

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee  
Wednesday 4 June 2025  
10th Meeting, 2025 (Session 6)

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

### Introduction

**Petitioner** Andrew Stuart

**Petition summary** Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to review the policy on school commencement and deferred school entry in Scotland and seek to reverse the potential harms caused by existing processes that have resulted in 19-month school year groups.

**Webpage** <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE2142>

1. This is a new petition that was lodged on 10 February 2025.
2. A full summary of this petition and its aims can be found at **Annexe A**.
3. A SPICe briefing has been prepared to inform the Committee's consideration of the petition and can be found at **Annexe B**.
4. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 12 signatures have been received on this petition.
5. The Committee seeks views from the Scottish Government on all new petitions before they are formally considered.
6. The Committee has received submissions from the Scottish Government and the Petitioner, which are set out in **Annexe C** of this paper.

### Action

7. The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take.

**Clerks to the Committee**  
**May 2025**

## **Annexe A: Summary of petition**

### **PE2142: Review the policy on school commencement and deferred school entry in Scotland**

#### **Petitioner**

Andrew Stuart

#### **Date Lodged**

10 February 2025

#### **Petition summary**

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to review the policy on school commencement and deferred school entry in Scotland and seek to reverse the potential harms caused by existing processes that have resulted in 19-month school year groups.

#### **Background information**

Children are cohorted for good reasons for sport and education. In almost all other countries, and in many sports, it is tightly limited to 12months. In Scotland it is permitted to extend to 19months.

Our deferral rates are among the highest in the world and it is likely to be doing more harm than good.

We know that being among the youngest in a normal cohort places you at disadvantage with higher rates of physical injury, mental ill health, suicide, some SENs, lower academic attainment, and lifetime earnings making this a public health problem. This is known as the Relative Age Effect. It can be expected that the effect is causing significant harm to children, but we do not know for certain because Scotland did not study the effect of this decision.

We also know that deferral is disproportionately chosen by white, wealthy, males; often the least disadvantaged thus widening inequality.

## Annexe B: SPICe briefing on PE2142



### Brief overview of issues raised by the petition

The petitioner is seeking a review of the policy around school start dates. The petitioner argues that the current system creates school cohorts where the age ranges are too wide.

This paper briefly sets out:

- the current policy in relation to school start dates
- how this interacts with funded Early Learning and Childcare
- some examples of how other jurisdictions manage school starts
- highlights some wider issues which touch upon this area.

### Policy and law starting school

A child is of school age at five years. However, the practicalities of when pupils start school is complicated.

The legislation around school start dates is set out in [section 32 of the Education \(Scotland\) Act 1980](#). Each local authority determines a school commencement date. Each local authority also sets another date in the year which is the latest date after the commencement date “on or before which a child must attain the age of five years in order to [be] of sufficient age to commence attendance at a public primary school at that school commencement date.” Local authorities generally must ensure that the second date is no more than six months and one week before the following commencement date. On paper local authorities have flexibility in when to set either of these dates, although there appears to be a high level of consistency across Scotland.

[Parents have a legal duty to ensure that their child receives “efficient education for him suitable to his age, ability and aptitude either by causing him to attend a public school regularly or by other means.”](#) Parents can choose not to send their child to school if they are not five years old at the commencement date – this is called deferring entry.

Generally, school years commence in mid-August and the second date is at the end of February. A school year group mainly consists of children born between the beginning of March in one year and the end of February the following year. Children are typically aged between around 4.5 and 5.5 years when they start school. In addition, any child whose start was deferred in the previous year will also join

P1. These children will be younger than six years old. (In rare cases, starting school might be deferred further if that is in the best interests of the child.)

A proposal to change the school commencement date of a primary school is a 'relevant proposal' under the [Schools \(Consultation\) \(Scotland\) Act 2010](#). This means that local authorities would be required to undertake a statutory consultation process before changing the commencement date.

