

## Department for Education 'Evidence check' memorandum Summer-born children

### Policy

1. The School Admissions Code<sup>1</sup> (para. 2.16) requires provision for the admission of all children in the September following their fourth birthday. However, children are not required to start school until they reach compulsory school age, which is on the prescribed day following their fifth birthday (or *on* their fifth birthday if it falls on a prescribed day). The prescribed days are 31 December, 31 March and 31 August. This means that children born from 1 April to 31 August are not required to start school until the September following their fifth birthday – the point at which the other children in their year group are moving up from the reception class to year one.

2. Flexibilities exist for any parent who feels their child is not ready to start school before compulsory school age. They may request that their child attends part-time, or defer their entry until later in the school year following their fourth birthday. In addition, parents of summer-born children may request that their child is admitted to the reception class – rather than year one (their normal age group) – in the September following their fifth birthday. The admission authority must make a decision based on the circumstances of the case.

3. We published non-statutory advice<sup>2</sup> on the application of this duty to summer-born children in July 2013. We are now consulting<sup>3</sup> on some changes to the School Admissions Code. These include clarification of the circumstances an admission authority should consider when making a decision – including parents' wishes, the child's academic, social and emotional development, whether they have previously been educated outside their normal age group, and headteacher views.

### Evidence

4. A large literature (as summarised, for example, in Sykes et al (2009)) shows consistent evidence that "summer-born" (May-September) children in England perform significantly worse than other children in tests at every age. For example, Crawford et al (2013) find that, at age seven, August-born pupils are 26 percentage points less likely to reach the expected level than identical September-born pupils. The gaps falls to 6.4 percentage points in achieving five or more GCSEs or equivalents at grades A\*-C. However, Crawford et al (2013) also find little evidence that detrimental effects (on likelihood of being in employment, on earnings, and on measures of wellbeing) persist in adulthood.

5. Crawford et al (2013) identify four potential drivers of poorer performance by summer-born children (but the bulk of the evidence is concerned with the first two points):

- *Age at test* – summer-born children are the youngest and least mature when tested.
- *Length of schooling* – when admissions systems have different entry points during the year, younger children who start later can receive less schooling than their peers.
- *Age on starting school* – younger children may be less able to cope with a 'formal' curriculum.
- *Relative age* – younger children may feel inadequate compared to older, more mature classmates.

6. *Age when sitting tests* – Being younger when tested is the main driver of relative age effects (Sharp et al, 2009; Crawford et al, 2013). Researchers have therefore suggested

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<sup>1</sup> [www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-admissions-code](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-admissions-code)

<sup>2</sup> [www.gov.uk/government/publications/summer-born-children-school-admission](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/summer-born-children-school-admission)

<sup>3</sup> [www.gov.uk/government/consultations/changes-to-the-school-admissions-code](http://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/changes-to-the-school-admissions-code)

providing greater flexibility in assessments, e.g. to age-normalise exam results so that children are compared to others of exactly the same age or to have multiple examination periods which allow children to sit exams when they are ready, would be the potential ways to counter the problem.

7. *Flexible within-year admissions* – Crawford et al (2010) used former variations in admissions policies to examine the relationship of the date of starting school with academic outcomes. Prior to the 2010 requirement to provide for admission of all children in the September following their fourth birthday, some schools had a single admission point in September in the academic year in which children turn five, while others had entry dates in September and January (depending on the child's date of birth) and some had dates in September, January and April. The key findings were:

- Significantly lower test scores at age seven for summer-born children who started school under a double (rather than a single) entry point system, and slightly worse still for those who started under a triple entry system.
- In general, summer-born children are slightly better off if they start school in September of the academic year in which they turn five, rather than delaying until the following January or April (Crawford et al, 2007).
- DfE analysis (2010) also found that pupils who joined Reception class in September performed better across the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile than those who deferred until January, and January entrants in turn did better than summer term entrants.

8. *Delayed admissions* – NfER (2009) concluded “*The practices of deferring entry for children not considered to be ‘ready’ for school or requiring children to repeat a year are not recommended for addressing relative age effects*”, and the 2009 independent review of the primary curriculum (the “Rose Review”; DCSF, 2009) also considered deferred entry to be “a questionable response”. In the Netherlands, children can spend up to two years in kindergarten before progressing to primary school at age six. However, keeping children considered to be too immature for primary school in kindergarten for the second year was shown to be ineffective (Sharp et al, 2009). In the US, the practice of delaying the start of kindergarten for age-eligible children to allow more time for social, emotional, intellectual or physical growth is known as “academic redshirting” but the balance of evidence suggests that it is ineffective (Lincove & Painter, 2006).

9. *Parental choice and cost implications* – A survey of parents in 2009 showed that 60% wanted a choice on when their child starts school (TNS-BMRB, 2010) but views were divided on when the start should be; 55% said they would choose the September following their child's fourth birthday; 32% would prefer to wait until their child was five; 12% wanted a start date between those two points. Of those who wanted to delay their child's start, 70% would seek childcare instead (so it seems clear that demand for childcare would increase if parents had the option of delaying school start dates). This emphasises the point that there are likely to be significant costs (childcare, foregone income) associated with delayed school starting dates.

10. *Other international evidence* – Sharp et al (2009) found that few countries have policies to mediate the impact of the summer birth effect, but the authors did find further relevant evidence:

- In New Zealand, all children begin school at their fifth birthday (i.e. staggered entries) and only sit tests after the same specified period of teaching time.
- Evidence from Germany and Switzerland on starting school *earlier* than the compulsory age suggests that the practice does not confer any attainment benefits. The same was found in Norway but alongside a significant positive effect on IQ scores at age 18.

11. *Conclusion* – The evidence suggests that allowing flexibility around the school start date is popular with parents. A September start date for a summer-born pupil (rather than the following January or April) is advantageous but arguably not sufficiently so as to justify removing the flexibility. Delaying starts by a year or more incurs significant costs and the evidence of its effect is mostly neutral or negative. NfER (2009) argued that the evidence suggests that the Government's attention should focus on ensuring; developmentally appropriate experiences for relatively younger children; that identification of special educational needs takes account of relative age; and that relative age effects are taken into account in assessment results. Crawford et al (2013) argue for age-adjusted test scores to feed into performance tables, to determine entry to schools that select on ability, and potentially to assign pupils to ability groups but also see no reason to give greater flexibility over school starting age to parents.

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