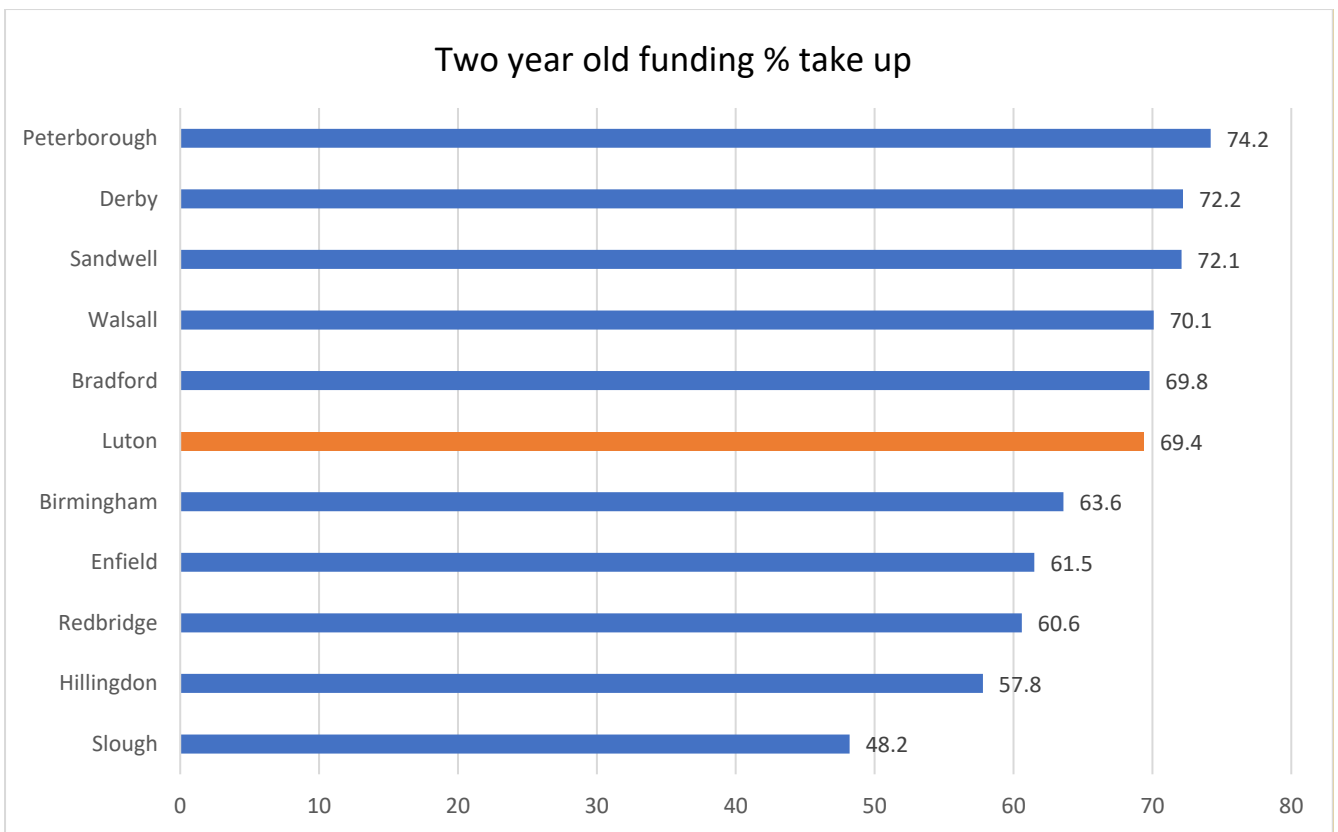
Statistical neighbour comparison

Luton has ten statistical neighbours when comparing Ofsted and Department for Education (DfE) data and these range from being “very close” to “somewhat close” to various statistical aspects of Luton.

The “closeness” of these statistical neighbours has been decided by the [National Foundation for Educational Research \(NFER\)](#) who was commissioned by the DfE to identify and group similar local authorities in terms of their socio economic characteristics. Each local authority was assigned ten such neighbours.

These socio economic characteristics include among others; the mean weekly pay, the percentage of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals, the percentage of residents from different ethnic backgrounds, and the general health of those in the area.

In January 2023 Luton ranked sixth out of its eleven statistical neighbours with the take up of two year old funding in these local authorities ranging between 48.2 per cent and 74.2 per cent.



