

**Schools for the Future:  
A Policy for Sustainable Schools – User Guide**

**(February 2022)**

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## **PURPOSE**

This document is a “User Guide” to the “[Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools \(2009\) \(SSP\)](#)”. It should be used regularly by the education planning and managing authorities, sectoral support and representative bodies, school Boards of Governors (BoGs) and the wider community, as the framework to help assess whether or not a school is demonstrating a trend of sustainability issues or is facing the risk of unsustainability and what action is required to address this.

The “User Guide” supplements the [SSP](#). Throughout the “User Guide” reference will be made to specific sections of the original policy to assist the reader.

This guidance takes account of the changes since the SSP’s publication including, amongst other things, the introduction of Area Planning, additional statutory duties conferred through new legislation, new education policies and reflects changes in education administration through the establishment of the Education Authority (EA) in April 2015.

Annex A provides links to a range of educational policies that readers should familiarise themselves with in order to fully understand the context within which this policy is being taken forward.

## Abbreviations

<b>BoG</b>	Board of Governors
<b>CCMS</b>	Council for Catholic Maintained Schools
<b>CnaG</b>	Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta
<b>CSSC</b>	Controlled Schools' Support Council
<b>CSTS</b>	Catholic Schools' Trustee Service
<b>DC</b>	District Council
<b>DE</b>	Department of Education
<b>DP</b>	Development Proposal
<b>EA</b>	Education Authority
<b>ETI</b>	Education and Training Inspectorate
<b>GBA</b>	Governing Bodies Association
<b>IID</b>	Investment and Infrastructure Directorate
<b>IM</b>	Irish Medium
<b>IRE</b>	Independent Review of Education
<b>LGD</b>	Local Government District
<b>NICIE</b>	Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education
<b>NICS</b>	Northern Ireland Civil Service
<b>NISRA</b>	Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency
<b>RPA</b>	Review of Public Administration (in 2015)
<b>SI</b>	Strategically Important (reference to SI Small School)
<b>SSP</b>	Sustainable Schools Policy (Schools for the Future – A Policy for Sustainable Schools)
<b>TRC</b>	Transferor Representatives' Council

## Section 1 – The Policy

[“Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools”](#) (known as the *Sustainable Schools Policy* (SSP)) was published in January 2009. It was developed to address the recommendations in the “Independent Strategic Review of Education” (the Bain Report) by Professor George Bain, published in December 2006.

The original SSP policy document reflects the context and thinking of that time and was built around an assumption that the post-conflict society was ready to embrace new and innovative solutions to deliver a network of educationally and financially sustainable schools in which there would be fewer but bigger schools to better meet the needs for pupils.

The Department remains committed to the SSP aims and objectives as a means of delivering its vision for education which is broad and challenging for everyone involved in the delivery of the education system. That is:

*“A system that is recognised internationally for the quality of its teaching and learning, for the achievements of its young people and for a holistic approach to education”.*

Education represents one of the most significant investments in developing the individual, society and the economy. Strong, sustainable schools providing quality education and access to the full curriculum are central to the achievement of the educational vision. [SSP paragraph 1.8](#) gives more detail on considerations for the education sector in advancing towards this vision.

### Aim

The SSP<sup>1</sup> aims to ensure that all pupils in primary and post-primary schools have access to a broad and balanced curriculum that meets their educational needs in a school that is **educationally** and **financially viable** and takes account of the expressed preference of parents for a diverse education system. It sets out a framework of criteria and indicators for use by the Department, the education planning and managing authorities, sectoral support and representative bodies, school Boards of Governors (BoGs) and the wider community, to help assess whether a school may be considered fit-for-purpose or whether action is required to address emerging issues of educational and financial sustainability.

### Implementation of the Sustainable Schools Policy (SSP)

Area Planning is the process of strategic planning for primary and post-primary provision and has been developed to support the implementation of the SSP. The effective implementation of the SSP and the embedding of the Area Planning process

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<sup>1</sup> SSP does not apply to pre-school provision nor to Special Education Provision.

are key Departmental priorities and aim to ensure that **pupils have access to a network of viable and sustainable schools that are of the right type, right size, located in the right place and have a focus on raising standards.**

### **The Sustainable Schools Policy (SSP) Framework - Six Sustainability Criteria**

The [SSP paragraph 6.1](#) sets out six sustainability criteria and associated indicators which are the key reference for assessing existing and future education provision to ensure it meets the needs of the pupils. A copy is attached at Annex B.

The criteria are both quantitative and qualitative and cover the:-

- quality of the educational experience;
- stable enrolment trends;
- sound financial position;
- school leadership and management;
- accessibility; and
- strength of links to the local community.

Following the publication of the [Northern Ireland Audit Office Report on 'The Sustainability of Schools' – June 2015](#) and the subsequent Public Accounts Committee (PAC) Hearing in November 2015, the SSP criteria and indicators were reviewed by a team comprising the relevant DE policy colleagues, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), the Education Authority (EA) and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS). The conclusion of the review panel, which was accepted by the Department in March 2017, was that the six criteria were still relevant and while the indicators could benefit from some enhancements to reflect changes in policy they were sufficiently robust to remain in place until a wider review of the entire policy took place. The rationale for this recommendation was that a single indicator does not provide a complete picture of the issues relevant to each of the criterion. However, if multiple indicators are demonstrating a trend for any school, that school may be at risk of unsustainability.

The SSP criteria form a wide ranging framework and highlight considerations that should be taken into account when assessing the short and long-term viability of a school. It is recognised that local circumstances need to be considered when determining appropriate action and the position needs to be assessed on a case-by-case basis. The criteria are therefore not weighted, although evidence would suggest that an underlying trend emerging or existing on one or more criteria has the potential to effect other criteria if the emerging or existing trend continues.

