

POLICY ON DEFERRAL OF SCHOOL STARTING AGE

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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Currently, children in Northern Ireland who turn 4 on or before 1st July start primary school at the beginning of September that year. Children turning 4 between 2nd July and 31st August will not start primary school until the following year when they are 5 years old.
- 1.2 This means children born in April, May and June are the youngest in the school class, starting school a few months after their fourth birthday. These children are sometimes known as Young for Year children.
- 1.3 Northern Ireland is unusual at present internationally in not offering any degree of flexibility in regard to the age at which children start school. In response to this, in Spring 2021, the Department commenced a review to consider the potential to introduce greater flexibility. The review has led to the development of the Department's Policy on Deferral of School Starting Age. The policy aim of this new approach is to permit flexibility in school starting age for the youngest children in the year group born between 1st April and 1st July.
- 1.4 This document sets out the core components of the Department's policy on Deferral of School Starting Age, including the rationale for change and objectives for the new policy. It also explains what the policy proposals mean for children, parents and practitioners. The policy contains a series of key actions that will be reviewed regularly, with progress reported to the Education Minister and published on the DE website.
- 1.5 This policy has been guided and shaped by an engagement exercise, drawing on many informed contributions from key interest groups and stakeholders. Between 9th November 2021 and 4th January 2022, the Department held an eight week public consultation on proposals to permit deferral of school starting age for the youngest children in the year group born between 1st April and 1st July. During the consultation period, 755 responses were received and a copy of the Consultation Report is available at Consultation Report - Deferral of School Starting Age. Evidence from the consultation has informed the final policy document.
- 1.6 This policy is part of a wider suite of Departmental policies which are in place to support and develop all children throughout their time in education. Our aim is to ensure all children have access to high quality education suitable to their individual needs.

2. CURRENT LEGAL POSITION

- 2.1 Parents have a legal duty to educate their children and there is a legal requirement on parents to ensure that any child of compulsory school age receives full-time education. These requirements are set out in Articles 45 and 46 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986.
- 2.2 Currently, children who turn 4 on or before 1st July will reach compulsory school age on 1st August that year. Children turning 4 between 2nd July and 31st August do not reach compulsory school age until the following year when they are 5 years old.
- 2.3 This means the youngest children in the year start primary school aged 4 years and 2 months, whilst the oldest start aged 5 years and almost 2 months. Children born in July, August and September are the oldest in the year group whereas those born in April, May and June are the youngest.
- 2.4 There are, however, some parents¹ who feel that starting school shortly after their fourth birthday is not appropriate for their child's needs. Parents have voiced particular concerns around issues such as social skills, emotional readiness, the longer school day and independence in personal care. Parents of children born prematurely who are also Young for Year have raised particular concerns.
- 2.5 The law states that the parent of every child of compulsory school age shall cause them to receive full-time education suitable to their age, ability, aptitude and to any Special Educational Needs (SEN) they may have, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise.
- 2.6 This means that currently if a parent chooses not to send a child to school when they reach compulsory school age, they have to make their own education arrangements outside the formal school system, for example by home educating. This is a very important legal provision as it ensures that all children of compulsory school age receive full-time education.
- 2.7 The current law also means, however, that if parents do not wish their Young for Year child to start primary school until they are older, they have a duty to ensure the child receives a full-time education outside school. A small number of parents currently decide to home educate for one year in order to defer entry to primary school. For many families, however, home educating is not a realistic or practical option, particularly if both parents are working.

¹ The term parent in this context is taken to mean a parent, guardian or carer.

3. THE CASE FOR CHANGE

The Northern Ireland Education System

- 3.1 Early Years education through Sure Start Programmes, the Pre-School Education Programme and the Foundation Stage of the Northern Ireland Curriculum offer important and stage-appropriate education to support children to achieve their full potential.
- 3.2 The Foundation Stage in primary school (Years 1 and 2) is the beginning of compulsory education. The Foundation Stage aims to provide a smooth transition from pre-school. It recognises that young children come to school from a variety of different backgrounds, having had a range of diverse learning experiences at home and, for most, some form of pre-school education. It recognises that children develop at different speeds and is designed to build on children's earlier learning experiences by providing an appropriate learning programme to develop their dispositions to learn and to provide them with the skills and competencies they will need to succeed in school and in later life.
- 3.3 In the Foundation Stage, children learn through well-planned, challenging play that develops their interests, curiosity and creativity according to their individual age and stage of development. The key principle is that young children learn best when learning is interactive, practical and enjoyable.
- 3.4 Children start school at four and five years old with a whole range of abilities and at different levels of maturity. Teachers are trained to adapt the school day and all activities and learning to meet a range of children's needs, including those who are the youngest children in the year group.
- 3.5 As children progress through the Foundation Stage they are introduced to more formal learning, particularly the development of literacy and numeracy skills, at a pace that takes account of their age and level of development.
- 3.6 The vast majority of children, regardless of their age within the year group, thrive at primary school. We have excellent schools and our education system has many of the features of top performing systems internationally. This includes a highly qualified teaching workforce and a flexible curriculum which allows space for creativity and innovation to meet the needs of individual pupils. The success of our primary education system is evidenced in the consistently excellent performance of our primary pupils in large international studies of maths, science and reading.
- 3.7 A recent report from the Education Policy Institute (EPI) provides comparative insights into the educational outcomes of pupils in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.² The EPI study compares outcomes in reading, vocabulary, language and maths. Pupils in Northern Ireland lead the way among UK nations in most measures of pupil outcomes. Our system works well.

