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School Starting Age: Policy and Practice in the UK

Sinéad McMurray

1 Introduction

The Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 implemented the current compulsory school age so that each child receives a full 12 years of schooling. In Northern Ireland (NI), children who have reached the age of four on or before 1st July will commence primary school the following September, and therefore can begin school from the age of four years and two months.

Northern Ireland has one of the lowest compulsory school starting ages in Europe, and there are some concerns regarding the comparatively low school starting age here (and throughout the UK). For example, a number of commentators suggest that children aged four and five may not be ready for formal primary school or reception class, and highlight the fact that children who start formal schooling at an age significantly younger than their classmates 'those who are summer born' may have poorer educational and social outcomes that can persist over the course of a child's education.

Governments in the UK have sought to provide more flexibility with school starting age (SSA) and deferral arrangements to accommodate families who feel their children would benefit from delaying their first year of school. In February 2021, the Minister for Education Peter

Weir, announced that he also intends to introduce legislation to allow parents flexibility over when their children enter primary school in NI.

This briefing paper provides an overview of the main arguments relating to school starting age, views on appropriate education provision at ages four-five, the potential adverse outcomes for summer born children who start school early and the various policy options relating to school starting age and deferral across the UK. The paper serves as refresh of Caroline Perry's previous paper on arguments relating to school starting age.

2 School starting age in NI and elsewhere

Compulsory school age in NI is governed by Article 46 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986. Children who have reached the age of 4 on or before the 1st July start primary school at the beginning of the September of that year.¹ For example:

- A child born on 1 September 2013 would start school on 1 September 2018 aged 5 years;
- A child born on 1 July 2014 would start school on 1 September 2018 aged 4 years and 2 months; and
- A child born on 2 July 2014 would start school on 1 September 2019 aged 5 years and 2 months.

Similarly, in England, Scotland and Wales, most pupils enter reception classes in primary school at age four (although the compulsory starting age is 5). This is in contrast to the vast majority of countries in Europe and across the world where six is the most common starting age. Table 1 provides an overview of compulsory school starting ages in Europe. France and Hungary report the earliest starting age for compulsory education (3 years old). By contrast, in Estonia, compulsory education starts at the age of 7.² However, it should be noted that this is often the latest age at which children must start school, and in some countries such as the UK regions mentioned above and the Netherlands, most children enter school below the compulsory school age. In addition, most countries have pre-school systems which the majority of children attend.³ Table 1 below indicates formal school starting ages in selected countries.

¹ See <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1986/594/article/46> Accessed 24/02/2021

² European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2019) Compulsory Education in Europe –2019/20. Eurydice Facts and Figures. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the Europe

³ Perry, C (2011) *Arguments on the school starting age*, Research and Information Service Briefing Paper Northern Ireland Assembly

Table 1: Formal school starting ages in selected countries⁴

Age	Country
Three	France, Hungary
Four	Northern Ireland
Five	England, Malta, Netherlands, Scotland, Wales
Six	Australia, Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Republic of Ireland, Italy, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Turkey
Seven	Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Sweden

3 Views on appropriate education provision at ages four-five

The literature indicates that there is a degree of consensus across many countries regarding what early years provision is appropriate for children aged from three years. Provision internationally for this age group tends to involve an active, play-based approach, encouraging self-management and independence among young children.⁵

There are several strands of evidence that point towards the importance of active play in young children's development, and the value of an extended period of playful learning before the start of formal schooling. Several research studies have demonstrated that physical, constructional and social play supports children in developing their skills of intellectual and emotional 'self-regulation'.⁶ Furthermore, neuroscientific studies, have shown that play based activity leads to synaptic growth, particularly in the frontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for higher mental functions.⁷

A number of longitudinal studies have also demonstrated better academic, motivational and well-being outcomes for children who had attended child-initiated, play-based pre-school programmes. For example, a study of 3,000 children across England funded by the Department for Education (DfE), showed that an extended period of high quality, play-based pre-school education was of particular advantage to children from disadvantaged households.⁸

⁴ As cited immediately above

⁵ Bertram, T. and Pascal, C. (2002) *Early Years Education: An International Perspective*. London: QCA

⁶ Whitebread, D., Basilio, M., Kuvajja, M. & Verma, M. (2012). *The importance of play: a report on the value of children's play with a series of policy recommendations*. Brussels, Belgium: Toys Industries for Europe and Hyson, M., Copple, C. and Jones, J. (2007). *Early Childhood Development and Education*. In *Handbook of Child Psychology* (eds W. Damon, R.M. Lerner, K.A. Renninger and I.E. Siegel).

