

Report on the Outcome of Public Consultation

Deferral of School Starting Age 10th January 2022

**Review of School Age Flexibility Team
Department of Education**

Introduction

1. On the 9th November 2021, the Department launched an eight week public consultation on proposals to permit deferral of school starting age for the youngest children in the year group born between 1 April and 1 July. The consultation closed on 4th January 2022
2. This report provides a short summary of the consultation responses and highlights the main findings. Full details of the consultation responses and analysis tables are provided at **Appendix A**.

Consultation Proposals

3. The Department's consultation proposals may be summarised as follows:
 - Flexibility in regard to school starting age will be available on parental request to any child born between 1 April and 1 July. This will **not** involve an educational assessment.
 - Most children born between 1 April and 1 July will continue to start pre-school in September following their 3rd birthday and Year 1 of primary school in September following their 4th birthday.
 - However, should they wish to do so, parents of children born between 1 April and 1 July will be able to defer their entry to pre-school and in turn primary school by 12 months. This means they would then 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 immediately prior to starting primary school. 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.

- Parents who wish their child to defer would usually nominate to do so instead of applying for pre-school at the usual time.
- Deferred children will be treated as normal members of the school year group below their original school year and will apply for pre-school and Year 1 through the normal admissions process. They will usually remain part of their new year group throughout their time at school.
- A parent of a child born between 1 April and 1 July may also choose to nominate to defer entry to primary school at a later stage – at any point prior to the child commencing Year 1. However, if the child has already held a funded pre-school education place, they would not receive a second funded year.
- The law will also be amended so that deferred children do not reach compulsory school age until 1 September after their 5th birthday. This means that there would be no legal requirement for parents to provide full-time education prior to a child starting school should they choose to defer entry to Year 1.
- All children in Northern Ireland currently receive 12 years of compulsory education and are permitted to leave school on 30 June following their 16th birthday. The Department will, therefore, amend the law to ensure deferred children receive 12 years of compulsory education and will remain of compulsory school age until the end of the academic year when they turn 17.

Overview of Responses

4. During the consultation period, 755 responses were received (725 via Citizen Space and 30 by email). The largest number of respondents were parents who made up almost two-thirds of responses, followed by school leaders and teachers.

5. The key headline findings may be summarised as follows:

- 93% strongly agreed or agreed that there should be more flexibility within the Northern Ireland education system for some children to defer school starting age.
- 90% strongly agreed or agreed that deferral should be available on parental request to any Young for Year child born between 1 April and 1 July.
- 75% strongly agreed or agreed that in most cases application for deferral should be made at the usual time of applying for pre-school.
- 75% strongly agreed or agreed that children who defer should receive one year of government funded pre-school in the same manner as other children within the year group.
- 86% thought that deferral should also be available for premature children who are not Young for Year.
- 58% thought that deferral should also be available for multiple births who are not Young for Year.
- 70% thought that deferral should also be available for Looked After Children who are not Young for Year.
- 93% thought that deferral should also be available in exceptional circumstance for any child in the year group based on an individual assessment of need by appropriate professionals.
- 50% thought deferral should also be available in 'other' circumstances.
- 89% strongly agreed or agreed 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

6. There was a large degree of support from respondents both for more flexibility in regard to school starting age in Northern Ireland and the Department's proposals to permit deferral for Young for Year children born between 1 April to 1 July.

7. Whilst some respondents noted that applications for deferral should be made at the time of applying to primary school, the majority of respondents agreed with the proposed approach of applications usually being made at the time of applying to pre-school. A similar majority of responses supported the Department's preferred option of offering one year of government funded pre-school to all children even if they defer.
8. There was strong support from respondents for further flexibility in addition to that proposed by the Department. In particular, there was significant support from respondents for deferral for premature children who are not Young for Year, Looked After Children who are not Young for Year and also that deferral should also be available in exceptional circumstance for any child in the year group based on an individual assessment of need by appropriate professionals. A much slimmer majority of respondents felt deferral should be available for multiple births or in other circumstances.
9. Respondents strongly agreed with the Department's position that the law around compulsory school age should be amended to ensure that deferred children receive 12 years of compulsory education like all other pupils.
10. In addition to answering to the consultation questionnaire, many responses to the consultation also included additional commentary. These comments reflected the variety of views and opinions held by respondents and a desire to share and explain these views. All commentary has been reviewed by officials and detailed commentary from key organisations provided to the Minister.

Concerns

11. A small minority of respondents did not agree with the Department's proposals and cited a range of concerns with proposals for greater flexibility. Others raised concerns with specific aspects of the Department's proposals. The main concerns raised are summarised below.

- There is little research to suggest that deferring school starting age has a significant positive impact on a child's education and development;
- Early diagnosis of any special educational needs for a child is beneficial.
- Early intervention is key to ensuring each child has the opportunity to develop their full educational potential.
- Parents may be unaware that their child is not yet ready for school until they attend pre-school so the proposed timing needs to be more flexible.
- During the pre-school admissions process, applications from penultimate pre-school aged children are considered after those of target aged children, therefore, ensuring that target aged children are prioritised for the places available and are not displaced by a minority of children who may access two years of funded provision. Children who chose to defer should have a similar opportunity, on an equitable basis, to apply for two years of provision where it was available.
- By not providing a second pre-school year, there is potential for an educational gap between pre-school and Year 1.
- The potential for uptake of deferral to be concentrated amongst the most advantaged in society.

Other Key Issues

12. There are two further key areas which the public consultation responses particularly emphasised. These were the need to provide wide ranging resources and support to parents to inform decision making and the need for robust monitoring and review of the implementation of the proposals to ascertain the impact on both those Young for Year Children who deferred starting school and those who did not.

