

Department of Education Consultation on Pre-School Education – Review of the Statutory Admissions Criteria

July 2021

1. We welcome the opportunity to respond to the Department’s consultation on its Review of Pre-School Education Statutory Admissions Criteria. Our response is in two parts, the first considering the consultation and the second the screening.

Consultation response

2. While noting the questions asked in the consultation questionnaire, and cognisant of the Commission’s statutory remit, our response sets out a number of points which we believe should inform the decision-making process.
3. In determining the admissions processes to adopt or the duration of the school day, in the short and longer terms, the Commission recommends that the Department of Education’s choices **maximise the positive impacts of early years’ education upon those children for whom it has the most beneficial impacts.**
4. High quality early-years provision plays a key role in children’s development, and can have significant beneficial impacts for those children most at risk of educational underachievement. It has a significant impact on children from particular equality groups – **including children from minority ethnic communities¹ and children with disabilities².**
5. Whilst socio-economic status is not a specified ground under the equality legislation, the **barriers and inequalities experienced by equality groups can be exacerbated by poverty and social exclusion.** We stress the need to have a wider discussion not just about poverty, but also these barriers.
6. We note that children with a Statement of Special Educational Needs do not use the general admissions process with regard to pre-school education. However, it seems likely that the general process is applicable to the majority of children with special educational needs and disabilities as they will not yet have, or require, a Statement. **Provision of pre-school education which**

¹ DE (2015) [A compendium of evidence on ethnic minority resilience to the effects of deprivation on attainment](#)

² DE (2017) [Study of Early Education and Development: meeting the needs of children with special educational needs and disabilities in the early years](#), page 11

meets the needs of children with disabilities and special educational needs remains necessary within the general admissions process.

7. There is a long-standing body of evidence pointing to the importance of effective early-years provision. For example, 2011 research found that 'pre-school quality continues to have an effect on cognitive and social outcomes at age 11. Attendance at low quality pre-school led to fewer long term benefits in cognitive and social development, whereas attendance at medium to high quality pre-school led to significantly greater gains³.
8. European Commission research (2010) found that children who attended high quality provision had better performance in school, and better economic and social outcomes in later life⁴.
9. 2010 research in Northern Ireland has found that children who did not attend pre-school showed poorer cognitive and behaviour outcomes than their peers who attended pre-school⁵.
10. A number of reports⁶ from Northern Ireland have highlighted that early interventions are more effective and less complex than later remedial action. Save the Children (2013)⁷ has also argued that given the gap in children's development by the age of three, the highest priority should be given to the development of a fit-for-purpose early childhood education and care model.
11. **Tracking the impact of policies on children from equality groups can make public policy more effective and put resources where they are most needed. Data gaps and lack of disaggregation in relation to Section 75 groups present a barrier to the assessment of the extent of particular groups within the school population.** They limit the accurate and robust measurement of educational attainment, experiences and progression for those with particular equality characteristics. This in turn limits the scope for more effectively meeting the needs which specific groups may have, and prevents a detailed assessment of the effectiveness of measures aimed at benefitting such pupils / students across Section 75 groups.

³ Sylva, Melhuish, et al, Journal of Early Childhood Research (2011) [Pre-school quality and educational outcomes at age 11: Low quality has little benefit](#)

⁴ EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy (2012) Final Report

⁵ Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons et al (2010) Early Childhood Matters: evidence from the effective pre-school and primary education project, cited in Northern Ireland Assembly Research Paper (2013) Early Years Provision, NIAR 68-13

⁶ For example, Purvis, D., (2011) Educational disadvantage and the Protestant Working Class, A Call to Action, p 7; PUP (2015) Firm Foundations, Educational Underachievement and the Protestant Working Class Education: Getting it right for every child

⁷ Save the Children (2013) Too Young to Fail, Closing the educational achievement gap in NI p.3

Feedback on the screening undertaken by the Department

12. The Commission welcomes that the Department has issued its screening assessment alongside the policy consultation and that the questionnaire includes specific questions relating to S75 asking consultees for:
 - comments on the needs, experiences and priorities of the S75 equality categories in relation to the potential options for review of the admissions criteria and / or the implications of standardising pre-school session time.
 - views in relation to the likely impact of the options on the S75 groups.
13. The Department could have also asked if there was any other research, evidence, data etc. that it should take account of in its considerations.
14. The Department's screening assessment appears to be based on its preferred option i.e. option 3 – extend the statutory criterion and amend the definition of socially disadvantaged circumstances to include all children with parents in receipt of Universal Credit or one of its legacy benefits in the short term with the criterion being removed once pre-school education session times are standardised.
15. In the evidence section, in addition to DE's own statistics, a number of other research reports and consultations have been listed. It would have been useful to outline some of the key findings / data / feedback from these rather than just listing sources of evidences. This would increase transparency and make it easier for stakeholders to engage with the screening assessment.
16. Evidence in relation to racial group focuses on ethnicity. It would also be useful to consider Nationality / proportion of children from Newcomer families whose first language is not English.
17. The section on needs, experiences and priorities doesn't reference that attending pre-school can benefit some S75 groups at risk of educational underachievement - e.g. in relation to ethnic minority/newcomer children and children with a disability.
18. In relation to multiple identities the screening states that support is currently available in the pre-school sector for children with additional support needs due to multiple identities. It would be helpful if DE was more specific about the additional support available and who it is available for.
19. The monitoring arrangements in part 4 of the screening assessment are vague, referring in general terms to 'data used for management information and accountability purposes.' Monitoring will be important to ensure that in widening the social disadvantage criterion to include more people, this does not adversely impact on the ability of section 75 groups who are at risk of educational underachievement to obtain a suitable pre-school place.
20. We trust that this response is of assistance, and if any clarification is required please do not hesitate to contact us.