⁷ Pellis, M, Pellis, C and Himmler, B (2014) *How Play Makes for a More Adaptable Brain. A comparative and neural perspective* American Journal of Play, volume 7, number 1

⁸ Sylva, K. (2004) *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education [EPPE] Project: a longitudinal study funded by the DfES (1997-2003)* University of London

In many of the countries with an older SSA, there is structured preschool provision available for a period before the compulsory school starting age (usually one or two years). For example, Finland provides early year's education and care for every child under the compulsory school age of 7 and almost every child aged 6 participates in pre-primary education.⁹

There are a number of key differences between pre-school and primary school education, including the following:

- Children spend less time on tasks of their own choosing in primary school;
- Children are less physically active and spend more time sitting still at primary level;
- In primary school the curriculum is more subject-related and places emphasis on number, reading and writing, rather than play and the development of oral and social skills;
- Adult-child ratios are generally higher in pre-school settings; and
- Teaching staff in pre-school settings usually have qualifications that are specifically focused on the needs of young children.¹⁰

Many authors assert that the curriculum for children aged below five should not involve 'formal' academic teaching or focus on particular subjects; rather it should emphasise play and development and provide children with opportunities to socialise and take responsibility for their own learning.¹¹

The Foundation Stage of the Revised Curriculum which became statutory in Northern Ireland in 2007 aimed to give teachers more flexibility in how they teach children in the first two years of primary school and to place greater emphasis on play. It uses play as a context for learning, recognising that stimulation through play is an important factor in the physical, social, emotional and educational development of the child.¹² Nonetheless, the Foundation Stage includes reading, writing and mathematics as part of its curriculum.¹³

4 Limited evidence to support school starting ages in the UK

Those who support the current situation on a SSA of four here and four/five in the UK put forward a number of arguments, suggesting that:

- Children can get a head start in learning;
- Young children are able to learn the more formal skills inherent in the curriculum;

⁹ OECD (2015), *Starting Strong IV: Early Childhood Education and Care, Data Country Note* OECD Publishing, Paris

¹⁰ Sharp, C. (2002) *School Starting Age: European Policy and Recent Research. Paper presented at the LGA Seminar, November 2002.* NFER and Local Government Association

¹¹ As cited immediately above

¹² Education Authority (2016) *School starting age: a guide for parents*, Belfast

¹³ Education Authority (2016) *School starting age: a guide for parents*, Belfast

- An early start provides an opportunity for children from disadvantaged backgrounds to make up the deficit in their academic skills; and
- Early SSA is thought to be popular among parents.¹⁴

However, in a review of the evidence, Sharp notes that arguments in favour of children being taught academic skills earlier do not appear to be borne out by the evidence. The review found no compelling educational rationale for a statutory school age of four or five. The report also noted that a later start at school does not appear to hold back children's progress. For example, while children who have been taught reading, writing and numeracy at an early stage will perform better than their counterparts who have not, the evidence consistently shows that this advantage is not sustained in the longer-term. In addition, children who are taught these skills up to three years later tend to acquire them rapidly and perform as well or better than children with an early start. There is also little evidence to indicate that an early start in school can make up for any deficiencies in the home learning environment of children from disadvantaged backgrounds.¹⁵

5 Strong evidence indicates a later school start age is beneficial

The complexity of identifying an optimum age for starting school is acknowledged by researchers. Some studies have suggested that there is no evidence of an optimum age to start school. For example, research carried out on behalf of the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) into SSA in Europe did not find evidence for an optimum age for children starting school.¹⁶ Similarly, a study in Scotland found 'no evidence at all' for an optimum age.¹⁷ Furthermore there are multiple influences that affect educational and social outcomes outside of just SSA.¹⁸ However, most findings do suggest considerable benefits for a delayed school entry. A review of the research by Bradfield and Priestley identified several advantages to a later school start including:

