

EDUCATION PDS COMMITTEE
30th January 2014

QUESTIONS TO THE EDUCATION PORTFOLIO HOLDER

Oral Question for the Education Portfolio Holder received from Andrea Asbury

I want my summer-born son to begin school at the compulsory school age of 5, to experience the critical Reception foundation year AND have access to 7 years of primary school education, as is his right. Flexibility to begin Reception aged 5 exists in law - why is this so difficult to negotiate with admissions authorities?

Reply:

*Existing school policies for 2014 have already been determined and are in line with the current admission code that states that parents have the right to *defer *a start in the current academic year, with the opportunity for the child to join the year group that they are assigned according to their date of birth at a later date. The existing Code states that parents of gifted and talented children, or those who have experienced problems or missed part of a year, for example due to ill health, can seek places outside their normal age group.*

Bromley Council's interpretation of this statement is that it does not include children who are young for their year group. This interpretation is uniform across all Bromley Primary Schools.

The current admission arrangements for admission to Bromley Community and Voluntary Controlled Schools for 2014 has been set in line with the mandatory requirements of the existing Admission Code. As there are no proposed changes for 2015, this Authority is not consulting. This is in line with the admission code that states admission authorities do not have to consult for 7 years if there are no changes.

This Authority provides the opportunity for all reception age children to receive 7 full years of education by following legislative guidance, the Rose Report of 2009, to enable children to attend school from the September following their 4th birthday. It is a parent of a summer-born child's decision whether they take up this available option. This will continue until, if or when, legislation changes to enforce a change to the Admission Code guidance on the admission of summer-born children.

Supplementary question:

Elizabeth Truss, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Education and Childcare has stated, "We are absolutely clear that parents should be able to say to a school, 'We want our child, who is aged five, to enter Reception', if they feel that that is in the best interests of their child." However it does not feel like there is genuine flexibility for parents, and that they must chose between taking up a

place for their child before he is ready for school or giving up their child's Reception year.

Reply:

The statement made by Elizabeth Truss is not backed by legislation and the Local Authority will continue to work within the bounds of existing legislation.

Oral Question for the Education Portfolio Holder received from Richard Asbury

Given the now incontrovertible evidence that summer-born children are more likely to experience additional social, emotional and academic challenges, could you comment on campaigners calls for more flexibility around school entry for summer-born children, as highlighted in the media earlier this month?

Reply:

I appreciate the views of campaigners for flexible school admissions for summer-born children and cannot dispute the research that demonstrates that summer-born children can perform less well than their peers.

However, in the context of Bromley where the Council is committed to all schools becoming academies, it must be understood that each academy will be its own admissions authority. Each authority will have to operate within the Admissions Code of Practice, although there may be some chains and academy trusts who take a more flexible view than a council that has had to oversee admissions to all schools in the Local Authority.

Meanwhile it is our intention, as the admissions authority for maintained schools, to abide by the Admissions Code of Practice, as explained in the answer to the previous question. Should the Code be amended to allow for greater flexibility in the admission of summer-born children, then our policy (should it still be relevant) will be adapted to reflect the revised guidance.

Supplementary question:

How is it that the Local Authority, that has an inherent interest in children, can ensure the best interests of children are prioritised to enable parents to exercise the right of their child to enter Reception at compulsory school age, which is the term after their fifth birthday?

Reply:

The Local Authority acts as the admissions authority for Bromley and needs to operate within the existing admissions code. It is up to individual parents to make representations to school governing bodies to gain access in this way.

Oral Question for the Education Portfolio Holder received from Marjorie Ouvry, Consultant in Early Years Education and Author

When summer-born children start school in the term after they are 5, parents are frequently told they must skip reception and go into year one for administrative purposes. How can this local authority assist state-funded schools to offer real choice to parents of summer-born children to have their full entitlement of 7 years of primary schooling?

Reply:

It is my understanding that parents have a choice as to whether their child begins school in the term after their fourth birthday, defers entry to a later point in the reception year or skips reception and goes straight into year 1. In terms of offering even more flexibility and choice to the parents of summer-born children, there is a need for a national rather than local policy change, for reasons previously stated.

Supplementary question:

Could the Local Authority draw up a framework that firstly reminds Head Teachers and Governors of state-funded schools (including academies) of the legal age of compulsory schooling and secondly requires them to give choice to parents of summer born children, bearing in mind that only a minority of parents will choose to delay entry?

Reply:

Reception year is not a compulsory year of education, with Year 1 as the first year of compulsory education. I can see it would be useful for parents and Head Teachers of Local Authority maintained schools to make clear there is an option available for parents to delay entry and that it is likely to only be for a minority of children. Some Head Teachers may seek not to do this to avoid classes made up of children of differing age groups.

Oral Questions for the Education Portfolio Holder received from Rosalind Luff, Chair - Bromley Parent Voice

1. Bromley Parent Voice appreciates that processes cannot be finalised until the code of practice is published however, as focus should be on achieving better outcomes for all SEND families. In light of further austerity savings, how will the Local Authority ensure appropriate support is available via the Local Offer?

Reply:

Bromley is committed to achieving better outcomes for our SEND families. Appropriate support, based on individual needs continues to be high priority for our pupils with complex needs. The Bromley SEN Pathfinder is progressing with developing and delivering the Local Offer. Clear and transparent thresholds for the Local Offer for school-based educational interventions have been devised with school SENCOs, parent representatives and Bromley Officers. The Local Authority local offer in terms of "top-up funding" in schools is currently being implemented successfully in Bromley schools. Other elements of the Local Offer (such as Short Breaks Services) continue to be developed.

Supplementary question:

The Local Offer is a non-statutory offer. Please can you confirm how funding for children and young people with SEND who do not meet the threshold will be ensured?

Reply:

The Local Authority is looking closely at how it operates and is seeking to ensure the most vulnerable groups, including children and young people with SEND, are protected as far as possible from any impact. The SEND Pathfinder has been successful in bringing together Health and Social Care, and the Local Authority anticipates that the offer for SEND families will benefit as a result of the SEND Pathfinder and that it is not anticipated that any families will see a substantial reduction in their child's offer.

2. Can the figure of 850 children be clarified, i.e. does this include mainstream children within unit provision? We believe the £12K and above cohort to be a higher number than stated.

Reply:

This figure only includes pupils in specialist educational placements both in and out of borough. We expect that there will be many pupils with complex needs who currently access their education in mainstream schools or in resourced provisions attached to mainstream schools who will transition to an Education, Health and Care Plan.

Supplementary question:

Why is the figure of 850 children used?

Reply:

The figure of 850 children is an indicative figure used to support the Local Authority to analyse current statements and identify whether they are for children with more or less complex needs.