

**DEFERRING SCHOOL STARTING AGE**

**CONSULTATION QUESTIONS BOOKLET**

**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  Member of the public

School Leader  Parent / Guardian

Education Body  Trade Union rep

Other  Teacher

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](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

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 1st 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** |
| **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. |

1. **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:**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Principles** | **Strongly agree** | **Agree** | **Neither agree nor disagree** | **Disagree** | **Strongly disagree** |
| 1. Be child-centred and aim to ensure that all children receive education suitable to their individual age, ability and aptitude. | **X** |  |  |  |  |
| 1. Permit an element of parental preference in regard to school starting age for very young children | **X** |  |  |  |  |
| 1. 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** |  |  |  |  |
| 1. Ensure that provision of flexibility is compatible with the efficient and effective operation of the school system in the interests of all children. | **X** |  |  |  |  |
| 1. Be easy for parents to understand and access and avoid unnecessary bureaucracy. | **X** |  |  |  |  |
| 1. Ensure all children continue to have the same entitlement to receive 12 years of compulsory education. | **X** |  |  |  |  |

**Additional comments.**

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| --- |
| 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. |

1. **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 4th 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** |
| **X** |  |  |  |  |

**Additional comments.**

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| 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. |

1. **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 4th birthday and primary school in September following their 5th 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** |
|  |  |  |  | **X** |

**Additional comments.**

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| --- |
| 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. |

1. **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?**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Strongly agree** | **Agree** | **Neither agree nor disagree** | **Disagree** | **Strongly disagree** |
|  |  |  |  | **X** |

**Additional comments.**

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| --- |
| 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. |

1. **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 staring age should also be available in the following circumstances?**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Agree** | **Disagree** |
| 1. **Premature children (who are not Young for Year)** | **X** |  |
| 1. **Multiple births (who are not Young for Year)** | **X** |  |
| 1. **Children Looked After (who are not Young for Year)** | **X** |  |
| 1. **In exceptional circumstance for any child in the year group based on an individual assessment of need by appropriate professionals.** | **X** |  |
| 1. **Other (Please specify details)** | **X** |  |

**Additional comments.**

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| --- |
| It is hugely important to me as a parent that the option of deferral of school staring age should also be available for:   * Premature babies * Multiple birth siblings * Looked after children (foster/adoptive) * Children with special educational needs (statemented 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. |

1. **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 16th 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** |
|  |  |  | **X** |  |

**Additional comments.**

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| --- |
| 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. |

1. **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

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| Please put any personal stories or other thoughts you may have in this section.  This is your chance to have your say! |

**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/>).