² [EPI_UK-Comparisons-Cognitive-outcomes-1.pdf](#)

3.8 There are, however, some parents³ who feel that starting school shortly after their fourth birthday is not appropriate for their child's needs. Parents have voiced particular concerns around issues such as social skills, emotional readiness, the longer school day and independence in personal care. Parents of children born prematurely who are also Young for Year have raised particular concerns. Parents and a number of interest groups have highlighted that Young for Year children do not, on average, attain as highly as their older counterparts in the class. In response to stakeholder concerns, the Department has closely examined the issue.

What does the research say?

3.9 Research both internationally and in the UK has consistently indicated that, on average, the attainment of younger pupils born later in the academic year is lower than those born at the start of the academic year.⁴ As well as achieving lower test scores and assessments from teachers, children's confidence in their academic ability can also be affected. Young for Year children have been over-represented in the lower bands or learning streams and over-represented in those assessed as having SEN. This is of course an average finding. Children who are younger in the class range across the normal ability spectrum and many have extremely high attainment.

3.10 The gap in attainment between Young for Year children and their peers narrows as they get older. UK research has shown that the difference is most pronounced early in pupils' school lives but it does remain evidenced and statistically significant⁵ in high stakes exams such as GCSEs which are taken at the end of compulsory schooling.⁶

3.11 It is reassuring that the differences observed in educational attainment at the end of compulsory education do not generally lead to widespread differences in adulthood where there are few statistically significant differences in terms of occupation, earnings and self-perceived health and mental health between those adults who were Young for Year and others.⁷

3.12 Literature recognises the potential double disadvantage for a child who is both Young for Year and a premature baby. These children are likely to have been in a younger school year if they had been born at term. Studies indicate that children who are in the latter category face significantly increased developmental risks. The effect of going to school a year earlier than predicted by their due date appears to have measurable consequences into adolescence and is likely to limit adulthood opportunities.⁸

³ The term parent in this context is taken to mean a parent, guardian or carer.

⁴ See for example <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED508563.pdf> which provides a review of research evidence to investigate the issue of relative age in the international context. The review findings are drawn from 18 research studies published from 2000 to 2008 and carried out in Australia, Chile, the United Kingdom and the USA together with further information supplied by international contacts in 13 countries and states. All of the studies found evidence of statistically significant effects for relative age comparing the youngest to the oldest in the year group.

⁵ This means the likelihood of this difference happening by chance is low.

⁶ Some studies suggest this may be an age at test effect rather than an actual differences in educational attainment.

⁷ It should be noted this is not the case for premature children where long-term follow up studies have shown that children born preterm are less likely to go on to higher education or attend university. Preterm children's learning difficulties tend to persist from childhood to adolescence and can impact on their future employment prospects, economic potential, health and wellbeing as an adult.

⁸ <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0155157>

- 3.13 One longitudinal study concluded that extremely preterm children who entered compulsory education an academic year early due to preterm birth had similar academic attainment but required more SEN support. It concluded that adopting admission rules based on corrected age could reduce the number of children needing SEN support.⁹
- 3.14 A recent study concluded that this group's odds of not showing a good level of development were more than three-and-a-half times greater than summer-born preterm children who did not start school a year early due to prematurity.¹⁰ It suggests that the increased likelihood of difficulty may be due to the risk factors around prematurity and being Young for Year converging.
- 3.15 It is important to highlight that whilst the evidence base around educational attainment is relatively clear, assessing the benefits of deferred entry to school for Young for Year children is less so.
- 3.16 We do have very clear evidence that simply starting Year 1 at a later point in the same school year (as happens in a number of Local Authorities in England) is generally **not** in the interests of Young for Year children. Research by the Institute of Fiscal Studies has compared the performance of children who start school across areas of England which operate different admissions systems.¹¹ They found that entry to school later in the same academic year (for example at Halloween or January) does not close the gap in educational attainment between those born at the start and end of the academic year. In fact, on average, those born later in the year benefit slightly from starting school at the *beginning* of the academic year with their older peers, rather than joining them later. This is because the benefit of additional time in school more than outweighs any disadvantage of starting school slightly younger.
- 3.17 An approach where a child joins a younger chronological year group may have more benefits. A number of research studies have shown improvements in self-regulation and reduction in inattention and hyperactivity in younger pupils who deferred school starting age.¹² Research has also shown that an extended period of early childhood play may yield mental health development gains.