Each criterion has a set of indicators which are outlined in [SSP Section 6](#). Each school's unique circumstance will determine which of the indicators will be most relevant at the time of assessment and the most relevant indicators may also change over time as the local context changes. It is important that **each school regularly assesses** itself against the relevant indicators in an objective, evidenced and candid manner to understand any sustainability issues that are emerging or existing from the analysis of available verifiable information. The following indicates the type of issues

BoGs and managing authorities should regularly consider when assessing a school's sustainability. These are for indicative purposes and are not exhaustive and are summarised below:-

- A. **Quality Educational Experience** - Are there indications that the school will not be able to provide a broad and balanced educational experience for the pupils, including extra-curricular activities, and realise and sustain high standards of educational attainment? For Post-primary schools, pupils should be able to have a full set of option choices and pursue their chosen subjects to the highest level. The indicators here also recognise the needs of teachers. Can the school cater for children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and is the quality of Pastoral Care high?
- B. **Stable Enrolment Trends** - Is the enrolment stable and above the minimum SSP threshold<sup>2</sup> or are admissions/enrolments decreasing year-on-year thus contributing to an increase in available places and financial difficulties? In a situation of declining enrolments across many areas, it is a challenge for schools to sustain their intake levels. Sustainability considers whether the trend in the annual changes to enrolment numbers should raise concerns for the longer-term viability of the school.
- C. **Sound Financial Position** - Is the school expected to sustain financial viability or will it have an ongoing budget deficit? Is the school operating within the budget tolerances outlined in the [Local Management of Schools \(LMS\) arrangements](#) (+/- 5% or £75,000, whichever is lesser)? Is the school operating within its in-year budget allocation? Are there unique circumstances which have led to a deficit? Does the school have a plan to reduce any deficit?
- D. **Strong Leadership and Management by BoGs and Principals** - Is there evidence of strong leadership and effective management in the school? Absence of effective leadership and management can affect morale and motivation, contribute to inconsistent standards of attainment and lead to a lack of direction and accountability. Ineffective teaching can reduce learning opportunities and lead to poor academic achievement. It can lead to pupils' disaffection and pupils' poor attendance and behaviour which can in turn disrupt teaching, divert teaching resources, add to the administration burden, reduce staff motivation and affect pupil and staff wellbeing.
- E. **Accessibility** - Is the distance to school and the travel time for pupils reasonable? In the absence of a suitable alternative school in the local area should the school be retained? Are there suitable transport arrangements between local schools? The Bain Report recommended that maximum travel distances and times for all pupils should be established to inform siting of new schools. This would need to take account of both the ages of pupils and the needs of the area.

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<sup>2</sup> Urban Primary School = 140; Rural Primary School = 105; Post-Primary = 500 (y8-y12); Sixth Form = 100



- F. **Strong links with the Community** - Are the links and relationships with parents and the local community strong? Are parents actively involved with the school? Do local children attend the school? How does the school actively contribute to the local community?

## SECTION 2 – USING THE SUSTAINABLE SCHOOLS POLICY (SSP)

### Why use the Policy?

The SSP provides a transparent, common and consistent policy for all involved in the Area Planning process regardless of the diverse representation of interests, ethos, needs and perspectives.

Use of the policy helps to identify sustainability trends either at individual school level or in relation to education provision within an area. Gathering evidence on the criteria and indicators outlined in the policy helps to lead those best placed to consider and develop solutions to future proof education provision at a specific school or area and to take action in proposing these solutions. This also informs the decision making process on proposals which come forward.

### Who should use the Policy?

The SSP is a policy for use by all grant-aided primary and post-primary schools, school planning/managing authorities and sectoral support bodies, in considering the educational experiences of children and young people and in making the best use of available resources:

- *Education Authority (EA)*: has a statutory duty to ensure that efficient primary and secondary provision is available to meet the needs of all pupils; and that schools sufficient in number, character and equipment are available. The EA is the Managing Authority of schools in the Controlled sector, the Funding Authority for all schools and the lead body in the Area Planning process.
- *Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS)*: is the Planning Authority for schools in the Maintained sector. CCMS has a statutory duty to promote and co-ordinate, in consultation with the Trustees, the planning of the effective provision of Catholic maintained schools.
- *Sectoral Support Bodies and Sectoral Advocates*: Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE), Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG), Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC), Catholic Schools' Trustee Service (CSTS), Governing Bodies Association (GBA), and Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC)), representative of the Integrated<sup>3</sup>, Irish medium and Controlled sectors, Voluntary Grammar Schools and their Trustees and 'Other Maintained Schools', ie including Church Schools.
- *Boards of Governors (BoGs)*: play an integral part in managing and controlling their schools. Governors have a role to play in ensuring their schools remain financially and educationally viable and in identifying sustainability concerns.

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<sup>3</sup> Controlled Integrated Schools are managed by the EA and supported by NICIE and CSSC.

- The *Wider Community*, which includes anyone with an interest in the educational well-being of children and young people, should also familiarise themselves with the SSP and endeavour to appreciate the reality of the sustainability of the local schools.

The policy sets the direction of travel for the Area Planning process and its support structures (eg Area Planning Steering Group (APSG), Working Group (APWG) and Local Groups (APLG)). These groups include the statutory planning authorities and sectoral support bodies and work at all levels to ensure that Area Planning is carried out effectively.

