



# **DEFERRING SCHOOL STARTING AGE**

## **OFFICIAL RESPONSE**

**From**



### **Introduction**

The Education Minister proposes to introduce a policy to allow the youngest children in each year group born between 1 April and 1 July to defer starting school and enter Year 1 of primary school one year later by joining a younger school year group. These children are referred to in this document as Young for Year children. Deferral for Young for Year children will be available on parental request and will not involve an educational assessment.

The Department would like to hear your views and feedback on these proposals to inform, shape and improve final policy proposals and changes to the law on this important issue. During the past number of months, the Department has engaged with key interest groups and stakeholders and this has informed the current proposals. This consultation, therefore, forms part of wide ranging and ongoing engagement.

**It is advisable to read the accompanying consultation document prior to completing this questionnaire.**

This consultation is not about changing school starting age more generally. Most children born between 1 April and 1 July will continue to start school at the usual time.

### **Respondent Details**

Please tick the box that best describes you as a respondent:

Pupil	<input type="checkbox"/>	Member of the public	<input type="checkbox"/>
School Leader	<input type="checkbox"/>	Parent / Guardian	<input type="checkbox"/>
Education Body	<input type="checkbox"/>	Trade Union rep	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Other	<input type="checkbox"/>	Teacher	<input type="checkbox"/>

If Other, please specify:

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The Department may make responses available on the website [www.education-ni.gov.uk](http://www.education-ni.gov.uk), although contact names and addresses would be removed.

Please note that under the Freedom of Information Act (2000) (Annex A) your response may be made available, on request, to the public.

If you would prefer your response to remain confidential, please tick this box ☐

**Timescales and Submission of Responses**

This questionnaire can be completed online until 4 January 2022. If you prefer, you can email or post responses to:

[SchoolStartingAge@education-ni.gov.uk](mailto:SchoolStartingAge@education-ni.gov.uk)

or

Flexible School Starting Age Team  
Department of Education  
Rathgael House  
43 Balloo Road  
Rathgill  
BANGOR  
BT19 7PR

**Completing this Questionnaire**

This consultation contains a number of statements and questions. You are asked to indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the statements. There are a series of comment boxes available to provide additional information.

### 1. Flexible Starting Age for Primary School

Currently in Northern Ireland, children who turn 4 on or before 1<sup>st</sup> July will reach compulsory school age at the beginning of September that year. Children turning 4 between 2 July and 31 August do not reach compulsory school age until the following year when they are 5 years old. This means the youngest children in the year group start primary school aged 4 years and 2 months, whilst the oldest start aged 5 years and almost 2 months.

Parents have a legal duty to educate their children and there is a legal requirement to make sure that any child of compulsory school age receives full-time education. This means that if a parent chooses currently **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.

**To what extent do you agree or disagree that there should be more flexibility within the Northern Ireland education system for some children to defer school starting age?**

Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
		✓		

#### **Additional comments.**

There is an almost universal expectation that children will commence compulsory schooling at the first opportunity or else risk losing an entire year of their primary education: perhaps bypassing the reception year altogether. But there is evidence to suggest that summer-born children, those born in July and August in particular could benefit from deferred start. (*Summer Born Report, Pauline M Hull & Michelle T Melson: 2014*).

There may be times when children are ready to enter the education system before the legal minimum age. Equally there may be some who do not appear to be ready, who, when placed in the formal environment with their peers and provided with staff support, make excellent progress.

Research by Warwick University (*Delayed school entry and academic performance: a natural experiment in the Journal of Developmental Medicine and Child Neurology: 2015*) indicates a desire by parents of summer-born children to hold their children back a year, believing they are not mature enough. However, further analysis found that delayed school entry could mean children missing out on learning opportunities “during the critical early years”. This evidence did not present itself until standardised tests were undertaken at age eight.

Of the many points to be considered, the primary focus as rightly identified in the accompanying document, must be on the child. Therefore, whilst it will be those with parental responsibility who make the decision, it must be based on the child's individual needs.

