



Early Learning and Childcare Delivery Progress Report

April 2026



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Key Messages



- This data collection provides an update on the status of funded ELC delivery in April 2026.
- Data returned by local authorities indicates that approximately 117,089 children were accessing funded ELC in the week commencing 27th April 2026; this represents a 1.7% decrease year-on-year.
- Of these, 97.8% (114,477 children) were reported to be accessing more than 600 funded hours, and 88.4% (103,461 children) were reported to be accessing 1140 funded hours.
- The number of children aged 3 and older (not including deferrals) taking any amount of funded ELC has been relatively stable since April 2021 with a slight year-on-year decrease of 1.5% between April 2025 and April 2026 (1,516 fewer children).
- Local authorities reported a total of 7,610 funded two-year-olds receiving funded ELC in April 2026, including 671 children in receipt of discretionary funded ELC (outlined in more detail in the Methodology section).
- The number of children reported to be accessing an additional year of funded ELC and deferring entry into primary school decreased by 6.2% from April 2025 to April 2026 (a decrease of 565 children) to a total of 8,621. This is the first decrease reported since April 2021. Nevertheless, deferral numbers have increased by 65.7% (+3,418 children) since April 2021. A change in Scottish legislation was piloted (in 2021-22 and 2022-23) and introduced (2023-24) during this period, automatically entitling all children still 4 years old on the first day of the school term to an additional year of funded early learning and childcare if their school entry was deferred.
- The number of settings available to deliver funded hours has decreased since last year with a reduction of 4 local authority settings and 10 private and voluntary partner setting (henceforth referred to as PVI settings) compared to April 2025. However, an additional 9 childminders were reported in April 2026 compared to April 2025. Of the 929 childminders in partnership, 153 were categorised as inactive (meaning they had no children registered to receive funded ELC) during the reference week. This was also the case for 17 local authority settings and 2 PVI settings.

Key Messages



- Of all children accessing funded ELC in Scotland, 68.1% receive all or most of their funded hours with local authority settings, 30.7% with PVI settings and 1.2% with childminders. These proportions have remained relatively stable across the period.
- The total local authority ELC workforce (including central staff) reported in April 2026 was 17,716 FTE, which is approximately 25 FTE higher than in April 2025, representing a 0.1% increase.

Background and Context

The duty on local authorities to secure 1,140 hours of funded early learning and childcare (ELC) for all eligible children has been in effect since August 2021. To provide information on the implementation of this commitment, the Improvement Service (IS) collects and analyses data on the delivery of funded ELC across local authorities. The objective of this data collection is to understand the status of the ELC sector across the country regarding uptake, workforce, and settings in place as of the week commencing the 27th April 2026 and to capture change in uptake and workforce patterns. This report aims to summarise the status of the sector near the end of the academic year as reported by local authorities, comparing this to their reported position from the previous academic year.

Objectives, Methodology and Assumptions

Each collection requests a snapshot of the status of funded ELC delivery in a reference week, in this case commencing on 27th April 2026. Comparison is made with data collected in April 2025, specifically the week commencing 28th April 2025. A complete response was received from every council except for one which provided a partial response not including workforce figures. The last available workforce data from this council from the beginning of the academic year has been used in lieu of updated figures (September 2023). Although the Improvement Service has liaised with individual local authorities to ensure consistency of data returns, it has not undertaken an audit of the data, systems and processes used to capture the data within the 32 local authorities. The data submitted by local authorities is, therefore, presented in good faith without having been audited by the IS.

Local authorities occasionally report minor updates and revisions to historic figures in-between reporting periods. These updates are incorporated into the time-series figures in subsequent reports, which can result in small differences between figures published in this report and earlier reports.

Changes and Clarifications to guidance

Workforce

In its April 2024 data collection, the Improvement Service provided further clarifications on which staff should be counted in some roles and collated other roles. This is the fifth data collection which has used the revised roles. In some councils this resulted in a small shift in full-time equivalent staff between categories, however this had a negligible effect on workforce role proportions nationally. In this report we have mapped historic workforce roles (pre-April 2024) to the newer roles (aggregating some categories). Some historic figures have been adjusted slightly due to local authorities providing corrections. These adjustments have not significantly altered historic workforce figures but result in slight differences in time-series data when comparing with those published in earlier reports.

Data Analysis

Uptake

From the April 2024 data collection onward, the guidance formalises the inclusion of two distinct groups of funded two-year-olds in local authority returns:

1. Statutorily eligible two-year-olds

These are children who meet the national eligibility criteria outlined in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014. These children have a statutory entitlement to funded ELC.

2. Discretionary two-year-olds

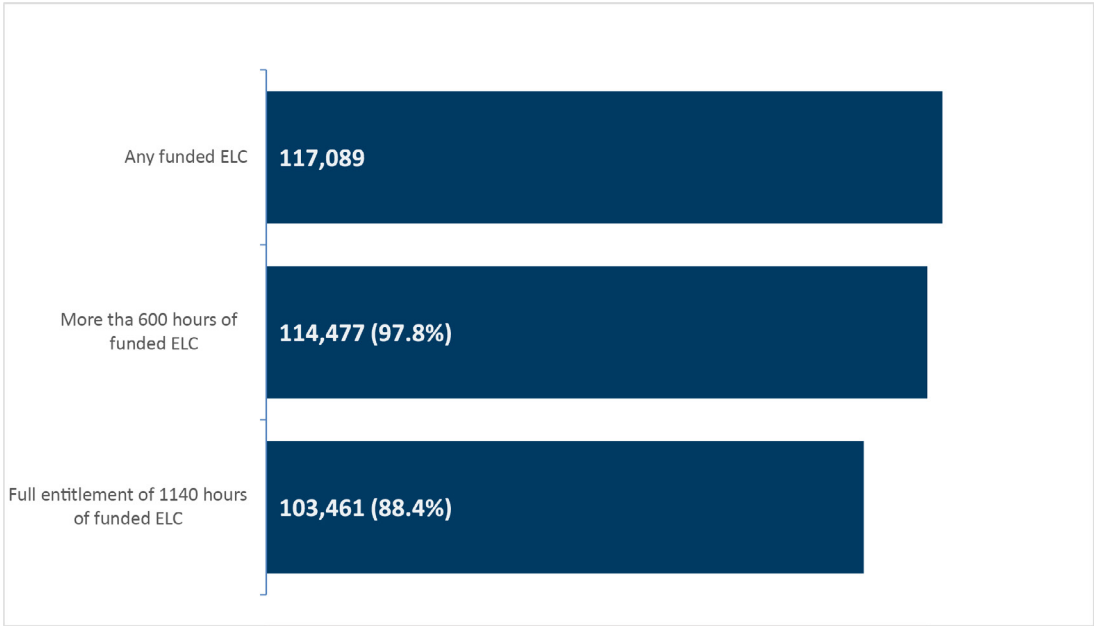
These are children provided with funded ELC as a result of local authorities exercising their discretionary powers under the relevant legislation. Local authorities have the flexibility to extend funded ELC to children who do not meet the national eligibility criteria but are identified as benefiting from funded early learning and childcare based on local priorities and needs. Access to funded ELC for discretionary two-year-olds depends entirely on decisions made by individual local authorities, reflecting their specific contexts and priorities. It is also important to note that some children accessing funded ELC through discretionary places may incidentally meet statutory eligibility criteria, even if this has not been formally verified.

Prior to April 2024, there was inconsistency in how these groups were reported. While some authorities included discretionary two-year-olds in their uptake figures, others did not. The revised guidance ensures that both groups are now explicitly accounted for, improving the accuracy and consistency of reported figures across Scotland.