### **How to use the Policy?**

The SSP's six sustainability criteria and associated quantitative and qualitative indicators are the key reference for assessing existing and future education provision to ensure it meets the needs of the pupils. The criteria will help provide a view of how effectively a school is functioning and highlight where issues have arisen and if action is required to safeguard the educational experience of pupils. The [SSP Section 6](#) indicates that the intention is not to have a mechanistic application of the criteria and indicators. However, it is expected that each school will regularly (preferably annually) use the appropriate indicators which reflect its current circumstances to assess its own sustainability.

### **When to use the Framework?**

School Planning and Managing Authorities should have appropriate systems in place to facilitate the early and regular review of schools against the SSP's criteria and indicators to ensure that education provision at a given setting or area is viable currently and in the future and to initiate action as required to overcome and address any identified issue(s).

BoGs should annually self-assess their school against the SSP criteria and indicators and keep a record of the findings and any discussions. A BoG checklist is attached at Annex C to assist with this process.

All BoGs should avail of the training provided by the EA on SSP Criteria and Self-evaluation.

### **What to do if SSP criteria and indicators flag up an issue?**

Regular review through self-assessment and assessment undertaken by the managing authority of schools as part of the Area Planning process will result in early detection of sustainability issues and trends and this evidence can be used to develop early solutions before the situation worsens and the opportunity for the widest range of solutions diminishes.

BoGs, in association with their Planning/Managing Authority or Sectoral Body, should consider appropriate action or support available.

If action is required that may require the statutory Development Proposal (DP) process, the relevant School Planning/Managing Authority or Sectoral Body will progress the matter through the Area Planning structures for consideration and discussion to help determine the proposed way forward.

**See Annex D for contact details in those organisations most directly involved in Area Planning.**

## SECTION 3 – SUPPORTING DEFINITIONS FOR APPLICATION OF THE SUSTAINABLE SCHOOLS POLICY (SSP) CRITERIA

In order to apply the six SSP criteria there are a number of definitions that impact on the categorisation of each school.

### Urban and Rural Definitions

The [SSP Section 4](#) currently defines urban schools as those schools within the former Belfast and Derry District Council (DC) areas and rural schools as those located in any other area.

Following the Review of Public Administration (RPA) in 2015, the 26 Local Government Districts (LGDs) in Northern Ireland were reduced to 11. Belfast LGD now incorporates parts of the former Castlereagh, Lisburn and North Down Council areas and Derry LGD and Strabane LGD merged to form 'Derry and Strabane' LGD. The stated definition in the SSP is, therefore, not aligned with the new LGDs and needs to be reviewed.

In preparation for the next Strategic Area Plan (SAP), the Department has considered how best to reflect the current administrative boundaries (LGDs) and to align the approach taken across the Department of Education (DE) and the wider Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS). It has determined that in advance of a wider review of education it is reasonable and practical to adopt the definition that is applied across the majority of policies in Northern Ireland and the one that is recommended by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA). The current definitions to be applied for the SSP policy are now:-

**Urban:** schools are defined as urban if they are in settlements with a population greater than or equal to 5,000 people (NISRA Bands A-E); and

**Rural:** schools are defined as rural if they are in settlements with less than 5,000 people (NISRA Bands F-H).

### Transition Period

The Department recognises that some primary schools changing from Rural to Urban may be impacted by this change in definition, particularly those who are currently above the minimum enrolment threshold of 105 pupils for a rural school but less than the 140 pupil threshold for an urban school. To mitigate the potential impact on schools, a transition period will be provided in terms of assessing their sustainability against the stable enrolment trend criteria in the SSP.

The transition period will apply to those primary schools that change from being above the minimum enrolment threshold to below, solely as a result of a change in their definition from a Rural school to an Urban school.

The transition period will run to **31 August 2027**, the end of the next Area Planning cycle. This will allow time for the schools and school managing authorities to assess impact and develop solutions.

Schools will be able to check their Urban/Rural classification on the Department's website as this is already available within the 'School Level Data' published with the other data gathered through the school enrolments census exercise. The Rural/Urban classification for each school is located at the 'reference data' tab in each link.

The link to DE's website is at: [School enrolments - school level data | Department of Education \(education-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/school-enrolments-school-level-data)

### **Independent Review of Education (IRE)/Sustainable Education Provision in Rural Areas**

The Department is currently supporting the work of the Independent Review of Education (IRE) which has been commissioned by the Northern Ireland Executive. There will be no changes to the SSP (other than the necessary redefining of Urban and Rural) in advance of the findings and recommendations of this Review. The Department remains of the view that there is sufficient cover in the existing policy, supported by the statement of Ministerial priorities to allow Area Planning to proceed effectively.

It should be noted that the Department has embarked on work to consider options for a programme to support the retention of sustainable education provision in rural areas. This will feed into the IRE and inform Area Planning decisions.

## SECTION 4 – SUSTAINABLE ENROLMENT THRESHOLDS FOR ESTABLISHED SCHOOLS<sup>4</sup>

### PRIMARY SCHOOLS

The [SSP Section 4 paragraph 4.4](#) outlines that the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) advises that ideally an established primary school should have a minimum of seven class bases (one for each year group) or multiples thereof. The optimum size of an established primary school, based on the ETI recommended model of single year groups and assuming a class maximum size of 30, should be around 210 pupils or larger. New schools in the controlled and maintained sector would be expected to reflect this optimum configuration for primary schools.

The [SSP Section 4 paragraph 4.5 and Table 4.1](#) specify a minimum sustainability enrolment threshold for primary schools. While a minimum threshold is specified and applied to established schools, these figures were primarily aimed at the establishment of new schools. The thresholds described reflect those pertaining to the development of Integrated and Irish-medium schools at the time of publication of the policy and remain so. It is unlikely that schools which have stable enrolments at the minimum threshold over a long period of time will generate sufficient funds to deliver quality education provision that is outlined in the optimum configuration of single year group classes.

