

Written evidence submitted by Bliss to The Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill Committee (CWSB250).

Bliss is the UK charity that champions the right of every baby born premature or sick to receive the best care. We achieve this by empowering families, influencing policy and practice, and enabling life-changing research.

Executive summary

- Children born premature must be able to start school at the time most suitable for them, with access to appropriate early years’ education until they are developmentally ready
- Studies have shown that children born at both extremely early and at later preterm gestations are more likely to have poor test scores and need greater levels of Special Educational Needs support compared to term peers
- Children born premature develop according to their due date, rather than the date they were actually born, as a result children who were due after 1 September but were in fact born early in August, July, June or even May can find that they are not ready for school when they are due to start
- Despite schools having discretion within the current system to permit flexibility for this group of children, parents' feedback to Bliss has highlighted that this remains an ongoing challenge. Many families are having to mount significant battles with Local Authorities across England to fight for this flexibility
- The Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill should include a statutory requirement for all schools to accept a request to delay school entry based on a prematurely born child’s birth date. Where a delay is granted, the child must be allowed to remain in their adopted year group throughout their entire academic career, even if they move into a new authority area.

1 Introduction

2 For every 13 babies born in the UK, one is born prematurely¹. Neonatal care is the type of hospital care that a baby receives if they are born unwell. Babies may be admitted to neonatal care shortly after birth because they have been born prematurely (before 37 weeks of pregnancy). These babies are among the most vulnerable patients cared for in the NHS: they may spend days, weeks, and in some cases months in hospital. For parents of these babies, the experience is life-altering. Rather than taking their baby or babies home shortly after birth, they are admitted to a specialist hospital unit to receive care which ensures they have the best possible chance of survival and quality of life.

3 Children born premature develop according to their due date, rather than the date they were actually born. As a result, when they reach school age, some premature-born children may still

¹ ONS (2024) Birth characteristics in England and Wales – data for 2022

struggle with the demands of daily school life including communication and social interaction, going to the toilet unaided, and using playground or classroom equipment².

- 4 Despite The Schools Admissions Code 2021 paragraph 2.19 stating that “Admission authorities must make decisions on the basis of the circumstances of each case”, many school admission authorities across England refuse parent requests to delay starting school, resulting in a postcode lottery across the country. This means children are missing the opportunity to complete reception year at a time that is most suited to their development.
- 5 Under current guidance, if a delay is awarded there is also no guarantee the child will be able to remain in the same adopted year for the rest of their time at school. This means that we hear from families who have secured a delayed school start for their child when they start primary school but have subsequently found that when their child starts secondary school they are expected to join the year above. This can lead to children being forced to effectively skip a year when they get to secondary school which is extremely disruptive to their education.
- 6 Many families of premature children having to fight for flexibility in starting school indicates that admissions authorities interpret the School Admissions Code 2021 and Guidance on the Admission of Summer Born Children 2021 differently, creating an unequal, complex and unfair system. Moreover, this demonstrates a lack of clarity within the current School Admissions Code about Local Authorities responsibilities and powers regarding school entry for children born prematurely during the summer months.
- 7 Bliss recommends introducing a statutory requirement for all schools to accept a request to delay school entry based on a prematurely born child’s birth date. Where a delay is granted, the child must be allowed to remain in their adopted year group throughout their entire academic career, even if they move into a new authority area.
- 8 **Key issues and findings from Bliss’ work**
- 9 Research shows consistently that children born preterm have poorer educational outcomes than their full-term peers in relation to performance in standardised tests, being at a greater risk of needing Special Educational Needs (SEN) support, and socially, with these children being at a higher risk of being bullied³. These developmental challenges, which can affect children’s confidence and ability to thrive in school, can often be mitigated by allowing them a little more time to develop before starting school.
- 10 The number of parents contacting Bliss every year asking for support in delaying their child’s school date is growing.

- a. "We are waiting to find out from our Local Authority (LA). I understand the request should have been processed before Thursday but our LA have informed us they are not reviewing it until later. Our son was 14 weeks premature, due October but born in July. He is meeting milestones broadly in line with his corrected age with some slight delays.

² NICE (2017) Developmental follow-up of children and young people born preterm

³ BMJ (2021) Neurodevelopmental outcomes at age 5 among children born preterm: EPIPAGE-2 cohort study

We had a full term baby one year later born in October who will be one of the oldest in his year and as he started to develop we became aware of the genuine developmental differences between the two boys which made us concerned about our first son starting school effectively a year early.

- b. "We submitted various pieces of evidence/ support; details of his prematurity, ongoing medical issues, supporting letter from his nursery and evidence/ support from Occupational Therapy. **We also approached the six schools on our school application form with varying degrees of success - some head teachers who were open to a delay and others unwilling to even entertain the discussion.** So we are waiting and hoping that the delay will be accepted, hoping we are doing the right thing and hoping that the scare stories of missing a year of school further down the line won't happen."

– Mum to son born 14 weeks premature

11 Later school years

12 If a delay is granted, there is no guarantee the child will be able to remain in the same adopted year for the rest of their school career. Often, parents applying for their child to delay their school start are told that when their child moves on to secondary school they may have to miss the first year and re-join their chronological age group who will be going into their second year.

13 Similar challenges are presented to children who have been granted a delay when changing primary school for any reason or moving to a different area. This loop-hole can be used by admissions authorities to deter parents from applying to delay, indicating a lack of understanding or disregard amongst Local Authorities of the very specific challenges that many pre-term children face.

14 Summer-born premature children

15 For children born between 1st April and 31st August (summer-born), they become eligible for reception very soon after they turn four and may not be ready for the daily pressures of a school routine – especially if they were born premature and experiencing any resulting developmental delays.

16 Of those children born premature in the summer months, a significant proportion could fall into a school year different from the one they were due to be born into. As a result, they are expected to start school a year earlier than other children conceived at the same time as them. This group of children in particular face the greatest challenges under the current system, as any developmental delays they may have as a result of their prematurity will be exacerbated by starting school so much earlier, and can lead to the misdiagnosis of SEN.

17 Most parents would prefer their child to complete reception year, as it is a vitally important play-based learning year which eases children into the more structured routine of school they will experience when they enter year one. For premature born children who are not ready for school when they first turn four, their parents may prefer them to start school at the compulsory school age of five, but in reception year rather than year one.

- 18 **Bliss recommends introducing a statutory requirement for all schools to accept a request to delay school entry based on a prematurely born child's birth date. Where a delay is granted, the child must be allowed to remain in their adopted year group throughout their entire academic career, even if they move into a new authority area.**
- 19 There is strong evidence that allowing flexibility to defer or delay entry to school would help improve the outcomes of preterm children and benefit those most in need. This flexibility would give the most vulnerable children the best possible chance to reach their full emotional, social and academic potential.
- 20 We believe that our proposal to introduce a statutory requirement for all schools to accept a request to delay school entry based on a prematurely born child's birth date may mean that this specific group of children could need less support at school if they are allowed to defer their entry by a year. Additionally, the number of unnecessary and costly appeals is likely to reduce as parents will be allowed to choose to defer or delay their child's entry to school without resistance from the admissions authorities.

February 2025.