Three and four year old universal funding

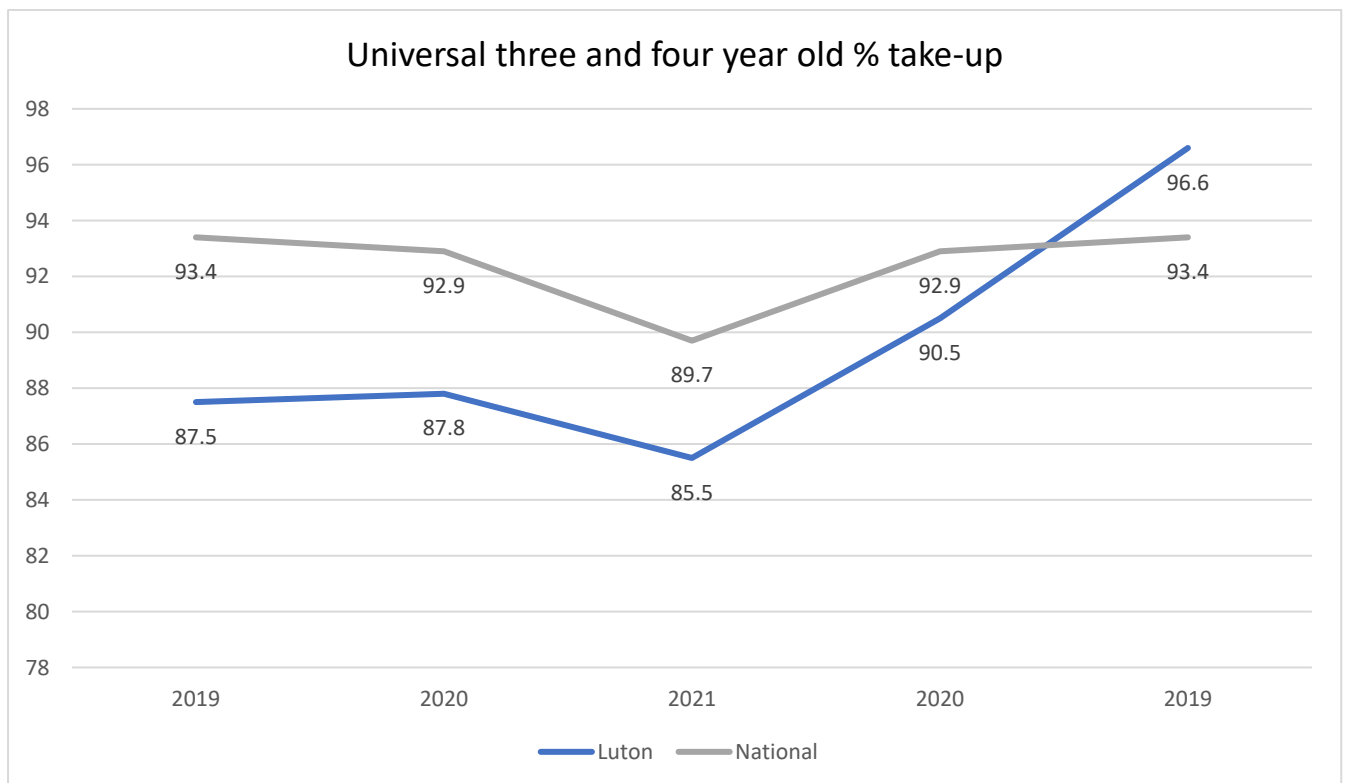
All children aged three and four are entitled to 15 hours funded early education per week until they start reception class in school.

Take up percentages for universal funding include the 2,001 reception class children attending in January 2023.

Eligible children taking up their universal funded place (for at least some of the available hours) in Luton and nationally as at January 2023.

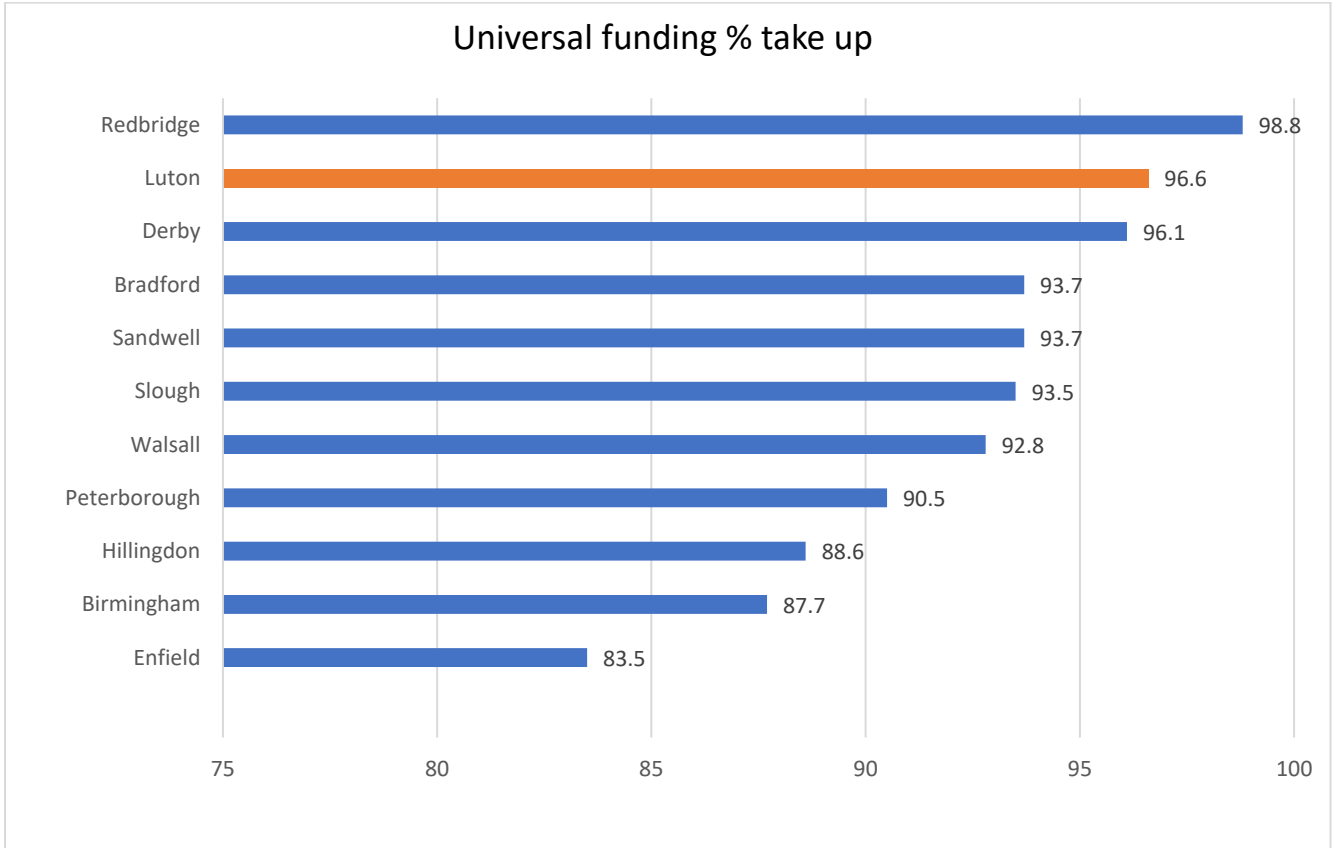
Universal funding age 3 and 4	% of eligible children in Luton	% of eligible children nationally
Take up	96.6%	93.7%

The percentage of three and four year olds registered to receive funded early education entitlements in Luton has increased by 6.1 per cent compared to 2022, and is now 2.9 per cent higher than national. The DfE have advised that the three and four year old take-up rates need to be treated with caution as the population estimates and take-up rates back to 2013 will be revised in the 2024 release following ONS publication of a full and consistent time series based on Census



Statistical neighbour comparison

In January 2023 Luton ranked second (previously eighth in 2022) out of its eleven statistical neighbours with the take up of universal funding in these local authorities ranging between 83.5 per cent and 98.8 per cent.