The SSP minimum thresholds for a primary school together with the optimum configuration are as follows:

Size	Approved Admissions	Approved Enrolment
Optimum	30	210*
Minimum Urban	20	140
Minimum Rural	15	105

\* Optimum class size is 7 class based at 210 or multiples thereof – 420,630 etc.

When assessing and reconfiguring area provision the school planning authorities should seek to achieve a network of schools which reflect the **optimal** configurations within the area and, where possible, develop provision that is based on multiples of seven class base schools. Where this is not possible due to the historical development of individual schools based on need then they should seek to ensure that pupils are not educated in classes with more than two year groups.

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<sup>4</sup> An established school is one that has been in operation for more than 10 years

## Criteria for Recurrent Funding for New Primary Schools

As previously outlined, new schools that are not the result of a school rationalisation or amalgamation (largely in the controlled and maintained sectors), have been in the Integrated and Irish medium sectors. These schools have not previously existed in any form and are requiring recurrent and capital funding for the first time. In deciding to approve a Development Proposal (DP) for a new school and, therefore, agreeing to provide recurrent funding if conditions are met, the Department will assess the potential for that school to reach its full approved enrolment figure over a period of time to ensure it will be educationally and financially sustainable for the long-term. This will be based on the minimum threshold (105/140) or higher.

In recent years it has generally been the Integrated and Irish-medium sectors which have sought to establish new schools in response to parental demand, though the criteria apply to all sectors.

The minimum Year 1 intakes required to secure recurrent funding at new primary schools in urban and rural areas are:

Year of operation	Urban Primary Schools	Rural Primary Schools
1	15	12
2-7	20	15
Total enrolment minimum	140	105

It is expected that the enrolment at a new primary school will increase year-on-year until it reaches at least the minimum threshold of 140 or 105 (depending on whether the school is in an urban or rural location) or higher. While the minimum is acceptable, the optimum size is more desirable to enhance the opportunity of pupils to have a quality educational experience in a school which is sustainable.

It should be noted that the minimum admissions number in the first year is lower than that required for admissions in subsequent years. This is in recognition of the Department's duty to encourage and facilitate Integrated and Irish medium education and that attracting pupils in the first year of a new school can be particularly challenging.

## Criteria for Irish Medium Units in Primary Schools

Meeting educational needs through establishment of an Irish-medium (IM) unit (*delivering the complete curriculum through Irish*) attached to an English medium host school may be an option for the development of Irish-medium education.

The [SSP Section 4 paragraph 4.10](#) specifies that IM units in primary schools should achieve a minimum intake of 8 pupils in Year 1 and subsequent years 2-7 to be considered educationally viable.



In line with the overall policy approach, the combined unit and host school enrolment should be expected to have the minimum enrolment levels of 140 for Urban primaries and 105 for Rural primaries. This approach would not rule out establishment of a stand-alone school at a later stage if there is a demonstrated need and agreement for it.

**Criteria for Capital Investment in Primary Schools**  
**(SSP Section 4 paragraph 4.5 and Table 4.1)**

The criteria for investment in new primary schools are in line with the recommended minimum thresholds -

- a minimum of 20 pupils per year over 3 years in an urban area – which equates to 140 pupils over 7 years; and
- a minimum intake of 15 pupils per year over 3 years in a rural area – which equates to 105 pupils over 7 years.

The Department will not normally replace school buildings unless the enrolments are projected (based on robust evidence) to be at least at these levels. Nevertheless, it is also recognised that the position at each individual school needs to be considered in the context of local circumstances.

Decisions on schools below these levels will need to be taken in the context of area based plans that identify schools which will be needed for the longer term to serve the local areas.

## POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS

The [SSP Section 4 paragraph 4.13](#) reflects the recommendations made by the Bain Review which recommended minimum enrolment levels for Post primary schools. The minimum levels are as follows:-

Year	Annual Approved Admissions	Approved Enrolment
Years 8 -12	100	500
Years 13-14	50	100

The policy does not specify an optimum enrolment threshold for post-primary schools. However, the [SSP in Section 4 paragraph 4.16](#) does highlight that the average size of post-primary schools may be significantly higher than the minimum and states that the larger the school the more scope there is to recruit teachers to teach subjects and to offer a broad range of extra-curricular activities and enrichment opportunities. This would be commensurate with the requirement for post-primary schools to deliver the Entitlement Framework (EF).

### Criteria for recurrent funding for new Post-primary schools

The Department, when considering a proposal for a new post-primary school wishes to ensure that the school has the potential to reach the minimum enrolment threshold or higher within a reasonable development period. In recent years it has generally been the Integrated and Irish-medium sectors which have sought to establish new schools in response to parental demand, though the criteria apply to all sectors.

In recognition of the statutory duty to encourage and facilitate the development of these sectors and taking account of the challenges facing new post-primary schools the [SSP Section 4 paragraph 4.14](#) specifies the following minimum enrolment thresholds to enable a school to secure and retain recurrent funding. The thresholds are as follows:

Year	Minimum Admission Year 8	Minimum Admissions Year 13	Minimum Enrolment
1 <sup>st</sup>	50		50
2 <sup>nd</sup>	80		130
3 <sup>rd</sup>	100		230
4 <sup>th</sup>	100		330
5 <sup>th</sup>	100		430
6 <sup>th</sup>	100	50	530*
7 <sup>th</sup>	100	50	600*

\*The enrolment number in 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> year will be dependent on the number in 6<sup>th</sup> form and will align with the approval of the DP – at this stage a school should be meeting the minimum thresholds for both Year 8 and Year 13 admissions.