Uptake

Uptake of funded ELC – all children

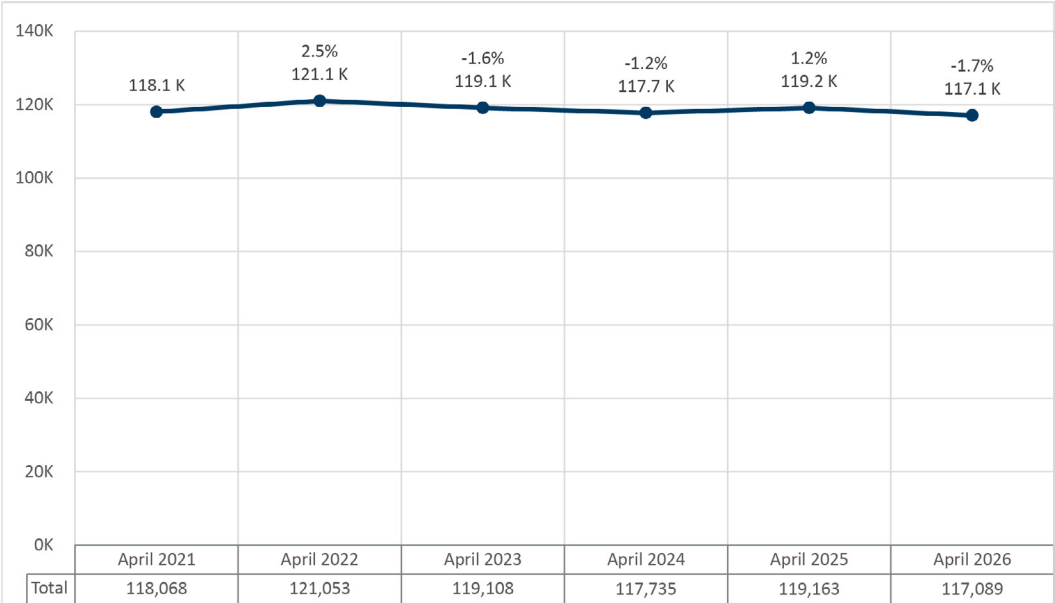
Figure 1: Number of children (any age) accessing funded ELC in April 2026.



The number of children (any age) reported by local authorities to be receiving funded ELC in April 2026 was 117,089. Of these, 97.8% (114,477 children) were reported to be accessing more than 600 funded hours, and 88.4% (103,461 children) were reported to be accessing 1140 funded hours (Figure 1).

The total number of children eligible for funded ELC increases throughout the academic year as more children become eligible. The summer term, starting in March/April, is the last statutory intake period in the academic year, meaning that these uptake figures represent near peak demand for funded ELC in the academic year 2025/26. However, some local authorities have additional intake periods which may result in increases to uptake numbers in the weeks following this data collection exercise.

Figure 2: Change in number of children (any age) in receipt of funded ELC in April from 2021 to 2026.

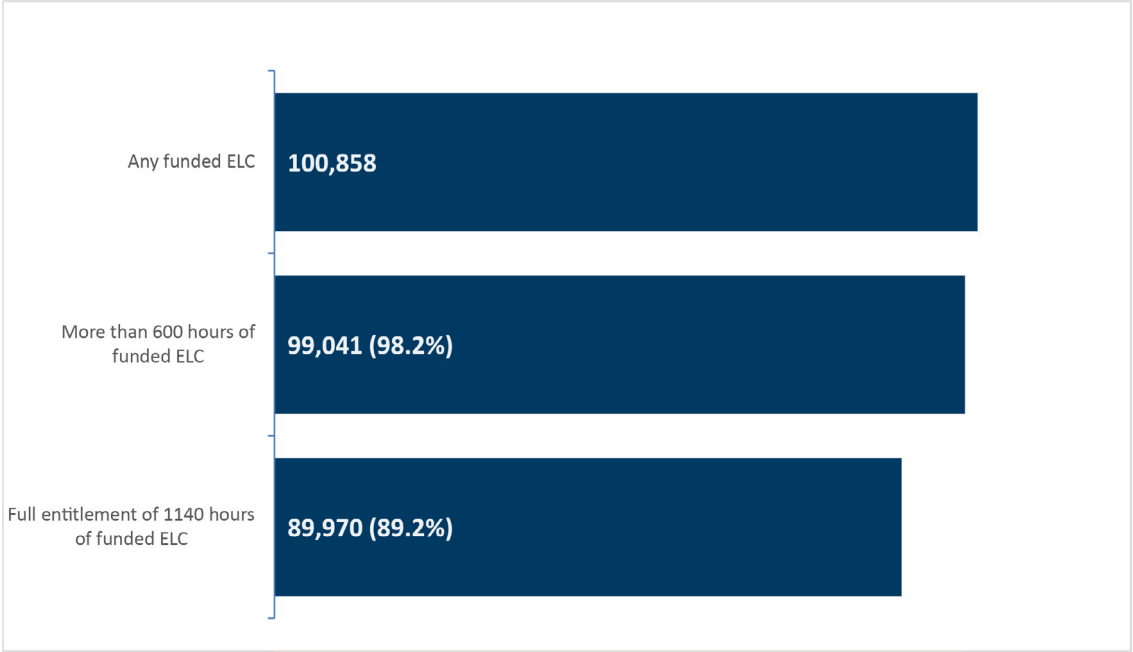


The number of children reported to be accessing any amount of funded ELC in April 2026 is lower than that reported in April 2025. The reported uptake decreased by 1.7%, representing 2,074 fewer children (Figure 2).

Uptake of funded ELC: children 3-years-old and older (not including deferrals)

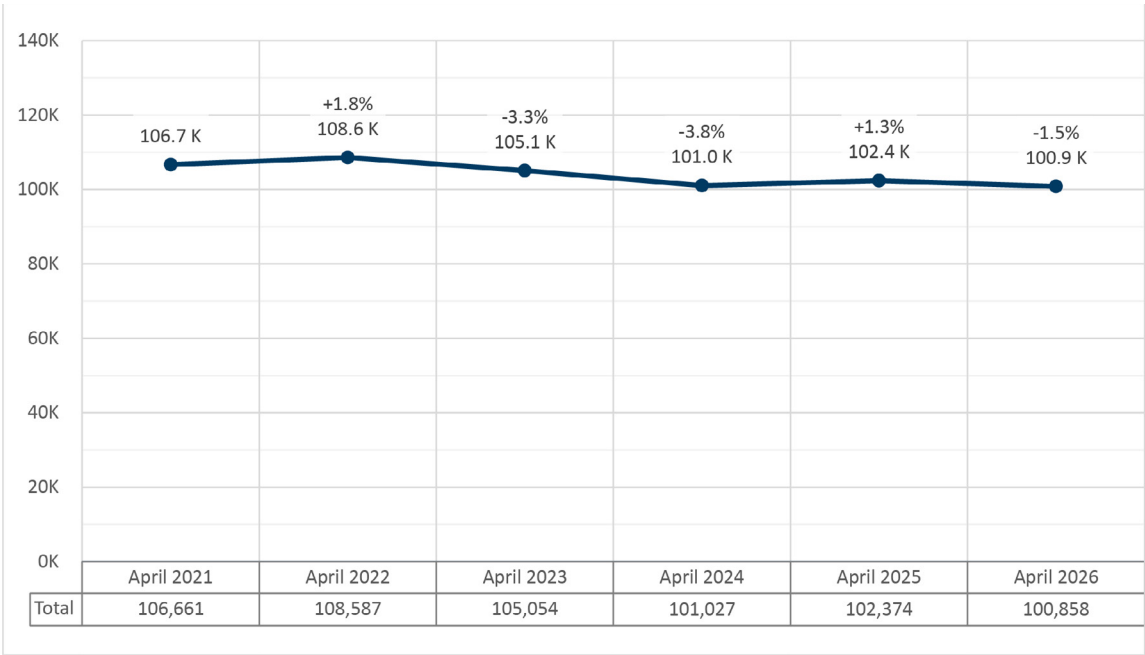
Local authorities reported a total of 100,858 children aged three and older (not including deferrals) were receiving funded ELC in April 2026. Of these, 98.2% (99,041 children) were reported to be accessing more than 600 funded hours, and 89.2% (89,970 children) were reported to be accessing 1140 funded hours (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Number of children aged 3+ (not including deferrals) accessing levels of funded ELC in April 2026.