Three and four year old extended (30 hours) funding

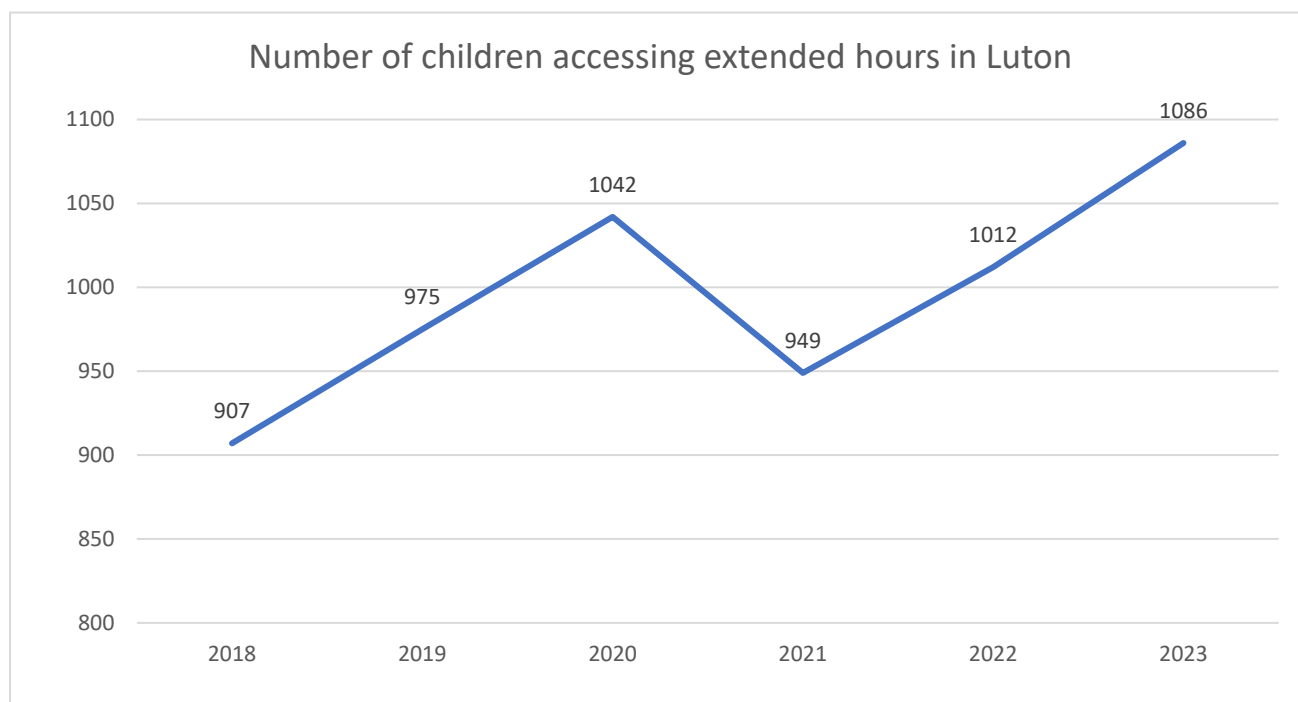
Since September 2017, children aged three and four from eligible working families are entitled to 30 hours funded early education per week until they start in a reception class in school.

To qualify parents must each expect to earn (on average) at least £125 per week (equal to 16 hours at the National Minimum or Living Wage) and less than £100,000 per year. Parents may still qualify if they are on maternity, paternity or adoption leave, or are unable to work because they are disabled or have caring responsibilities.

Parents who think they are entitled to a 30 hours extended hours place apply for this online through the government’s Childcare Support website [Childcare Choices](#). The same website is used to apply for tax free childcare and parents can apply for either or both. If a parent is eligible, the system creates a code which they can use with their chosen childcare provider. If they are ineligible, they will still be entitled to the universal 15 hours of funded childcare.

The number of families accessing the 30 hours extended funding increased in 2023 by 7.3 per cent.

Eligible children taking up their extended hours funded place (for at least some of the available hours) in Luton as at January 2023.



Early Years Pupil Premium

Disadvantaged three and four year olds registered for the 15 hour entitlement are eligible for early years pupil premium (EYPP) funding. Early years education providers can receive up to £376 per year to help with a child’s education.

There has been a 12 per cent decrease in the number of children identified to be eligible for EYPP in Luton since 2022. This compares with a national decrease of 1.4 per cent and an East of England regional increase of 3 per cent.

Providers offering funded early education places

Luton providers currently receive £7.54 per hour for a funded two year old and £5.17 for a funded three or four year old. They are not required to offer funded places to parents, but parents may choose to use a different provider if they do not. Some providers offer a restricted number of funded places.

The number of private, voluntary and independent providers (PVI) offering the early years entitlements in Luton has increased slightly during the last year with one additional registered provider. However the number of registered childminders has fallen by 17 per cent (a loss of 18 childminders) in the same period.