Deferral for all Young for Year children born between 1st April and 1st July

- 3.18 In light of the evidence around the attainment of Young for Year Children, the Department has decided to permit deferral of primary school entry for children born between 1st April and 1st July who are currently the youngest in the school year.
- 3.19 The option of offering deferral on parental request for children born 1st April to 1st July recognises the academic evidence around the attainment of Young for Year children and offers flexibility for very young children, including those Young for Year children born prematurely.

⁹ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/19282336/>

¹⁰ <https://adc.bmj.com/content/105/2/160>

¹¹ [Microsoft Word - Month of Birth.docx \(ifs.org.uk\)](#)

¹² <https://cepa.stanford.edu/content/gift-time-school-starting-age-and-mental-health> This study found that children whose birthdays fell on the side of the threshold that delayed their starting school had a dramatically improved capacity for attentiveness, as well as lower levels of hyperactivity.

- 3.20 This approach facilitates parental preference in regard to when the very youngest children start primary education. This is in line with the provisions of Article 44 of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986 that so far as is compatible with the provision of efficient instruction and training and the avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure, children should be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents.
- 3.21 The Department's approach also maintains a maximum variation in age of approximately 15 months within any year group, thereby limiting the age range within the class. Deferred children will not be significantly older than many children in their new year group. This means that intervention and support for children who defer and who also have additional needs or SEN will not be significantly delayed. These children will be a maximum of 5 years and 5 months when they start primary school.

Premature children and other groups who are not Young for Year

- 3.22 The Department is not at this time proposing introducing greater flexibility in school starting age for children born prematurely or other groups of children at risk of under-achievement, such as children with SEN, multiple births or Children Looked After, who are not Young for Year.
- 3.23 This is not an approach that is taken widely internationally, as there is significant difficulty in legally defining and determining which particular groups at risk of lower academic achievement may benefit from deferral and should be eligible. Each group needs to be individually defined. Furthermore, it is an approach with a significant number of risks.
- 3.24 Notably, parents and interest groups have advocated for more flexibility in regard to school starting age for children born prematurely. Not all children born prematurely will have significant developmental delay but it is fully recognised that some children born prematurely have social, emotional, physical and intellectual development behind that of their peers and some children may also have additional health problems.
- 3.25 Evidence suggests that on average, children born preterm have lower levels of academic attainment than children who were born at term. The more preterm a baby is born the greater the likelihood they will have difficulties with learning later in life and the poorer their academic attainment is likely to be. Premature children experience particular difficulties with processing speed, working memory and hand-eye coordination. Premature children are also at risk of experiencing particular difficulties in regard to mathematics throughout their time at school.¹³
- 3.26 Children born preterm are also more likely than children born at term to have SEN. Again, the more preterm a baby is born, the greater the risk they will have SEN later in life. It is a common misconception that children born preterm who have developmental or learning difficulties in the early years will catch up with their peers over time. Research has shown that, on average, preterm children's difficulties tend to persist throughout primary and secondary school and that, as a group, children born preterm are unlikely to catch up with their peers.

¹³ <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/helm/dev/prism/index.html>