The number of eligible children aged 3 and older who were accessing funded ELC in April 2026 is lower than the previous year; the number has decreased by 1,516 children since April 2025 representing a 1.5% decrease (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Change in number of children aged 3+ (not including deferrals) in receipt of funded ELC in April from 2021 to 2026.

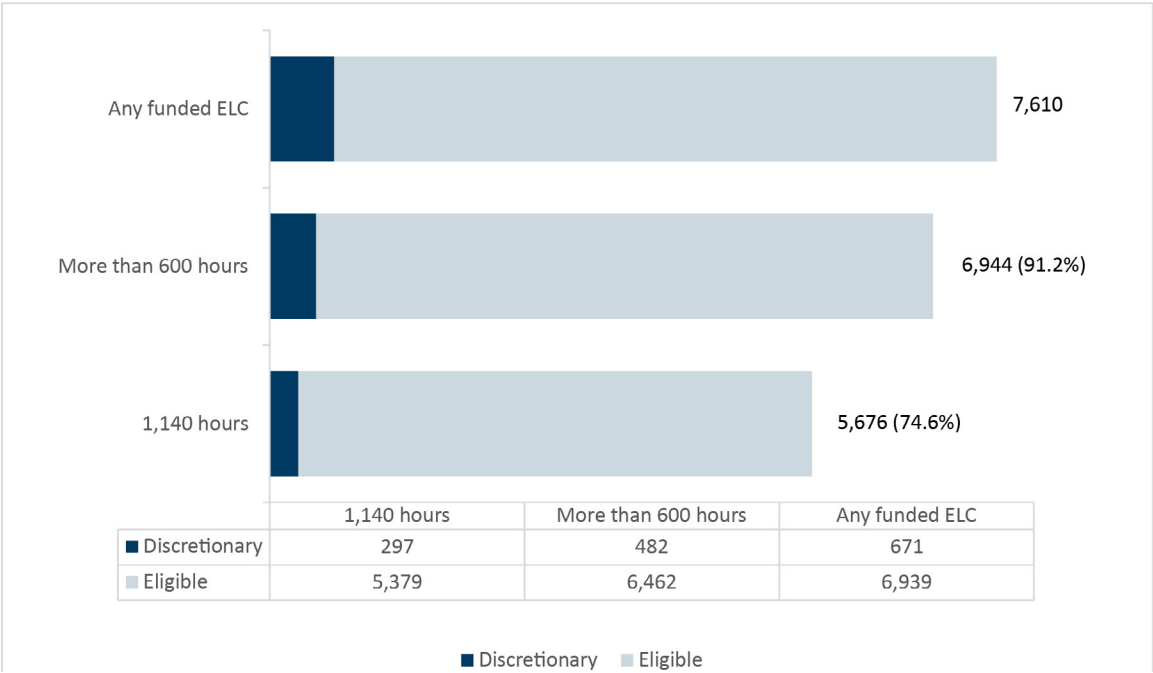


Uptake of funded ELC: 2-year-olds

As highlighted in the Objectives, Methodology, and Assumptions section, this data collection now makes a distinction between 2-year-olds who are receiving funded ELC because they meet eligibility criteria and 2-year-old children who are provided with funded ELC through a local authority’s discretionary powers. There was some inconsistency in the inclusion of the latter in earlier returns.

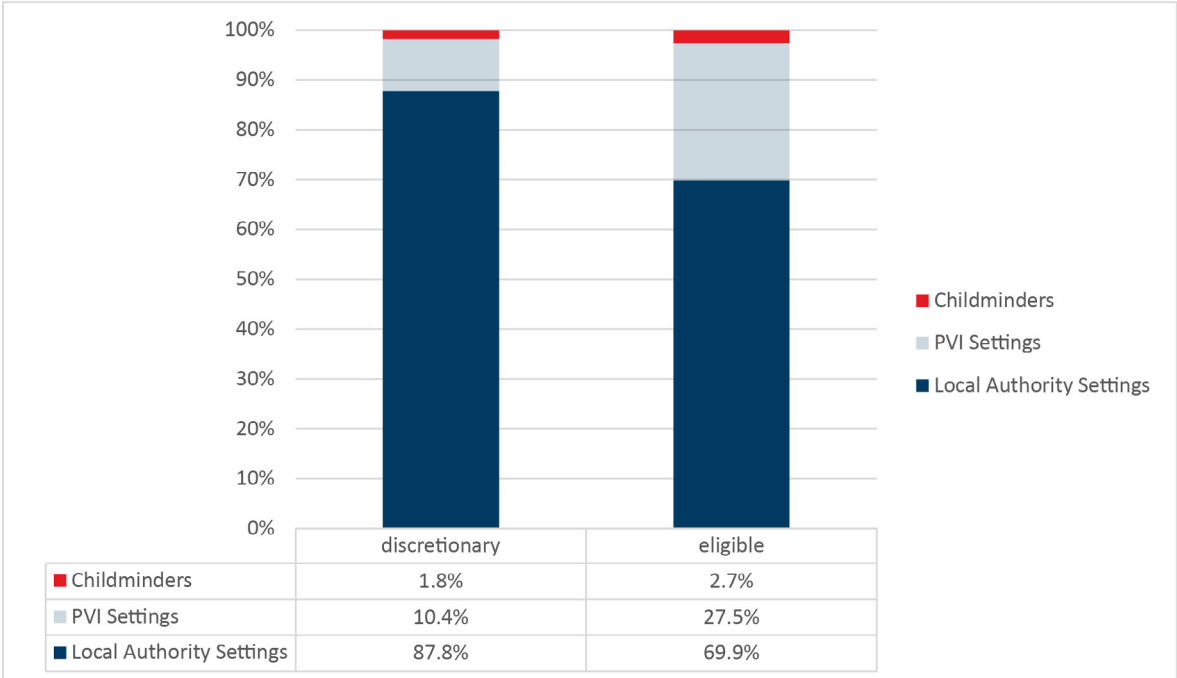
The number of 2-year-olds reported to be receiving funded ELC in April 2026 was 7,610 children (of which 6,939 were categorised as eligible). In total, 91.2% (6,944 children) were reported to be accessing more than 600 funded hours, and 74.6% (5,676 children) were reported to be accessing 1,140 funded hours (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Number of 2-year-olds accessing different levels of funded ELC in April 2026.



Local authorities vary in the number of funded hours of ELC they offer to discretionary 2-year-olds since they are not under a statutory duty to provide any amount of ELC to children who do not meet national eligibility criteria. The inclusion of discretionary 2s in the above figure therefore contributes to a smaller proportion of 2-year-olds accessing 1,140 hours compared to other age groups. The difference in distribution between hour bands used by the two 2-year-old categories are shown below in Figure 6. Among eligible 2-year-olds, 77.5% are accessing 1,140 hours compared to 44.3% of discretionary 2-year-olds as of April 2026.

Figure 6: Proportion of discretionary and eligible 2-year-olds accessing different hour bands of funded ELC.



Eligible and discretionary 2-year-olds also differ in their distribution between the different service types where they receive all or most of their funded hours of ELC (Figure 7). Among children categorised as being in receipt of discretionary places, a higher proportion receive all or most of their funded hours in local authority settings compared to the eligible 2-year-old category; 87.8% compared to 69.9% respectively. Conversely, a higher proportion of eligible 2-year-olds receive all or most of their funded hours with childminders: 2.7% compared with 1.8% among discretionary 2-year-olds.

Figure 7: Variations in service type usage by different categories of funded 2-year-olds.

