

## **Department for Education 'Evidence check' memorandum School starting age**

### **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. Parents who feel their child is not ready to start school before the compulsory school age can request that their child attends part-time, or defer their entry until later in the school year, but not beyond the point where they reach compulsory school age. 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 on requests for children to be admitted outside their normal age group. Circumstances to be considered include: the parent's wishes; the child's academic, social and emotional development; whether they have previously been educated outside their normal age group; and head teacher views.

### **Observed school starting age**

4. The current school starting age of five was introduced in the 1870 Elementary Education Act and made compulsory under the 1880 Elementary Education Act. The reasons for starting at age five related mainly to child protection issues, such as avoiding exploitation at home and unhealthy street conditions<sup>4</sup>. Although attendance at school is compulsory from five years old, many children start school prior to this – for example there were 624,000 four-year-olds in state-funded primary school in January 2014<sup>5</sup>.
5. There are a number of possible reasons for children starting school at a younger age. In the 1980s, pre-school places were insufficient to meet parental demand, which was rising due to an increasing number of women in the workforce. In addition, the 1988 Education Reform Act gave schools greater control over their budgets, which were linked to the number of children attending, thereby giving an incentive to recruit younger children. At the same time, there was a reduction in the population of children starting school, which gave schools the capacity to act on this incentive. Regulations on staff ratios and qualifications that applied to nursery classes did not apply to school reception classes. It was therefore in

---

<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)

<sup>4</sup> Riggall, A. and Sharp, C. (2008) The structure of primary education: England and other countries. NFER [www.nfer.ac.uk/nfer/publications/PRO01/PRO01.pdf](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/nfer/publications/PRO01/PRO01.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Schools, pupils and their characteristics; January 2014 [www.gov.uk/government/statistics/schools-pupils-and-their-characteristics-january-2014](http://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/schools-pupils-and-their-characteristics-january-2014)

schools' interests to lower the starting age by creating reception classes<sup>6</sup>. And then there is also the parental wish of some to start children at school earlier.

---

<sup>6</sup> Riggall, A. and Sharp, C. (2008) The structure of primary education: England and other countries. NFER  
[www.nfer.ac.uk/nfer/publications/PRO01/PRO01.pdf](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/nfer/publications/PRO01/PRO01.pdf)

## International comparison of school starting age

6. The English statutory school starting age of five is relatively low compared to other countries, albeit within a narrow range. The most common compulsory starting age is six. Table 1 (source: Sharp, 2002<sup>7</sup>) shows the statutory school starting age for a range of European countries, although it must be noted that in some countries children are often admitted to school earlier than statutory age, as is the case in England.

Age four	<i>Northern Ireland</i>
Age five	<b>England</b> , Malta, Netherlands, <i>Scotland, Wales</i>
Age six	Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Republic of Ireland, Italy, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Norway, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain
Age seven	Bulgaria, Estonia, Denmark, Finland, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Sweden

7. Data from 213 countries<sup>8</sup>, suggests that children start school at age six in 62% of countries, at age five in 10%, and at age seven in 20% of countries.

## International comparison of pre-school education

8. Although children in other countries tend to enter compulsory primary education later than children in England, most children under the age of five in OECD countries attend pre-school education<sup>9</sup>. In some European countries such as Belgium, France and Norway, more than 90% of three-year-olds and 82% of four-year-olds attend early education provision. In the UK, 86% of three-year-olds and 67% of four-year-olds attend early education provision (a further 30% of four-year-olds attend primary education). Pre-school education is also compulsory in a number of European countries including Cyprus (aged four years and eight months); Denmark (aged six); Greece (aged five<sup>10</sup>); Hungary (aged five<sup>11</sup>); Luxembourg (aged four); Bulgaria (aged six); Latvia (aged five-to-six); Poland (aged five); and Serbia (aged six).

## Impact of pre-school education on achievement

9. Evidence from the EPPE<sup>12</sup> project has shown the beneficial impact of attending pre-school education on cognitive and social/behavioural outcomes. Attending pre-school (compared to not attending pre-school) had a beneficial impact on attainment in English and mathematics, as well as on pro-social behaviour at age 11. Similarly, for every month of preschool after the age of two, there is a beneficial impact on cognitive and behavioural development. It is suggested that high-quality early education will also help close the attainment gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children at the start of primary school.

<sup>7</sup> Sharp, C. (2002) School Starting Age: European Policy and Recent Research. NFER  
[www.nfer.ac.uk/nfer/publications/44410/44410.pdf](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/nfer/publications/44410/44410.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.PRM.AGES/countries/1W?display=default>

<sup>9</sup> Education at a Glance 2013. OECD [www.oecd.org/edu/eag2013%20\(eng\)--FINAL%2020%20June%202013.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/edu/eag2013%20(eng)--FINAL%2020%20June%202013.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Aged five by 31 December in the year they enrol.

<sup>11</sup> Note this is due to change to age three in 2014.

<sup>12</sup> [www.gov.uk/government/publications/final-report-from-the-primary-phase-pre-school-school-and-family-influences-on-childrens-development-during-key-stage-2-ages-7-11](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/final-report-from-the-primary-phase-pre-school-school-and-family-influences-on-childrens-development-during-key-stage-2-ages-7-11)