

PE2142/C: Review the policy on school commencement and deferred school entry in Scotland

Petitioner written submission, 21 May 2025

In addition to the scientific evidence that I based my petition upon, felt it important to share a lived experience in the hope of bringing this fairly abstract issue to life. We moved to Scotland in July 2023. On arrival, we were led to believe that Scotland had a different school starting age to England and that it was offset by around 6 months. We joined the school “year-groups” as we were advised, however, we rapidly became concerned that our children born in the youngest 3 months were no longer enjoying school or sport.

I watched them playing rugby and did not understand how they were the second smallest on their teams. I was so concerned that they may have stopped growing that I measured their heights and plotted them on a growth chart. They were 50th and >95th centile for height making it inconceivable that they could be the second smallest. I asked other parents, and they said that this will be because of all the boys that deferred. For context a 50th centile child in primary school if they are the oldest of the year will appear to be around the 95th centile and around the 5th if they are the youngest of 12-months. Deferral exacerbates this difference and in primary school to place the sort of difference in growth across these 19-month cohorts into a context that may be more relatable, it is roughly equivalent to the difference between a 6ft tall 85kg man and a 6ft 8ins 119kg man.

We know that children up to the age of 14 are more physically injured if in the youngest 3 months of a 12-month cohort and that the oldest are least injured. The mechanism behind this is physical mismatch in sporting settings. It switches after 14 and this has been attributed to the youngest children being driven from sport. This is not good for the health of the nation. A now famous footballer was famously dropped by his academy for being “a bit chubby” aged 12, and a rugby league Man of Steel winner was dropped by his academy at U14 for being “small and immature”. consider trying to excel or just avoid injury when the youngest of 19 months. Logic would suggest that in Scotland children will be more frequently and more seriously injured until they give up, but no studies have looked at this! My children asked to stop rugby due to repeatedly being hurt and indeed injured. They moved to other sports. This is called strategic adaptation though it was for safety not strategically planned.

In school they are doing well but both became anxious where they have not before. This is consistent with the higher rates of anxiety, depression, and suicide in the youngest of 12-month cohorts. Their good academic performance means they also appear lower in the order of merit than they should: abilities tend to converge in classrooms pulling the youngest up and the oldest down. This disadvantages both as on average the oldest underachieve but still attain higher grades and the youngest overachieve but not by enough and so lose out on opportunities. To quote an academic paper on the issue in 12-month cohorts: the “disadvantage is insurmountable”.

Now consider the equality of this process. We did not know of the nuances of deferral due to being migrants. It was presented as an option to delay school commencement, but our children had already commenced and were excelling. Our experience may help explain both migrant and ethnic variation in deferral. The socio-economic variation is likely due to the culture of deferral that started amongst the wealthiest males.

You will note also that it is more common for males to defer. I strongly suspect the artificial creation of older male / younger female cohorts is detrimental to female attainment (possibly unseen due to generally better female attainment) and may represent cultural/structural sexism. The belief that boys are being disadvantaged and that we are just levelling the playing field for the boys (against the girls!) has been shown in studies.

When we were told about deferral it was presented as a choice, one that I have seen being described as part of Scottish schooling heritage. I have two issues with this. One is that "choice" is not open to half of the year, one of ours was not offered nor allowed to defer. The other is that it is not deferral: Scotland starts the August after turning 5. What is referred to as "deferral" is therefore the correct way to start school and starting younger/earlier is advancement. We did not knowingly choose to advance our child and as a result our children have lost opportunities and been physically and mentally harmed. They will also attain less academically than they would have if cohorted correctly and will have lost out on leadership opportunities due to your policy. All this will result in lower life-time earnings and poorer lifetime health. This makes it a social determinant of health: one we impose. It does come with compensatory benefits/advantages for those that have deferred but that does not seem fair. In 12-month cohorts it has been described as "creating winners and losers".

Our "fresh-eyes" will hopefully give you insight into the harms of this system. A system that must change and should have been evaluated before implementation. It must now be evaluated, corrected, and children that have been advanced supported in overcoming the disadvantage.