- Higher scoring on standardised exams both in primary and secondary school across different countries and improved test scores within classrooms;
- Positive effects within the secondary schooling context including an increase in contributions to high school leadership, greater uptake in secondary students' application for disability identification, assistance with mental health, and support from special education assistance programs;
- Research with boys found that 18-year olds who started school later are less likely to have poor mental health compared to their earlier-beginning peers; and
- A 1-year increase in SSA led to significantly improved mental health results and further demonstrated that these positive effects appear to persist into later childhood¹⁹

¹⁴ Sharp, C. (2002) *School Starting Age: European Policy and Recent Research*. Paper presented at the LGA Seminar November 2002. NFER and Local Government Association

¹⁵As cited directly above

¹⁶As cited in footnote 15

¹⁷ Tymms, P. et al. (2005) *Children starting school in Scotland*. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive Education Department

¹⁸ Bradfield, K and Priestley, M (2021) *School Starting Age (SSA): A Brief Summary*

¹⁹Bradfield, K and Priestley, M (2021) *School Starting Age (SSA): A Brief Summary*

One American study found that ‘early school entry was associated with less educational attainment, worse midlife adjustment, and most importantly, increased mortality risk’.²⁰ A study in New Zealand compared groups of children who started formal literacy lessons at ages 5 and 7. Their results show that the early introduction of formal learning approaches to literacy does not improve children’s reading development, and may be damaging. By the age of 11 there was no difference in reading ability level between the two groups, but the children who started at 5 developed less positive attitudes to reading, and showed poorer text comprehension than those children who had started later.²¹

6 summer born children and the impact of an early school start

There is significant evidence internationally to indicate that the youngest children in their year group at school tend to perform at a lower level than their older classmates, particularly in reading, writing and mathematics.²² In Northern Ireland, the relative age disadvantage is thought to be greatest for children born in May and June.

The research suggests that this ‘birthdate effect’ is most pronounced during pre-school and primary school, and that the effect gradually decreases throughout post-primary school. Nonetheless, it is thought to remain significant at GCSE, A level and possibly during higher education.²³

Academic attainment

In May 2010, the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), published a working paper ‘When you are born matters: the impact of date of birth on educational outcomes in England’, which found that:

- The month in which a child born matters for test scores at ages 7, 11, 14 and 16, with younger children performing significantly worse, on average, than their older peers;
- Almost all of this difference is due to the fact that younger children sit exams up to one year earlier than older cohort members;
- The difference in test scores at age 16 potentially affects the number of pupils who stay on beyond compulsory schooling, with predictable labour market consequences; and
- The research found that the impact of month of birth persists into higher education (college) decisions.²⁴

²⁰Kern, M. L., & Friedman, H. S. (2008). Early educational milestones as predictors of lifelong academic achievement, midlife adjustment, and longevity. *Journal of applied developmental psychology*, 30(4), 419–430.

²¹ Suggate, S. P. (2007). Research into Early Reading Instruction and Luke Effects in the Development of Reading. *Journal for Waldorf/R. Steiner Education* Vol. 11.2, p.17 and Suggate, S. P., Schaughency, E. A., & Reese, E. (2013). Children learning to read later catch up to children reading earlier. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 28(1), 33-48.

²²Sharp, C. (2009) *International thematic probe: The influence of relative age on learner attainment and development* NFER

²³Sykes, E. et al. (2009) *Birthdate Effects: A Review of the Literature from 1990-on*. Cambridge: Cambridge Assessment

²⁴ Institute for Fiscal Studies (2010) *When you are born matters: the impact of date of birth on educational outcomes in England*

The IFS, alongside the Nuffield Foundation and the Economic and Social Research Council, published a further report in 2013 which highlighted ‘large differences in educational attainment between children born at the start and end of the academic year,’ and evidence of impact in other areas such as the likelihood of being assessed as having special educational needs at school, as well as children’s self-esteem and confidence in their own ability. However, the paper found “little evidence” that these detrimental effects persisted into adulthood.²⁵

Social and emotional wellbeing

With regard to social and emotional readiness for schooling, research indicates that many children aged four may not be well equipped to deal with a number of features of attending school, including:

- Facing separation from their parents each morning;
- Leaving familiar surroundings and possessions;
- Spending time with other adults and children and getting to know strangers;
- Finding their place in a new hierarchy;
- Adapting to new routines and rules; and
- Getting used to not having their own way.²⁶

Further research indicates that the central nervous system of younger children is less mature, particularly in terms of self-regulation of attention, emotion and other functions. This has implications for their ability to adapt to school life, for example, remaining seated for extended periods.²⁷

