

# PROPOSAL TO LOWER THE AGE RANGE AT 3 COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

<b>Cabinet Member &amp; Portfolio</b>	Cllr Susan O'Brien, Cabinet Member for Children, Families and Education
<b>Responsible Officer</b>	Abi Preston, Director of Education & SEND
<b>Report Author &amp; Directorate</b>	Philip Ryan, Adult Social Care and Health
<b>Papers with report</b>	Appendices A-C - responses from consultation on proposals, carried out from 25 September to 25 October 2024

## HEADLINES

<b>Summary</b>	<p>This report presents the recommendations to lower the school age at three community schools (Colham Manor Primary School, Field End Infant School, and Minet Infant and Nursery School) following statutory public consultation, allowing them to offer funded childcare places for 2-year-olds.</p> <p>The changes will be implemented in schools by September 2025. Each school governing body agrees with the proposed changes.</p>
<b>Putting our Residents First Delivering on the Council Strategy 2022-2026</b>	<p>This report supports our ambition for residents / the Council of: Have opportunities to earn an income that supports their families</p> <p>This report supports our commitments to residents of: A Thriving Economy</p>
<b>Financial Cost</b>	<p>This proposal does not incur any cost to the Council. The schools will be eligible to receive Early Years DSG funding for qualifying children. Additionally, schools may apply for DfE capital funding available to support the expansion of Early Years entitlements. However, this is a competitive application process, and approval of the recommendations is not dependent on the agreement of capital funding.</p>
<b>Select Committee</b>	Children, Families and Education Select Committee.
<b>Ward(s)</b>	<p>This report relates to the following Wards:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Colham &amp; Cowley Ward (Colham Manor Primary School)</li><li>- Eastcote and South Ruislip Wards (Field End Infant School)</li><li>- Wood End Ward (Minet Infant and Nursery School)</li></ul> <p>However, children from neighbouring wards may attend the schools and therefore also benefit from the recommendations.</p>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Cabinet consider the consultation responses and agree:

- 1) That the age range of Colham Manor Primary School may be lowered from 3-11 years to 2-11 years;
- 2) That the age range of Field End Infant School may be changed from 3- 7 years to 2- 7 years; and
- 3) That the age range of Minet Infant and Nursery School may be changed from 3-7 years to 2-7 years.

### Reasons for recommendations

The purpose of this report is to present recommendations for lowering the school age at three community schools: Colham Manor Primary School, Field End Infant School, and Minet Infant and Nursery School. This change will allow these schools to offer funded childcare places for 2-year-olds, following a statutory public consultation which Cabinet is asked to consider.

Subject to Cabinet's decision, the proposed changes would be implemented by September 2025, with each school's governing body agreeing to the proposed change. Lowering the age range of these three community schools will provide more funded childcare places for eligible two-year-olds.

### Alternative options considered / risk management

1. If the decision is made not to lower the school's age range, eligible two-year-olds, particularly those from disadvantaged families, may face challenges in securing childcare. The council may also be unable to fulfil its statutory duty to ensure sufficiency of childcare places, in so far as is reasonable, for working parents or parents who are studying and training for employment.
2. The primary risk of expanding provision for two-year-olds in schools is the potential impact on the sustainability of local private and independent childcare settings. However, enabling the above named schools to provide places for two-year-olds is unlikely to significantly affect other local childcare providers as the number of places offered by schools for two-year-olds will be limited. An assessment of parental demand in the vicinity of each school indicates that there is unmet need for childcare which is not currently addressed by existing providers.
3. Furthermore, schools provide a different model of childcare compared to many existing providers; for example, school-based childcare places usually cover only the school day rather than operating from 8 am to 6 pm, which is common among other childcare settings. Additionally, school-based childcare places are typically only available during term time, while many other providers offer year-round availability. This distinction reduces direct competition between schools and local childcare settings.

## Democratic compliance / previous authority

Under the Council's Constitution, Cabinet authority is required to determine school organisational changes where there are objections received.

