

SCHOOL START FLEXIBILITY NI

School starting age flexibility: why the NI Executive needs to act

What's our case in brief?

Northern Ireland is the only country in the world where children are required to start formal schooling at the age of 4.¹ In most countries, including the Republic of Ireland, children are not required to start school until the age of 6 or 7. **Every year, in Northern Ireland, many children start school before they are ready, and there's evidence that this premature start impacts negatively on their self-confidence and educational attainment.**

School start flexibility is an example of exactly the kind of common sense, 'win win' policy which the Northern Ireland Executive should be delivering for families. The Republic of Ireland, Scotland and England all have a more flexible approach to a child's school start than is the case in Northern Ireland.

We want fair and equal access to school starting age flexibility, similar to the system which operates in Scotland, which consists of the following:

1. ***Automatic* deferral should be available, on request, in *limited* circumstances** to children who fall into certain, defined categories, where their parents feel they could benefit
2. ***Discretionary* deferral should be available in *exceptional* circumstances** to other children who do not fall into any of the defined categories, but who, in the opinion of a panel of suitable experts, would benefit from a 12-month deferral of their school enrolment

We believe that such a system could **save money in the short term and is likely to improve academic outcomes.** Most importantly, **it would transform the lives of thousands of individual children, enabling them to start school feeling secure and confident, and to leave school having reached their true academic potential.**

But aren't P1 and P2 play-based anyway?

The Department has previously argued that deferral should only be allowed in 'exceptional circumstances' because the Foundation Stage (P1 and P2) provide a "smooth transition" from a pre-school environment, "uses play as a context for learning" and "provides an environment which best suits the needs of young children".² **But that's not how many parents see it.**

We carried out an online survey, promoted on its Facebook page by the family magazine and website, ni4kids. Of the 401 individuals who responded, nearly all with recent experience of P1 and/or P2:

- three-quarters (76%) did not feel that most of the activities in P1 were based around play throughout the year, with **nearly two-fifths (38%) saying there was an academic focus after the first few weeks or from the start**
- **nearly two-thirds (62%) thought that P1 was “quite different” or “very different” from a pre-school setting**
- of those with recent P2 experience, **84% felt there was an academic focus from the beginning or within the few first few weeks in P2**

Although some of the respondents clearly approved of a lack of focus on play, many felt their children were losing out as a result:

- “Nursery was all play the layout everything [in] p1 is more structured and all about drilling in to them how to sit listen speak only when your hands raised etc”
- “P1 is much more structured. Play is integrated throughout all of the nursery session. Play within P1 is separate.”
- “My son is June birthday and 2nd youngest in his year - he is 5 now [in P2]. Homework sometimes takes him up to 2 hours a night (then we give up!) at which stage he is exhausted and we are both nearly crying with frustration.”
- “My youngest child this year has repeated P1. Throughout her time at nursery I was very keen for her to repeat her pre school year as she simply was not ready to start school. This was not allowed.”
- “In nursery the toilets tend to be very close and easily accessible. My daughter couldn't push the door into the girls' toilets when she was in P1 and had to wait for another child to come along.”

What's the evidence that some children lose out?

There's plenty of evidence that some children in those groups lose out under the current system. In Northern Ireland, there's evidence that the youngest for year children are more likely to be referred to the Educational Psychology Service (EPS) and less likely to do well academically, even right up to GCSE level:

- data supplied to us by the Education Authority shows that **the youngest for year children with May and June births are 18% more likely than average to be referred to the EPS, and 30% more likely to be referred than their oldest for year counterparts with July and August birthdays**³

- one large study found that **children with May and June birthdays were at a double disadvantage in terms of the development of core literacy skills in the early primary school years** as they suffered from the observed negative impact of being both summer born and relatively young for their year.⁴ **Children with May and June birthdays also had lower levels of literacy attainment at age 14 and in GSCE English Language examinations.**

While the school starting age in England is five, many children have to commence school at four. Similar patterns have been seen in England. A large study which investigated differences between the youngest for year and oldest for year children in England found:

- **a significant difference in the academic performance, at age seven, of the youngest for year August birth children, and their oldest for year September-birth counterparts.**⁵
- although the scale of the difference in academic performance decreased over time, it remained significant at age 16, with **the youngest for year less likely to achieve the minimum GCSE performance generally required to continue in post-compulsory education** (five GCSEs at grade C or above).⁶
- **young for year children, when assessed at the same age (as opposed to point in time) tended to have lower self-esteem than their oldest for year counterparts at age 8, and to show less social and emotional development relative to their older peers at age 7 than at 5.**⁷

We acknowledge that **differences in academic performance between the youngest for year and their older counterparts are common throughout the world.** However, **there is some evidence that they do not persist for as long as they do in England and appear to do in Northern Ireland.**