It has been suggested that the age-related disadvantages of young-for-year children can lead to lower self-esteem, which may in turn have further impacts on behaviour and achievement.²⁸ For example, younger children may compare themselves with older classmates, leading to feelings of inadequacy, whereas older, more mature pupils may receive more positive feedback and assume a ‘leadership position’.²⁹

Special education needs

The evidence also suggests that a disproportionately high percentage of relatively young children in the school year are referred for special educational needs, and many of them appear to be misdiagnosed. A suggested reason for this is that teachers may have unrealistic expectations of younger pupils, and, as such, may not make sufficient

²⁵ Crawford, C, Dearden, L and Greaves, E (2013) *When You Are Born Matters: Evidence for England*, Institute of Fiscal Studies

²⁶ Sykes, E. et al. (2009) *Birthdate Effects: A Review of the Literature from 1990-on*. Cambridge: Cambridge Assessment

²⁷ Polizzi, N. et al. (2007) “Season of birth of students receiving education services under a diagnosis of emotional and behavioural disorder” *School Psychology Quarterly* Vol. 22 (1) pp.44-57

²⁸ As cited directly above

²⁹ Sharp, C. (2009) *International thematic probe: The influence of relative age on learner attainment and development* NFER

allowances for their level of attainment.³⁰ A study in NI showed that children born at the end of the school year (May/June) i.e. the youngest in their class, appeared to be substantially over represented in referrals to a psychology service.³¹ The study also found that primary school teachers in NI 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.

A recent 2019 study of children across the UK found that relatively young children were 1.3 times more likely than the oldest quarter of children in the school year to be diagnosed with intellectual disability, 1.4 times more likely to be diagnosed with ADHD, and 1.3 times more likely to be diagnosed with depression.³²

A key hypothesis for this effect relates to the relative age of children, with the gap between the youngest and oldest pupils in a class being almost a year in many cases. Research suggests that the youngest in the year group tend to be less mature cognitively, socially and emotionally than their older classmates.³³

Premature birth and multiple birth children

There is also evidence to suggest that children born prematurely and multiple birth children can be adversely affected by starting 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 SEN support;³⁴
- Pettinger et al. have shown that even children born just three weeks premature, who consequently fall into an earlier school year, are more likely to experience 'significant setbacks' in their education.³⁵
- Data from the Millennium 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.

7 Policy suggestions for addressing the summer born effect

A number of policy options are suggested in the literature to address the gap in attainment between summer-born and other children. These are summarised in the table below: ³⁶

³⁰ Sykes, E. et al. (2009) *Birthdate Effects: A Review of the Literature from 1990-on*. Cambridge: Cambridge Assessment

³¹ Menet, F, Eakin, J, Stuart, M & Rafferty, H (2000) Month of Birth and Effect on Literacy, Behaviour and Referral to Psychological Service, *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 16:2, 225-234,

³² Root A, Brown JP, Forbes HJ, et al. (2019) Association of Relative Age in the School Year With Diagnosis of Intellectual Disability, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, and Depression. *JAMA Pediatr.* 2019;173(11):1068–1075

³³ As cited in footnote 30

³⁴ Johnson, S, Hennessy, E, Smith, RA et al (2009) Academic attainment and special educational needs in extremely preterm children at 11 years of age: The EPICure study. *Archives of disease in childhood. Fetal and neonatal edition.* 94. F283-9.

³⁵ Pettinger, K. J., Kelly, B., Sheldon, T. A. et al (2020) Starting school: educational development as a function of age of entry and prematurity. *Archives of disease in childhood*, 105(2), 160–165.

³⁶ Crawford, C. et al. (2007) *When You Are Born Matters: The Impact of Date of Birth on Child Cognitive Outcomes in England*. London: Institute for Fiscal Studies; Sharp, C. (2009) *International thematic probe: The influence of relative age on learner attainment and development* NFER and <https://www.tes.com/news/summer-born-children-should-have-test-scores-adjusted>

Option	Overview
Use of age standardised tests	Adjusting test scores to take into account the different ages of children when grouping children into sets or classes according to their achievement.
Curriculum and pedagogy	Ensuring that the curriculum and approach to teaching is appropriate for relatively younger children.
Monitor referral rates for age effects	Referral of children for SEN could be monitored to explore relative age effect including reviewing processes of identification to avoid relative age being mistaken for developmental delay.
Include issue of relative age in teacher training	Raising awareness among teachers of the effect of age on outcomes may help them to tailor provision to children of different ages.

