

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

AREA PLANNING

ANNUAL REPORT 2017/18

July 2018

A. INTRODUCTION

1. Welcome to the first Department of Education (DE) annual report on Area Planning. The main purpose of this report is to provide you with information on Area Planning activity and impact during the planning year (April 2017– March 2018). Providing year on year comparisons, you will be able to see progress from a baseline position when Area Planning was first introduced in September 2011 to 31 March 2018.

B. ORIGINS OF AREA PLANNING – SUSTAINABLE SCHOOLS POLICY

2. This first annual report provides some background information on the history and development of Area Planning which is the process designed to support the implementation of DE's "Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools" (Sustainable Schools Policy or SSP) which was published in 2009. The aim of the SSP is to improve the quality of education offered to pupils of all ages and backgrounds through the development of a network of schools that are educationally and financially viable.
3. The consistent implementation of the SSP across all school sectors will ensure that every pupil has access to high quality education that meets their needs and enables them to fulfil their potential. This contributes to the draft Programme for Government Outcome 12 (*"We give our children and young people the best start in life"*) and to the supporting indicators:
 - 11: Improve educational outcomes.
 - 12: Reduce educational inequality.
 - 13: Improve the quality of education.
 - 15: Improve child development.
4. The SSP's six sustainability criteria are considered when assessing a school's viability, these are:
 - quality education experience;
 - stable enrolment trends;
 - sound financial position;
 - strong leadership and management;
 - accessibility; and
 - strong links with the community.
5. Each criterion is supported by a set of associated indicators that provide a framework for schools to monitor and self-review and to consider, along with their managing authority, how to strengthen and improve in the best interests of their pupils. No criterion is more important or carries more weight than another but the principle of the provision of and access to quality education apply.
6. The SSP contains minimum enrolment thresholds first recommended in the 2006 Bain Report (*Schools for the Future: Funding, Strategy, Sharing*):

School Type	Minimum Pupil Numbers
Rural Primary (anywhere other than Belfast and Derry/ Londonderry)	105
Urban Primary (Belfast and Derry/ Londonderry)	140
Post-Primary*	500
Sixth Form	100

*excluding sixth form provision

C. AREA PLANNING STRUCTURES, PROCESS AND GUIDANCE

7. Area Planning was first introduced in 2011 to support the implementation of the SSP. There are a range of key stakeholders involved in the process and each has a distinctive role to play.
8. The role of DE is to set the policy and strategic context, reflecting Ministerial priorities, provide advice and scrutiny of the Area Plan to ensure it complies with legislation and is consistent with policy and guidance. The Education Authority (EA), as statutory planning authority, has overall operational responsibility for planning sufficient education provision for schools of all types and phases and is also the managing authority for controlled schools. The EA works in close co-operation with the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), the statutory planning authority for Catholic maintained schools, and support bodies of other school sectors to embed a unified cross-sectoral approach to Area Planning.
9. Sectoral support bodies involved in the Area Planning process include the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE), Comhairle na Gaelscolaíocht (CnaG), the Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC), the Governing Bodies Association (GBA) and Catholic Schools' Trustee Service (CSTS). Their role is to provide a sectoral perspective to inform planning and work collaboratively on Area Planning support structures in the development of Area Plans and Annual Action Plans.
10. Area Planning governance structures comprise a strategic Area Planning Steering Group (APSG), an operational Area Planning Working Group (APWG) and three Area Planning Local Groups (APLGs). APSG, APWG and APLG membership includes all statutory planning authorities and sector support bodies.
11. The APSG provides strategic oversight from senior leaders involved in the process and enables the Minister (when in place) and senior DE officials to

engage with the statutory planning authorities and sectoral support partners. The APWG deals with operational planning issues and facilitates consistency of approach across all partner bodies and all areas. APLGs facilitate discussion of local planning issues and identification of planning priorities, drawing upon a broad range of evidence, informed by stakeholder opinion.