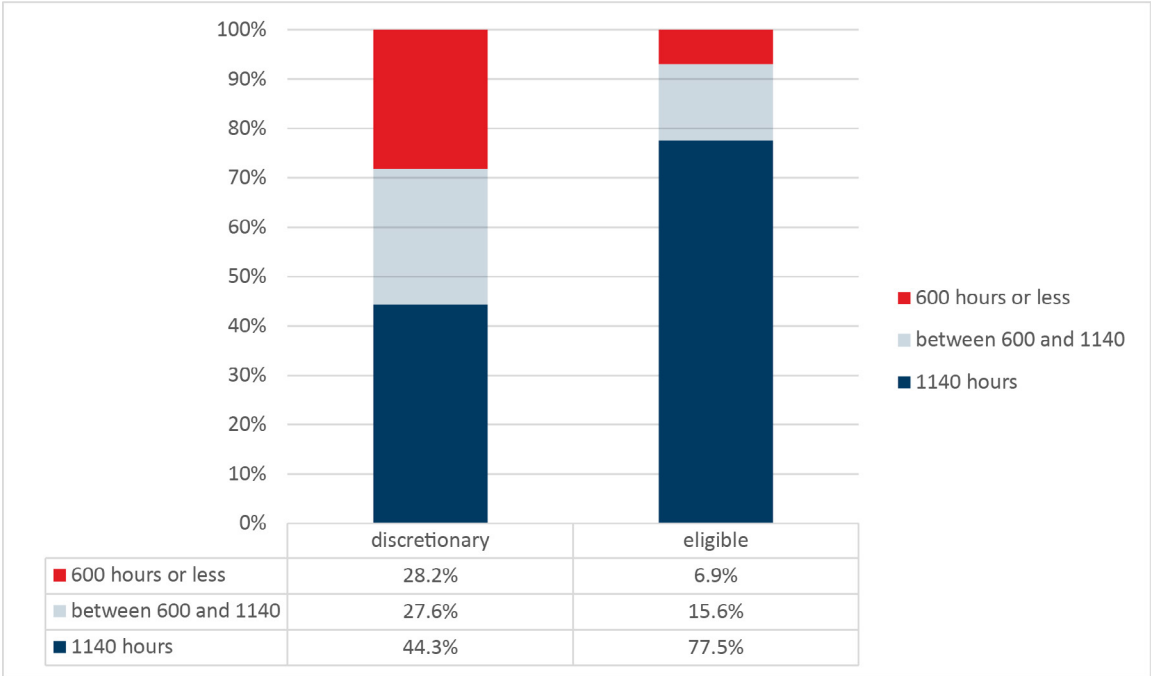
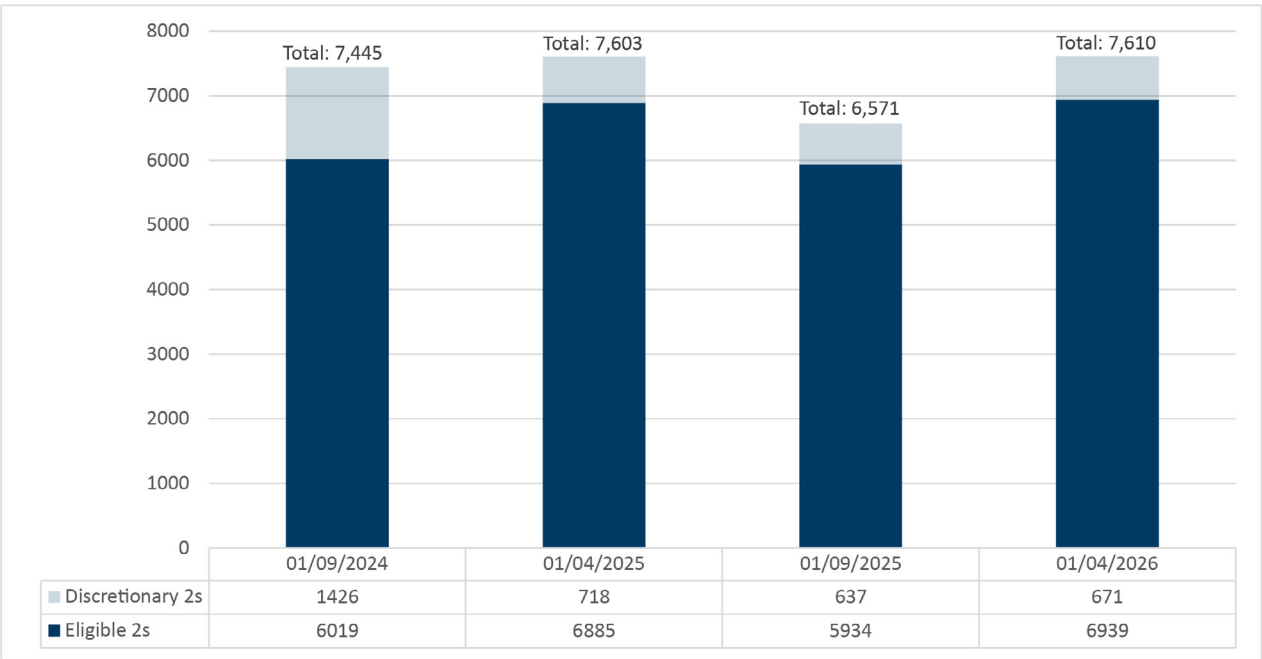


Figure 8 below shows the number of 2-year-olds reported by local authorities in the last four data collections. As previously mentioned, there was inconsistency in the inclusion of discretionary 2-year-olds prior to April 2024 and therefore earlier data is not included.

Figure 8: 2-year-old uptake from September 2024 onwards.

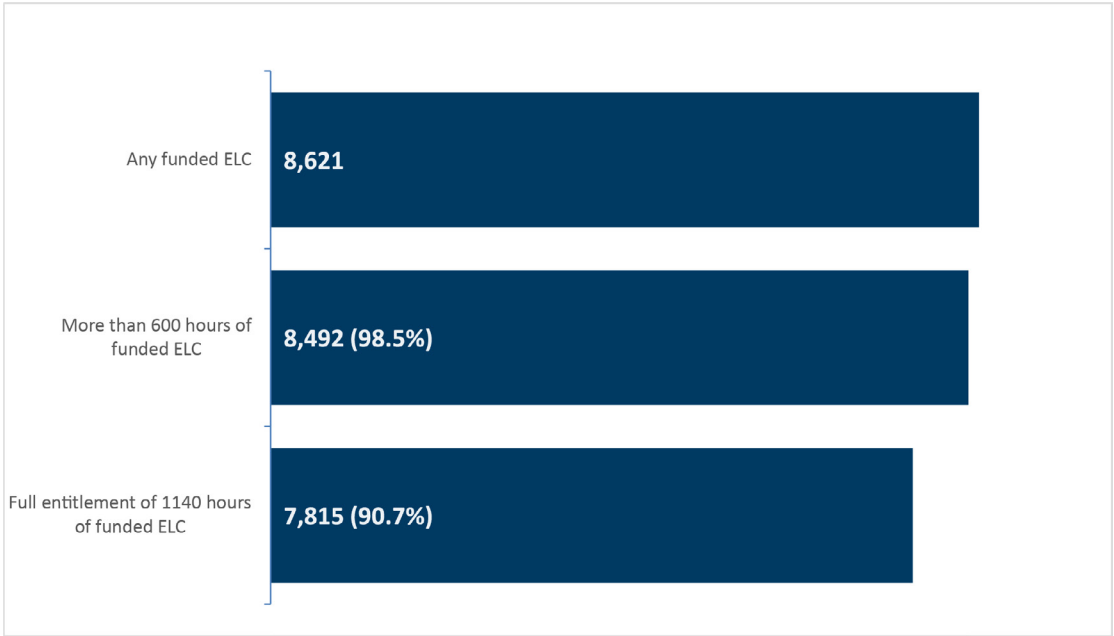


Uptake of funded ELC: children deferring entry to primary school

It is important to understand changes to deferral uptake numbers in context with legislative change which has adjusted eligibility criteria for a funded year of ELC for those deferring entry to primary school. This change in Scottish legislation was introduced in August 2023 and ensured all children whose parents or carers exercised their legal right to defer their child’s entry into primary school (as they had not reached the age of day 5 at the start of the school term) received an additional year of funded ELC. Previously a child was only automatically entitled to funding during their deferral year if they would still be 4 at the end of the calendar year during which they were first eligible to attend school. Some pilot local authorities introduced the expanded entitlement in the academic years 2021-22 and 2022-23 and some local authorities, not included in the pilot, chose to introduce the expanded entitlement in advance of August 2023 to ensure preparedness.