None of the above policy options have been without criticism. For example, parent campaign groups argue that adjusting test scores to take into account the different ages of children is too narrowly focused and does not account for the adverse social and emotional impacts that summer born children can experience. With regard to raising teacher awareness of summer born children, critics argue that if teachers were not already adept at identifying and helping summer born children, the data demonstrating adverse outcomes for summer born children would likely be worse and that teachers cannot be expected to protect every summer born child against adverse effects.³⁷

8 Flexibility with school starting age – preferred policy option

Parent campaign groups, and increasingly UK government policy, cite flexibility with SSA as the most effective way to reduce the potential attainment, social and emotional gaps experienced by many summer born children. While parent campaign groups advocate for a later compulsory SSA for all children, being able to identify those 4-year-olds who are evidently not as emotionally or socially developed, or as mature, as their chronological peers and allowing these children to start school one year later (where they would effectively lie somewhere among the autumn-born children in that class) is an effective interim solution.³⁸

However there are some conflicting research reports on the benefits of flexible SSA. For example, an IFS report highlighted that flexible SSA could be unfair on less well-off families who may be more reliant on the extra hours of free childcare that school provides in order to make work affordable. Wealthier parents may be in a better position to allow their summer born children to wait until they're 5 before starting school. It has been proposed that full-time pre-school provision should be available if flexibility in SSA is introduced.³⁹

accessed 2/03/2021

³⁷ See <https://summerbornchildren.org/2013/08/28/flexibility-exists-in-law-please-let-parents-use-it/> Accessed 02/03/2021

³⁸ See <https://summerbornchildren.org/2013/08/28/flexibility-exists-in-law-please-let-parents-use-it/> Accessed 02/03/2021

³⁹ Crawford, C. et al. (2007) *When You Are Born Matters: The Impact of Date of Birth on Child Cognitive Outcomes in England*. London: Institute for Fiscal Studies

Some research also indicates that delayed entry for premature children is not likely to compensate for being born early. Findings from some research indicate that within a given school year, the risks to development faced by children born prematurely did not vary depending on when within that school year they were born. The research instead proposed that schools should be informed which of their pupils were born prematurely so they can be given extra support, particularly early on in their schooling as well as routine sharing of data between health and education services.⁴⁰

9 Current arrangements for delaying a child's entry to P1 in NI

Currently, parents do not have the option of applying to defer their child's entry to primary school in NI. The Education Authority (EA) published guidelines in 2016 to advise parents who wish to delay their child's entry into P1. In the Guidelines it states that parents must make their own arrangements for educating their child and have a legal duty to ensure that their child receives a full-time education suitable to the child's 'age, ability, aptitude and to any special educational needs he may have, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise'.⁴¹

A child of compulsory school age who does not take up a P1 place is not entitled to any funded pre-school education and parents are responsible for any educational costs incurred as a result of their child's delayed entry.

Parents who chose not to send their child to school at the compulsory school age and subsequently apply to admit their child to the school system, do not apply through the open application process but rather complete the process of 'Application for admission to a primary/post-primary school other than Years 1 and 8'. The principal can only admit the child if the school has spare capacity within its enrolment number. Where a child is offered a place, the child would then be admitted to his/her chronological age group. So in the case where a child delayed taking up a P1 place, that child would be placed in P2. After admission, the decision to educate the child outside his/her chronological age group will be made by the Board of Governors, taking into account the parents views, advice from the Principal and the views of the EA, in the best interests of the child.⁴²

10 New proposals for a flexible school starting age in NI

In 2014 the DE proposed new legislation which would have allowed families to seek flexibility with SSA, and which would have guaranteed funding for an additional year in pre-school and a P1 start the following year for all children granted deferral.⁴³

The DE undertook a public consultation in 2014/15, the main proposal of which was:

⁴⁰ Pettinger, K. J., Kelly, B., Sheldon, T. A. et al (2020) Starting school: educational development as a function of age of entry and prematurity. *Archives of disease in childhood*, 105(2), 160–165

⁴¹ Education Authority (2016) *School starting age: a guide for parents*, Belfast

⁴² Education Authority (2016) *School starting age: a guide for parents*, Belfast

⁴³ See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-32420572> accessed 27/02/2021

- A system of deferral in exceptional circumstances to be introduced where it is considered that deferring primary school for one year is in the best interests of the child; and
- The evidence provided by a parent for deferral would be subject to approval by the EA and assessment would involve a panel of experts.