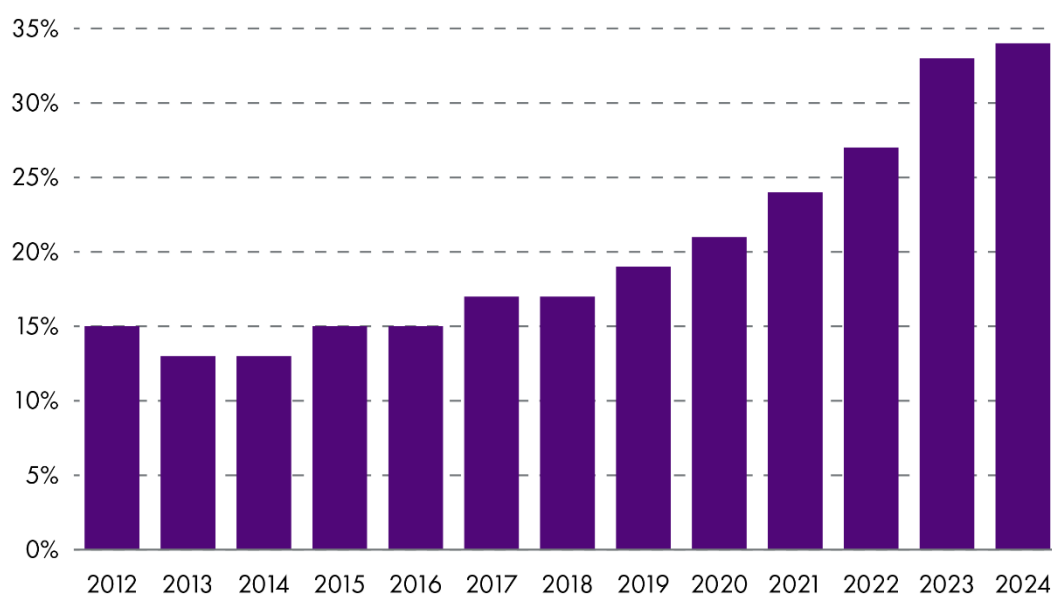
## Early Learning and Childcare (ELC)

The choice of parents to defer is longstanding. However, there has been a relatively recent change to the right to funded ELC for families who defer entry to primary school.

Since 1 August 2023, local authorities must continue to provide or fund ELC for any child whose parents have decided to defer entry to primary school. Prior to 2023, local authorities were required to fund ELC only for those children whose birthday fell in January or February (i.e. the younger children) and could choose to provide funded ELC in other cases where the child's start to primary had been deferred.

The Scottish Government produces statistics on ELC registrations. [In 2024, the parents of around a third of children who could defer did so and were receiving funded ELC](#). The chart below shows how this figure has grown over the past decade.

**Figure 1:** ELC registrations of children whose start to primary school was deferred as a percentage of the eligible population



## School starts in other jurisdictions

Different jurisdictions take different approaches to determining when pupils begin primary school.

[In England, there is a Reception year](#), which is sometimes known as Year 0. Most children start reception full-time in September after their fourth birthday. The statutory school age is five in England. A child must start full-time education in the term following their fifth birthday. If a child's birthday was in July, their parent would not be required to send their child to school in the Reception year. They would begin school at the start of Year 1 (i.e. the year after Reception).

[In France, children start primary school in early September in the calendar year in which they turn six.](#) [In Denmark, similarly, a child starts school on 1 August in the calendar year in which the child turns six](#), but there is some flexibility for a child to start earlier or later depending on circumstances. [In Portugal, all children aged six by 15 September enrol in that academic year \(Sep-Aug\)](#); children that turn six between 16 September and 31 December may also be admitted at the request of parents.

## Starting age

Discussions around the start of school in Scotland have tended to focus on the starting age. For example, [Upstart Scotland campaigns on this issue](#) and advocates increasing the starting age to seven with a “kindergarten” stage replacing P1 and P2. [The SNP agreed a motion at its 2022 conference](#) to increase the statutory age to six with a “kindergarten” being introduced before then.

## Relative age effect

The petitioner mentions the relative age effect. [The National Foundation for Educational Research \(NFER\) produced a paper on this in 2009](#). This found there is evidence that, on average, younger pupils in cohorts perform less well in attainment tests; are more frequently identified as having Special Educational Needs; and have higher rates of mental health problems.