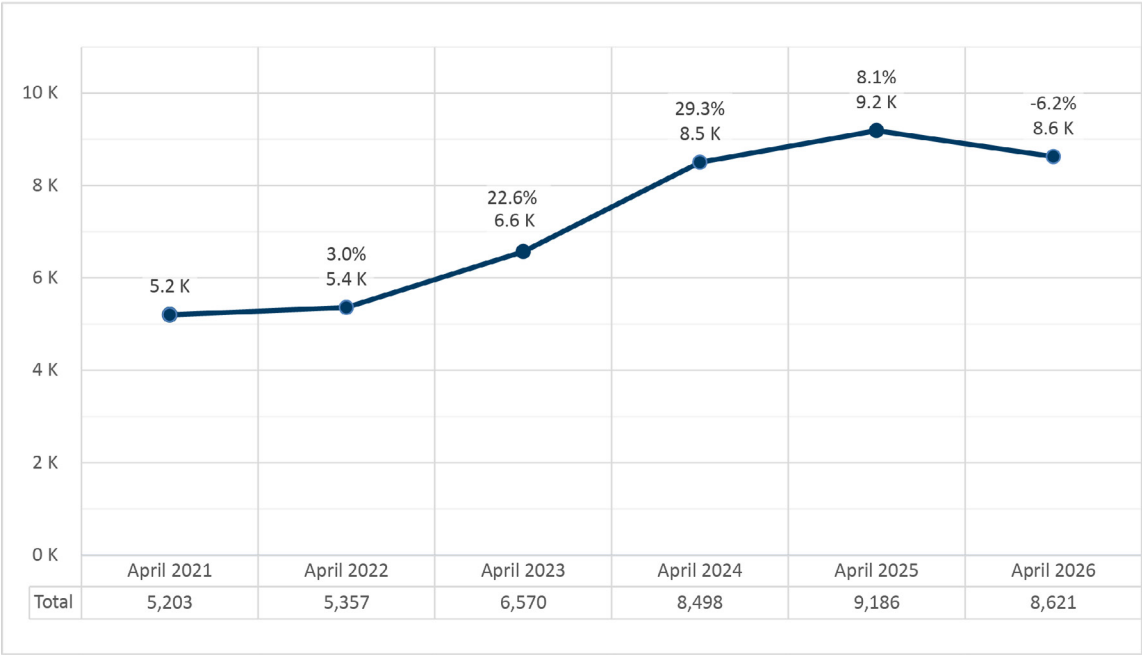
The number of deferring children reported to be receiving funded ELC in April 2026 was 8,621 children. Of these, 98.5% (8,492 children) were reported to be accessing more than 600 funded hours, and 90.7% (7,815 children) were reported to be accessing 1,140 funded hours (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Number of deferrals in receipt of funded ELC in April 2026.



The year-on-year change in the numbers of deferrals accessing funded ELC is shown in Figure 10. A significant increase in deferrals in the academic year 2023/24 was expected due to the change in legislation mentioned. Deferrals increased by 29.3% between April 2023 and April 2024. The significant increase reported in the previous year (22.6% increase between April 2022 and April 2023) was likely due to increases in deferrals in those councils piloting the afore-mentioned expansion. The rate of increase in uptake for this category of children slowed significantly in April 2025 (8.1% year-on-year increase) and now shows a 6.2% decrease in April 2026, representing 565 fewer children than in April 2025. Nevertheless, comparing the latest deferral numbers from April 2026 with uptake in April 2022 (after which the first significant increase was reported) shows a 60.9% increase in deferrals (+3,264 children).

Figure 10: Change in number of deferring children in receipt of funded ELC in April from 2021 to 2026.

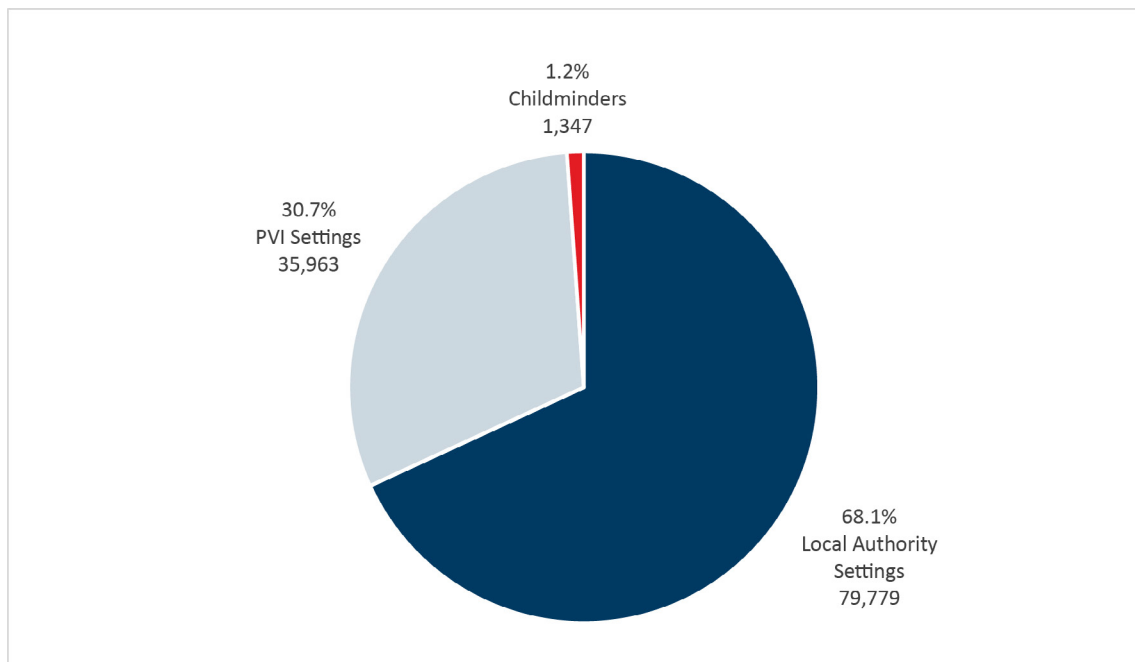


Provision in Local Authority, Private Partner, and Childminder Settings

When capturing the setting type in which children receive their funded ELC, local authorities are asked to record each child once. When a child receives a blended placement, such as spending some funded hours in a Local Authority setting and some with a childminder, local authorities are instructed to count that child in the setting type where most of their hours are spent. As a result, the distribution of children between the service type where they spend most of their funded hours does not reflect the demand for ELC nor the number of registrations for each service type. Figures have been recorded in this way to avoid the double-counting of children who receive blended placements in the overall figures.