12. Since the publication of Area Planning Terms of Reference in September 2011 and the issue of Area Planning Guidance in February 2012, there have been significant changes to the administration of education, notably the establishment of the EA in 2015. The Area Planning process is subject to continuous review and refinement which DE publishes in Area Planning guidance.
13. The EA has published the 'Providing Pathways' first regional Strategic Area Plan 2017–2020. This plan sets out the issues and priorities to be addressed across Northern Ireland and in each Local Government District (LGD) boundaries.
14. An Annual Action Plan is published for each year of the Area Plan setting out workstreams for each LGD. The EA also publishes Annual Area Profiles for each primary and post primary schools which provide a snapshot of key information for anyone to access but may be of most use to parents, Boards of Governors, Principals, sector support bodies and statutory planners. This information includes enrolment and budget information and for post primary schools GCSE attainment levels and Entitlement Framework provision.
15. The Area Plan, Annual Action Plans and Annual Area Profiles are all published on the EA website.
16. If through the Area Planning process a proposer determines that a significant change to the design of education provision is required, this is given effect through a Development Proposal (DP) which follows a statutory process. DE publishes guidance on the process leading to the publication of a DP, and the decision making process that ensues.
17. DPs must align with the EA's Area Plan and Annual Action Plan and are assessed against the SSP criteria. Each proposal will have a number of other significant considerations including intended educational benefits, accommodation implications, the application of statutory duties and other resource implications. The overriding consideration must be the quality of education provided for pupils.

D. AREA PLANNING KEY STATISTICS

18. This section looks at the baseline position when Area Planning was first introduced and compares it with the current position one year into the implementation of the first Strategic Area Plan. There has been significant contributions from all key stakeholders through the Area Planning structures and the development and assessment of DPs.

Baseline Position - 2011/12

19. **Appendix A** shows the number of pupils, network of schools and available places that existed when Area Planning was introduced. The then Minister's statement in September 2011 (*Putting Pupils First; Shaping Our Future*) provided some headline facts that provide a context for what has followed, and the 2011/12 position serves as a baseline to assess the impact that Area Planning has made in subsequent years.
20. **Appendix B** illustrates the education landscape during 2017/18 and compares this to 2016/17.
21. The infographic shows six year trends in sustainability, assessed against the recommended minimum enrolment thresholds specified within the SSP. This provides evidence that Area Planning is making a positive difference, improving the sustainability of primary (urban and rural) and post-primary schools. However, more needs to be done to improve the sustainability of sixth form provision, an identified Ministerial priority.
22. Available places is the term used to describe places that remain available through the competitive admissions processes, in other words, surplus capacity in the system. The number of available places, expressed as a percentage of approved places, is used as an indicator of how well supply and demand for places is in equilibrium. It is unrealistic to expect supply and demand to be precisely matched as parental preferences change year on year and the system must have a built in tolerance to allow for that. The SSP states that "surplus capacity in the schools' estate should be no more than 10% of the total capacity distributed across the system".
23. A downwards trend in the proportion of approved places available is a positive indicator of Area Planning impact, and for primary and post-primary provision 0.9% and 0.2% improvements have been realised relative to 2016/17.
24. Although that is a positive indicator, the longer term goal is to get as close to the 10% tolerance figure as possible, and with a system wide figure of 17.5% (with surplus capacity a greater consideration for primary schools) it is clear that there is still much to be done by the planning authorities. The equivalent baseline (2011/12) figure was 22.1%.
25. Children admitted to schools outside the competitive admissions process, predominantly children with a statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN), are currently discounted from the calculation of available places, which could be viewed as inflating the number of available places. The Department is reviewing this practice. Inclusion of these pupils in the available places calculation would reduce the number of available places from 63,063 to 50,760.