Crawford et al. cite a United States study which found that differences in academic attainment seen at a younger age had disappeared by around the age of 12 – 14.⁸ They postulate that this may be due to the fact that **parents have the option of delaying a child's school entry in the United States.** We would add that **the school starting age is also higher in the US, as in much of the world.**

There is also evidence that premature birth and multiple birth children lose out when children start school at four:

- one longitudinal study of pre-term infants concluded that **adopting admission rules based on corrected age could reduce the number of children needing special educational needs (SEN) support.**⁹
- Huddy et al have shown **even late pre-term children (32-36 weeks) can benefit from flexible admissions, as they access greater numbers of SEN resources.**¹⁰
- data from the Millenium Cohort Study showed twins and triplets were more likely than average to be classified as 'delayed' in terms of school-readiness; 15% were categorised as 'delayed' compared to 10% of the whole sample.¹¹

What's our preferred option?

We want a system, similar to that which operates in Scotland, which consists of the following:

1. **automatic deferral should be available, on request, in limited circumstances** to children who fall into certain, defined categories;
2. **discretionary deferral should be available in exceptional circumstances** to other children who do not fall into any of the defined categories, but who, in the opinion of a panel of suitable experts, would benefit from a 12-month deferral of their school enrolment;
3. all deferred children should be eligible for an additional year's funded pre-school place on the same basis as other children, but with priority over 2 year olds, and should be admitted to P1 the following year.

1. Automatic deferral on request, in limited circumstances

Parents of those categories of children most likely to benefit from the deferral of school enrolment should have an automatic right to keep back their child for one year. We believe this should include the following categories of child:

- **very young for year children (with a May, June or 1st July birth)**
- **children born prematurely**
- **relatively young for year children who are part of a multiple birth (with a birthday which falls between March and July 1st inclusive)**
- **children with special educational needs, whether stated or not** – where, in addition to parental testimony, there is documentary evidence of that need
- **adopted and looked after children** (where the child's parent, guardian and/or social worker believe that deferral would be in the child's best interests)
- **children whose first language is not English**

2. Discretionary deferral in exceptional circumstances

Parents of other children should have the option of seeking discretionary deferral in exceptional circumstances where their child does not fall into one of the above 'limited circumstances' categories. But the 'exceptional circumstances' test should only be used in the context of determining what is in the best interests of the child, and what provision will be "**suitable to [the child's] age, ability and aptitude and to any special educational needs he may have**" as stipulated in the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986, article 45 (1).

While all available evidence should be taken into consideration, **parents should not be required to provide evidence to support their application, and their views should be given full weight.**¹²

We also think it's vital that the following steps are taken:

- all parents of children at pre-school stage, pre-school staff, schools and other relevant professionals should be made fully aware of the new system;
- parents should be issued with clear, user-friendly guidance which outlines the deferrals process, together with the factors they may wish to take into consideration in reaching a decision;
- pre-school staff should be encouraged to discuss the option of deferral with parents whose child could benefit from this option;
- decisions on discretionary deferrals should be made by a three-person panel of relevant experts, including an early years expert;
- the panel should compile a short report on each of its decisions which demonstrates that the parents' views have been taken into full consideration, and is given to a child's parents;
- parents should have the right to appeal to a wider appeals panel;
- that wider panel should include representatives of parents and relevant charities, and should have a monitoring, review and advisory role, in addition to its appeals role.

What about the extra pre-school places which will be needed?

Our proposed system is similar to that in Scotland where the youngest for year children are granted automatic deferral of school enrolment, where parents wish, while others can be considered for discretionary deferral. Although we are proposing additional categories should be eligible for automatic deferral, we believe there are likely to be proportionately fewer discretionary applications than in Scotland as a result.

Statistics published recently by the Scottish Government show that 15% of children in P1 in Scotland have deferred places.¹³ We believe that, if our proposed system is introduced, **demand for deferral is likely to grow slowly over a number of years, and is unlikely to represent a sudden and undue burden on funding for the Department's Pre-School Education Programme (PSEP).** Moreover, a survey which we carried out of deferral rates in Scottish local authorities showed that, while there were major differences *between* local authorities in the proportion of children with deferred entry, there was generally **little significant difference over time in this proportion within any one authority, even where actual numbers of deferred children fluctuated considerably.**¹⁴ The overall rate in Scotland has grown slightly in recent years.

Our survey also found that no Scottish local authority which responded to our survey **had experienced a shortage of pre-school places** in any of a sample of five years within the previous 11 years.

As one single Education Authority will be dealing with deferrals in Northern Ireland, **we believe the Education Authority should be able to cope with the additional demand for places if, as in most**

Scottish local authorities, the deferrals system is designed to help inform the planning of sufficient funded pre-school provision in any given year.