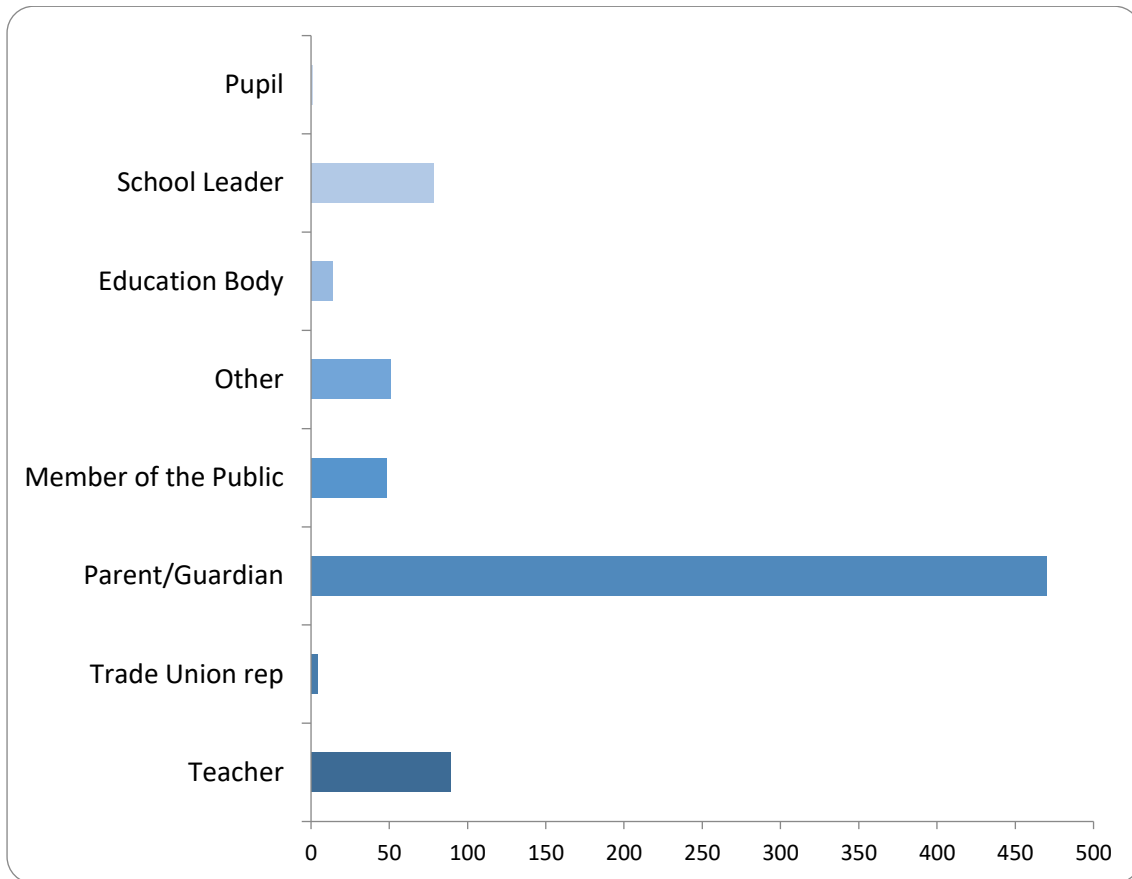
Next Steps

13. The public consultation has indicated significant agreement from the vast majority of respondents both with the need for greater flexibility more generally and for the Department's policy proposals to introduce deferral on parental request for any child born between 1 April and 1 July.

14. The Department will use the wide range of information from the consultation to inform the development of final policy proposals and changes to the law on this issue.

Respondents

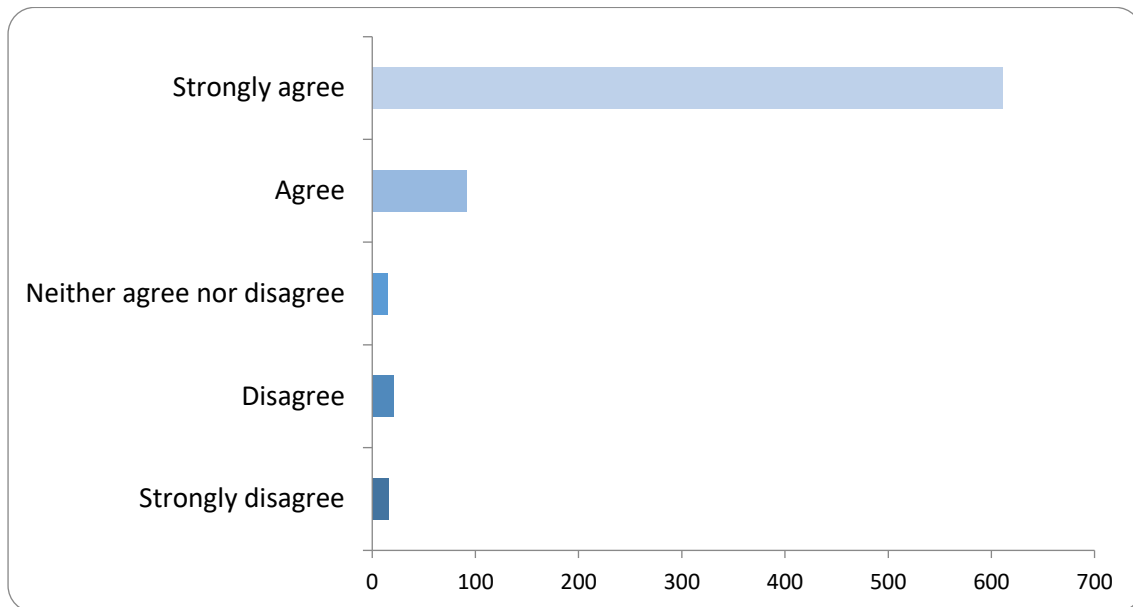
There were 755 responses to this question.



