**CONSULTATION ON**

**THE PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION PROGRAMME:**

**STATUTORY ADMISSIONS CRITERIA**

**AND**

**PRE-SCHOOL SESSION TIMES**

**(Easy Read)**

**WHAT IS THE PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION PROGRAMME?**

The Pre-School Education Programme is the Department of Education’s funded programme which provides a year of pre-school education for every child in their immediate pre-school year (age 3 to 4) whose parents want it.

**WHAT ARE STATUTORY ADMISSIONS CRITERIA?**

The statutory admissions criteria are the rules about which children pre-schools (nursery schools, nursery classes or pre-school providers) have to give priority to when they apply for a pre-school place. They are set out in laws called Regulations.

**WHAT IS THE CONSULTATION ABOUT?**

The Regulations were made over 20 years ago. Many things have changed since then in terms of the number of places available and change is still happening today such as changes to benefits. We need to review the Regulations to make sure that with all these changes we are doing things in the right way and for the right reasons.

**WHO GETS PRIORITY AT THE MOMENT?**

At the moment, all pre-school providers must give priority to children from “Socially Disadvantaged Circumstances”. These are children who have a parent who receives certain benefits. At the moment this is about 16% of all pre-school pupils.

**WHY ARE THESE CHILDREN PRIORITISED?**

In 1998, when the Regulations were put in place, there were not enough places for all children to attend pre-school, so the Department prioritised the children that were considered to be most in need of a pre-school education place. Today there are enough pre-school places for every child whose parents want it, and this is part of the reason the Department is reviewing the Regulations.

**WHO IS AFFECTED?**

The admissions criteria affect all the children who apply for a funded pre-school education place, not just those who are prioritised.

All parents apply through an admissions process administered by the Education Authority (EA), except those whose child is in receipt of a Statement of Special Educational Needs, whose placements are managed through a separate process. The priority admissions criteria for children from ‘socially disadvantaged circumstances’ does not apply to children with a statement of Special Educational Needs.

**WHAT ABOUT OTHER ADMISSIONS CRITERIA?**

Every pre-school setting chooses their own admissions criteria; only the statutory criteria is required by law. The Department gives pre-school guidance to help them decide on their other admissions criteria.

There are no statutory criteria for primary and post-primary schools – these schools choose their own admissions criteria in line with the Department’s guidance.

**WHY CHANGE NOW?**

The Department wants to make sure that the rules are fair for all children who apply for pre-school places. The introduction of Universal Credit will replace the benefits listed in the Regulations and it provides an opportunity to review the need for the priority criterion.

The Department also plans to make all pre-school sessions the same length, and that may change how people view the priority criterion.

**DO ALL CHILDREN GET THE SAME PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION?**

Funded pre-school places are provided in different types of settings, but they all follow the same curricular guidance and they are all inspected to the same educational standards.

The length of a pre-school session can range from 2.5 hours (part-time) to 4.5 hours or more (full-time) per day.

This consultation asks for your opinions on making all funded pre-school education sessions the same length and whether the priority criterion should change when this is done.

**WHAT ARE THE QUESTIONS?**

The Department would like to know if you think it is still necessary to have a statutory criteria for pre-school admissions.

You will be asked for your opinion on the options below, but you can suggest others if you like. The options are:

**Prioritise children who would be eligible for free school meals** – This would mean that all pre-schools must prioritise children who met the criteria for free school meals first and then consider other children. This would mean that around 30% of children applying for a pre-school place would be prioritised before everyone who applies. This would include applications for places in part-time settings that do not currently offer a meal.

**Don’t have any statutory criteria** – This would mean that all pre-school settings would choose their own admissions criteria, taking into account guidance provided by the Department, in the same way that all primary and post-primary schools currently do.

**Retain the statutory criterion and include Universal Credit and all of its legacy benefits** – This would mean that all pre-schools must prioritise all children who met this criterion first and then consider other children. As the expanded criterion would include additional welfare benefits, this would mean more children (around 33%), including some from working families, would be given priority in the admissions process before everyone else who applies.

**WHAT DOES THE DEPARTMENT THINK?**

The Department thinks that change needs to happen in two stages.

While pre-school education sessions are still different lengths and only some offer a school meal, the Department thinks we should **retain the statutory criterion and include Universal Credit and all of its legacy benefits.** Once all pre-school sessions are the same length, the Department thinks the law should change so that we **don’t have any statutory criteria,** and pre-schools can set all their own criteria, in the same way that schools do.

**HOW DO I GET INVOLVED?**

The Department is keen to hear your views. You can share your thoughts in lots of ways. The fastest way is to fill out the online survey [here](https://consultations.nidirect.gov.uk/de-early-years-group/pre-school-education-review-of-the-statutory-admis) but you can also download a questionnaire from the DE website [here](https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/consultations)

You can write to us atde.earlyyears@education-ni.gov.uk

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