E. AREA PLANNING ACTIVITY AND IMPACT 2017/18

26. The table at **Appendix C** provides a summary of DP activity during the 2017/18 planning year which runs from April 2017 to March 2018. This includes decisions taken on DPs published prior to the commencement of the planning year in addition to decisions on DPs published during the planning year.
27. Key Statistics for DP activity and outcomes in 2017/18 are illustrated at **Appendix D**. The number of DPs published and decisions made during 2017/18 was broadly the same as in 2016/17, with a slight increase in the proportion of DPs approved in 2017/18.
28. DP decisions during the period included the establishment of two new post-primary schools as a result of five post-primary schools closing to facilitate an amalgamation; the closure of five primary schools and one post-primary school; twelve adjustments to a school's approved admissions/enrolment number (eleven increases and one decrease); the establishment of a Learning Support Unit (LSU) and the establishment of a nursery unit.
29. A net total of 388 primary places have been removed as a result of DP decisions (467 primary places added; 855 primary places removed) and a net total of 1990 post-primary places removed (2965 post-primary places added; 4955 post-primary places removed).
30. The addition and removal of places aims to ensure there are enough places in the right schools to respond to parental preferences across all sectors and planning areas. Effective Area Planning is not just about adding places where they are needed it is also about addressing the sustainability of schools in a timely way where places are no longer needed.
31. Where there is a need to reduce a school's approved admissions and enrolment numbers, this is known as a 'right sizing' proposal, aimed at balancing supply and demand for places at a named school where, for whatever reason, the established approved numbers are no longer needed.

F. DE AREA PLANNING ACTIVITY DURING 2017/18

32. DE Area Planning activity during the reporting period includes:
 - Scrutiny of published DPs, their supporting Cases for Change and all evidence received during a two month consultative period following publication, and the provision of detailed advice to inform DP decisions;
 - Regular engagement with the planning authorities and sectoral support bodies to discuss planning issues through the Area Planning structures (APWG and APSG) and also bilateral meetings with the statutory planning authorities to review progress on bringing forward DPs;
 - Scrutiny and endorsement of the EA Annual Action Plan for 2018/19;

- Staff training in anticipation of the introduction of the Rural Needs Act, and reporting on the extent to which rural considerations were significant when considering published DPs;
- In-year improvements to DP processes and guidance e.g. the introduction of a new template that proposers are required to complete, setting out details of any accommodation implications arising from DPs;
- Actions arising from the DE Area Planning Communications Strategy e.g. the publication of answers to Frequently Asked Questions on the DE website;
- Ongoing Judicial Review activity, including preparation for hearings and actions required in response to judicial outcomes;
- The Community Planning process has increased the awareness of education issues and active involvement of local councils as education stakeholders. DE as a support partner has a statutory duty to support and take cognisance of Community Plans and has attended meetings with local councils on invitation throughout the year and provided comments and feedback on each of the eleven local council draft Community Plans.

G. AREA PLANNING 2017/18 – DE PERSPECTIVE

33. While recognising the positive impact that Area Planning has made, both in 2017/18 and over a number of years since its introduction in 2011/12, the pace of change has been slow and the volume of published DPs fell far short of expectations following publication of the 2017/18 Annual Action Plan. These concerns have been raised and are regularly discussed with the EA and CCMS at established governance reviews and periodic meetings between Directors.
34. For example, the 2018/19 Annual Action Plan includes details of 62 work streams (out of 102) carried forward from 2017/18. Accepting that not all listed actions will result in a published DP that year or potentially at any point in the future, the conversion of work streams into published DPs that give effect to meaningful change and address sustainability issues in the school network should be a priority for the statutory planning authorities.
35. DE also has a concern that previously stated Ministerial priorities (too many schools that are too small to adequately provide for their pupils and ensure they have the opportunity to fulfil their potential, particularly primary schools with more than two composite classes and sixth forms with fewer than 100 pupils) are not being meaningfully addressed in the various work streams listed. For example, only one action in the 2017/18 plan was specifically aimed at reconfiguring sixth form provision. Small schools receive additional funding to help them deliver the curriculum and release Principals from teaching and other duties. Even with additional funding, some small schools are experiencing stress when assessed against the six criteria used to identify

sustainability issues under the SSP and need to be prioritised for planning action.