The evidence collected throughout the consultation period indicated that:

- The majority (93.8%) of respondents agreed that parents should be able to defer their child's SSA by one year;
- The majority of respondents (98.6%) agreed that the needs of the child should be paramount; and
- The majority of respondents were in favour of a (current/or new) pre-school place being made available for the deferred child.

The area where respondents disagreed with the policy was in regard to making deferral available in exceptional circumstances only (51.5% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed) and the requirement of the parent to provide evidence (69.4% strongly disagreed or disagreed).⁴⁴

The proposed changes were ultimately not advanced as a result of the limited time window available to push through the legislation before the 2016 elections.⁴⁵

In February 2021, the Minister for Education Peter Weir, announced that he intends to introduce legislation to allow parents flexibility over when their children enter primary school in NI. The Minister stressed that the legislation was not intended to open the debate on compulsory SSA but rather to give flexibility for parents to defer their children starting primary school for a year if they feel it will be beneficial.⁴⁶

The National Education Union (NEU), who have been campaigning for flexibility with SSA in NI alongside a number of other stakeholder bodies, are advocating for a system similar to that which operates in Scotland. They propose that:

- **Automatic deferral should be available in limited circumstances** to children who fall into certain, defined categories;
- **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; and

⁴⁴ Department of Education (2015) *Summary of consultation responses on the Department of Education proposals on the policy of deferral of compulsory school starting age* Bangor

⁴⁵ See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-32420572> accessed 27/02/2021

⁴⁶ See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-56089067> accessed 27/02/2021

- **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.⁴⁷

The DE) has begun the process of preparing a bill which will require consultation and assembly support if it is to become law before the end of the current assembly mandate in 2022.

11 School starting age and deferral arrangements in the UK

England

All children are entitled to a full time school place in the September following their 4th birthday. Most children in England start school at this time, entering what is called 'reception year'. Children are not required, however, to go to school until the first day of the school term that follows their 5th birthday. The prescribed terms dates are the 31 December, 31 March and 31 August. For example, if a child reaches compulsory school age on 31 March, they must start full-time education at the beginning of the next term (summer term that year).⁴⁸

Once a school place has been accepted there is legislative provision for parents who do not feel their child is ready to start school before compulsory school age. They may defer the date their child is admitted to school until later in the school year, providing they do not defer beyond the point at which they reach compulsory school age, or beyond the start of the final term of that school year. Alternatively, their child may attend school part-time until they reach compulsory school age.⁴⁹

A degree of flexibility is also provided in England whereby a parent may request their child is admitted to school outside of their normal age group. For example, if the child is gifted and talented or has experienced problems such as ill health. In addition, the parents of a summer born child may choose not to send their child to school until the September following their fifth birthday and may request that they are admitted out of their normal age group at this point – to reception rather than year 1.⁵⁰

However, the law only provides the right to apply for reception deferment; it does not guarantee that this will be granted and a school's admissions authority is responsible for making the decision on which year group a child should be admitted to. Government advice states that decisions should be made on a case-by-case basis according to what is

⁴⁷ National Education Union (2016) *School starting age flexibility: why the NI Executive needs to act*

⁴⁸ See <https://www.gov.uk/schools-admissions/school-starting-age> Accessed 24/02/2021

⁴⁹ Department for Education (2020) Advice on the admission of summer born children For local authorities and school admission authorities; London

⁵⁰ Department for Education (2014) School Admissions Code : statutory guidance for admission authorities, governing bodies, local authorities, schools adjudicators and admission appeals panels; London

considered to be in the child's best interest, with particular factors such as whether the child was born prematurely to be taken into account.⁵¹

Concerns have been raised about the manner in which this process operates, in particular that many parents whose request is accepted find that their child's deferred entry into school may not be into the reception class but rather into year 1, meaning the child misses reception year. There can also be consequences later in education, when a child advances to secondary school or moves to a new area. There have also been several reports of cases involving children who had been extremely unwell or were born very prematurely where their interests would have been best served by allowing them to start the reception year at age five but their requests were refused by admission authorities.⁵² Furthermore, in October 2018, the BBC published an article setting out findings that parents who want to delay their child's first year of school have varying success rates depending on where they live. The report stated that some councils approve 100% of requests, while others turn down more than half.⁵³

In September 2015, the Schools Minister announced that the Government would consult on changes to the school Admissions Code to strengthen the rights of parents to choose when their child enters reception class, and to ensure children remain in the same school year throughout their education if they prefer. Plans for a school admissions review were also included in the Conservative manifesto for the 2017 General Election.