## Criteria for Irish Medium Units in Post Primary Schools

The option of meeting educational needs through **units** (*delivering the complete curriculum through Irish*) attached to an English medium host school may be a particular route for the development of IM education. Units in post-primary schools should achieve a minimum intake of 12 pupils in Year 8.

In line with the overall policy approach, the combined unit and host school enrolment should be expected to have the minimum enrolment levels of 100 per year group in years 8-12 and 100 for sixth forms. **SSP Section 4 paragraph 4.15 refers.** This approach would not rule out a stand-alone school at a later stage if there was a demonstrated need and agreement for it.

## Criteria for Capital Investment in Post Primary Schools

The criteria for investment in new post-primary schools applies to both Urban and Rural schools (**SSP Section 4 paragraph 4.12 refers**). The criteria reflects the recommended minimum threshold for years 8-12 and sixth forms -

- a minimum annual intake of 100 pupils on average – which equates to 500 pupils in years 8-12; and
- a minimum enrolment for sixth forms of 100 pupils.

It is important that those bringing forward proposals for a new school engage at the earliest possible stage with the Department's Investment and Infrastructure Directorate (IID) to explore options for siting a new school. This is to ensure that appropriate accommodation can be provided that meets a school's initial needs but also takes account of the opportunity for the school to develop to become a sustainable school in the longer term.

The Department will not normally consider replacing school buildings unless the enrolments are projected to be at least at these levels. Nevertheless, it is also recognised that the position at each individual school needs to be considered in the context of local circumstances. Decisions on schools below these levels will be taken in the context of area planning that identifies the school provision needed for the longer term to serve local areas.

## Clustering and Collaboration

Whilst new schools are one means of providing for identified preferences on the ground, there needs to be a strong expectation of viability for the longer term. There may be alternative means for developing sustainable provision in response to local demand without the establishment of a new school. For example, the following clustering or co-operative arrangements could provide ways that schools could work together to become a sustainable entity for the general good of their pupils and in doing so help address sustainability issues:-

Amalgamation - a new school is formed to replace two or more previously existing schools of similar size coming together and usually means a new name, uniform, etc. (This differs from a closure where a small school closes and pupils are able to transfer to available larger schools). [Circular 2018/15](#) provides guidance on the implementation of approved DPs for amalgamations.

Federation - involving collaboration of a number of primary schools of the same management type managed by a single BoG with the possibility of a shared principal and/or other staff. Each school retains its own identity and budget and collectively they must be sustainable. The focus must be on enhancing the educational experience of the pupils attending the federated schools.

Shared Campus – where schools retain autonomy but share infrastructure.

Jointly Managed – refers to schools where representatives of the Transferor churches and the Catholic church working together have a joint role in the management of the school. The [Jointly Managed Schools guidance](#) is available on the DE website.

## **Section 5 – Developing Schools**

The Department approves statutory Development Proposals (DPs) for new primary and post-primary schools in the expectation that they will grow to become educationally and financially sustainable in line with the SSP within a reasonable timeframe. The SSP does not specify a development period for new schools; however, the Department considers that it is unreasonable to apply the policy immediately to new schools. A period of 10 years from date of opening will, therefore, be considered as the development period for new schools (as defined in Section 4).

During the 10 years of development, a new school will be expected to show steady progress towards meeting the SSP criteria, particularly demonstrating that enrolments are rising in line with the SSP minimum admissions each year. Ideally, it is the optimum enrolment levels which new schools should be striving to achieve.

### **Developing Schools Frameworks**

In order to ensure that that new schools have the support they need at this crucial stage of development and to protect the educational well-being of the pupils that attend these schools, the Department has developed Frameworks for new primary and post-primary schools (below) to assist and inform new schools (and all associated with their establishment and development) as they progress through the development phase.

The frameworks identify key review points in the development of new primary schools and post-primary schools and highlight the different intake and enrolment requirements for each phase (aligned to the SSP).

## Development Framework for New Primary Schools

Key Milestone	Intakes/Enrolments and Outcomes	Action
<b>Year 1</b>	Minimum intake 12/15. School receives recurrent funding.	Site and accommodation assistance may be available via the Department's Rental Policy. Proposer / Managing Authority / Sectoral Support Body should engage with IID.  <u>Options should have been discussed with IID before publication of the DP to establish the new school.</u>
<b>Years 2-3</b>	Minimum average intake 15/20 per year to reach the recommended minimum enrolment for a sustainable school.	Managing Authority / Sectoral Support Body will assess the position of the school in relation to eligibility for capital investment.  If <b>achieved</b> the Department will recognise the schools eligibility for capital investment.  If <b>not achieved</b> the school and the Managing Authority / Sectoral Support Body should develop a plan to get the school on track for capital investment eligibility.
<b>Years 4-7</b>	Minimum average intake 15/20 per year to reach the recommended minimum enrolment for a sustainable school.	Managing Authority / Sectoral Support Body to continue to monitor and support school to increase admissions and enrolment.
<b>Year 8-10</b>	Minimum enrolment 105/140 in years 1-7	Managing Authority / Sectoral Support Body to:- <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review progress (Years 1-7).</li> <li>• Develop a three year plan (Years 8-10) to help achieve minimum enrolment and/or progress to optimum enrolment.</li> </ul>
<b>Year 10</b>	School is regarded as 'established' SSP minimum enrolment (105/140) <b>achieved</b>  SSP minimum enrolment (105/140) <b>not achieved</b>	SSP now applies in full.  School should continue to self-evaluate to ensure enrolment maintained and / or progresses to optimum level.  Managing Authority / Sectoral Support Body to provide DE with clear statement of intent regarding the school's future and proposed way forward.