Option	Total	Percent
Pupil	1	0.13%
School leader	78	10.33%
Education Body	14	1.85%
Other	51	6.75%
Member of the Public	48	6.36%
Parent/Guardian	470	62.25%
Trade Union rep	4	0.53%
Teacher	89	11.79%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

1. 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?

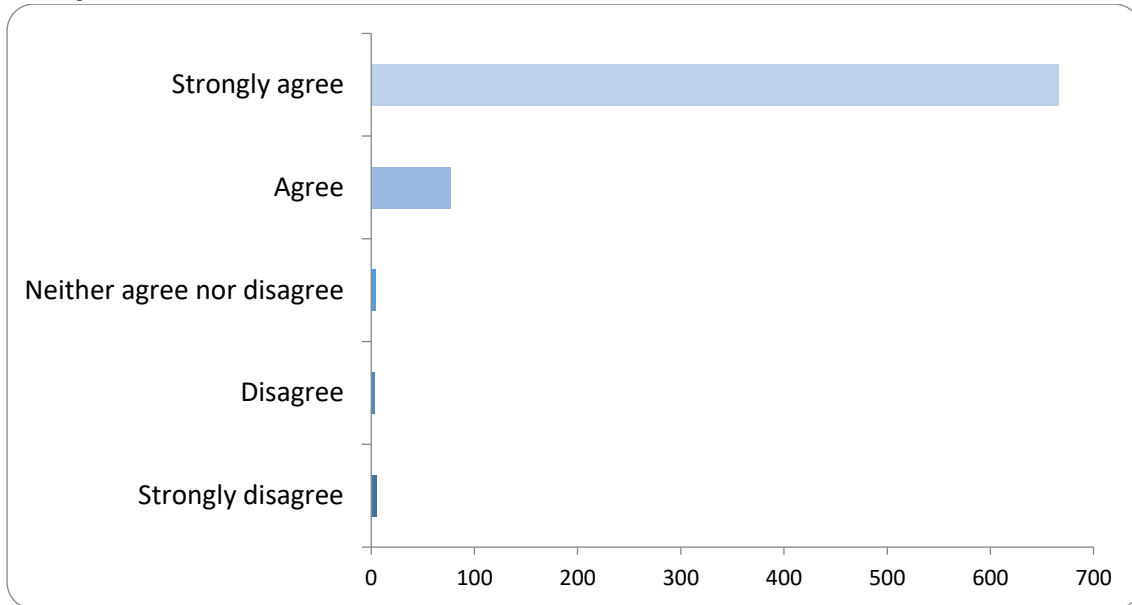
There were 755 responses to this part of the question.



Option	Total	Percent
Strongly agree	611	80.93%
Agree	92	12.19%
Neither agree nor disagree	15	1.99%
Disagree	21	2.78%
Strongly disagree	16	2.12%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

2. Key Principles

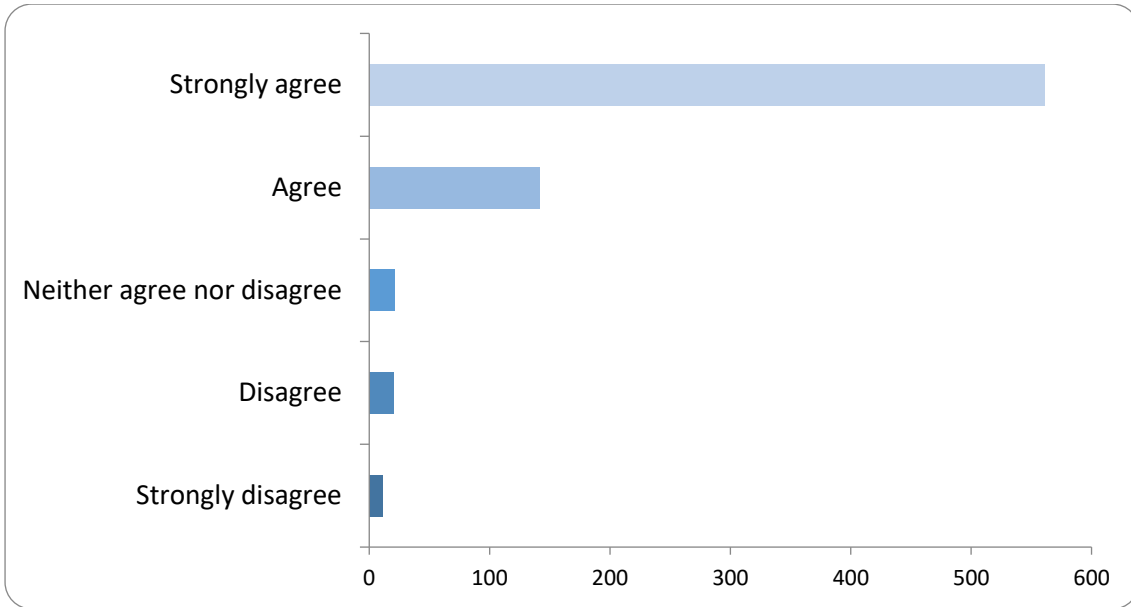
Any system of flexibility in regard to school starting age should: a) Be child-centred and aim to ensure that all children receive education suitable to their individual age, ability and aptitude. There were 755 responses to this part of the question.



