It can be normal for a nursery to charge for some things alongside funded hours. But “funded” should not become a vague label that makes it hard to tell what you are paying for. You should be able to see which hours are covered, what any extra charge is for, and whether you can decline optional items.

Before agreeing to a bill, ask for a **written breakdown**. It is much easier to check a fee sheet than to untangle a monthly invoice after the money has gone out. And if an extra charge is optional, the nursery should make that clear rather than presenting it as an unavoidable cost of taking a funded place.



What do funded hours cover?

Funded childcare is government support towards a set number of childcare hours for eligible children. The exact offer and rules depend on where you live in the UK, your child’s age and your circumstances. GOV.UK explains the funded childcare offers in England; parents in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland should check their own government guidance.

In England, a nursery can usually charge separately for things such as meals, nappies, trips or particular activities. It cannot simply charge a fee for the funded hours themselves. A provider should also explain what is included in its offer and what is not. The details can vary between nurseries, so check the contract, fee sheet and invoice rather than relying on the phrase “free hours”.

Funded hours do not necessarily cover every hour your child attends. For example, you might use funded hours for part of the week and pay the nursery’s usual rate for additional hours. Ask how the funded hours are allocated across the week, whether they are stretched over more weeks, and how the nursery calculates any remaining paid hours.

Which extra charges might be reasonable?

Some extras are common, but common does not automatically mean compulsory. A nursery may offer meals, snacks, nappies, sun cream, outings or additional activities. It should identify these charges clearly and explain whether they are optional, what they cost and what happens if you do not choose them.

Ask whether you can provide your own alternatives. For example, can you send lunch, nappies or sun cream from home? Is there a no-cost way for your child to take part in the day if you decline a paid activity? The answer may depend on the item and the provider's arrangements, but you should be able to understand your choices before signing up.



Watch for charges that are described as mandatory but appear to be extras rather than payment for additional childcare. If you are told that a "consumables fee" or daily charge is compulsory, ask the nursery to explain in writing what it covers and whether there is an alternative. A clear answer should let you see the difference between funded care, additional paid hours and optional extras.

Ask for a written breakdown

A useful breakdown separates the bill into understandable parts. It should show how many hours are funded, how many are paid, and the rate for any additional hours. It should also list extras individually, with prices and a note about whether each is optional.

You could email something like this:

"Please could you send me a written breakdown of my child's monthly fees? I'd like to see the funded hours, any additional paid hours and their rates, plus each extra charge. Please also confirm which items are optional, whether I can provide my own alternatives, and how declining an extra affects my child's place."

Keep the reply with your contract and invoices. If the amount changes, you can compare the new bill with the original explanation rather than trying to remember a conversation at the nursery door.

Questions to ask before accepting a place

- How many funded hours will my child receive, and over how many weeks are they spread?
- Which attendance hours are funded and which are charged at the nursery's usual rate?
- Are meals, nappies, trips or other activities charged separately?
- Which charges are optional, and can I provide my own items instead?
- Are there registration, deposit, late collection or holiday charges?
- How much notice is needed to change or cancel an optional service?

Work out the true monthly cost

For budgeting, use the amount you will actually pay—not the *toddleabout.co.uk* headline price or the number of funded hours. Include the routine charges and the small costs that are easy to overlook. My running list of sneaky extras includes meals, nappies, parking, trips, late collection fees and any deposit or renewal cost.

Here is a simple example. Imagine a nursery invoice includes £180 for additional hours, £45 for meals and £20 for nappies. The monthly childcare total is £245, before travel or occasional trips. If you can supply nappies yourself, check whether that really removes the £20 charge and whether doing so creates another cost at home.

Cost to check Example monthly amount Question to ask Additional paid hours £180 How many hours, and what hourly rate? Meals and snacks £45 Can I send food from home? Nappies or consumables £20 Is this optional, and what is included? Travel and parking £30 How often will I need to pay this? Estimated total £275 Allow for occasional costs too.

Do the same check for your wider household budget. Housing costs, such as rent or a mortgage, council tax, utilities and travel to work, affect how much you can safely commit to childcare. For instance, if housing costs are £1,200 a month and the nursery's full monthly cost is £275, those two categories alone come to £1,475 before food, debt payments or other bills. That is why it helps to look at the full household picture, not just the nursery's advertised fee.

Add a contingency for costs that vary, such as extra sessions during a busy week or a price rise at renewal. The right amount depends on your circumstances; the point is to avoid budgeting to the exact penny when one change could leave you short.

Keep emergency money separate from goal savings

Nursery deposits and fee increases can arrive at awkward times. It is tempting to keep all your spare money in one pot, but mixing emergency cash with a planned expense makes it harder to know what is genuinely available.

Use a **separate savings pot** for a named, dated goal. For example, call it "Nursery deposit – September 2027". Work out the target and the time available: **£2,400 in 12 months = £200 a month**. If you have 18 months, the monthly amount would be about £134. Naming and dating the goal turns "we should save for nursery" into a plan you can check.

An **instant-access savings account** can be useful for money you may need quickly, but decide whether it is for emergencies or a specific upcoming bill. If you are saving for a known deposit, keep it distinct from the emergency fund, even if both accounts are easy to access. MoneyHelper has practical information on budgeting and saving, and Money Trumpet also offers budgeting guidance that may help you organise household goals.

Set an emergency fund floor based on essentials

Your emergency fund is for unexpected events: a broken boiler, urgent travel or a sudden loss of income. It should not quietly become the nursery deposit fund, because then an actual emergency may leave you with no buffer.

Start by listing essential monthly outgoings: housing, council tax, basic utilities, food, necessary transport, minimum debt repayments and essential childcare needed to keep working. Decide on an emergency fund floor—the minimum balance you want to protect. The right figure depends on income security, family support, health needs and how quickly you could reduce spending. You might build it gradually, starting with a smaller accessible buffer and increasing it over time.

Check your plan against a bad month before recommending it to yourself. What if the car needs a repair at the same time as a nursery bill rises? What if your pay arrives late, or you need an extra day of care? If paying the planned savings amount would push you below your essential-cost floor, reduce the goal contribution temporarily rather than raiding the emergency fund for a predictable expense.

What if the nursery will not explain the charges?

Stay calm and keep the conversation in writing. Ask the manager to point to the relevant section of the contract or fee policy. If the explanation still does not make sense, contact your local authority's early-years team for guidance on funded childcare arrangements. The rules and routes for raising concerns can vary across the UK, so make clear where you live.

Before accepting a place, compare the full cost with other local options, including any differences in opening hours, meals and holiday arrangements. A lower hourly rate is not necessarily cheaper if it comes with more unavoidable extras or does not cover the hours you need. Equally, a higher quote may include meals or longer sessions. Compare like with like.

The bottom line

Extra charges alongside funded hours can be normal, but they should be clear, properly explained and distinguished from the funded childcare itself. Ask for a written breakdown, check which optional extras you can decline, and calculate the true monthly cost—including meals, nappies, parking, deposits and a sensible contingency.

Then give each saving job its own place: a named and dated goal for known nursery costs, and an emergency fund with a protected floor based on essential spending. That makes it much easier to decide what you can afford, even in a bad month, without treating funded hours as if they automatically mean zero cost.