Voice Community are reassured by the following statements from the consultation document that the proposed new arrangements should:

- Be child-centred and aim to ensure that all children receive education suitable to their individual age, ability and aptitude.
- 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.
- Ensure that provision of flexibility is compatible with the efficient and effective operation of the school system **in the interests of all children**.
- Be easy for parents to understand and access and avoid unnecessary bureaucracy.
- Ensure all children continue to have the same entitlement to receive 12 years of compulsory education.

Again, we are reassured that the Department for Education has committed to ensure that at least one year of pre-school education is available even to those who defer as this will help to support the child to make a successful transition from the home into an informal and then formal learning environment.

## **2. Principles – Flexible School Starting Age**

The Department has developed a number of key principles which would underpin any new system of increased flexibility in regard to school starting age. You are invited to comment on the extent to which you agree or disagree with these principles.

**Any system of flexibility in regard to school starting age should:**

<b>Principles</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
a) Be child-centred and aim to ensure that all children receive education suitable to their individual age, ability and aptitude.	✓				
b) Permit an element of parental preference in regard to school starting age for very young children			✓		
c) 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.		✓			
d) Ensure that provision of flexibility is compatible with the efficient and effective operation of the school system in the interests of all children.	✓				
e) Be easy for parents to understand and access and avoid unnecessary bureaucracy.		✓			
f) Ensure all children continue to have the same entitlement to receive 12 years of compulsory education.	✓				

**Additional comments.**

As previously stated, any deferment should focus on a child's individual needs and therefore Voice Community are pleased to see this referenced throughout the consultation document. Whilst we acknowledge that at such a tender age, the decision will be made by those with parental responsibility and therefore will come down to parental 'choice' it is vital that parental preference is not the overriding determining factor here.

In the view of Voice Community, comprehensive pre-school provision, which the department is committed to providing, is in the most able position (alongside parents) to determine the ability of the child and be on hand to arrange learning support where it is deemed necessary and appropriate. As has been documented, just because a child is 'summer born' does not automatically mean they will perform behind their peers, indeed some will outperform those older than themselves and must not be prevented from doing so.

It is vital that the flexibilities proposed here are openly accessible, as much as possible for all children – both those who defer and those who do not – across the education system and this system must not be bureaucratic nor burdensome for parents and carers, schools or authorities to operate, else it risks becoming selective and elitist.

Moreover, the system must guard against potential abuse of the open access process, and in some cases, it may be appropriate to require supporting evidence - based on observations and assessment by education and medical experts, in order to ascertain whether the child's need is social, cognitive or developmental which would determine if delaying the start of primary education would be of benefit. This would also bolster the safeguarding aspects of this proposal and ensure that children remain in safe and appropriate environments.

There will be a number of children whose specific needs cannot be met by the available provision. Existing arrangements already exist to ensure that these children's needs are met through special educational needs provision; however, it is likely that there will be some crossover between the two processes.

### 3. Deferral for Young For Year Children

Currently children born in April, May and June are the youngest in the school class starting school a few months after their 4<sup>th</sup> birthday. These children are often referred to as Young for Year children. The Education Minister proposes to introduce a new policy and changes to the law to allow flexibility in school starting age for the youngest children in the year group born between 1 April and 1 July.

**To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal that deferral should be available on parental request to any Young for Year child born between 1 April and 1 July?**

Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
		✓		

**Additional comments.**

As previously stated, any deferment should focus on a child's individual needs and not be solely about parental 'choice'.

The Department of Education provide for comprehensive pre-school provision which, in most cases, will be suitable for children across the age range. These pre-school settings will also be well placed to provide robust advice, supported with evidence of the appropriateness of progression into school for any child whether they be 'Young for Year' or not, and it may be appropriate to seek the support of pre-school in certain cases.