Early education funding by provider type

The number of two, three and four year olds accessing early education funded places in Luton as at the [January 2023 Early Years census](#) is shown below.

Type of provider	Two year old funded children	Universal funded children
Private and voluntary	591	2588
Childminders	16	56
Maintained nurseries	141	581
Nursery classes in schools	2	670
Independent schools	16	154
Special schools	0	10
Total children	766	4059

Supply and demand of childcare places in Luton

Local data suggests that currently Luton has sufficient childcare spaces, however with the extension of the entitlements, and the unknown level of demand, this is a situation which will require monitoring closely.

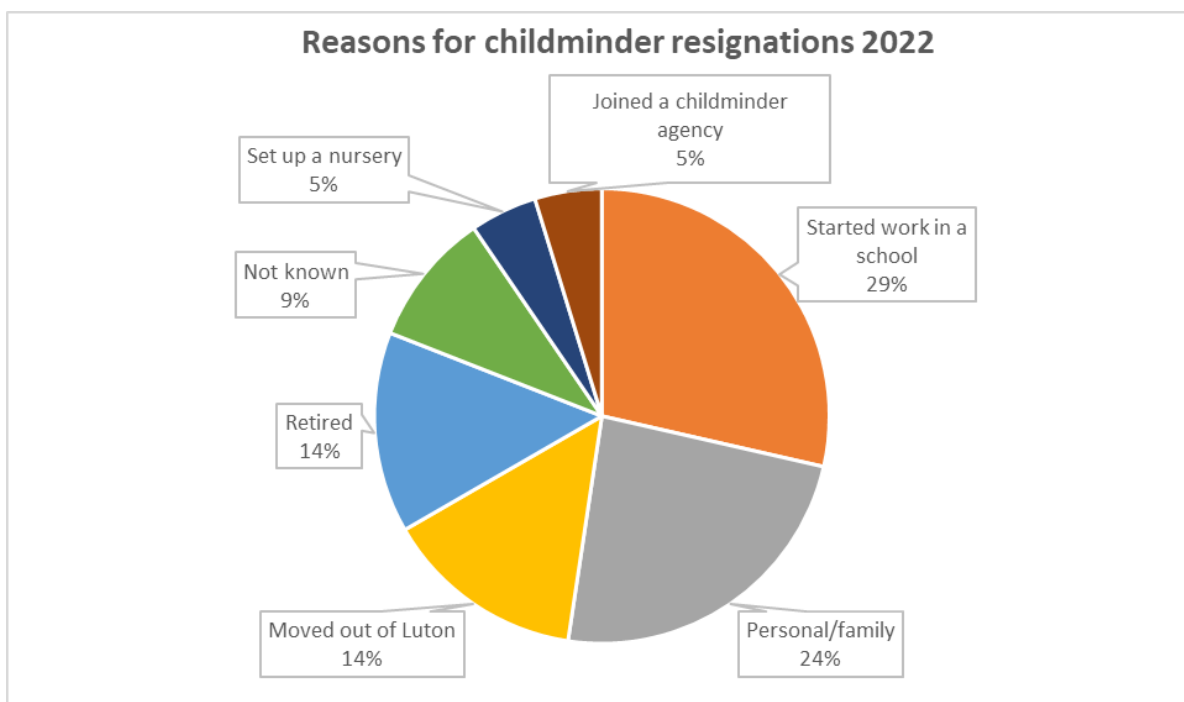
Luton Council does not hold information on private paying families who are accessing childcare, however a provider survey answered by 55 providers estimated that 29 per cent of two year olds that did not currently qualify for two year funding may already be accessing a childcare place. Potentially these will be some of the families that may become eligible for the entitlements in April 2024, and already have their place in a setting.

The survey also estimated that 15 per cent of children aged nine months to two years old may already be accessing childcare.

Currently, the number of additional families that will want to use childcare and the additional demand for places as the entitlements are introduced is unknown. During the summer term of 2023, historically the term with the highest attendance of children in settings, there were estimated vacancy levels of 22 per cent for two year old places and 11 per cent for three and four year olds in non-domestic childcare settings. Vacancy levels within each ward will vary.

There are some early years providers that currently have the space to offer additional places, or have expressed an interest in expanding their settings. However challenges in the sector such as the recruitment of qualified practitioners, current funding rates and the financial costs may affect business decisions.

The most significant change in the supply of childcare in Luton during 2022 was the resignation of 21 childminders resulting in a net loss of 17 childminders.



Childminder resignation reasons 2022

- started work in a school 29%
- personal/family 24%
- moved out of Luton 14%
- retired 14%
- not known 9%
- set up a nursery 5%
- joined a childminder agency 5%

Other types of setting remained relatively unchanged. DfE data reports that Luton had a loss of 123 childcare spaces from March 2022 to March 2023.

Luton provision changes January 2022 to December 2022

Provider Type	Registrations	Resignations	Proposed as at 31 Dec 2022
Childminder	4	21	0
Day Nursery	4	4	0
Holiday Scheme	0	0	0
Out of School	0	1	0
Pre School	1	1	0
Total	9	27	0

Luton's projected population data indicates a possible decrease of 5 per cent in the 0 to 4 year old age group between 2017 and 2027 which may offset some of the increase in demand created by the extension to the entitlements.

