

Report to: Lead Member for Education and Inclusion, Special Educational Needs and Disability

Date: 23 March 2026

By: Director of Children's Services

Title of report: East Sussex Childcare Sufficiency Assessment 2026

Purpose of report: To approve the publication of the East Sussex Childcare Sufficiency Assessment 2026

RECOMMENDATION:

The Lead Member is recommended to approve the publication of the East Sussex Childcare Sufficiency Assessment 2026.

1. Background

1.1 The Childcare Sufficiency Assessment is a statutory document. It outlines how the Council plans to secure sufficient childcare places as far as is reasonably practicable, for parents who are working, studying, or training for employment. The report covers childcare for children from birth to 14 (or up to 18 for disabled children). The publication of this report meets the Council's Childcare Sufficiency Duty under sections 6 and 7 of the Childcare Act 2006 ("the Act").

1.2 The Act gives Councils a role in shaping the childcare market. The Council is committed to working with providers from the private, voluntary, and independent sectors (PVI) and the school run sector to create a strong, sustainable, and diverse childcare market that meets the needs of families and supports children's learning through the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS).

1.3 Councils are required to secure fully funded places offering 570 hours a year over no fewer than 38 weeks, and up to 52 weeks for every eligible child in their area, until they reach compulsory school age (the beginning of the term following their fifth birthday). Although this is a legal duty, attendance by children from birth to age five at any early education or childcare setting is voluntary. It is not compulsory for a child to attend education provision until the term after their fifth birthday.

1.4 In the Government's Autumn Budget in October 2025 the Chancellor confirmed its commitment to continue to reform early years provision. New Early Years Funding Streams - to provide working families access to funded childcare places for children aged 9 months to two years old - were fully implemented by September 2025:

- From September 2025 eligible working families had access to 30 hours of funded childcare for children aged 9 months+ in line with the offer of extended 30 hours to eligible families of three- and four-year-olds.

1.5 The Council is required to report annually to Members and publish information for families to show how it is meeting its sufficiency duty. This includes providing specific information about the supply and demand for early education and childcare places affordability, accessibility and quality of early education.

2. Childcare Sufficiency Assessment 2026

2.1 The report focuses on two key areas of the childcare market in East Sussex: measuring the demand for, and supply of childcare within the five districts of East Sussex, identifying gaps in the market and planning how to support the childcare market to address any shortfall of childcare places.

2.2 The take up of the 15-hour universal entitlement for three- and four-year-olds has been strong across all areas of the county although there has been a decrease in numbers since 2024. The percentage of children accessing the 15-hour universal entitlement fell from 96.2% to 93.3%. This is still above the national average of 93.1% which also decreased.

2.3 In East Sussex, the number of children taking up some or all of the extended 30-hour working family's entitlement for the summer claim period in 2025 was:

- 3&4-year-olds = 49%
- 2-year-olds = 78%
- Under 2's = 100%

2.4 Despite these encouraging figures, we have seen several early years providers take the difficult decision to close for viability reasons due to low demand for places. The local authority is working with the childcare market to fill any gaps in provision caused by these closures.

2.5 In areas of the County where shortfalls of childcare places have been identified the Council has:

- supported established providers to look at increasing their current capacity
- working with new providers moving into East Sussex to open new provision
- working with schools to apply for Phase 1 and 2 of the DfE's School Based Nursery capital grants to increase early years places available at schools. Four Schools were successful in their bid to the DfE for Phase 1. Two new school nurseries opened in September 2025, one opened in January 2026, and one will open in September 2026.

2.6 Since April 2025 the Council has taken action to support the Early Years sector to work towards the full implementation of working families funding streams for children aged 9 months by:

- Continued dialogue with all childcare providers
- Continued support for families to find/access a funded childcare place
- Collation of headcount data to continue to feed into updating current capacity/demand reporting considering new funding streams and housing developments
- Assessing the impact of changes to the East Sussex early years workforce
- Parental and provider consultations
- Provider support meetings
- Provider consultation/Focus Groups, looking at issues around SEND children's access to early years provision.

3. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

3.1 In conclusion, the Council has a duty to publish a Childcare Sufficiency Assessment annually. The document supports the Council's statutory obligation of on-going assessment of childcare provision for children aged 0-14 years old (and up to 18 years old for children with SEND) in East Sussex.

3.2 Accordingly, the Lead Member for Education and Inclusion, Special Educational Needs and Disability is recommended to approve the publication of the East Sussex Childcare Sufficiency Assessment for 2026.

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LOCAL MEMBERS

All

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

East Sussex Childcare Sufficiency Assessment 2025