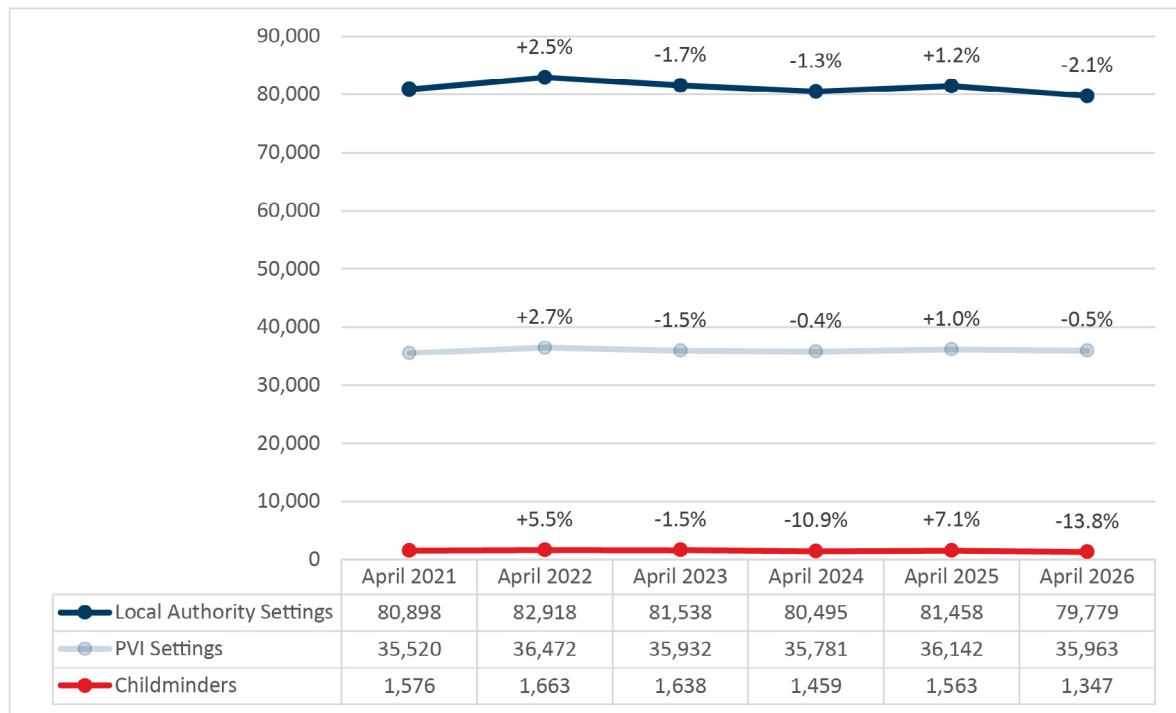
Figure 11 shows that, for April 2026, 30.7% of all children accessing funded ELC were accessing all or most of their funded hours in PVI settings, compared to 68.1% in local authority settings, with the remainder (1.2%) accessing all or most of their hours with childminders.

Figure 11: Distribution of children by the provider type where they receive all or most of their funded hours of ELC.



The proportion of children receiving all or most of their funded hours in each service type has remained relatively stable across the period (see Figure 12).

Figure 12: Change to number of children receiving all or most of their hours in different service types (April 2021 – April 2026).

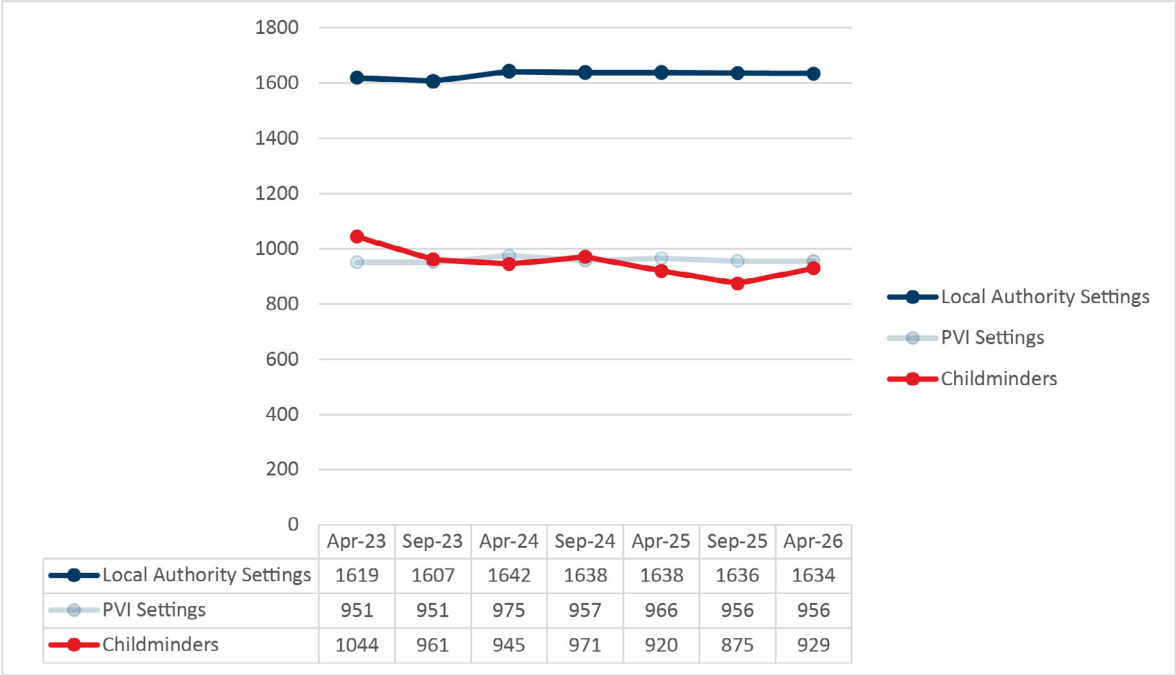


For each service type, a year-on-year decrease in children was reported: 1,679 fewer children (-2.1%) in local authority settings, 179 fewer children (-0.5%) in PVI settings, and 216 fewer children (-13.8%) with childminders. A large proportion – approximately two thirds – continue to receive all or most of their hours in local authority settings.

Number of Settings

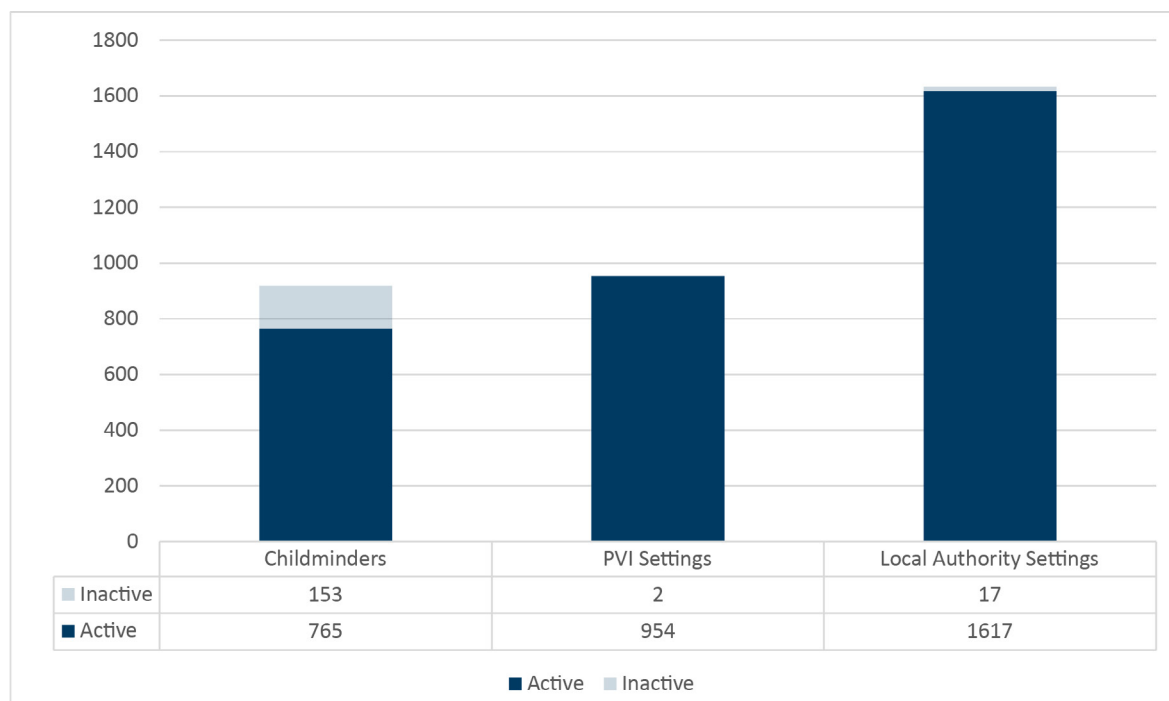
Nationally, there are 4 fewer local authority settings reported in April 2026 compared to April 2025, and 10 fewer PVI settings. Conversely, the number of childminders in partnership to deliver funded hours has increased by 9 in the last year (see Figure 13 below).