The NFER suggested possible explanations for the relative age effect. It noted that assessment results do not account for the age differences among children taking the test. NFER also said that younger children may struggle with a curriculum designed for older children, leading to poor performance and potential psychological issues.

The NFER highlighted another possible explanation: the length of schooling in systems where children start school at different times based on their birth dates. NFER reported that evidence on this factor's impact is inconclusive.

**Ned Sharratt**  
**Senior Researcher**  
25 February 2025

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## **Annexe C: Written submissions**

### **Scottish Government written submission, 7 May 2025**

#### **PE2142/A: Review the policy on school commencement and deferred school entry in Scotland**

Thank you for writing to the Scottish Government, seeking its view of PE2142: Review the policy on school commencement and deferred school entry in Scotland. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to review the policy on school commencement and deferred school entry in Scotland and seek to reverse the potential harms caused by existing processes that have resulted in 19-month school year groups.

The Scottish Government's approach on pupil's entry to school and the right of parents in legislation to defer entry school starting date has been a longstanding feature of the Scottish education system. Many parents value the choice this gives them, particularly where they feel more time within an early years and childcare setting is more appropriate for their child's needs.

Teachers also have a responsibility to ensure that all children in their care are given the attention and work appropriate to their age and circumstances. Classes, irrespective of their composition, are made up of a number of individuals whose particular needs and attributes should be addressed. Teachers are professionally skilled in delivering effective education, whether or not they are teaching a class with pupils of a range of ages. The Scottish Government's view is that the quality of the teacher and the organisation of the class to meet the range of children's learning needs are more important factors in the success of children, than the classes themselves.

It is also the case that under Curriculum for Excellence practitioners are empowered to design curriculum in best way to meet all learners' needs. The framework is designed to be flexible in order to permit careful planning for those with differing needs, including those who, for example, have a learning difficulty and those who are particularly able or talented. As a result, meeting different learners' needs within a single class cohort is already built into the principles and practices of curriculum design.

We do of course keep such matters under review, and I would be happy to look at this issue again if evidence of significant harm to pupils was to emerge.

I hope the Committee finds this letter helpful in setting out the Scottish Government's position on school commencement and deferral.

Yours sincerely

**NATALIE DON-INNES**  
**MINISTER FOR CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND THE PROMISE**

## Petitioner written submission, 12 May 2025

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

I've read the initial assessments and think that some key points and perspectives are being missed. Specifically, there has not been an assessment of the impact on the disabled or minority or disadvantaged groups.

Another key issue is the misleading use of the term deferral. It must be reframed as advancement for most, with correct commencement for some, and those choosing later commencement tending to be the already advantaged.

Finally, defence of a system by focussing on what is in an individual child's best interest with disregard of the best interests of or impact upon others can quite reasonably be predicted to be more harmful overall and lead to an arms race to maintain hegemony/advantage.

### Policy Brief on the Relative Age Effect in Scottish Schooling Cohorts

The aim of this policy brief is to describe the harms posed to health and the inequities of being relatively younger within a schooling cohort, and to then propose solutions that are specific to the Scottish educational system, to Education Scotland and the Scottish Government.

**Public Health Importance:** The advantages and disadvantages associated with age relative to the rest of an age-banded cohort is known as the Relative Age Effect (RAE). Extensively studied and well known in sport, the effect also correlates with:

- Learning disabilities including ADHD
- Mental health including suicide
- Physical injury rates
- Career opportunities and earnings
- Sports/physical activities participation
- Academic attainment and streaming

Being relatively younger within 12-month cohorts is detrimental. Of specific concern in Scotland is that school cohorts are routinely 19-months with no evidence of an active decision to create these. To our knowledge, no research has been conducted of the direct health effects of extended cohorts, but research of the academic and developmental impact in similar populations has shown worse outcomes for relatively younger children, girls, those from deprived communities, and ethnic minorities.