In June 2020 the DfE published a consultation on changes to the School Admissions Code. However, changes to the position for summer-born children were not included. The Department published a further statement that it still intended to legislate to give summer-born children the right to stay in the same cohort throughout their schooling, and published revised advice to local authorities and parents in September 2020. No date has been given for when this legislation might be put before Parliament.⁵⁴

The government stressed that it did not intend for it to become the norm for summer born children to start school at age 5 'Whatever the school starting age, there will always be children who are the youngest in their age group, and most children thrive when admitted to school at age 4'.⁵⁵

Scotland

In Scotland, the school year starts in August with any single school year group usually consisting of children born between the beginning of March in one year and the end of February the following year. Children are typically aged between 4.5 and 5.5 years old when they start school. Currently all children who are still four when they are due to start their first

⁵¹ Long, R (2020) Summer-born children: starting school Briefing Paper Number 07272 House of Commons Library

⁵² Department for Education (2020) Advice on the admission of summer born children For local authorities and school admission authorities; London

⁵³ See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-45901714> accessed 26th February 2021

⁵⁴ Department for Education (2020) Updated statement on admission of summer-born children: London

⁵⁵ Department for Education (2014) 'Evidence check' memorandum Summer Born Children

year of school (P1) can be deferred and start the following year. The option to defer is a matter of parental choice.⁵⁶

If a parent chooses to defer their child's entry to P1, legislation determines whether they qualify for an additional year of funded Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) automatically, or at the local authority's discretion:

- The youngest children, those born in January or February, are automatically able to access an additional year of funded ELC when they are four, if the parent chooses to defer the child's entry to primary school.
- For children who turn five after the school commencement date in August to the end of December, parents can still defer their entry to P1 for a year but local authorities decide whether additional funded ELC will be made available.⁵⁷

On 2 October 2019, the Minister for Children and Young People committed to bringing forward legislation to extend the automatic funding of an additional year of ELC to children born after the school commencement date in August to the end of December. This means that all children who defer entry to primary school will be automatically entitled to an additional year of funded ELC.⁵⁸ The purpose of the new legislation is to align the funded ELC more closely with the existing right to defer for children in this age group. The principle is based on allowing families to make decisions for their children, based on what they feel is in the best interests of the child, without the financial barrier of additional ELC costs.⁵⁹

The government has agreed to full implementation of the legislation by 2023, with a number of local authorities taking part in a pilot implementation of the policy in 2021-22.⁶⁰

There has also been political interest in changing the compulsory SSA in Scotland in recent years. In 2018, the Scottish Liberal Democrats called for the SSA to be increased to 6 or seven years of age and the introduction of universal pre-school provision to provide age appropriate educational experiences for younger children.⁶¹ While the proposal was not carried forward, campaigning groups such as Upstart Scotland and Give Them Time have been vocal about keeping the issue to the fore. More recently, as part of their 2021 election manifesto, the Green Party have proposed a later SSA. The proposal includes a play-based "kindergarten stage" at 3-6, with formal primary school starting at 7. The policy, which is based on models being used in Nordic countries, followed the publication of a report by academics commissioned by the Green party, which indicated that the majority of research points to better outcomes for children who start school at a later age.⁶² While the response from education stakeholders has been largely positive, the Scottish government has

⁵⁶ Scottish Government (2018) Deferred Entry to Primary School Statistics; Edinburgh

⁵⁷ As cited directly above

⁵⁸ As cited in footnote 54

⁵⁹ Scottish Government and Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (2020) Joint implementation plan : funded early learning and childcare places for all children who defer their primary one start; Edinburgh

⁶⁰ See <https://www.gov.scot/news/deferring-entry-to-primary-one/> Accessed 25/02/2021

⁶¹ See <https://www.tes.com/news/lib-dems-raise-school-starting-age-6-or-7> Accessed 25/02/2021