We estimate that the likely **net financial impact of our proposals would range from a potential annual net saving of £0.07m in the short term to an eventual potential annual net investment of just over £4m** (see Table 1 overleaf). This takes into account the following:

- There were 23,759 children in funded pre-school provision in 2019/20, and the average cost of a funded pre-school place under the PSEP is £2,542;¹⁵
- We estimate that an initial 5% of children might be granted deferral, and that this is likely to rise to between 10% and 15% eventually;
- **We believe that, based on our own experience, around 25% of parents with children eligible for automatic deferral would also opt to defer their child's pre-school entry** – this might mean that 20% of the total children with deferred school entry would only avail of one year's PSEP place (as a minority of deferred children will have been granted discretionary deferral, meaning their parents could not have planned ahead);
- **We would like to see the £2m we estimate is currently spent on PSEP places for 2 year olds reallocated to provide an additional year's PSEP place for children with deferred school entry** – and our figures assume this is how the funding is spent.¹⁶ The previous Education Minister, John O'Dowd, had committed to phasing out PSEP places for 2 year olds, all of which are provided in nursery classes and primary school nursery units, and the Department has previously acknowledged that this type of provision does not suit the needs of many 2 year olds.
- We estimate that **up to £1.05m annually could be saved through a reduction in the number of children who would be referred to the Educational Psychology Service, and who would require additional or special educational needs support in the classroom.**¹⁷ In Table 1, we assume that the amount is proportionately less than £1.05m, where the total proportion of children with deferred places is less than 15% i.e. £0.35m if it is 5% and £0.69m if it is 10%.

Benefiting the economy, benefiting individual lives

Our proposals are also likely to result in a significant improvement in academic outcomes for many of the children whose school entry is deferred; that will have a net positive impact on the Northern Ireland economy which has not been factored into our figures.

Most importantly, however, **providing the opportunity to defer school entry on a broader basis than that proposed by the Department will transform the lives of thousands of individual children, enabling them to start school feeling secure and confident, and to leave school having reached their true academic potential.**

Table 1: estimated savings and net costs of additional PSEP places if our deferral proposals are introduced

Average annual cost of PSEP place per child = £2,542.

Total number of PSEP places awarded in 2019/20 = 23,759.

	Scenario 1	Scenario 2	Scenario 3
% of children deferred	5%	10%	15%
Number of children deferred	1,188	2,376	3,564
Gross cost of additional PSEP places if all require them	+ £3.02m	+ £6.04m	+ £9.06m
Saving if 20% of deferred children also defer pre-school entry	(-) £0.6m	(-) £1.21m	(-) £1.81m
Amount of additional funding available if PSEP funds for 2 year olds reallocated	(-) £2.0m	(-) £2.0m	(-) £2.0m
Estimated saving on EPS and support costs	(-) £0.35m	(-) £0.69m	(-) £1.05m
Total net cost of/savings made to DE budget (excluding administrative costs which should be minimal)	£0.07m saved	£2.14m net cost	£4.2m net cost

About School Start Flexibility NI

We are an umbrella campaign group which is co-led by the parents' forum, ParentsOutLoud, and the NEU teaching union. The campaign is also supported by three other not-for-profit organisations, together with around 240 individual supporters, most of whom are parents, but also including school principals, teachers, teaching assistants, early years workers and academics. The not-for-profit organisations which support us are Early Years, Tiny Life (which supports families with children born prematurely), and the Twins Trust (which supports families with multiple-birth children).

¹ See World Bank data on international school starting ages at: <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.PRM.AGES>

² Department of Education (2015) *Deferring Compulsory School Starting Age in Exceptional Circumstances. Consultation Document*, paras. 5-6.

³ These figures relate to all referrals in the period 2015-16 to 2019-20 inclusive, and were provided to us by the Education Authority in April 2021.

⁴ McPhillips, Martin and Jordan-Black, Julie-Ann 'The effect of month of birth on the attainments of primary and secondary school pupils' in *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, Vol. 79, pp. 419 – 438, 2009. See also Menet, Fiona et al. 'Month of Birth and Effect on Literacy, Behaviour and Referral to Psychological Service' in *Educational Psychology in Practice*, Vol. 16, No. 2, 2000. Menet et al. found that children in Northern Ireland with May and June birthdays were significantly more likely than average to be referred to the Educational Psychology Service. Their study also found that primary school teachers in Northern Ireland were more likely to identify behaviour problems in children with May and June birthdays, and that this group's attainment in literacy was poorer than average.

⁵ Crawford et al. (2007) *When you are born matters: the impact of month of birth on child cognitive outcomes in England*. London: Centre for the Economics of Education.

⁶ Crawford et al. (2014) 'The drivers of month of birth differences in children's cognitive and non-cognitive skills', in *Statistics and Society*, Vol. 177, Issue 4, pp. 829 – 860.