Option	Total	Percent
Strongly agree	666	88.21%
Agree	77	10.20%
Neither agree nor disagree	4	0.53%
Disagree	3	0.40%
Strongly disagree	5	0.66%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

b) Permit an element of parental preference in regard to school starting age for very young children.

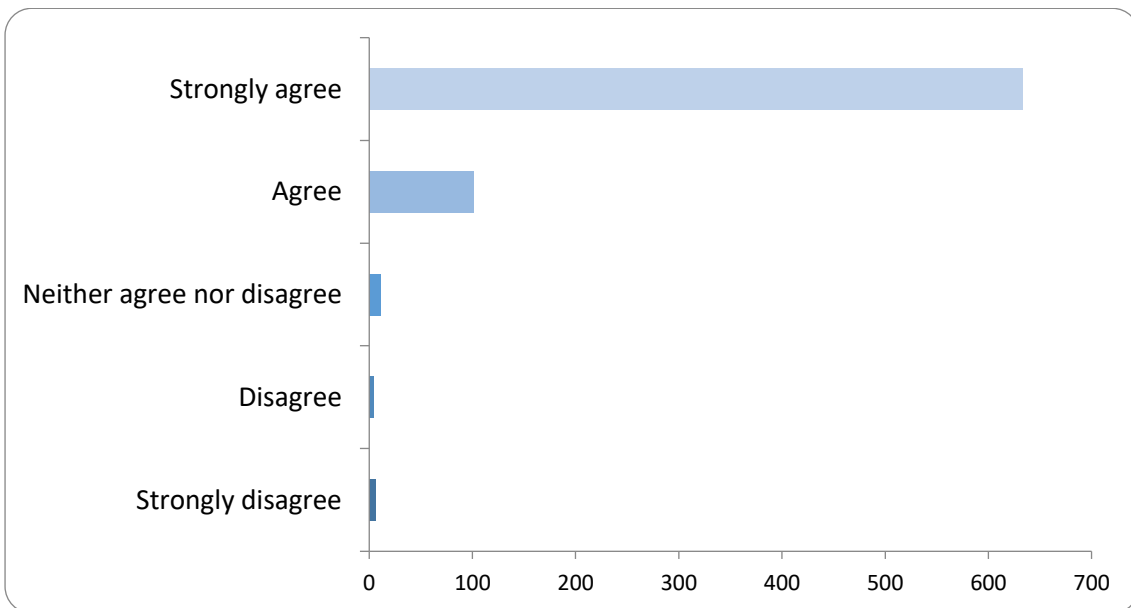
There were 755 responses to this part of the question.



Option	Total	Percent
Strongly agree	561	74.30%
Agree	142	18.81%
Neither agree nor disagree	21	2.78%
Disagree	20	2.65%
Strongly disagree	11	1.46%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

c) Ensure that flexibility operates as equitably and fairly as possible for all children - both those who defer and those who do not - across the education system.

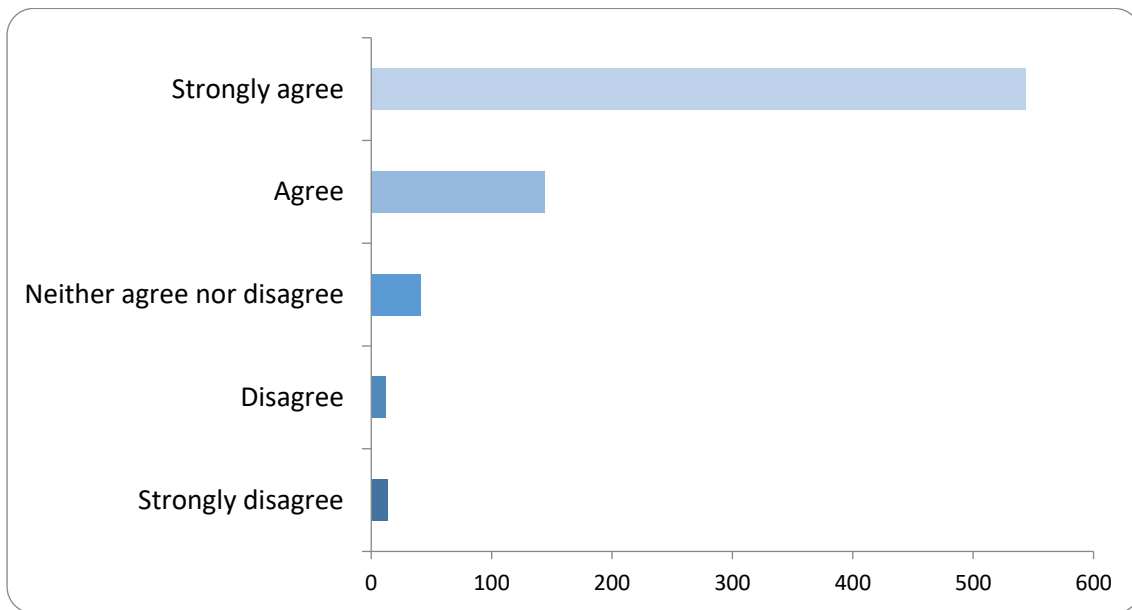
There were 755 responses to this part of the question.



