



Tiny Life Guidance Document for Parents on Deferred School Starting Age Consultation: How To Respond

What's Happening?

School starting age in Northern Ireland currently depends on when a child's 4th birthday falls. Children who turn 4 on/before 1st July start school at the beginning of September that same year. Children turning 4 on/after 2nd July start school the following year when they are 5.

The Department of Education is now considering a policy change which would mean 'young for year' children (born 1st April - 1st July) could wait another year before starting school, if their parents/carers think that is best for them. This is called "deferring school starting age".

What does this mean for me and my child?

This is really welcome news for all parents.

Northern Ireland already has one of the earliest school starting ages in Europe. A change in the law would mean that parents of 'young for year' children (born between 1st April and 1st July) would have a say in whether or not you feel your child is ready for school at age 4.

We know school starting age is also a major issue for parents and carers of premature babies, multiple birth siblings, looked after children (foster/adoptive) and children with special educational needs (statemented or not).

Whatever your perspective, it's important that you share it with the Department.

How and when can I have my say?

Your consultation response needs to be received by the Department of Education before 5pm on 4th January 2022 but we're encouraging parents to respond early.

The consultation guidance and questionnaire booklet are available [online](#). You can post or [email](#) your response or choose to complete an [online questionnaire](#).

Whichever format you choose, you will be asked to **identify yourself as a parent** and given the option to provide your name if you want to.

TinyLife have developed a **sample response** which you can tailor to your individual circumstances or perspective.

Making a Response

This guidance document has been created by TinyLife to help explain what you're being asked in the consultation and to share some of the key points we think are important to include in your response.

The Department has its own official **consultation guidance** which you might also want to read.

The Department's **questionnaire booklet** has 8 sections or response categories. Each category has a statement. You are asked to what extent you agree or disagree with it. You can then add more detail into the Additional Comments box to explain your response.

Below, we take you through each section of the questionnaire booklet, using screenshots of the actual questions to show you how we will be responding and to suggest some key points you might want to make in your response.

Providing Respondent Details

- Tick the box to **indicate you are a parent**
- **Provide your name if you wish to**, noting how this will/will not be used
- Tick the box if you wish your response to be **confidential**

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 checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Education Body	<input type="checkbox"/>	Trade Union rep	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other	<input type="checkbox"/>	Teacher	<input type="checkbox"/>

If Other, please specify:

Name: (optional)

Name of School (if applicable):

School Reference Number (if applicable):

The Department may make responses available on the website 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

Section 1: Flexible Starting Age for Primary School

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
X				

Additional comments.

I strongly believe there should be more flexibility within the Northern Ireland education system for some children to defer school starting age.

There needs to be flexibility to ensure that children born prematurely can enter school based on their due date not their birth date.

I worry about the short and long term consequences of my child having to start school before they are developmentally ready.

Section 2. Principles

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

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

Section 2. Principles (continued)

Additional comments.

My child is entitled to an education that is:

- accessible to them,
- appropriate and adaptable to their needs
- acceptable to my parental preference.

The whole system and any changes to it should be child-centred and easy for parents for parents to understand.

The principles should ensure that the rights and needs of my child are met.

Section 3. Deferral for Young for Year Children

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
X				

Additional comments.

I strongly agree that this should be my choice as a parent.

I might not need or want to defer school starting age for my child but I should have that option available to me if I feel my child is not yet ready.

I am a parent of a premature child, born at XX weeks.

My child will/will not qualify as 'young for year'. They may have developmental delays. I want to have a say in what's best for them, including deciding when they are ready to start school.

Section 4. Timing of Deferral

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
				X

Additional comments.

Some parents may wish to defer their child's pre-school place, but others may only realise their child is not ready for school when that child is in pre-school.

I would like reassurance from the department that my child would not be forced to proceed from pre-school to primary school if I didn't think they were ready.

I believe that having no option to defer at the time of applying to primary school would go against all of the principles of this proposal.

Section 5. Pre-school Provision

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?

Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
				X

Section 5. Pre-school Provision (continued)

Additional comments.

My child, and every other child, should receive early years education and support which is appropriate to their needs.

An extra pre-school year for children who need it would help "ensure that all children receive education suitable to their individual age, ability and aptitude."

If I cannot access a second year of nursery for my child I feel that there should be an alternative to help parents of premature babies support their child's development for them to be 'school ready'.

I cannot afford an additional year of childcare and worry that I may have to send my child to school before they are ready. Many parents will face the same dilemma.

This part of the proposal risks totally undermining the benefits of flexible school starting age because we, like other families, simply won't be able to afford to defer and the children with the greatest need for that early support will suffer as a result.

Section 6. Other Options for Flexibility

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?

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

Section 6. Other Options for Flexibility (continued)

Additional comments.



It is hugely important to me as a parent that the option of deferral of school starting age should also be available for:

- Premature babies
- Multiple birth siblings
- Looked after children (foster/adoptive)
- Children with special educational needs (stated or not)

I believe the parent's voice should be given full weight in these decisions.

No part of the process should disadvantage any parent by asking them to provide evidence to professionals.

Section 7. Compulsory School Age

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
			X	

Additional comments.

I agree that my child, and all children, are entitled to 12 years of education, even if their school starting age is deferred.

However, I wouldn't want any changes to this law to delay the introduction of deferred school starting age for my child.

Section 8. Additional Comments/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

Please put any personal stories or other thoughts you may have in this section.

This is your chance to have your say!

If you are the parent of a premature baby, you might also want to include some of the following points in this final section:

- Children born premature develop according to their due date, not their birth date
- Children with developmental delay or learning difficulties can have these problems compounded when they are up to 2 years developmentally younger than their classroom peers
- For some children, this can also lead to a gap in attainment in later years
- Research is showing us that deferring school entry for premature children can help address these issues and may be beneficial in reducing the need for extra supports (Odd et al, 2013; Johnson et al, 2009).

Finally... send in your response!

Remember, your consultation response needs to be received by the Department of Education before **5pm on 4th January 2022**

Download the questionnaire booklet [here](#) or complete an online questionnaire [here](#).

You can **email** your response to SchoolStartingAge@education-ni.gov.uk or you can **post** your response to the address below:

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

Thank you!