⁶² Bradfield, K and Priestly, M (2021) School Starting Age (SSA): A Brief Summary; University of Stirling

indicated that their curriculum is already rooted in play and outdoor learning experiences for the early years, and there are no plans to change the school starting age.⁶³

Wales

Wales follows a similar model to England with regard to school admissions for summer born children. A child reaches compulsory school age in the term following their 5th birthday but in practice, most Welsh children start school in reception class when they are four.⁶⁴

Where the admission authority for a primary school offers a place in reception class to parents before their child is of compulsory school age, they must allow parents the option of either deferring their child's entry until later in the same school year or sending their child to school on a part time basis until the term after their 5th birthday. However as is the case in England, parents are not able to defer entry beyond the beginning of the term after the child's fifth birthday, nor beyond the school year for which the original application was accepted. Where a parent does not send their child to school in the term following their fifth birthday they will lose their place in the class and will have to reapply for a place.⁶⁵ In this instance the child would not normally join the next reception class but would join the class in which they were originally offered a place.⁶⁶

The Welsh Government's school admissions code does make allowances for children to be admitted to school outside of their normal age group. It notes that requests for admission outside the normal year group may be considered in particular cases, although it refers to exceptional ability or ill health rather than the child concerned being born at the end of the school year.⁶⁷ It is at the discretion of the relevant local admissions authorities to approve such requests and reports suggest that the application of the guidelines vary across authorities and that the majority of age related requests are not approved – including requests where there is supporting evidence from educational specialists that the child would be disadvantaged from starting school with their own cohort group.^{68 69}

Similar to other jurisdictions, various organisations including the Flexible Admissions Group Wales have proposed changes to the current admissions criteria including automatically allowing requests for children born between 1 April and 31 August to start reception a year later; or failing that, placing more emphasis on councils to fully consider requests for deferment.

⁶³ See <https://www.tes.com/news/school-starting-age-could-it-be-raised-7> Accessed 27/02/2021

⁶⁴ Sharp, C (2002) School Starting Age: European Policy and Recent Research; National Foundation for Educational Research

⁶⁵ See <https://gov.wales/school-admissions-code> Accessed 28/02/2021

⁶⁶ See <https://business.senedd.wales/documents/s76766/CYPE5-20-18%20-%20Paper%20to%20note%207.pdf> Accessed 28/02/2021

⁶⁷ As cited in footnote 63

⁶⁸ See <https://business.senedd.wales/documents/s76766/CYPE5-20-18%20-%20Paper%20to%20note%207.pdf> Accessed 28/02/2021

⁶⁹ See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-46139275> Accessed 02/03/2021

12 Summary

Northern Ireland has one of the lowest school starting age in Europe at four years. The most common school starting age in Europe and across the world is six years. The evidence indicates that there is no optimum age for starting school. However, there is broad agreement that the curriculum for children aged four and five should emphasise play and development rather than formal academic teaching.

Those who support an early school starting age suggest that children can get a head start in learning and that it can help children from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, these arguments do not appear to be supported by the evidence. For example, while there is an initial educational benefit for young children starting school early, this is not sustained in the long-term, and there is little evidence that an early start can make up for any deficiencies in the home learning environment of young children.

Proponents of a later school starting age often cite arguments from developmental psychology, which can suggest that children aged four and five may not be ready for formal education.

It is widely acknowledged that the youngest children in a year group tend to perform at a lower level than their older classmates. This 'summer born' effect is found to be greatest at pre-school and primary school, continually decreasing throughout post-primary school. Nonetheless, it is thought to remain significant at GCSE, A level and possibly during higher education. Research suggests that the youngest children in the year group tend to be less mature than their older counterparts, and that teachers may not make sufficient allowances for their level of attainment.

A number of policy options have been suggested to address the 'summer born' effect, including age normalisation of test results, raising teacher awareness of the effect and flexibility in the school starting age.

Governments in the UK have recently sought to provide more flexibility with SSA and deferral arrangements with varying degrees of eligibility and recently the Minister for Education, Peter Weir, has indicated that NI is to follow this trend by introducing legislation to allow parents flexibility over when their children enter primary school. The NEU who have been campaigning for flexibility with SSA for many years have indicated that this is likely to improve academic outcomes and more importantly, transform the lives of individual children, enabling them to start school feeling secure and confident, and to leave school having reached their full academic potential.