Figure 13: Number of settings delivering funded ELC split by setting type for data collections in academic years 2022/23 to 2025/2026.



Since the September 2024 collection, the Improvement Service has asked local authorities to identify those settings which did not have children registered to deliver funded ELC during the reference week despite being in partnership to deliver funded ELC (Figure 14). These ‘inactive’ settings (which are included in the totals in Figure 13) are not closed, are still registered with the Care Inspectorate, and were more commonly identified in rural local authorities. A higher proportion of childminders were identified as inactive (16.7%), although it is important to note that, since childminding services are usually individuals and can provide care to a very wide age range of children beyond 1,140 eligibility, they are more likely to have no children registered in a given week.

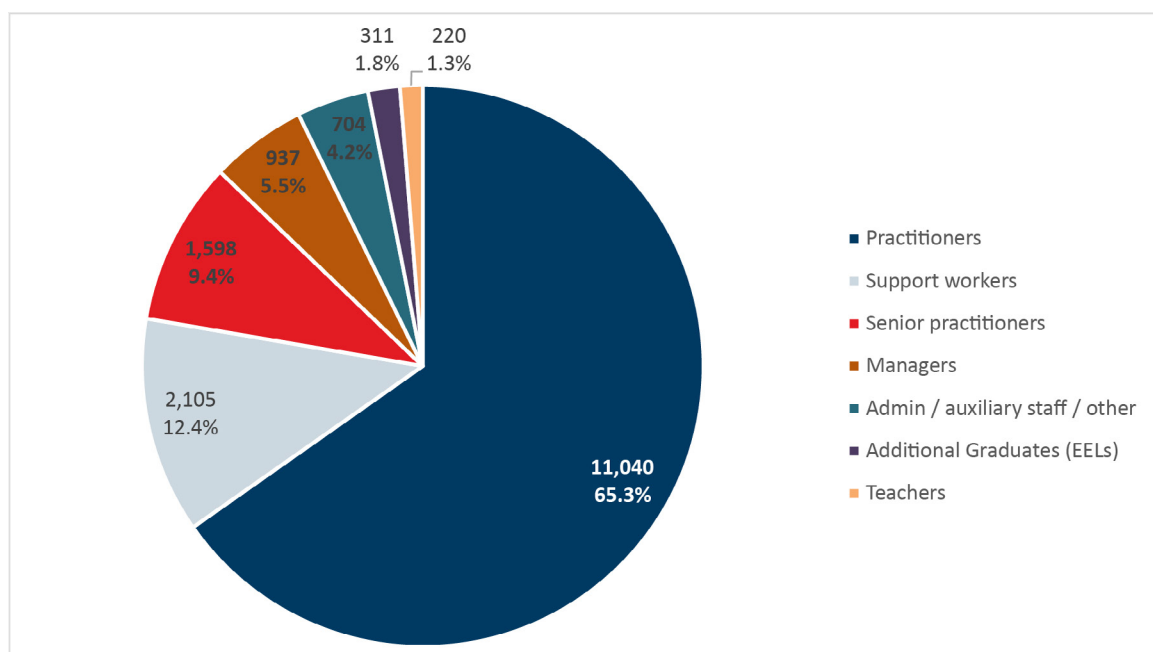
Figure 14: Number of each setting type which were in partnership but not actively delivering funded ELC during the April 2026 reference week.



Local Authority ELC Workforce

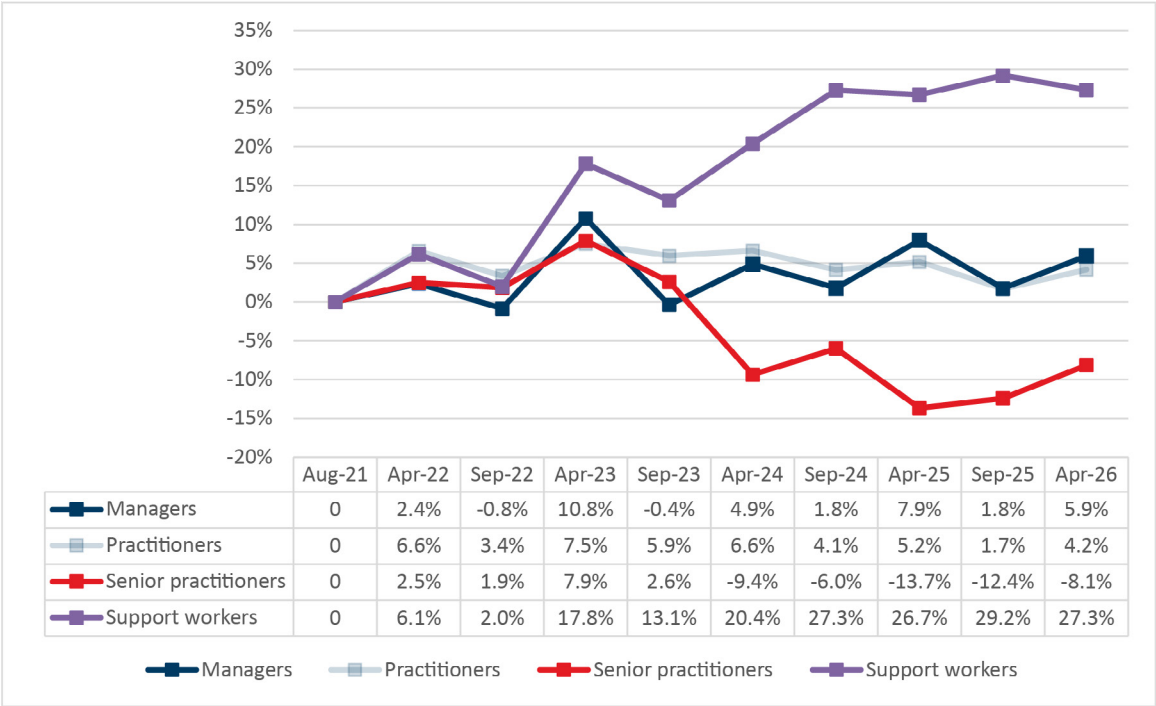
In April 2026, councils reported that the workforce in local authority ELC settings (not including central teams) comprised of 16,916 FTE (full-time equivalent) staff, not including apprentices unless also registered under another Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) registration (e.g., Support Worker). Figure 15 shows the FTE split by role type.

Figure 15: Breakdown of full-time equivalent staff in local authority settings (excluding Apprentices) in April 2026.



By far the biggest role type in the ELC workforce is practitioners, comprising of approximately 11,040 FTE (65.3%). Practitioners are defined in this collection as individuals registered with the SSSC under the practitioner category and are differentiated from senior practitioners (who may be registered with the SSSC as either a practitioner or manager), who have additional responsibilities such as day-to-day supervision or management of other staff, or operational leadership responsibilities. The proportional split between roles has not changed significantly since April 2025. The overall FTE within local authority settings (excluding apprentices) has increased by 0.3% since April 2025.

Figure 16: FTE percentage change with respect to the status in August 2021 for the four largest local authority setting workforce categories.