## Select Committee comments

This proposal was discussed at the Children, Families & Education Select Committee meeting on 13<sup>th</sup> November 2024, and the following comments were agreed following the meeting:

*“With the expansion of the Early Years Entitlements, the Committee recognises that developing the provision for 2-year-old children in the three named schools will support parents and families to have choice and accessibility in the childcare market.”*

## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

### Early Years Childcare Entitlements for 2-year-olds

1. Previously, early years childcare has been universally funded for all 3- and 4-year-olds, for 15 hours a week, 38 weeks a year. This was subsequently extended to 30 hours funded childcare for children whose parents were working, subject to meeting the eligibility criteria for the additional hours.
2. Children aged 2 years, who may be disadvantaged, are also able to access 15 hours of funded early years childcare (38 weeks per year) from the term after their second birthday, if they meet any of the following criteria:
  - Parents are in receipt of an eligible benefit e.g. Income Support, Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance;
  - Are looked after by a local authority;
  - Have an Education, Health and Care Plan;
  - Get Disability Living Allowance;
  - Have left care under an adoption order, special guardianship order or a child arrangements order.

(Full eligibility criteria can be found at: [Help paying for childcare: Free education and childcare for 2-year-olds if you claim certain benefits - GOV.UK](#))
3. In April 2024, the Early Years Entitlements were expanded with the principal aim of supporting more parents to return to work. The new entitlement often referred to as the 'working parent' entitlement was introduced, providing 15 hours of funded childcare per week for 38 weeks per year, for 2-year-olds whose parents are working (subject to meeting the eligibility criteria), thereby increasing the number of 2-year-olds eligible for funded childcare.
4. This entitlement is set to rise from 15 to 30 hours of funded childcare for 2-year-old children with eligible working parents from September 2025. At the same time the 'working parent' entitlement for children aged 9-23 months will also be increased from 15 to 30 hours.

## Sufficiency of Childcare

5. The Childcare Act 2006 places a legal duty on local authorities to secure sufficient childcare (so far as is reasonably practicable) for working parents or parents who are studying or training for employment.
6. In Hillingdon, the childcare market is diverse; childcare is provided by childminders, group care providers such as day nurseries and playgroups and school-based providers. The introduction of the Early Years Foundation Stage, changes to the registration and inspection arrangements for childcare, and the expansion of the early years entitlements has seen the market change significantly over time. The number of sessional care providers, such as playgroups has significantly reduced, and in recent years there has also been a decline in the number of childminders. However, group care provision remains relatively stable, supporting sufficiency across the early years age ranges.
7. Estimates provided by the DfE indicated that the increase in the number of 2-year-olds eligible to receive funded childcare from April 2024, would mean that a further 955 children would be using funded childcare hours each term. In Hillingdon, the actual number of additional children using funded hours has been 1,059 in the summer term and 1,121 in the autumn term.
8. To date, the local childcare market has been able to provide sufficient places for children eligible for the 'working parents' entitlement, when considering the borough as whole. However, DfE projections anticipate a lack of childcare in some wards for children to access funded early years childcare, and it is anticipated that this may be exacerbated with the expansion in hours from September 2025.
9. It is also of note that the number of 'disadvantaged' 2-year-olds accessing funded childcare appears to have reduced. This may be due to families exercising parental choice, as early years childcare in non-statutory and they may prefer to keep their children at home or for them to be cared for by family members. Alternatively, it may be that some families are eligible for funded childcare under both schemes and are utilising the 'working parent' entitlement in anticipation of the increase in hours in the future.
10. Officers continue to closely monitor the uptake of places for 'disadvantaged' 2-year-olds to understand the impact of the new entitlements on the availability of childcare places for this cohort.
11. Schools are well placed to support families to access childcare; at least 2 schools already host private childcare providers on site, thus enabling families to readily access childcare. However, it may also be prudent for some schools to directly deliver childcare to a younger cohort of children, and the local authority is disposed to support this for 2-year-olds in areas where analysis of supply and demand shows this is needed.
12. It is important to remember that schools would be required to meet the differing requirements of the Early Years Foundation Stage for a younger cohort. Of particular note are the higher adult-child ratios (1:5), staff qualifications and experience, the appropriateness of the environment (both indoors and outdoors) including provision for sleep and toileting, and a curriculum that meets the needs and responds to the interests of young children.
13. Where schools have expressed an interest in supporting younger children, they are being supported by the Early Years Quality Team to ensure that they understand and are able to meet the needs of 2-year-olds and have the necessary space and business plans in place to do so well and in a sustainable way.

14. Officers have liaised with colleagues in the Education Improvement and Partnership service and Schools Finance to ensure that there are no current concerns that may mean the proposed change would have a negative impact on the school.
15. Officers have also liaised with colleagues in School Place Planning to ensure that is no identified adverse impact for school places for the existing cohorts, should the school use existing space to develop and extend their provision to support 2-year-olds.
16. It should also be noted that the process for academies differs from that for maintained schools. Academy Trusts are responsible for conducting their own consultation process and reporting the outcome; 2 schools in the north of the borough completed this process in the summer term and commenced taking 2-year-olds with effect from September 2024.