Option	Total	Percent
Strongly agree	630	83.46%
Agree	100	13.25%
Neither agree nor disagree	15	2.00%
Disagree	5	0.66%
Strongly disagree	5	0.66%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

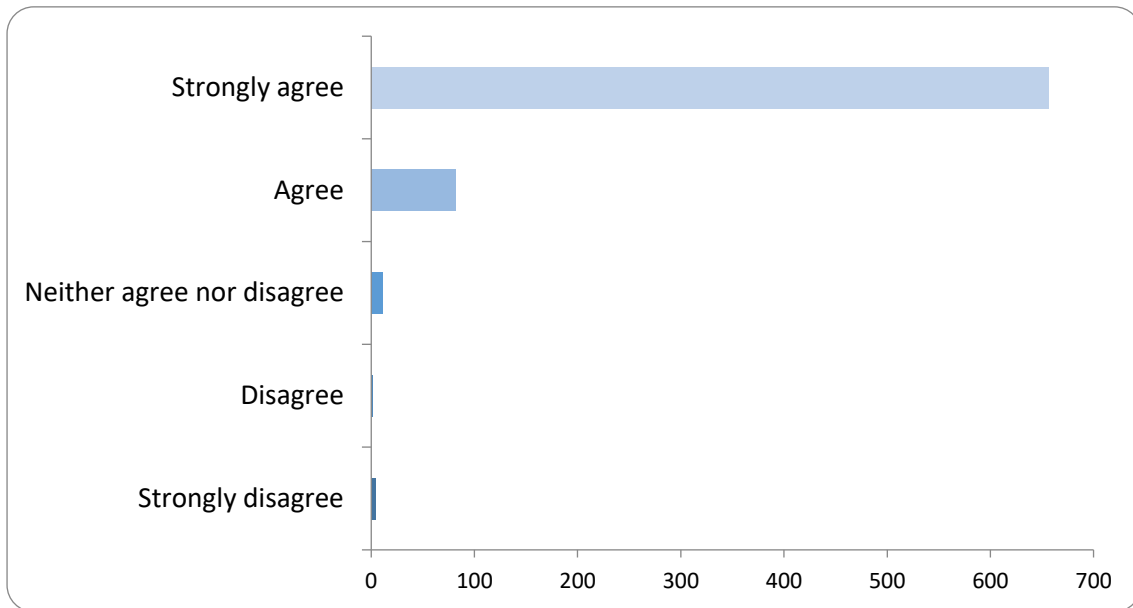
Strongly agree	633	83.84%
Agree	101	13.38%
Neither agree nor disagree	11	1.46%
Disagree	4	0.53%
Strongly disagree	6	0.79%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

d) Ensure that provision of flexibility is compatible with the efficient and effective operation of the school system in the interests of all children There were 755 responses to this part of the question.



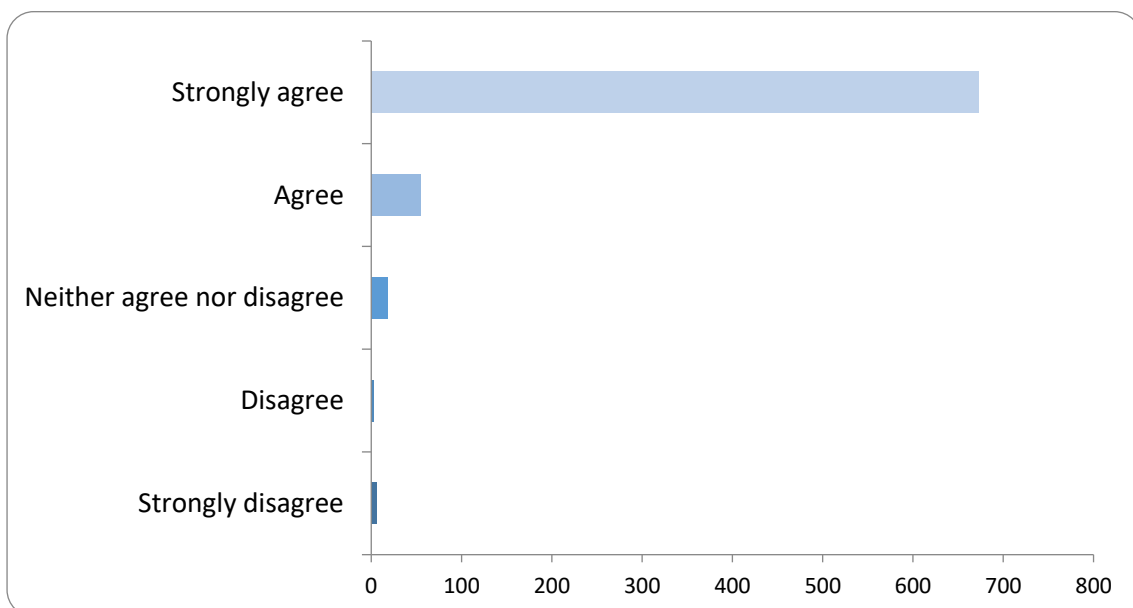
Option	Total	Percent
Strongly agree	544	72.05%
Agree	144	19.07%
Neither agree nor disagree	41	5.43%
Disagree	12	1.59%
Strongly disagree	14	1.85%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

e) Be easy for parents to understand and access and avoid unnecessary bureaucracy. There were 755 responses to this part of the question.



Option	Total	Percent
Strongly agree	657	87.02%
Agree	82	10.86%
Neither agree nor disagree	11	1.46%
Disagree	1	0.13%
Strongly disagree	4	0.53%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

f) Ensure all children continue to have the same entitlement to receive 12 years of compulsory education. There were 755 responses to this part of the question.