⁷ Crawford et al. (2007), op. cit., pp. 57 – 60.

⁸ op. cit., citing Robertson, E (2011) 'The effects of quarter of birth on academic outcomes at the elementary school level' in *Economic Education Review*, Vol. 30, pp. 300 – 311.

⁹, Samantha Johnson et al, *Academic attainment and SEN in extremely preterm children at 11 years of age: EPICure Study* (2009) [accessed online at]: http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/566/1/WRAP_Wolke_Epicure.pdf

¹⁰ CLJ Huddy, A Johnson, PL Hope, *Educational and behavioural problems in babies of 32-35 weeks gestation*, (2001) [accessed online at]: <http://fn.bmj.com/content/85/1/F23.full>

¹¹ Cited in McKay, Professor Stephen (2010) *The Effects of Twins and Multiple Births on Families and their Living Standards*, TAMBA. Available at: <http://www.tamba.org.uk/document.doc?id=268>

¹² Where a test of 'exceptional circumstances' is applied, we believe that the following evidence should be taken into full consideration:

- Evidence (which may be testimony from the parent(s) and/or professionals who know or have assessed the child) that the child in question is less advanced in terms of physical, emotional, educational and/or social development than peers of his/her age
- Evidence (which again may be parental or professional testimony as above) that the child becomes distressed or unusually withdrawn in situations similar to a P1 classroom (e.g. when placed among a large group of children, or where a child is required to sit still for relatively long periods)
- Evidence (which again may be parental or professional testimony as above) that the child is unlikely to be able to cope easily with one or more of the key demands placed on a child in a P1 setting e.g. independent toileting, the lack of provision for naps, sitting still and/or remaining quiet for relatively long periods
- Any other evidence or testimony which indicates that it would be in the best interests of the child to defer his/her school enrolment – and that a further year outside a school setting would best suit that child's ability, aptitude and any special educational needs they may have

¹³ Scottish Government 'Deferred entry to primary school: statistics', 27th October 2020. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/deferred-entry-primary-school-statistics/pages/2/>

¹⁴ We carried out a survey of Scottish local authorities in February 2015. Eight local authorities responded to the survey.

¹⁵ Information provided by the Department of Education, 31st March 2021. The cost of funded places for PSEP for 2019/20 was £60.394m and the total number of children in funded pre-school provision under PSEP was 23,759, meaning that the average cost of a place was £2,542.

¹⁶ A large and growing number of 2 year olds are awarded PSEP funded places in nursery schools and primary school nursery units. A total of 804 2 year olds were granted PSEP funded places in 2019/20, compared to approximately 700 in 2013/14. We estimate the cost of providing these places for 2 year olds is £2m, on the

basis that the average cost of a place was £2,542 in 2019/20. These places are all provided in nursery schools and nursery units, rather than non-statutory pre-school education provision. The Department of Education has previously acknowledged that this type of provision is not appropriate for many 2 year olds and the previous Education Minister, John O’Dowd, had committed himself to phasing out this provision. We would like this funding to be reallocated to help pay for the additional PSEP places which will be required once the deferrals system is introduced.

¹⁷ This estimate is based on the fact that May and June birth children are 18% more likely than average to be referred to the EPS, according to data from the Education Authority for the academic years 2015/16 – 2019/20 inclusive. We have calculated that, on average, 124 more children with May and June births are being referred to the EPS annually than would be the case if children born in those months were referred at the average rate across all birth months.

To arrive at our estimated annual saving, we assume that, in any given year, approximately 50% of these additional May and June birth children might not have required EPS referral and additional support if they had started school at an age more appropriate to their needs and that, if our proposed deferral system was introduced with a 15% deferral rate, 60 of those 124 additional children might have had their places deferred and subsequently not been referred to EPS. Circumstantial evidence from parents and teachers indicates that some children are receiving such support when the real issue is that they started school prematurely, so this seems a fair and, indeed, conservative assumption.

The Department of Education is unable to supply average costs relating to EPS referral. We have based our illustrative cost estimates on case studies provided in a report published by the National Audit Office ([Support for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities](#), September 2019, Figure 8). Two case studies related to children requiring additional support in mainstream schools. One required an additional £3,000 of support annually, while the other required an additional £11,000. We therefore have taken the average of these two figures, £7,000, as the likely typical additional annual cost of supporting children with special educational needs in mainstream schools. We assume that each child requires three years of support at this level which would cost £21,000. It would, therefore, cost £1.05m to support each annual cohort of 60 children for three years. Therefore, the annual saving would be more than £1m. In Table 1, we have assumed that this saving would occur if the deferral rate is 15%, with proportionately lower savings where the deferral rate is lower.

We would emphasise that our estimate is based on a number of assumptions and is for illustrative purposes only. However, we believe it is a conservative estimate and the actual potential saving could well be higher.