### 4. Timing of Deferral

Most children in Northern Ireland attend pre-school for one year before starting primary school. Government funds a pre-school place for every child whose family want it, but it is not compulsory for children to attend pre-school.

The Department is proposing that parents of children born between 1 April and 1 July who wish to nominate to defer would normally do so instead of applying for pre-school at the usual time. These children would then delay their entry to pre-school, and subsequently primary school, by 12 months. This means they would start pre-school in September following their 4<sup>th</sup> birthday and primary school in September following their 5<sup>th</sup> birthday.

This approach means children who defer will receive one year of pre-school and then enter Year 1 of primary school in the following year. 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.

**To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposal that in most cases application for deferral should be made at the usual time of applying for pre-school?**

Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
			✓	

### **Additional comments.**

It is important that children have the opportunity to socialise, play and learn from each other from an early age. As mentioned in previous answers, some children may benefit from being in pre-school provision for one year before moving into school, others may benefit from two years in pre-school provision in order to support their learning making them school-ready.

It will also be important to consider, over the longer term, if, how, and when the child will be re-integrated with their peer group. The proposal talks about this never happening but there are significant hurdles to this which will need to be considered and overcome. It is especially pertinent to consider when children would be expected to take statutory tests and public examinations. Similarly, any deferment could also have a significant impact upon school leaving age and the child's subsequent application to FE and continuing education. This could also have wider implications for the benefits system through payment of the Education Maintenance Allowance and Child Benefit.

Therefore, we believe that the option should also be there for children to be enrolled into pre-school with their peer groups and for a decision on deferment to be made later as per the needs of the child.

## **5. Pre-School Provision**

Pre-school education is an important stage of early education with many benefits to long term educational outcomes. The Department is proposing that all children, including those who defer, will continue to be eligible to receive one year of government funded pre-school provision. The Department does not think it is fair or equitable for deferred children to receive two years of pre-school education.

Just as it would be unfair for deferred children to miss out on this valuable provision due to their parents' desire to defer school starting age, the Department's view is that it would also be inappropriate that they were given additional provision compared to other children who do not defer. If this were the case, those children would then receive two years of pre-school provision and be the oldest pupils in the class, while other younger children in the deferred child's new year group would only have been eligible for a single year of pre-school. This has the potential to introduce greater inequity into the education system.

**To what extent do you agree or disagree that children who defer should receive one year of government funded pre-school in the same manner as other children within the year group?**

<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
			✓	

### **Additional comments.**

As previously mentioned, it is important that children have the opportunity to socialise, play and learn from each other from an early age and whilst all children will be entitled to and should benefit from one year before moving into school, others may benefit from two years in pre-school provision in order to support their learning making them school-ready.

Therefore, we believe that the option should be there for children to enrolled into pre-school and that this *could* be a two-year placement where deferment to starting school is made depending on the needs of the child.

**6. Other Options for Flexibility.**

There are a variety of ways flexibility in school starting age could operate. In developing the proposals set out in this consultation, the Department has very carefully considered and discussed with stakeholders a range of options for how flexibility could work. Taking into consideration the benefit and issues of each option, the Department is proposing to take forward changes to allow deferral of school starting age for the youngest children in the year group born between 1 April and 1 July **only**. We would like your views on whether flexibility should also be available in other circumstances.

**In addition to Young for Year children, do you think the option of deferral of school starting age should also be available in the following circumstances?**

	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>
<b>a) Premature children (who are <u>not</u> Young for Year)</b>	✓	
<b>b) Multiple births (who are <u>not</u> Young for Year)</b>	✓	
<b>c) Children Looked After (who are <u>not</u> Young for Year)</b>	✓	
<b>d) In exceptional circumstance for any child in the year group based on an individual assessment of need by appropriate professionals.</b>	✓	
<b>e) Other (Please specify details)</b>	<b>N/A</b>	

**Additional comments.**

As previously stated in questions 2 and 3, any deferment should focus on a child's individual needs, therefore it may be appropriate for children who were born prematurely, as part of a multiple birth, or looked after children - even if they are not Young for Year, to have deferred entry if by doing so, they are afforded greater support to succeed.