- 3.27 Long-term follow up studies have shown that children born preterm are less likely to go on to higher education or attend university. Preterm children's learning difficulties tend to persist from childhood to adolescence and can impact on their future employment prospects, economic potential, and health and wellbeing as an adult. It is clear that children born prematurely frequently need additional support and intervention within the education system. The Department recognises the need to increase awareness, understanding and support across the education system for the particular needs of premature children.
- 3.28 A number of research studies have concluded, however, that delaying school entry did not improve academic attainment for children born prematurely who were not also Young for Year.
- 3.29 For example, a study led by the University of Warwick concluded that children born before 34 weeks gestation have poorer reading and maths skills than those born at full term, and the difficulties they experience at school continue to have effects into adulthood. By the age of 42, adults who were born prematurely have lower incomes and are less likely to own their own home than those born at full term. The study also looked at whether delaying school entry enabled children born prematurely to do better at school but found no evidence to support this. Children who started school a year later did not perform better in teacher ratings of their academic attainment than children who had started at an age appropriate time. In light of this, the researchers recommended that children born prematurely should enter school at an appropriate age but receive additional support.¹⁴
- 3.30 Another recent study found no evidence of age within a given academic year interacting with the preterm risk, and while this was not an analysis of the direct effect of delaying, the authors concluded this lack of a moderating effect may suggest that simply delaying the age of school entry per se may not be the best way to support children born prematurely.¹⁵
- 3.31 The Department notes that the evidence around deferral for premature children, who are also very Young for Year and whose expected date of delivery rather than actual birth date would have been within a younger chronological year group, is somewhat different and suggests deferral may have benefits for these children. These premature and Young for Year children will now automatically be eligible for deferral.
- 3.32 There have also been some requests that deferral should be a choice for children who have English as an additional language. Yet environmental factors such as limited opportunities for learning a language at home can contribute to language delay. Research shows the clear link between attainment and proficiency in English and that extended intensive support is required within school to assist language acquisition for children with English as an Additional Language.¹⁶
- 3.33 The Department aims to ensure that all children receive appropriate support during their early years and those children at greatest risk of poor longer term outcomes with additional

¹⁴ <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/project/the-impact-of-premature-birth-on-maths-achievement-and-schooling>

¹⁵ <https://adc.bmj.com/content/105/2/160>

¹⁶ <https://www.bell-foundation.org.uk/news/blog-new-research-on-eal-learners-shows-the-importance-of-looking-behind-headline-attainment-data/>

needs and/or SEN and/or disabilities receive additional support from the earliest possible opportunity. By contrast, a policy of automatic deferral for certain identified categories of children regardless of their age within the year group could potentially delay identification and support of additional needs or SEN. Pre-school education is non-compulsory, so a parent may choose not to avail of pre-school provision and also defer school entry. Support and intervention could therefore be significantly delayed, with some older children in these categories being 6 years old or approaching 6 before starting school. During the consultation, a number of key stakeholders groups particularly highlighted that early diagnosis and support for any special educational needs for a child is beneficial.

- 3.34 Overall, the evidence does not strongly support the approach of permitted deferral for children who are **not** Young for Year and there are significant potential risks with such an approach, particularly potentially significant delays in support and intervention for older children with additional needs or SEN. The Department is not, therefore, proposing to provide flexibility for these groups at present but will keep the position under review.

4. POLICY FOR SCHOOL STARTING AGE

What are the objectives of the policy?

- 4.1 The Department's policy on Deferral of School Starting Age has four main policy objectives:
- i. To provide flexibility so that children born between 1st April and 1st July will be able to commence primary education in either September following their fourth birthday, or defer entry to primary school until September following their fifth birthday.
 - ii. To ensure that deferred children do not reach the lower limit of compulsory school age until after their fifth birthday, removing the requirement to provide home education in the year before deferred children commence primary school.
 - iii. To change the definition of the upper limit of compulsory school age for those children who choose to defer entry to primary school so that these children will receive 12 years of compulsory education, like all other children.
 - iv. To also permit deferral of pre-school so that parents of children born 1st April to 1st July can choose for them to attend pre-school in the school year following their fourth birthday immediately before commencing primary school. This will mean deferred children have continuity of early years' education.

Key Principles

- 4.2 The Department consulted on a number of key principles which would underpin any new system of increased flexibility in regard to school starting age. There was general support for the principles consulted on. The Department's policy for Deferral of School Starting Age is accordingly based on the six key principles set out below.

Core Principles Underpinning the Department's Policy on Deferral of School Starting Age

- i. Be child-centred and aim to ensure that all children receive education suitable to their individual age, ability and aptitude
- ii. Permit an element of parental preference in regard to school starting age for very young children.
- iii. Ensure that flexibility operates as equitably and fairly as possible for all children – both those who defer and those who do not – across the education system.
- iv. Ensure that provision of flexibility is compatible with the efficient and effective operation of the school system in the interests of all children.
- v. Be easy for parents to understand and access, and avoid unnecessary bureaucracy.
- vi. Ensure all children continue to have the same entitlement to receive 12 years of compulsory education.