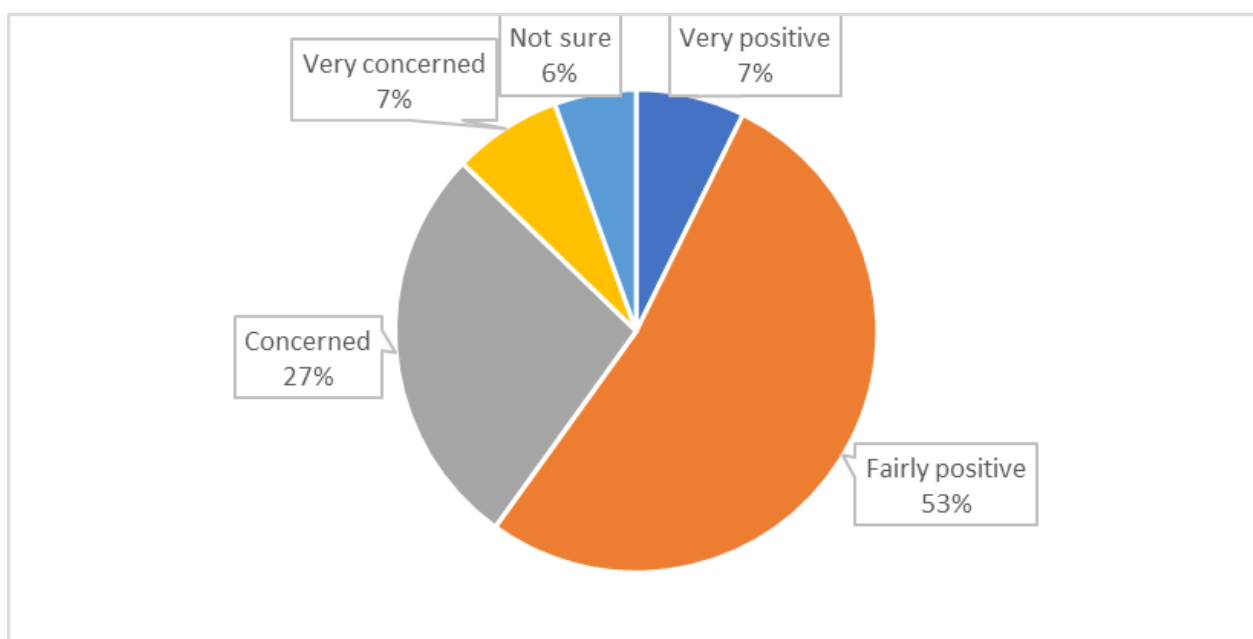
Luton Council will closely monitor the supply and demand of childcare places and work with providers from the private, voluntary, independent and maintained sector to ensure there are sufficient places to meet the needs of parents.

Provider views on sustainability in summer 2023

In June 2023 private, voluntary and independent (PVI) settings and childminders were asked how positive they were feeling about their current financial situation in summer 2023.

Approximately half of PVIs responded to the survey, with 60 per cent of providers feeling positive or very positive, although a few expressed some concerns. This was a fall from 78 per cent of providers feeling positive in 2022.

PVIs' assessment of sustainability summer 2023



PVIs' assessment of sustainability summer 2023

- very positive 7%
- fairly positive 53%
- not sure 6%
- concerned 27%
- very concerned 7%

Providers continued to list the recruitment of practitioners and a higher number of children with social, communication and language delays as their main challenges.

Provider views on future sustainability

Providers were similarly confident about their sustainability over the next twelve months with 61 per cent being either positive or very positive, 27 per cent being concerned and a further three per cent feeling very concerned.

Childcare to meet the needs of working parents

Cost of childcare

Each year the [Coram Family and Childcare Trust](#) carry out a national childcare cost survey and publish a report on their findings, by contacting the FIS in each local authority. This survey compares the cost of childcare in each local authority with the average cost in the region and nationally.

The 2023 report indicates that in Great Britain, childcare prices have continued to rise steadily. The report also highlights how the cost of living crisis is impacting childcare providers and the decisions they are being forced to make that may further impact the availability and affordability of childcare for families.

Cost of childcare for children under three years of age accessing 25 hours per week (no early education funding)

Area	Childminder	Day Nursery
Luton	£136.51	£132.92
East of England	£130.20	£161.48
England	£126.98	£144.01

Parents pay considerably less for childcare for three and four year olds due to the early education entitlements. The following table shows the average cost for 25 hours childcare for a three and four year old including the 15 hours universal entitlement. This does not include families who are eligible for the extended 30 hours.

Children aged three and four accessing 25 hours per week (including 15 hours universal early education funding)

Area	Childminder	Nursery/Pre school
Luton	£54.60	£53.16
East of England	£51.12	£89.85
England	£49.79	£59.83

With the current rising cost of living likely to affect both families and providers it is essential that parents are aware of the different types of childcare support available depending on their circumstances: the three free entitlements, childcare vouchers (no longer available to new applicants from October 2018), Tax Free Childcare, Universal Credit and Tax Credits.

30 hours early education funding for working parents

Since September 2017 three and four year old children of eligible working parents are entitled to **30 hours** per week early education funding. In January 2023, 1,086 families in Luton were accessing an extended hours childcare place.

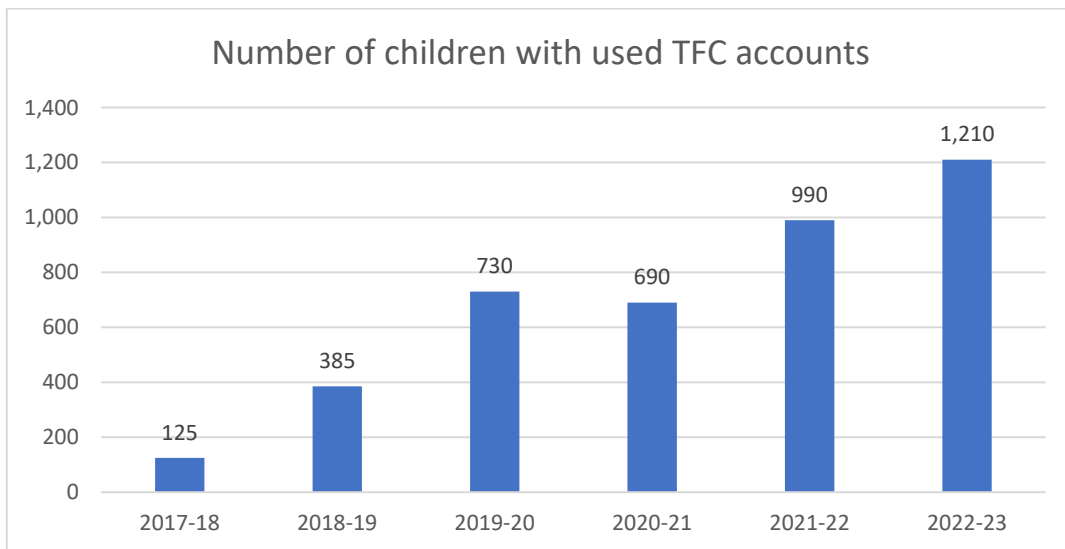
By September 2025 all children of eligible working families aged between nine months and compulsory school age will be able to access 30 hours.