36. The reconfiguration of special school provision has proved to be especially challenging for the EA, with no special school DPs now anticipated before the final quarter of the 2018/19 planning year.
37. An EA perspective on the impact of planning activity undertaken is published as part of Annual Area Profiles for each school at:



<http://www.eani.org.uk/schools/annual-area-profiles/>

H. FORWARD LOOK

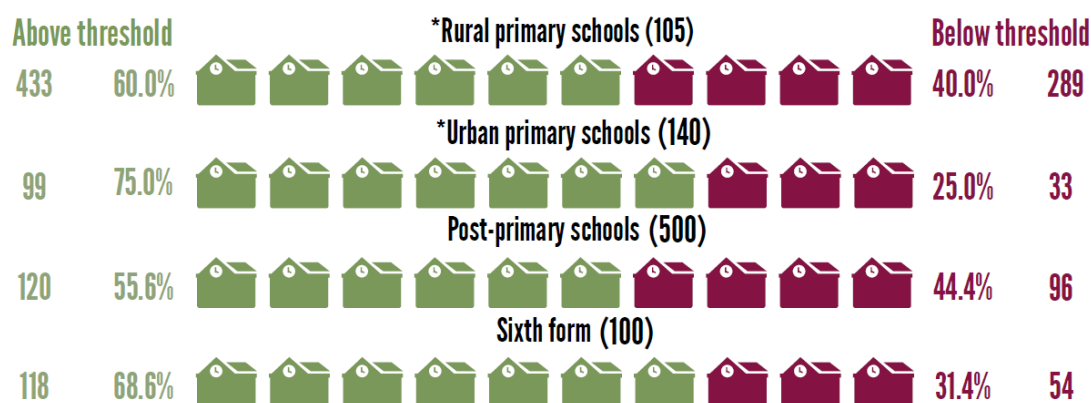
38. The EA's Annual Action Plan for 2018/19 identifies a further 70 work streams across pre-school, primary, post-primary and special schools which reflect the key issues and proposed actions published in the Strategic Area Plan for each LGD planning area. Almost one-third of the work streams for primary and post-primary relate to sustainability issues across 27 named schools and three areas. Overall, there are 76 schools named in the plan and ten wider areas identified.
39. During the 2018/19 planning year work will continue on developing a new process for considering non-significant changes to approved admissions and enrolment numbers, with a pilot scheme focusing on proposals for non-significant decreases in approved admissions and enrolment numbers at sustainable primary schools. This new process is intended to complement the established DP process which focuses on significant changes to the design of education provision, and has the potential to help accelerate the pace of change.
40. DE would also hope to initiate a review of the SSP, published in 2009 and considered in need of a refresh. Of particular concern to DE is the definition of urban and rural schools under the SSP which is considered to be outdated and in need of refinement. Mindful of the Rural Needs Act, this policy review may also examine the scope for developing criteria to identify strategically important small rural schools, requiring a different consideration of sustainability than applies at present. Any significant changes to this flagship DE policy would require Ministerial approval.
41. As part of a wider education transformation programme, it is hoped that additional resources will be secured to help DE, and those charged with delivery of planning priorities, accelerate the pace of change resulting from area planning activity.

I. CONCLUSION

42. No one involved in Area Planning underestimates the complexity and various issues involved, however, the current network of schools is not sustainable and real change will not be achieved unless there is collective agreement that the pace is accelerated to ensure every child in Northern Ireland has access to a quality education in a sustainable school.
43. **Appendix E** shows the volume of DPs processed over a five year period. The number of DPs published has reduced. This was influenced by a number of factors, including effort expended on establishing new governance structures, work on developing the first EA strategic Area Plan and a general trend towards more complex and multi school proposals involving the removal of academic selection, co-education, amalgamations and consideration of statutory duties in relation to integrated and Irish medium education. These demand a cross-sectoral approach and need to be capable of withstanding legal challenge.
44. With Area Planning structures now firmly embedded the foundations are in place to facilitate an acceleration in the pace of change, but some practical considerations have impeded expected progress. For example, within the EA it has taken longer than expected to establish a dedicated Area Planning resource that is not distracted by other competing priorities. Work is ongoing to develop and implement a planning tool to inform the work of APLGs and aid consistency of practice through cross-sectoral working and a shared goal to get the right number of schools of the right size in the right place, aligned as closely as possible to changes in parental preference for different forms of education provision. DE will continue to work with the planning authorities and sectoral support bodies to streamline Area Planning without compromising the integrity of this complex and important education priority.