## Development Framework for New Post- Primary Schools

Key Milestone	Intakes/Enrolments and Outcomes	Action
Year 1	Minimum intake 50. School receives recurrent funding.	<p>Site and accommodation assistance may be available via the Departments Rental Policy – Proposer / Managing Authority / Sectoral Support Body should engage with IID.</p> <p><u>Options should have been discussed with IID before publication of the DP to establish the new school.</u></p>
Years 2-3	<p>Intake is expected to increase to 80 in the second year and then 100 in the third year.</p> <p>SSP minimum intake of 80/100 <b>achieved</b>.</p> <p>SSP minimum intake of 80/100 <b>not achieved</b>.</p>	<p>School retains recurrent funding.</p> <p>Managing Authority / Sectoral Support Body to continue to monitor and support school to maintain / increase admissions and enrolment.</p> <p>Managing Authority / Sectoral Support Body to provide DE with clear statement of intent regarding the school’s future and proposed way forward.</p>
Years 4-7	<p>Minimum average intake 100 per year to reach the recommended minimum enrolment of 500 pupils in years 8-12 for a sustainable school.</p> <p>If the school has approval for post-16 provision then year 13 must have a minimum of 50 pupils enrolled in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> years</p>	<p>Managing Authority / Sectoral Support Body to continue to monitor and support school to increase admissions and enrolment.</p> <p>(The projected enrolments at new post-primary schools are expected to meet the minimum threshold for years 8-12 of 500 pupils and if applicable 100 at post 16 to be eligible for capital funding).</p>
Year 8 -10	<p>Minimum enrolment 500 in years 8-12</p> <p>Minimum enrolment at Post-16 should be 100 in years 13 and 14 collectively.</p>	<p>Managing Authority / Sectoral Support Body to:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review progress (Years 1-7).</li> <li>• Develop a three year plan (Years 8-10) to help achieve minimum enrolment.</li> </ul>
Year 10	<p>School is regarded as ‘established’</p> <p>SSP minimum enrolment (500 in years 8-12) <b>achieved</b>.</p> <p>SSP minimum enrolment 500 in years 8-12) <b>not achieved</b>.</p>	<p>School will be assessed alongside all other established schools for sustainability purposes.</p> <p>School should continue to self-evaluate to ensure enrolment maintained.</p> <p>Managing Authority / Sectoral Support Body to provide DE with clear statement of intent regarding the school’s future and proposed way forward.</p>

## **Transitional arrangements**

The context within which proposals for new schools are now being brought forward are different due to the introduction of Area Planning and policies to ensure new schools have more assistance with accommodation issues from the outset. However, there are some Irish Medium (IM) and Integrated schools that have been in existence for longer than 10 years that have yet to reach their full potential and they too require further assistance. To ensure a smooth introduction of the Developing Schools Frameworks up to an additional five years (a total development period of 15 years) may be provided, details of this transitional arrangement are set out below:-

- for existing IM or Integrated schools (open more than 10 years) – the Department will require the managing authority to work with the BoG, sectoral support body and the Department to agree an action plan to work towards sustainability within five years and after that period the school will automatically be deemed “established”;
- for existing IM or Integrated schools (open less than 10 years) – an assessment will be carried out in the tenth year and should the school need more time then the Department will require the managing authority to work with the BoG, sectoral support body and the Department to agree an action plan to work towards sustainability within five years and after that period the school will automatically be deemed “established”;
- for all new schools – assessment will be in line with the 10-year timetable. In exceptional circumstances, the Department will consider a robust evidence based case for an extension up to a maximum of an additional five years. After which the school will automatically be deemed “established”.

When drawing up plans to assist schools to reach sustainability levels, as outlined in the SSP, the managing/planning authorities, sectoral support bodies and the Department will take account of the prevailing strategic planning context and the Ministerial priorities for the Area Planning cycle.



### **Educational Policy and Statutory Duties**

This section highlights the range of specific policies and statutory duties relevant to considerations of longer-term viability and the future planning of the schools' estate. Links are provided to additional information available on the Department's website or where indicated by an external link to the Legislation.gov.uk website.

#### **Area Planning**

Area Planning is the process through which the SSP is implemented. The policy aim is to ensure that children and young people have access to high quality education that is delivered in schools that are educationally and financially sustainable. Area Planning supports the strategic planning of primary, post-primary and special education provision and is central to achieving the Departmental vision for education.

#### **The Entitlement Framework**

The Entitlement Framework sets out the minimum number and range of courses a school should offer at Key Stage 4 and Post-16. These courses should be economically relevant and individually engaging with clear progression pathways.

#### **The Statutory Curriculum**

The curriculum applies to all 12 years of compulsory education broken down into four stages:

- Foundation Stage which covers P1 and P2;
- Key Stage 1 covers P3 and P4 and Key Stage 2 covers P5, P6 and P7;
- Key Stage 3 covers Years 8, 9 and 10; and
- Key Stage 4 covers Years 11 and 12.

#### **Every School a Good School – a policy for school improvement**

Every School a Good School – a policy for school improvement aims to support schools and teachers in their work to raise standards and overcome barriers to learning some pupils may face. This policy includes a requirement to provide focused support for schools which, as a result of inspection by the ET, are found to be offering less than satisfactory provision for their pupils. This support is provided through the 'Formal Intervention Process'.

## Extended Schools

The Department of Education's extended schools programme aims to improve levels of educational achievement for disadvantaged children and young people by providing the additional support that they might need to help them reach their full potential.

## **Statutory Duties**

[Integrated Education](#) is the education together at school of Protestant and Roman Catholic pupils. [Article 64 of the Education reform \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1989](#) (*external link*) places a statutory duty on the Department to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education.

