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To: parents, local authorities, schools and admission authorities

The admission to school of summer born children

Having spoken to a number of parents in recent months, I know that ensuring their children start school at the right age, when they are ready and not before, is of the utmost importance. I wanted, therefore, to set out the government's position on the admission of summer born children, and our intention to amend the School Admissions Code to ensure that summer born children do not miss out on an important year of schooling.

The School Admissions Code (the Code) requires school admission authorities to provide for the admission of all children in the September following their fourth birthday. We know most parents are happy for their child to go to school at this point, confident that they are ready for the classroom.

A child does not reach compulsory school age until 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. There are some flexibilities for parents who do not feel their child is ready to go to school before compulsory school age. The Code enables parents to defer the date their child is admitted to school until later in the reception year, or to arrange for them to attend on a part-time basis.

Children born between 1 April and 31 August are not required to start school until the September following their fifth birthday - the point at which other children in their age group are moving up from reception to year 1. If parents wish their child to start school at this point, and to be admitted to the reception class rather than year one, they must currently request they are admitted outside their normal age group. The Code requires the admission authority¹ to make a decision on the basis of the circumstances of the case and in the best interests of the child. It is clear, however, that this system is flawed, with parents and admission authorities often failing to agree on what is in the child's best interests.

¹ The local authority is the admission authority for community and voluntary controlled schools. For voluntary aided schools, foundation schools and academies, the individual school's governing body or academy trust is the admission authority.

The number of parents who request their child is admitted out of their normal age group is small, but for these parents the issue will have serious implications. It also takes up a disproportionate amount of time for the local authorities and schools concerned. We have already taken some steps to improve the position. We published advice in July 2013 to dispel some of the myths that appeared to hinder admission authorities agreeing to parents' requests. We made it clear, for example, that there are no barriers to prevent these children starting school out of their normal age group, that schools will not miss out on funding, and that children are only assessed when they reach the end of a key stage rather than when they reach a particular age.

In December 2014, we amended the Code so that all decisions must be made in the child's best interests and that, in doing so, admission authorities should take account of the parents' views and information about the child's development. The Code now also requires them to take account of the views of the head teacher of the school concerned, to explain clearly the reasons for their decision, and to set out the process for requesting admission a child is admitted out of their normal age group. At the same time, we revised our published advice to simplify the decision making process.

It is disappointing that some parents continue to report that the changes are not working. They either feel forced to send their child to school before they are ready and before they are required to do so, or else miss out on their reception year at school where the essential teaching of early reading and arithmetic takes place. I have also heard that some children who are admitted out of their normal age group are later required to miss a year and move up against their wishes to join the other children of the same age range.

We have, therefore, decided that it is necessary to amend the School Admissions Code further to ensure that summer born children can be admitted to the reception class at the age of five if it is in line with their parents' wishes, and to ensure that those children are able to remain with that cohort as they progress through school, including through to secondary school. We will conduct a full public consultation in due course; and subject to Parliamentary approval will introduce these further changes to ensure that no child is forced to start school before they are ready.

Yours sincerely
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