### **Financial Implications**

There are no anticipated financial implications for the local authority for this proposal. Prior to making this recommendation to change the age range of these three schools, the schools were asked to provide a financial projection of the costs and income that would result from this change, to demonstrate that they understand the costs associated with providing places for two-year-olds.

## **RESIDENT BENEFIT & CONSULTATION**

### **The benefit or impact upon Hillingdon residents, service users and communities?**

17. The proposed recommendation will offer additional nursery places for eligible two-year-olds, improving the availability of childcare for Hillingdon residents.
18. Developing provision for 2-year-old children in schools will support the childcare market in the named wards where data suggests there is currently or likely to be insufficiency of places as a result of the expanded Early Years Entitlements. Creation of additional sessional care places will also support choice in the market and enable parents to more readily access childcare where best suits them.
19. Whilst it is recognised that there may be concerns regarding the sustainability of existing childcare providers in the proximity of these schools, should they start to take 2-year-olds, it is important to note that the number of places that will be developed is relatively small (approximately 20 per school). Furthermore, schools will be offering childcare during school term time, which is unlikely to meet the needs of all working parents, but will support 'disadvantaged' 2-year olds.
20. Parents may also choose to use both school based provision alongside local childminders and nurseries to access the childcare support as best meets their needs, as is already the case for many 3 and 4 year olds.
21. In reviewing sufficiency in areas where schools have expressed an interest in taking 2 year olds, officers have considered supply and demand data from the DfE, HMRC data regarding the validation of eligibility codes for 'working parents' and DWP data regarding eligibility for 'disadvantaged' 2 year olds.

### ***Colham Manor Primary School***

22. There is a lack of childcare in Colham and Cowley Ward for both elements of the early years' entitlements for two-year-olds.
23. 54 two-year-olds in Colham and Cowley Ward are eligible for the disadvantaged two-year-old entitlement but only 27 children are accessing a place, suggesting that current childcare provision may not be sufficient to meet parental demand.
24. Data on the eligibility codes issued and validated in the area around Colham Manor Primary School, for the 'working parents' entitlement' suggests that there is unmet need for funded childcare places for working parents. Colham and Cowley Ward, is in the lower half of wards in the borough (16 out of 21) for the percentage of eligibility codes issued that have been validated. This suggests that parents who are eligible are struggling to find a funded childcare place.

### ***Field End Infant School***

25. In the area around Field End Infant School, there is unmet need for childcare places for two-year-olds.
26. 60 families in Eastcote and South Ruislip Wards are eligible for the entitlement for disadvantaged two-year-olds but only 22 children are accessing a place. This suggests that current childcare provision may not be sufficient to meet parental demand.
27. Data on the eligibility codes issued and validated for the 'working parents' entitlement in the area around Field End Infant School suggests that there is unmet need for funded childcare places for working parents. Eastcote and South Ruislip wards have the highest number of parents with an eligibility code for the working parents' entitlement for two-year-olds. However, Eastcote ward has one of the lowest percentages of eligibility codes that have been validated (17 out of 21). This suggests that parents who are eligible may be struggling to find a funded childcare place.

### ***Minet Infant and Nursery School***

28. In the area around Minet Infant and Nursery School, there is unmet need for childcare places for two-year-olds principally for the 'disadvantaged' entitlement.
29. 60 two-year-olds in Wood End Ward are eligible for the entitlement for disadvantaged two-year-olds but only 20 eligible children are accessing a place. This suggests that there may be a lack of sufficient childcare provision to meet parental demand.

### **Consultation & Engagement carried out**

30. A public consultation on the proposal was held from 25 September to 25 October 2024, for each of the named schools, and statutory notices were published and posted outside each school. Schools promoted the consultation to local parents and all schools and childcare providers in the borough were also notified.
31. These were from parents, childcare providers, school and local residents, some of whom have raised concerns regarding increased traffic and footfall in the area which schools may need to take steps to address should the proposal go ahead.
32. Detailed analysis of responses by school are shown below.