Tax Free Childcare

Working parents can receive up to £2,000 per child per year towards childcare costs for children under 12, or 17 if disabled. With Tax Free Childcare, parents get a government top up of £2 for every £8 paid in. It is available to working parents including the self-employed, who earn (on average) at least £139 per week and less than £100,000 per year.

Tax Free Childcare payments can go towards a whole range of regulated childcare including nurseries, childminders, before and after school clubs and holiday clubs. Parents can take advantage of the offer at the same time as 30 hours free childcare.

The number of children using [Tax Free Childcare in Luton in 2022-23](#) has risen by 22 per cent compared to the previous year, which is higher than the regional and national increases of 19 per cent.



Universal Credit and childcare

From November 2018, Universal Credit became available to most residents in Luton. Universal Credit replaces many different benefits including the childcare element of Working Tax Credit. Through Universal Credit parents may be able to claim back up to 85 per cent of their childcare costs. Parents, and partners if living with them, will usually need to either be working or have a job offer and the childcare must be provided by a registered childcare provider.

Out of school settings

Following the budget announcements in spring 2023 local authorities and schools will be given additional funding for wraparound care, so that parents of school age children can access childcare in their local area from 8am to 6pm. This will include provision of activities that are outside the typical school day as well as breakfast and after school clubs.

The government's target is that by September 2026 most primary schools will be able to provide their own before and after school care.

Recent DfE data shows that out of 47 primary schools in Luton, 40 offer before school care, 34 offer after school care, and 33 provide both.

Children needing holiday care

High quality holiday childcare is essential for working families and gives children the opportunity to experience new activities. However, finding suitable childcare can be challenging with some prices being higher than regular childcare and many parents find it difficult to find childcare that covers the hours they require.

Information for every holiday scheme and activity in Luton is not always available, as many of the schemes do not provide their information to FIS.

However to meet parental need FIS compile and publish details of activities, schemes and attractions before each school holiday, including universal services and those that are available for children with disabilities and special educational needs, this information is available on the [Family section of the Luton Directory](#).

FIS is aware of over 80 holiday schemes for summer 2023, as well as 3,000 places per day being available as part of the Energise Luton Holiday Camps programme, run by Active Luton. These places provide children with a range of physical activities and the opportunity to have a good, nutritious meal during the day as part of the [holiday food and activities programme](#).

The list of available sessions has been shared with over 1,150 families this summer. FIS have not received any calls from parents unable to find suitable care.

Childcare to meet the needs of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)

Luton Council is committed to promoting equality and inclusion for children with SEND. We aim to remove barriers that prevent children accessing free places and work with parents, health and social work professionals, and others to ensure that children with SEND are able to access their early education place.

Luton Council meets their duties under the [Equality Act 2010](#) and take full account of the [SEND Code of Practice 0-25](#) when securing and providing free places.

Early Years SEND Advisors work with practitioners to support them to feel confident that they can support a child with SEND to access and enjoy their early years setting.

Finding inclusive childcare

Parents and carers are able to find inclusive childcare on the Luton Directory's guide to services for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities at the [Luton Directory](#).

The [Luton Local Offer](#) provides further information about local services, support and events for children and young people aged 0 to 25 years who have special educational needs or disabilities (SEND).

Provision of places

Luton has a range of providers who are able to support special needs; however, providers have previously reported the following challenges when providing a place for a child because of their complexity of needs:

- recruiting additional qualified staff members with appropriate skills
- managing additional costs for training, First Aid and DBS checks
- funding not covering all the hours attended