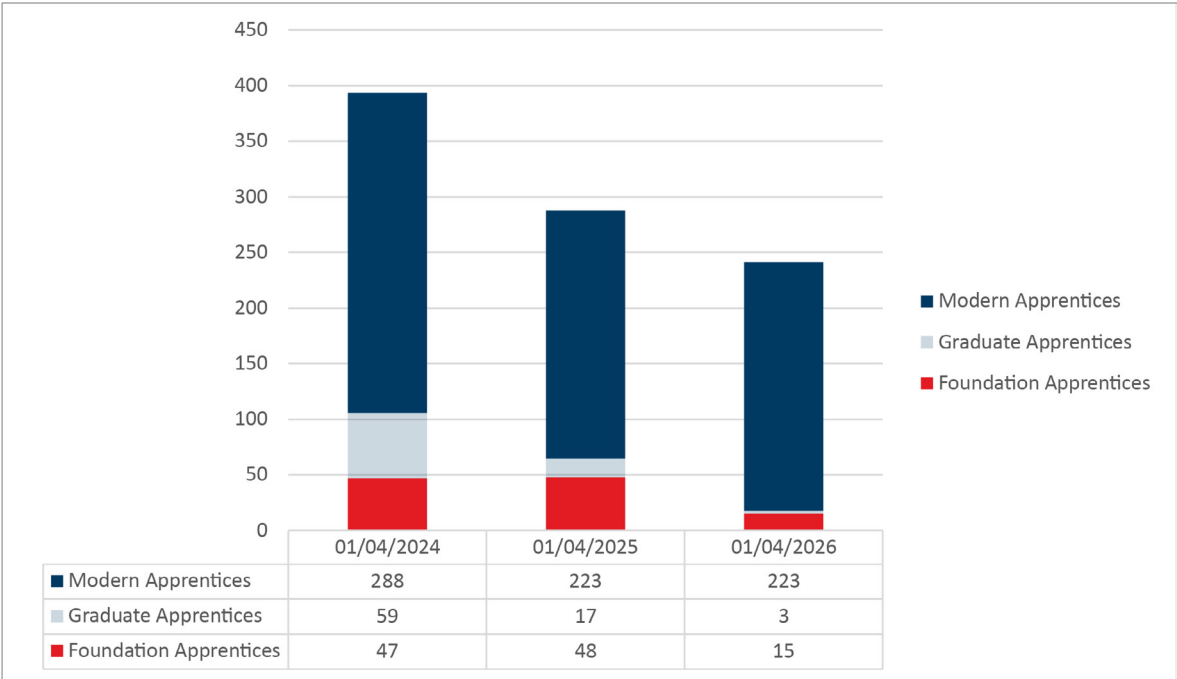


Of the four largest workforce categories in local authority settings, the support worker category has seen the largest relative growth and is now, in April 2026, 27.3% greater than the FTE reported in August 2021 (see Figure 16). Senior practitioner FTE increased for two consecutive years but started decreasing in April 2024 and is now 8.1% lower than in August 2021. Local authorities reported a 4.2% increase in FTE practitioners in April 2026 relative to August 2021. However, FTE was higher in April 2025; local authorities reported a year-on-year decrease of 105 FTE practitioners (0.9%) in April 2026. For managers, local authorities also reported a year-on-year decrease of 18 FTE managers (1.9%) in April 2026; however, this category is now 5.9% higher than in August 2021.

The reported apprentice figures are as shown below in Figure 17. From April 2024, councils were asked to submit the number of apprentices they employed under the three

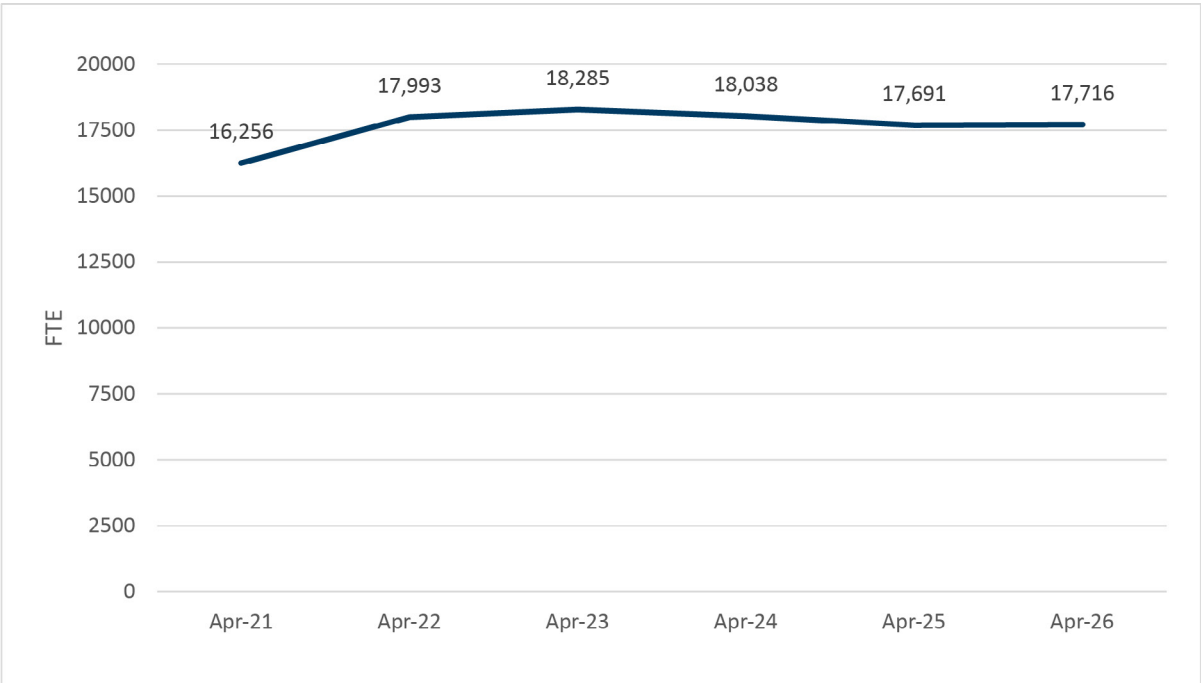
different apprenticeship types. In April 2026, local authorities reported that there were 241 apprentices in place, the largest sub-category being Modern Apprentices (233), followed by Foundation (15), and then Graduate Apprentices (3).

Figure 17: Number of apprentices working in local authority ELC settings in April from 2024 to 2026.



The total ELC workforce (in local authority settings and central teams) is shown below in Figure 18. According to submitted data this stands at 17,716 FTE in April 2026, which is 0.1% higher than in April 2025 (+25 FTE) but 1.8% lower than in April 2024 (-322 FTE).

Figure 18: Total ELC FTE workforce in April from 2021 to 2026.



Summary

Since August 2021, all local authorities have offered 1,140 hours of funded ELC to eligible children, with some extending additional hours at their discretion.

Data reported for the week commencing 27th April 2026 shows that approximately 117,089 children were accessing funded ELC. As in previous collections, the proportion of these who are projected to receive their full 1140-hour entitlement (based on children registered to uptake funded hours of ELC during the collection week) remains high at 88.4% (103,461 children).

The largest eligible group, representing 86.1% of all funded children, was the 3- to 5-year-old category which totalled 100,858; however, this is a 1.5% decrease from the previous year. Deferrals also decreased by 6.2% since April 2025 to 8,621. Deferrals now account for 7.4% of children accessing funded ELC according to the data submitted by local authorities, up from 4.4% in 2021. It should be noted that legislative changes introduced in 2023 expanded the entitlement to an additional year of funded ELC to defer entry to primary education to children who are not yet 5 on the first day of the school year.

Local authorities reported a total of 7,610 funded two-year-olds accessing funded ELC and identified that 671 of these were being offered funded ELC through a local authority's discretionary powers.

The number of settings available to deliver funded hours stands at 2,590 settings and 929 childminders. Local authority settings make up 63% of funded settings (not including childminders) and decreased by 4 in number since last year. There were also 10 fewer PVI settings and an additional 9 childminders compared to April 2025. In this data collection, local authorities are asked to differentiate between settings which are actively delivering funded ELC during the reference week and those which are in partnership but have no children registered to attend at this point – deemed 'inactive'. Of the 929 childminders in partnership, 153 were categorised as inactive. This was also the case for 17 local authority settings and 2 PVI settings.

The local authority full-time equivalent (FTE) workforce, including setting and central staff, reported in April 2026 was 17,716. This is 0.1% higher than the FTE reported in April 2025 (an increase of 25 FTE). Though most role categories have been relatively consistent, there has been an increase in support worker FTE and a decrease in senior practitioner FTE in the last three years.

In summary, the data collected in April 2026 represents a similar picture to April 2025 – with similar uptake, workforce, and setting availability figures overall.

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