### **Colham Manor Primary School**

There were 121 responses to the consultation and feedback was as follows:

***Do you agree with the proposal to lower the age range of Colham Manor Primary School from 3-11 to 2-11 years of age?***

Yes	100	(83%)
No	19	(16%)
Don't know	2	(1%)

***Do you think this proposal will disadvantage any residents in Hillingdon?***

Yes	14	(12%)
No	101	(83%)
Don't know	6	(5%)

***Are you completing this survey as:***

A parent / carer / guardian	68	(56%)
A staff member at a school	26	(21%)
Someone who works in childcare	9	(7%)
A local resident	7	(6%)
Other	7	(6%)
Prefer not to say	4	(3%)

A list of the comments received can be found in Appendix A.

### **Field End Infant School**

There were 41 responses to the consultation and the feedback was as follows:

***Do you agree with the proposal to lower the age range of Field End Infant School from 3-11 to 2-11 years of age?***

Yes	21	(51%)
No	20	(49%)

***Do you think this proposal will disadvantage any residents in Hillingdon?***

Yes	14	(34%)
No	22	(54%)
Don't know	5	(12%)

***Are you completing this survey as:***

A parent / carer / guardian	19	(46%)
A staff member at a school	0	(0%)
Someone who works in childcare	10	(24%)
A local resident	3	(7%)
Other	5	(12%)
Prefer not to say	4	(10%)

Field End Infant School have separately assessed the interest from parents with children at the school and 74% have said that they would be interested in using the provision for two-year-olds, if it is available. This showed that most parents who responded would use the provision.

A list of the comments received can be found in Appendix B.

**Minet Infant and Nursery School**

There were 50 responses to the consultation and the feedback was as follows:

***Do you agree with the proposal to lower the age range of Minet Infant and Nursery School from 3-11 to 2-11 years of age?***

Yes	37	(74%)
No	13	(26%)

***Do you think this proposal will disadvantage any residents in Hillingdon?***

Yes	8	(16%)
No	36	(72%)
Don't know	6	(12%)

***Are you completing this survey as:***

A parent / carer / guardian	31	(62%)
A staff member at a school	2	(4%)
Someone who works in childcare	7	(14%)
A local resident	3	(6%)
Other	6	(12%)
Prefer not to say	1	(2%)

A list of the comments received can be found in Appendix C.

**Analysis of consultation responses**

33. Responses to the consultation were largely in favour of the proposal to lower the age range at all 3 community schools; however some respondents raised their concerns. Free flow text



comments have been analysed and grouped to understand the common themes reflected across all three consultations. These are provided below and mitigated for where appropriate.

34. **Developmental concerns:** several respondents indicated that children aged 2 might be too young to begin school. They emphasised the importance of emotional, social, and physical development at this age, which they felt could potentially be hindered by a structured school environment. There was also concern that schools might not offer the necessary emotional care, potentially leading to stress and anxiety for the children.
35. **Reduced specialisation in early years care:** some respondents highlighted what they considered environments nurseries and childminders provide, specifically designed for the developmental needs of 2-year-olds. This extended to the necessary resources and trained staff to meet the specific needs of toddlers, including toilet training, sleep schedules, and responsive caregiving. They queried whether placing 2-year-olds in primary schools that are not tailored to their developmental stage might result in developmental delays.
36. **Strain on resources and overcrowding:** Some respondents were concerned that the inclusion of 2-year-olds in a primary school environment may potentially be disruptive for older students and burdensome for teachers. Respondents mentioned challenges related to dividing attention between younger and older children and the risk of teacher burnout.
37. **Long-term educational impact:** some responses questioned the long-term academic consequences of early exposure to formal education. Some respondents feared that beginning structured education too early could lead to a decline in children's natural curiosity and intrinsic motivation for learning.
38. Regarding the concerns as to whether schools can meet the needs of two-year-olds in terms of their personal care needs, emotional well-being, and learning, it is important to note that each school has planned for the delivery of places for two-year-olds. The schools recognise that the care and learning needs of two-year-old children will differ from those of older children who already attend the school. Each school has also considered the environment required to specifically meet the needs of two-year-olds.
39. As previously stated, all childcare providers (including schools) are required to adhere to the Early Years Foundation Stage statutory framework, which sets out the safeguarding and welfare requirements in relation to staff qualifications, training and experience, and adult to child ratios. Similarly, the learning and development requirements stipulate that providers must consider the individual needs, interests and development of the children in their care. Childcare provision is regulated and inspected by Ofsted and schools will receive support locally from the Early Years Quality Improvement team, both before and after they start offering places for this younger age group.
40. **Impact on existing early years providers:** Some respondents pointed out potential negative effects on private nurseries, which might struggle to remain operational with reduced numbers of 2-year-olds attending and could result in the closure of private nurseries, job losses, and reduced availability of childcare options for local families. There were also some concerns about the availability of childcare during school holidays and the overall sustainability of the private sector. Lowering the school entry age may also exacerbate the current staffing crisis in early years education.
41. In meeting its statutory duties to ensure sufficiency of childcare, as far as is reasonably practicable, the local authority aims to support a variety of childcare options to offer parents choices that meet their needs. Since the expansion of funded childcare in April 2024, there