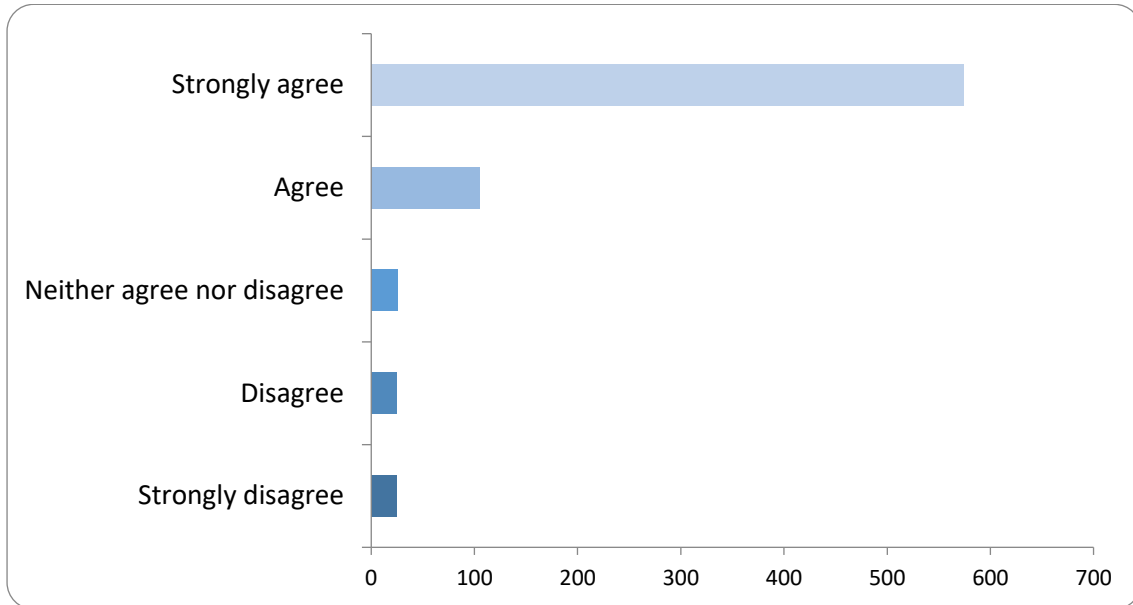


Option	Total	Percent
Strongly agree	657	87.02%
Agree	82	10.86%
Neither agree nor disagree	11	1.46%
Disagree	1	0.13%
Strongly disagree	4	0.53%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

Strongly agree	673	89.14%
Agree	55	7.28%
Neither agree nor disagree	18	2.38%
Disagree	3	0.40%
Strongly disagree	6	0.79%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

3. 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?

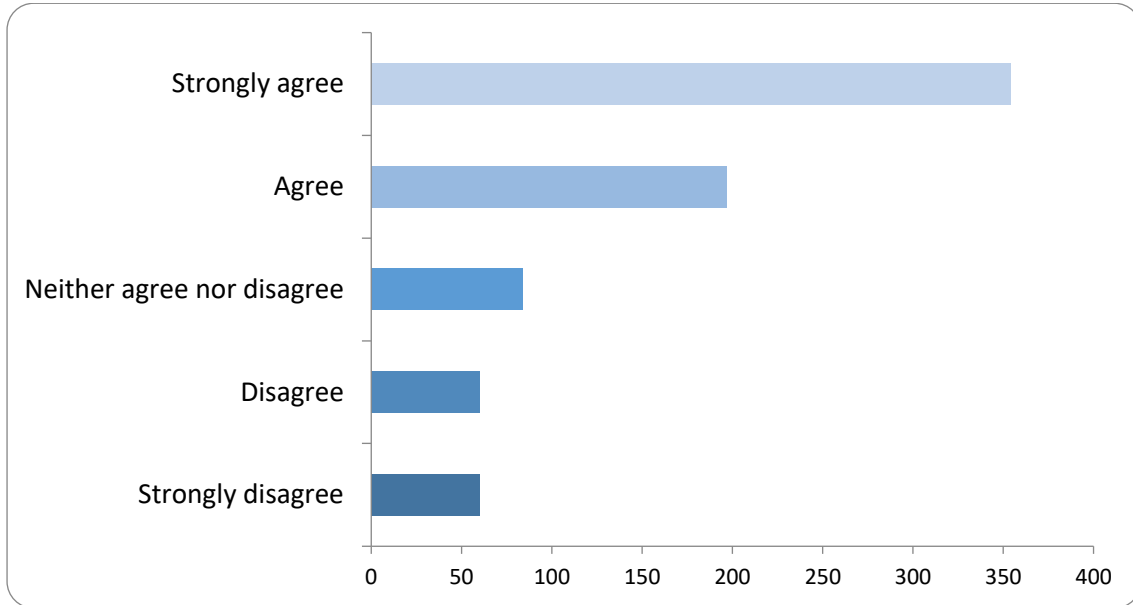
There were 755 responses to this part of the question.



Option	Total	Percent
Strongly agree	574	76.03%
Agree	105	13.91%
Neither agree nor disagree	26	3.44%
Disagree	25	3.31%
Strongly disagree	25	3.31%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

4. 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?