[Irish-medium Education](#) is education provided in an Irish speaking school or unit. [Article 89 of the Education \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1998](#) (*external link*) places a statutory duty on the Department to encourage and facilitate the development of Irish-medium education.

[Shared Education](#) encourages all types of schools to collaborate to provide opportunities for pupils from different religious and socio-economic backgrounds to be educated together. The aim is to deliver educational benefits to children and young persons, promote the efficient and effective use of resources, promote equality of opportunity, promote good relations; and promote respect for identity, diversity and community cohesion. [The Shared Education Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2016](#) (*external link*) places a duty on DE and the EA to encourage, facilitate and promote Shared Education. The Act also provides a power to relevant arms-length bodies to encourage and facilitate Shared Education.

## **Rural Needs**

The SSP criteria recognise that there can be different issues facing primary and post-primary schools. It is also recognised that there may be greater travel and transport issues for pupils living in rural communities that are relevant to consideration of rural provision. Schools are often at the heart of rural communities and provide valuable, often scarce, facilities. It is important that children in rural communities have access to a quality education in cost-effective provision. The policy was assessed against the RDC rural proofing checklist and no adverse impact was identified. [The Rural Needs Act \(NI\) 2016](#) (the Act) places a statutory duty on public authorities to have due regard to rural needs when developing, adopting, implementing or revising policies, strategies and plans, and when designing and delivering public services. The Act commenced on a phased approach, beginning with all government departments and local councils implementing the Act from 1 June 2017 and the remaining public authorities listed in the Schedule to the Act from 1 June 2018.

### ***Equality Considerations***

The Department is required under [Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998](#) to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity:

- between persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation;
- between men and women generally; and
- between persons with a disability and persons without; and between persons with dependents and persons without.

The SSP was subject to [equality screening](#) and was found to have no adverse impact on any groups, and therefore a full equality impact assessment was not required.

## Criteria and Indicators

Criterion	Indicator
<b>A Quality Educational Experience</b>	<p>1.1 Attainment levels of pupils<sup>5</sup>, Key Stage tests pending development of new indicators for Primary Schools, GCSE results for Post-Primary Schools.</p> <p>1.2 No more than <u>two</u> composite year groups in a single classroom at primary school level.</p> <p>1.3 A <u>minimum</u> of four teachers<sup>6</sup> at a primary school. This recognises both the needs of pupils and the demands on teachers.</p> <p>1.4 The ability of the school to cater for children with Special Educational Needs.</p> <p>1.5 The ability at post-primary level to be able to provide suitable access to the Entitlement Framework including, where appropriate, linkages with other schools, the Further Education sector or other providers.</p> <p>1.6 The standards and the quality of learning and teaching at the school.</p> <p>1.7 The range of curricular and extra-curricular activities available for children including Career Guidance, Physical Education, Music, Art, Drama and Science.</p> <p>1.8 The quality of the <u>physical</u> environment for learning and teaching i.e. the condition, energy and water efficiency and suitability of the buildings.</p> <p>1.9 The quality of, and arrangements for, pastoral care including the active promotion of the principles of social justice in all areas of the formal and informal curriculum.</p>

<sup>5</sup> Given the importance of factors such as the background of the children, the socio-economic conditions in the community and levels of parental support in pupils' attainment levels, the Department is working towards a contextualised 'value-added' approach.

<sup>6</sup> Where a small school is retained the teaching principal post will remain.

Criterion	Indicator
<b>B Stable Enrolment Trends</b>	<p>2.1 The enrolment trends in the school in the past three years and projected demand in the area.</p> <p><b>Primary:</b><sup>7</sup></p> <p>2.2 Ideally a primary school should have at least seven classrooms (one for each year group). The minimum (not optimal) enrolment for newly established schools or existing schools should be 140 in urban areas and 105 in rural areas.</p> <p><b>Post-Primary:</b><sup>8</sup></p> <p>2.3 The minimum (not optimal) enrolment for newly established schools or existing schools should be 500 pupils for an 11-16 school, i.e. an annual average intake of 100 per year.</p> <p>2.4 The sixth form should be self-sufficient financially and have a minimum of 100 pupils.</p> <p>2.5 Key Stage 4 and sixth form enrolments should enable pupils to spend 80% or more of their time in their home school.</p>
<b>C Sound Financial Position</b>	<p>3.1 The school's annual finances indicate that it can live within its delegated budget.</p> <p>3.2 The school's financial trends indicate that it will continue to be able to live within its annually delegated budget.</p> <p>3.3 The school's three year financial plans, based upon realistic assumptions, indicate that where there is a deficit this can be substantially reduced or recovered.</p>

<sup>7</sup> Initial minimum thresholds for new primary schools to start up are given at paragraphs 4.7 and 4.8.

<sup>8</sup> Initial minimum thresholds for new post-primary schools to start up are given at paragraph 4.14.

<b>Criterion</b>	<b>Indicator</b>
<b>D Strong Leadership and Management by Boards of Governors and Principals</b>	4.1 Governors' views on the school based on quantitative and qualitative evidence. 4.2 Composition of Board of Governors – skills and experience of Board members and number of vacancies. 4.3 Management of staff attendance and absenteeism. 4.4 Levels and nature of staff turnover and unfilled staff vacancies. 4.5 Teacher morale. 4.6 Management of curricular and organisational demands on the principal and staff. 4.7 Ensuring that the resource allocated is available so that the principal has at least 1 day per week to attend to leadership and management duties. 4.8 There is a school development plan in place and progress is being made to achieve the plan's aims and objectives. 4.9 Pupil behaviour, expulsions, suspensions and non-attendance as well as positive behaviours such as involvement in school management (e.g. buddying and mentoring schemes).
<b>E Accessibility<sup>9 10</sup></b>	5.1 Home to school transport travel times of less than 30 minutes for primary pupils (ie 1 hour per day in total) and 45 minutes for post-primary pupils (ie 1.5 hours per day in total). 5.2 <sup>11</sup> Distance to another suitable <sup>12</sup> primary school. 5.3 Existing co-operative arrangements with other schools and Further Education C/ training organisations - max travel time 30 minutes for a single journey and total of 2 hours per week. 5.4 Capacity in nearest schools.