Voice Community believe that robust early intervention can make significant differences to a child's prospects, and this is why we are supportive of expanded and high-quality early years' provision. The department provide comprehensive pre-school provision which, in most cases, will be suitable for children across the age range. These pre-school settings are already well placed to provide robust advice to parents and professionals alike, and have the skills and knowledge to support with evidence, the suitability of progression into school for any child whether they be 'Young for Year' or not, and therefore, we believe it may be appropriate to seek the support of pre-school in certain cases.

## 7. Compulsory School Age

Currently, all children in Northern Ireland receive 12 years of compulsory education being permitted to leave school on 30 June following their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. The Department considers it very important that all children should continue to receive the same entitlement to compulsory education and that deferred children do not leave compulsory education prior to completing qualifications at the end of Year 12. The Department would, therefore, intend to amend the law around compulsory school age to ensure deferred children receive 12 years of compulsory education like all other children.

**To what extent do you agree or disagree that the Department should amend the law around compulsory school age to ensure deferred children receive 12 years of compulsory education like all other pupils?**

Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
✓				

### **Additional comments.**

In situations where deferment is granted there must be provision to protect that child moving through the school system. A report into summer-born children entering the classroom (*S. Cassidy: The Independent, 25th February 2015*) details some examples of where this has been delayed and the subsequent problems of integration.

In England, the DfE Admissions Code does not provide protection for deferred entry, expecting children to jump straight into their chronological year group. So, Voice Community is very pleased to note that this is being seriously considered by the Department of Education within these proposals, with the protection being built into legislation.

Without this legislative protection, there risks being wide variation across Education Authorities, and this would have a negative impact in forward planning for class sizes causing capacity issues in pre-schools and primary schools as well as issues with the amount of progress made and achievement throughout the primary phase. There will also be a need to consider how to safeguard the children from discrimination by virtue of physical differences which children can be quick to exploit.

Further, it may be necessary to fund additional support staff to deal with specific needs such as behavioural difficulties which could be exacerbated due to separation from friends outside of school and yet within their peer group.

**8. Additional Comments and Research**

**Please provide any additional comments or evidence on this issue.**

In developing this consultation, the Department has aimed to review and take account of a wide academic evidence base on this issue. We would, however, particularly like stakeholders to highlight any other research findings that they think would be pertinent to development of policy on deferral of school starting age

## **ANNEX A – FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT 2000 – CONFIDENTIALITY OF CONSULTATIONS**

The Department will publish a summary of responses following completion of the consultation process. Your response, and all other responses to the consultation, may be disclosed on request. The Department can only refuse to disclose information in exceptional circumstances. Before you submit your response, please read the paragraphs below on the confidentiality of consultations and they will give you guidance on the legal position about any information given by you in response to this consultation.

The Freedom of Information Act gives the public a right of access to any information held by a public authority, namely, the Department in this case. This right of access to information includes information provided in response to a consultation. The Department cannot automatically consider as confidential information supplied to it in response to a consultation. However, it does have the responsibility to decide whether any information provided by you in response to this consultation, including information about your identity, should be made public or be treated as confidential.

This means that information provided by you in response to the consultation is unlikely to be treated as confidential, except in very particular circumstances. The Lord Chancellor's Code of Practice on the Freedom of Information Act provides that:

- the Department should only accept information from third parties in confidence if it is necessary to obtain that information in connection with the exercise of any of the Department's functions and it would not otherwise be provided;
- the Department should not agree to hold information received from third parties "in confidence" which is not confidential in nature; and
- acceptance by the Department of confidentiality provisions must be for good reasons, capable of being justified to the Information Commissioner

For further information about confidentiality of responses please contact the Information Commissioner's Office (or see website at: <http://www.informationcommissioner.gov.uk/>).