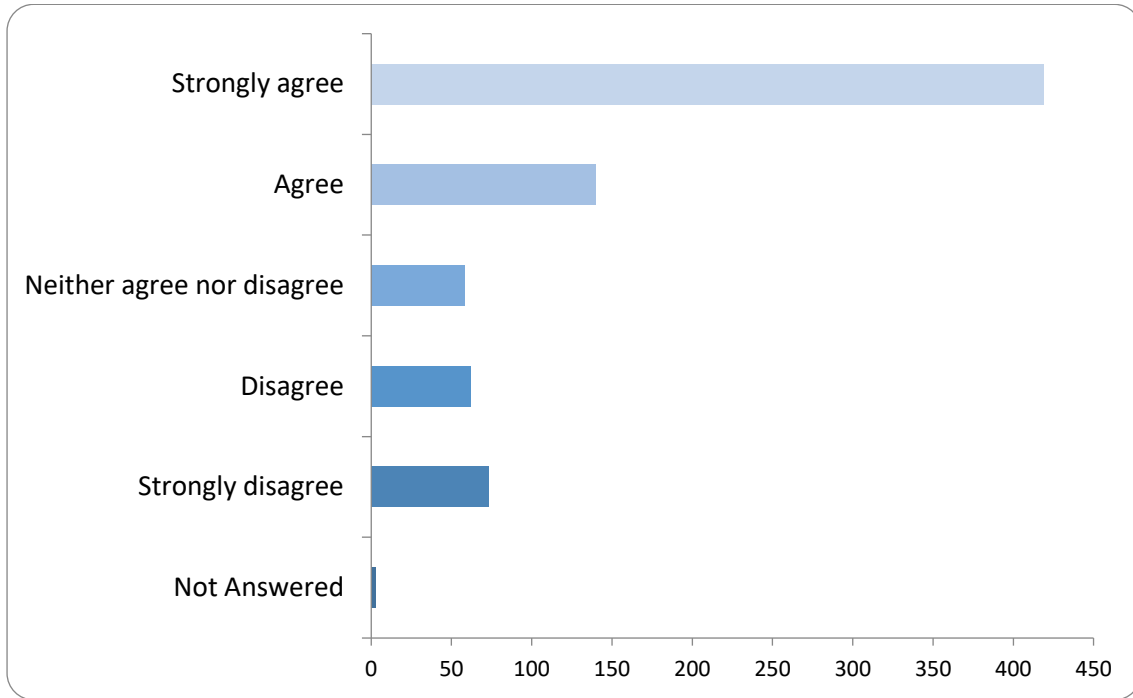
There were 755 responses to this part of the question.



Option	Total	Percent
Strongly agree	354	46.89%
Agree	197	26.09%
Neither agree nor disagree	84	11.13%
Disagree	60	7.95%
Strongly disagree	60	7.95%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

5. 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?

There were 752 responses to this part of the question.



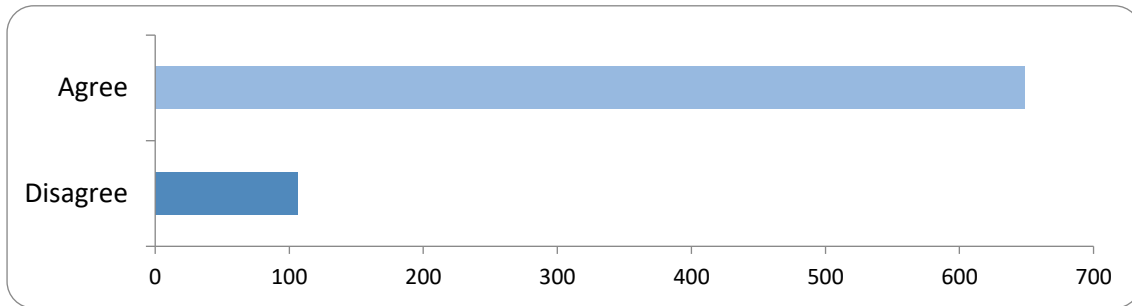
Option	Total	Percent
Strongly agree	419	55.50%
Agree	140	18.54%
Neither agree nor disagree	58	7.68%
Disagree	62	8.21%
Strongly disagree	73	9.67%
Not Answered	3	0.40%

6. Other Options for Flexibility

In addition to Young for Year children, do you think the option of deferral of school starting age should also be available in the following circumstances?

a) Premature children (who are not Young for Year)

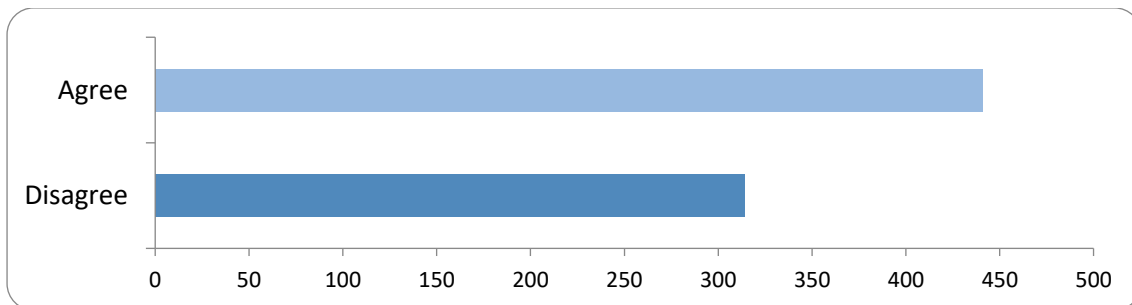
There were 755 responses to this part of the question.



Option	Total	Percent
Agree	649	85.96%
Disagree	106	14.04%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

-b) Multiple births (who are not Young for Year)

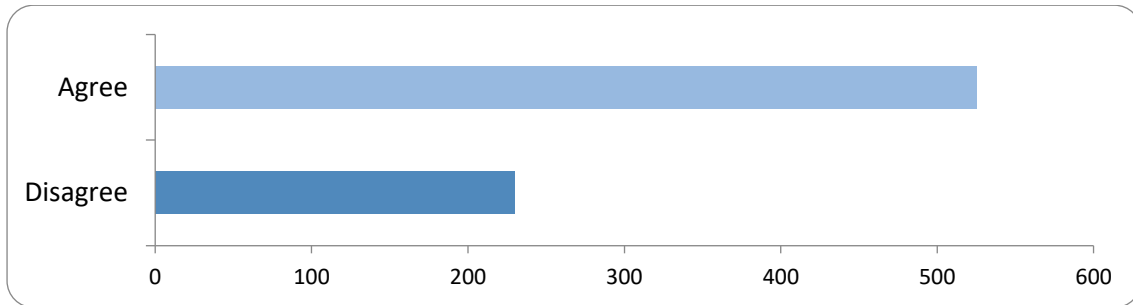
There were 755 responses to this part of the question.