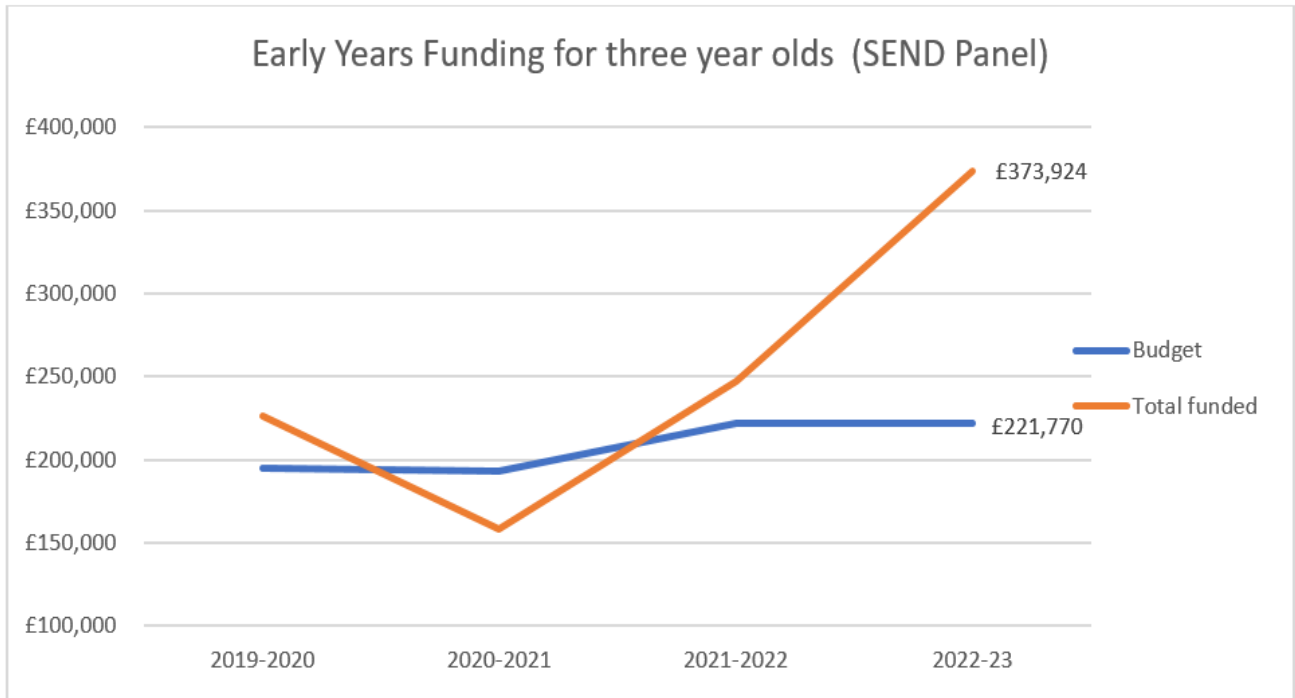
Demand for SEND support

The Luton SEND team has seen a rise in notifications from professionals seeking support for children under five with severe or complex needs who are not in an early years setting since 2019. Notifications can result in specialist provision, assistance to find a setting or support by the Family Service.

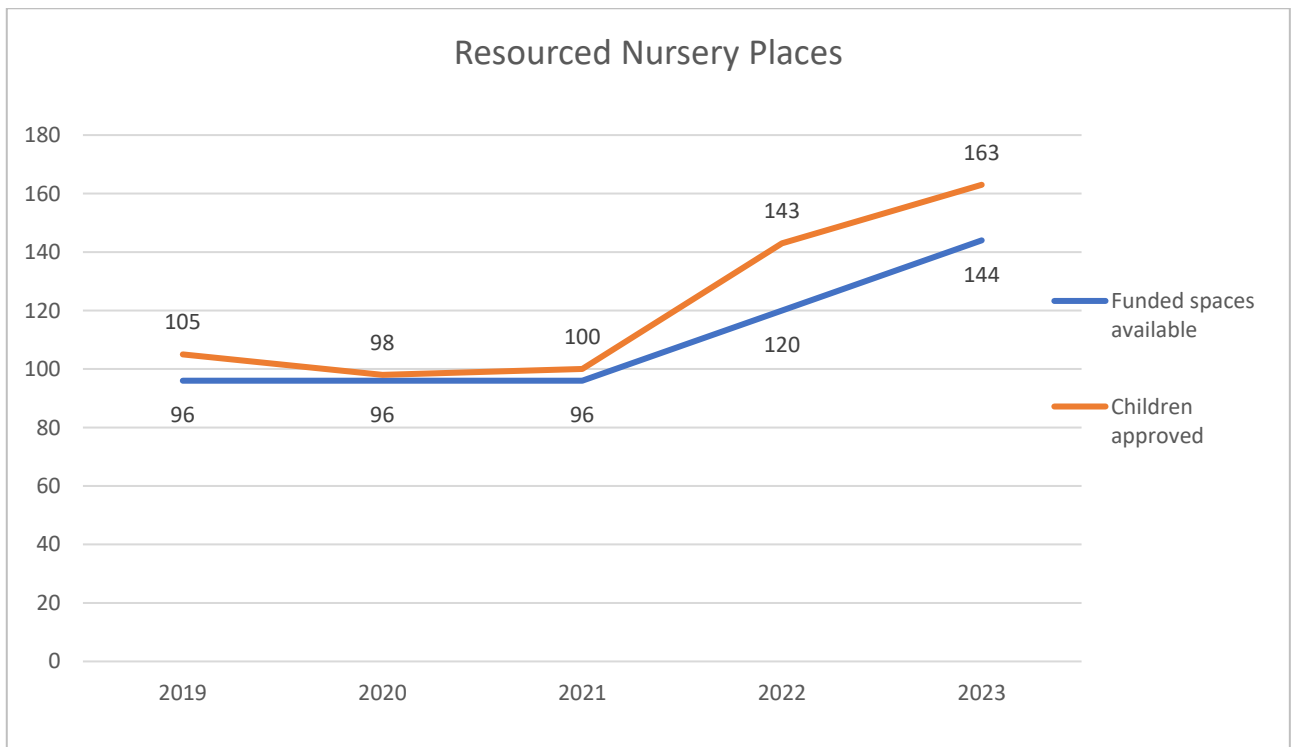
SEND notifications

	Number of families referred to specialist provision	Number of families supported by SENS/Children Centre/ Family service	Total Notifications
2019	24	38	62
2020	30	48	78
2021	36	58	94
2022	35	50	85

The number of approved applications for SEND funding to the Early Years Panel has increased, and demand continues to exceed the allocated budget.



The number of early years children in an approved resourced nursery place has also continued to exceed the number of places available.



Luton Council will continue to work with education, health and care services and families to achieve the best possible outcomes for children, which will include:

- an increase in the number of pre-commissioned special needs places in resourced nurseries and special school nurseries
- a review of existing funding to ensure that children with SEND have their needs met in appropriate provision
- the delivery of training to early years settings to maintain and develop the skills of the workforce
- professional advice and support to early years settings to appropriately meet the needs of pre-school children with SEND
- supporting settings in the development of the child's life skills
- continuing to work with families, ensuring their voice and the voice of the child is heard in matters affecting them

Disability Access Fund

The Disability Access Fund (DAF) helps children with special needs access early years places. The funding available helps providers make reasonable adjustments to their settings, purchase specialist equipment or seek specialist training that helps to meet the child's needs.