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted however that the distances and times stated are guidance. It is not possible to be absolutely prescriptive.

<sup>10</sup> Free transport is provided where there are no places at suitable schools within defined distances.

<sup>11</sup> Indicator 5.2 only refers to primary schools as parents often choose to send their child further afield for post-primary provision.

<sup>12</sup> A suitable primary school is one belonging to one of the recognized categories of school, namely: Controlled, Integrated, Irish-medium, and Maintained.

Criterion	Indicator
<b>F Strong links with the Community</b>	<p>6.1 Degree and quality of parental involvement (schools will be asked to provide evidence on this).</p> <p>6.2 Number of children in the vicinity attending (and not attending) the school.</p> <p>6.3 Contribution of the school to the community (schools will be asked to provide evidence on this).</p> <p>6.4 Presence of other features of provision, e.g. nursery or specialist unit.</p> <p>6.5 Multi-functional use of buildings outside formal education, for example, for sport, voluntary and community use.</p>

## Boards of Governors Checklist – Sustainability and Sustainable Schools Policy (SSP)

This checklist is available for Boards of Governors (BoGs) of schools to assist with their understanding and awareness of the Area Planning process and of the SSP as a framework to be used for considering the educational experiences of children and young people. It should be used in conjunction with the most up-to-date DE guidance and aims to help school governors develop, and take assurance that they have, defined actions incorporated into their School Development Plan, for addressing any sustainability pressures that have arisen or are anticipated.

Item	
The Board of Governors regularly considers the educational and financial viability of its school.	✓
The sustainability of the school is discussed and documented at least once each year by the Board of Governors.	✓
All members of the Board of Governors are familiar with, have read and understood the Sustainable Schools Policy.	✓
Annual Area Profiles are discussed on publication.	✓
Members of the Board of Governors understand the significance of information regarding enrolment numbers and the budget position of the school as presented in the Annual Area Profile for the school.	✓
Members of the Board of Governors are aware of and have accessed EA or other support body training programmes that cover sustainability.	✓
Where concerns are identified regarding any or all of the 6 SSP criteria and associated indicators, the Board of Governors have actions in their School Development Plan to address sustainability issues which is discussed and agreed with the school managing authority and appropriate support requested.	✓
A School Development Plan is in place and agreed actions as they relate to viability/sustainability are progressed and monitored for effectiveness	✓
Where financial deficits are escalating, there is a realistic and time-bounded plan in place to address this position.	✓
Where the school is operating with composite classes of three or more year groups there is a realistic and time-bounded plan in place to address this position.	✓
Members of the Board of Governors are familiar with and have read the current Strategic Area Plan published by the Education Authority.	✓
The Board of Governors has considered whole-area sustainability issues that may impact on their school and explored opportunities to discuss implications and with other school leaders	✓



## Annex D

### Contact details in those organisations most directly involved in Area Planning

Organisation	Contact Detail
Catholic Schools' Trustee Service (CSTS)	Pauline Martin Trustee Support Officer 02890268368 / 07741547613 <a href="mailto:p.martin@csts.stmarys-belfast.ac.uk">p.martin@csts.stmarys-belfast.ac.uk</a>
Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG)	Ciarán Mac Giolla Bhéin 02890 897310 <a href="mailto:cmacgiollabhein@comhairle.org">cmacgiollabhein@comhairle.org</a>  Peadar Ó Cuinneagáin 02890 897314 <a href="mailto:pocuinneagain@comhairle.org">pocuinneagain@comhairle.org</a>
Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC)	Jayne Millar Head of Education Support 028 9531 3035 / 07894 393 013 <a href="mailto:Jayne.Millar@csscni.org.uk">Jayne.Millar@csscni.org.uk</a>
Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS)	CCMS 028 9201 3014 <a href="mailto:areaplanning@ccmsschools.com">areaplanning@ccmsschools.com</a>
Education Authority (EA)	Mainstream and special education area planning Michael McConkey – Head of Area Planning 07973 634021 <a href="mailto:michael.mcconkey@eani.org.uk">michael.mcconkey@eani.org.uk</a>  Mainstream area planning Sinead McCartan – Lead Officer for Area Planning 07733 435010 <a href="mailto:Sinead.McCartan@eani.org.uk">Sinead.McCartan@eani.org.uk</a>  Special education area planning Nigel Freeburn – Lead Officer for Special Education Area Planning 07766 387122 <a href="mailto:Nigel.Freeburn@eani.org.uk">Nigel.Freeburn@eani.org.uk</a>  Mainstream and special education area planning Carol Hall – Information and Planning Officer 07974 202982 <a href="mailto:carol.hall@eani.org.uk">carol.hall@eani.org.uk</a>
Governing Bodies Association (GBA)	02890312259 <a href="mailto:administrator@gbani.org">administrator@gbani.org</a>
Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE)	Lorna McAlpine 02890 972910 <a href="mailto:lmcalpine@nicie.org.uk">lmcalpine@nicie.org.uk</a>
Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC)	Dr Peter Hamill, Secretary to the TRC 028 90828860 <a href="mailto:edunorth@ireland.anglican.org">edunorth@ireland.anglican.org</a>