Option	Total	Percent
Agree	441	58.41%
Disagree	314	41.59%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

c) Children Looked After (who are not Young for Year)

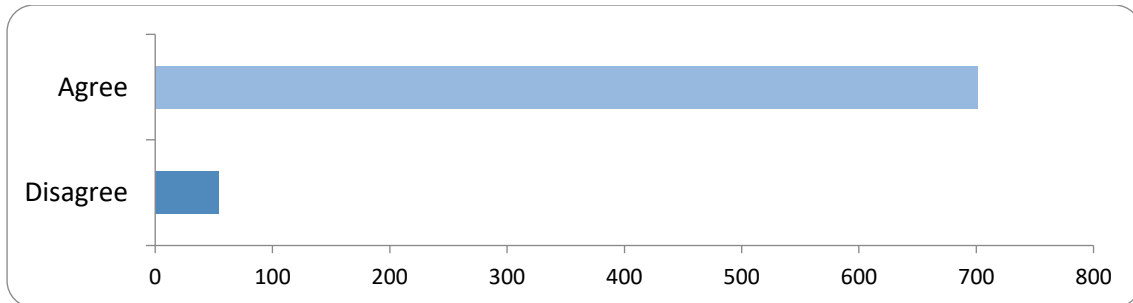
There were 755 responses to this part of the question.



Option	Total	Percent
Agree	525	69.54%
Disagree	230	30.46%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

d) In exceptional circumstance for any child in the year group based on an individual assessment of need by appropriate professionals.

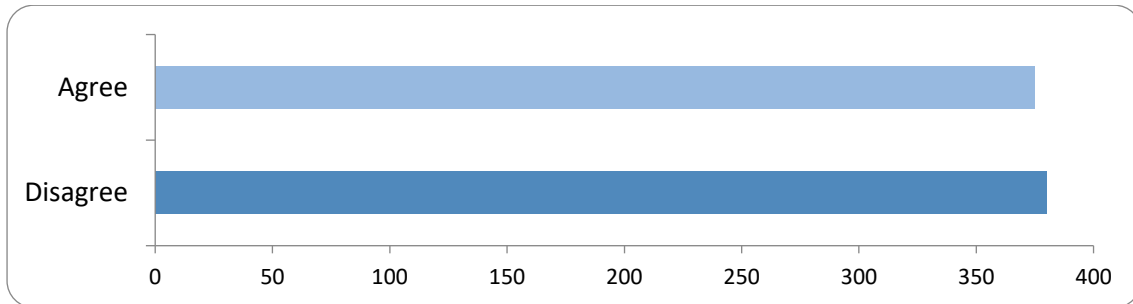
There were 755 responses to this part of the question.



Option	Total	Percent
Agree	701	92.85%
Disagree	54	7.15%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

e) Other

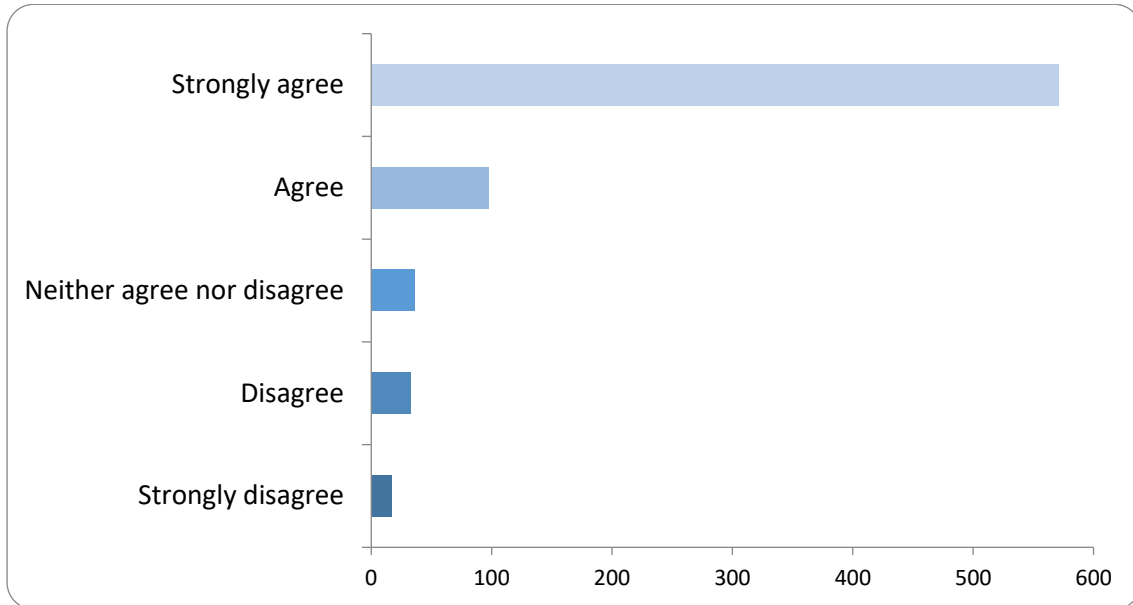
There were 755 responses to this part of the question.



Option	Total	Percent
Agree	375	49.67%
Disagree	380	50.33%
Not Answered	0	0.00%

7. 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?

There were 755 responses to this part of the question.



Option	Total	Percent
Strongly agree	571	75.63%
Agree	98	12.98%
Neither agree nor disagree	36	4.77%
Disagree	33	4.37%
Strongly disagree	17	2.25%
Not Answered	0	0.00%