Luton Council's Special Educational Needs Service provides advice and support to settings and parents on the funding available and how to apply for DAF. Luton Council provided DAF funding for 42 children during the 2022/23 academic year, a decrease from 53 in the previous year.

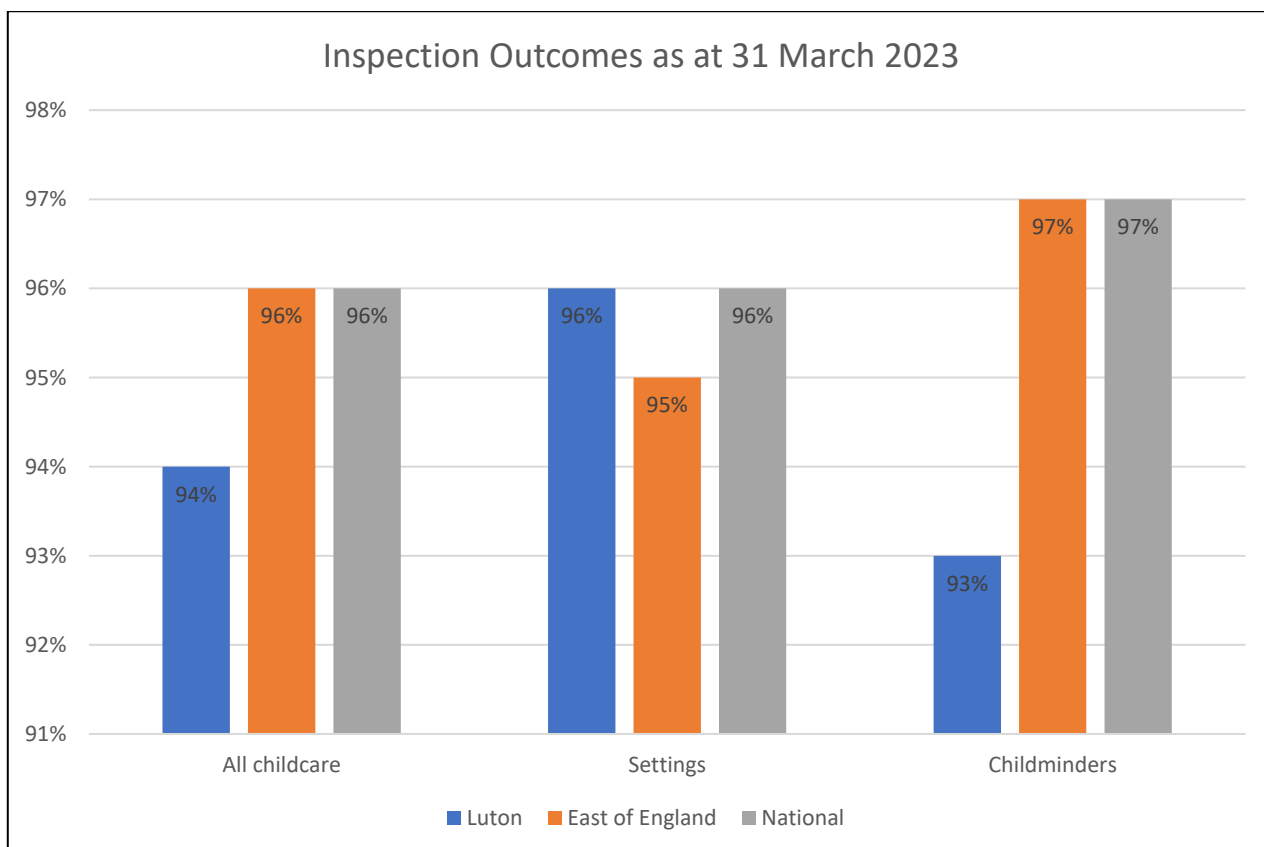
Specialist holiday schemes

Each year the council publishes a Short Break Service Statement that includes information on how to access residential short breaks and also a directory of services for information on groups, clubs and activities for children with special educational needs and disabilities. [The Short Break Service Statement](#) can be found on the council website.

Quality of providers in Luton

Latest published inspection outcomes

94 per cent of Ofsted inspected childcare in Luton was judged to be good or outstanding in March 2023. This is below the national and regional average but is a 2 per cent increase since March 2022.



The six per cent of early years settings offering childcare on non-domestic premises judged at March to be inadequate or requiring improvement represented three providers. The seven per cent of childminders judged as inadequate or requiring improvement represented five childminders.

In accordance with Ofsted regulations an early years provider will be inspected within the first 30 months of their registration, Luton has 29 providers on the early years register that have not yet been inspected.

When the Local Authority is made aware of an early years provider being judged to require improvement or as inadequate by Ofsted, an Early Years Consultant or Childcare Advice and Support Officer will contact the provider to offer support and advice to help them improve practices and meet the required standards.

Luton 2040 vision

Becoming a child friendly town, where our children grow up happy, healthy and secure, with a voice that matters and the opportunities they need to thrive, is one of the strategic priorities of Luton's 2040 vision.

The vision is that Luton will be a healthy, fair and sustainable town, where everyone can thrive and no one has to live in poverty. In order to achieve this it is essential that all Luton's children are given the best start to their education, and this begins with early years.

Luton Council must ensure that it continues to provide sustainable, accessible, affordable and high quality early years education and childcare, sufficient to meet the needs of all parents and carers.

Useful links:

[Statutory guidance for local authorities on the provision of early education and childcare](#)

[Family Information Service](#)

[Luton Directory](#)

[Luton Local Offer](#)

[Reports and surveys childcare in Luton](#)