Description of DE Policy

4.3 The Department's final policy in regard to School Starting Age may be summarised as follows:

- School Starting Age will remain unchanged for children born 2nd July to 31st March.
- Flexibility in regard to school starting age will be available on parental request to any child born between 1st April and 1st July. This will not involve an educational assessment.
- Deferred children will not reach compulsory school age until 1st September after their 5th birthday. This means that there would be no longer be a legal requirement for parents to provide full-time education prior to a child starting primary school should they choose to defer entry to Year 1.
- Most children born between 1st April and 1st July will continue to start pre-school in September following their 3rd birthday and Year 1 of primary school in September following their 4th birthday.
- However, should they wish to do so, parents of children born between 1st April and 1st July will be able to defer their entry to pre-school and in turn primary school by 12 months. This means they would then start pre-school in September following their 4th birthday and primary school in September following their 5th birthday.
- This approach means children who defer will receive one year of pre-school immediately prior to starting primary school. This provides continuity of Early Years education. It also means that all children, including those whose parents choose to defer, will continue to receive one year of government funded pre-school provision in their immediate pre-school year.
- Parents who wish their child to defer would usually nominate to do so instead of applying for pre-school at the usual time.
- Deferred children will be treated in line with the other members of the school year group below their original school year and will apply for pre-school and Year 1 through the normal admissions process. They will usually remain part of their new year group throughout their time at school.
- A parent of a child born between 1st April and 1st July may also choose to nominate to defer entry to primary school at a later stage – at any point prior to the child commencing Year 1. If, in such circumstances, the child has already held a funded pre-school education place, they will not be prohibited from applying or obtaining a second year of pre-school but when applying for a second year they will not be prioritised for entry as a child in their final pre-school year.
- All children in Northern Ireland currently receive 12 years of compulsory education and are permitted to leave school on 30 June following their 16th birthday. Deferred

children will also receive 12 years of compulsory education and will remain of compulsory school age until the end of the academic year when they turn 17. This means they will not be permitted to leave school at the end of Year 11 mid-way through their qualification courses.

5. DELIVERING CHANGE – KEY ACTIONS

This chapter sets out the actions and interventions that we will take to support the development of our revised policy on Deferral of School Starting Age. The Department is committed to encouraging and supporting a coherent approach to the introduction of Deferral.

Key Action 1: Bring forward Legislation

DE will as a matter of utmost priority bring forward a School Age Bill which will make the necessary legal changes to implement the Department's revised policy on Deferral of School Starting Age.

Key Actions 2-4 will be contingent on approval of the proposed legislation.

Key Action 2: Develop Sustainable Long-Term Delivery Arrangements

Following the passage of legislation, DE will work closely with the Education Authority (EA) to develop revised Admissions Arrangements which permit deferral of both pre-school and primary school for children born 1st April to 1st July.

Parents of children born between 1st April and 1st July who wish to nominate to defer would do so instead of applying for pre-school at the usual time. These children would then be treated as equal members of the school year group one year below their original year group. They will apply for pre-school and subsequently Year 1 through the normal admissions process. Within their new year group, deferred children would be treated as target age children for admission to both pre-school and Year 1.

This approach means deferred children are treated in the same manner as all other children and would in no way be advantaged or disadvantaged within the admissions process for pre-school and primary school. This approach is fair and equitable to all children.

Should legislation receive Royal Assent in the current Assembly Mandate, DE will also ensure interim arrangements are put in place for September 2022.

Key Action 3: Provide Advice, Guidance and Support for Parents

DE will work with CCEA and EA to develop and publish guidance on the option of deferral to provide practical advice and support to parents on the issue.

An awareness raising campaign on the educational evidence around deferral and the nature of the Foundation Stage Curriculum will ensure parents are supported to make informed choices.

This will also be an important opportunity to reach out to parents regarding their important role in supporting their child's education and to provide additional information and resources to parents prior to children commencing pre-school.

The Department will work specifically with the Department of Health to ensure all relevant professionals such as Health Visitors are aware of the option of deferral and the surrounding

education evidence base. The Department will also work with other relevant departments involved in supporting community-based interventions to identify opportunities to communicate key messages to parents who may be less likely to engage with statutory services.

Key Action 4: Develop Effective Monitoring and Evaluation Arrangements

Effective monitoring and evaluation arrangements for the Department's Policy on Deferral of School Starting Age will be put in place. This will inform both evaluation of the effectiveness of the current proposed changes and any need for further intervention.

A detailed independent research study will accompany the proposed changes in order to track the educational outcomes of deferred children and Young for Year children who do not defer. This will provide a robust evidence base informed by the experience of pupils within our education system and will be important in informing future monitoring and review of these arrangements.

The Education and Training Inspectorate will also consider the impact of deferral on both pre-school and Foundation Stage provision as part of the inspection process.