**Background:** The Education (Scotland) Act 1980 sets school commencement as the August after turning five but permits earlier commencement if you turned four before March. There appears to be no record of why these dates were selected nor why starting younger has become the norm. This custom sets conditions for the youngest half (Aug-Feb born) to lawfully choose to start one year later. This choice appears to have initially been taken by white, wealthy parents of boys born in January and February that cited concerns over "school readiness". Subsequent lobbying also focussed on "school readiness" but presented research related to RAE,

whilst that relating to “school readiness” was limited and included opinion pieces by journalists and others with financial interests. Despite this, automatic government funding of an additional year of childcare was secured for the youngest two months of the customary cohort from 2014 (Jan-Feb born) then the Aug-Feb born from 2023. This removed the main financial barrier and may have financially incentivised delaying but has preceded increasing rates of “deferral”, extended cohorts, and compounded RAE whilst differential demographic uptake has endured, thus continuing to widen inequities.

**Research Evidence:** Research evidence was synthesised from systematic review of RAE in health, academic, and sports settings for standard 12-month cohorts. Several authors were contacted and confirmed gaps in the literature relating to effects of extended cohorts, except limited studies in the USA and Australia of RAE on development and academic attainment. Stakeholders were identified and contacted. Those that engaged provided insight into historic context and barriers to implementation. A full and extensive exploration is available on request.

Key message	Policy Recommendation
1 School “year groups” are planned to be 12-months; in Scotland they can extend to 19.	Consider correcting 19-month cohorts to 12. This is a Public Health, equality, and possible safeguarding issue.
2 The custom of early commencement set conditions for deferral and extended cohorts.	Default early commencement with deferral is inequitable and harmful. The legal commencement age should be designated as the default. This aligns with the law, has funding agreed, and pilots show resources are sufficient.
3 Choice that causes undue harm to others cannot be allowed. A system that permits a similar degree of choice is desirable.	Choice is provisioned for in law through advancement. It should be reframed as an “informed request” and can be supported by a structured process to assess suitability for exceptional delay beyond legal commencement.
4 Being relatively younger in a 12-month cohort results in multiple disadvantages.	Education on RAE must be developed for parents and education, PE/sport, and health providers.
5 Extended cohorts have been shown to be detrimental for academic attainment and development, but no research has been conducted on health effects.	Research into the effects in Scotland of extended cohorts must be commenced: focussing on inequities, physical injuries, mental health, and academic attainment.
6 Differential rates of deferral widen rather than correct existing inequities.	Those that have advanced commencement, especially those that did so inadvertently, must be identified and provided with proportional additional support.
7 Funding an additional year of childcare for Jan-Feb born, and pilots for Aug-Feb born, led to	Funding decisions have inadvertently exacerbated inequities but also created both an opportunity to formally adopt the legal



	increased deferral but continued demographic bias.	starting age as default and a transition period due to high levels of deferral.
8	Commencement in August after turning 4½ is unique, complicates international comparison, competition, and transfer, and causes concern over “school readiness”.	Adoption of the legal commencement age will align with culturally and climatically similar Scandinavian nations balancing Scottish characteristics with interoperability.
9	“School readiness” has been used to justify deferral however the concept is disputed and better addressed by correcting the setting.	“School readiness” should be considered from the perspective of the setting. The Curriculum for Excellence advises play-based learning in Early Years. Formal education is therefore from Primary 2 whilst older, tighter cohorts reduce ability spread.

**Implementation:** The two most important barriers of legal and funding are both already addressed. Indeed, the most urgent recommendation is to align default starting age with the law. Fortuitously pilot schemes encouraging greater “deferral” have been successful suggesting resources can manage the adjustment to default later start. Incremental steps to this point have widened inequity but have also created a window of opportunity to complete the transition. The need to address RAE will remain and further barriers to implementing policies addressing this may include: “choice”, transition planning, stakeholder engagement, Scottish characteristics of the policy, and lack of Scottish specific research. These can be addressed by adopting the mutually supporting and reinforcing actions in the policy recommendations table.

## Petitioner written submission, 21 May 2025

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

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 50<sup>th</sup> and >95<sup>th</sup> 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 50<sup>th</sup> centile child in primary school if they are the oldest of the year will appear to be around the 95<sup>th</sup> centile and around the 5<sup>th</sup> 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.