has been a notable increase in the number of children eligible for places. While many parents in Hillingdon have secured childcare places, the proportion of disadvantaged two-year-olds taking up places has decreased compared to previous years. The uptake by these children in the wards where these schools are located remains relatively low, indicating potential difficulties for these parents in accessing funded childcare.

42. For the 'working parents' entitlement' for two-year-olds, the number of parents who have been able to find childcare in Colham & Cowley and Eastcote wards appears low, as measured by eligibility codes that have been validated by a setting. This suggests that parents may not have been able to find childcare that meets their needs.
43. From September 2025, the 'working parents' entitlement' will expand further and this will increase the funded hours that eligible children can receive from 15 to 30 hours a week, from the term after they are nine months old. It is anticipated that this will in turn increase parental demand for childcare.
44. Enabling these three schools to offer childcare for two-year-olds will help to address a potential shortfall in places, when more parents wish to use funded childcare. Though it is understandable that existing childcare settings would be concerned about additional competition, these schools are planning to offer a different model of childcare to most other group childcare settings e.g. opening during standard school hours, term time only.
45. **Impact on families:** several respondents were concerned that primary schools would not offer the flexible hours and specialised care available at private nurseries, leading to different logistical and financial considerations for parents. Working families relying on year-round childcare could experience changes if private nurseries face sustainability challenges.
46. Whilst school based provision is unlikely to offer flexible hours, they create choice in the market for parents when considering the type of childcare they require to meet their needs. With the reduction in the number of playgroups, there are fewer settings offering part time, term time only places and this is the type of childcare that schools are well placed to provide. Whilst other types of childcare provider may be able to deliver places more flexibly, parents who require full daycare may choose to use a school based nursery and access additional childcare support from registered childminders, many of whom already drop off and pick up from schools across the borough.
47. **Parental support:** Numerous comments highlighted the advantages of the proposal for parents, including easier access to nursery placements, support for working parents, and the potential for parents to return to full-time employment. The proposal is perceived as beneficial for families by providing better childcare options and alleviating parental burdens.
48. **Community and local benefits:** The proposal is positively regarded by some as a means to deliver a positive service to the local community, improve morning routines for parents with a single drop-off point, and assist local nurseries in offering increased spaces for young children.
49. **Benefits of Lowering School Entry Age:** some respondents suggested that lowering the school entry age would support more families by addressing the limited availability of nursery spaces due to staffing constraints, high demand, and waitlists.
50. Others stated that an earlier start in nursery would benefit children's progress and promote continuity of care, fostering stronger relationships and a sense of community.
51. Several respondents provided positive feedback about the proposal, highlighting the advantages for children's social development, knowledge acquisition, and preparedness for

the education system.

### **School specific responses**

#### ***Colham Manor Primary School***

52. Some comments raised concerns about the proposal, including the emotional impact on young children, and potential negative effects on existing school facilities and the impact on residents of additional footfall and parking in the area surrounding the school.

#### **Field End Infant School**

53. Respondents believe that the proposal would benefit working parents by providing more convenient childcare options and simplifying the drop-off process for families with multiple children.

#### **Minet Infant and Nursery School**

54. Whilst some respondents felt that that introducing younger children into schools may reduce the overall quality of education for all students, others noted potential benefits, such as convenience for families with multiple children and the belief that earlier education can help prepare children for future success.

55. There were some concerns about increased traffic and parking issues due to more parents attending the setting.

## **CORPORATE CONSIDERATIONS**

### **Corporate Finance**

Corporate Finance have reviewed this report and concur with the Financial Implications set out above, noting there are not direct financial implications to the Council associated with the recommendations in this report due to the schools being eligible to receive Early Years DSG funding for qualifying children.

Furthermore, it is noted that the schools have demonstrated to officers that they understand the costs associated with providing places for two-year olds by providing financial projections of the costs and income that would result from this change.

### **Legal**

There are no legal impediments to the recommendations set out within the report. The local authority must have regard to the consultation in reaching a decision.

## **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

NIL