	Primary (Years 1-7)	Post Primary	Special
 Enrolments	Number of Pupils 155,694	146,747	4,549
 Settings	Number of Schools 854 (includes preps)	216	41

Number and percentage of schools with enrolments above and below sustainability thresholds



* "Urban Schools" refers to those in the former Belfast or Derry LGD. "Rural" refers to any other former LGD

Number of Available Places

	Primary	Post-primary	Total
 Available Places	62,867	19,475	82,342
Available Places as % of All Approved Places	29.6%	12.2%	22.1%



'Putting Pupils First; Shaping our Future' (Minister's statement, September 2011)

- Primary and Post-Primary have almost 85,000 available places
- Around one third of primary schools have fewer than 100 children enrolled
- More than two fifths of post-primary schools have fewer than 500 pupils enrolled
- Around one third of sixth forms have fewer than 100 pupils enrolled





Primary
(Years 1-7)

173,744



2,132

Post Primary

140,545



132

Special

5,735



328

817 (includes preps)



4

199



2

39

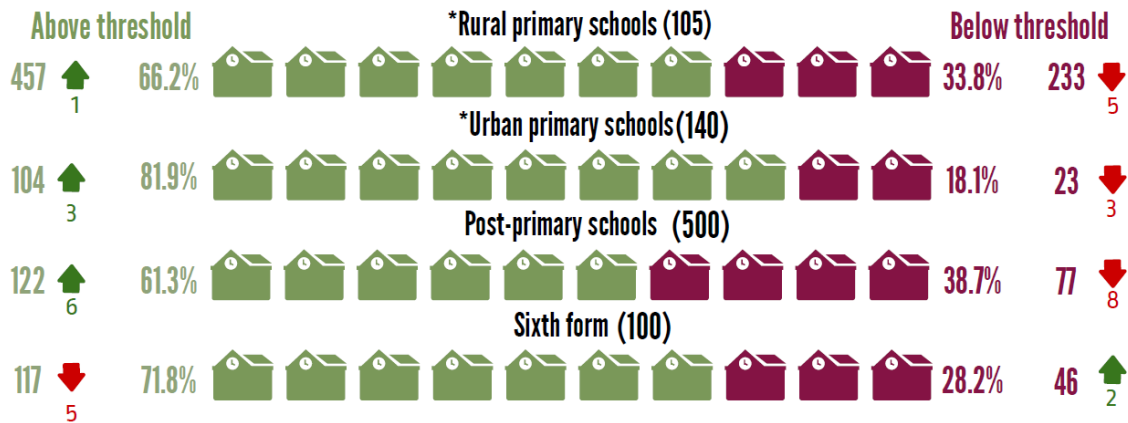


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Change on last year

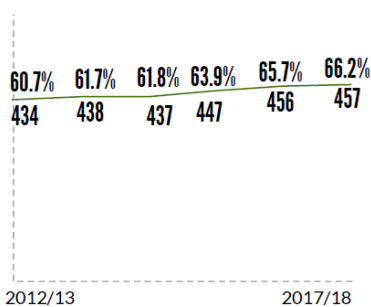


Number and percentage of schools with enrolments above and below sustainability thresholds

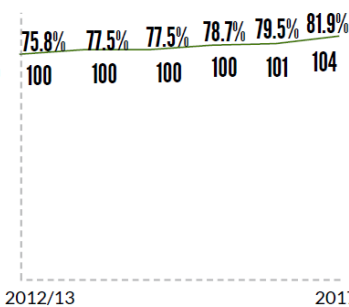


* "Urban Schools" refers to those in the former Belfast or Derry LGD. "Rural" refers to any other former LGD

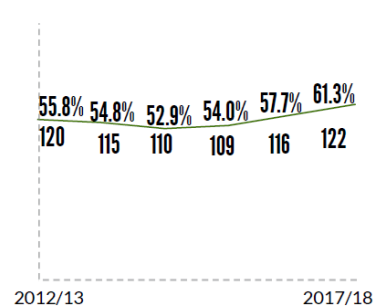
Rural Primary Schools Above the Sustainability threshold



Urban Primary Schools Above the Sustainability threshold



Post Primary Schools Above the Sustainability threshold



Number of Available Places



	Primary	Post-primary	Total
Available Places	42,041 ↓ 1,919	21,022 ↓ 256	63,063
Available Places as % of All Approved Places	20.3% ↓ 0.9 Percentage Points	13.6% ↓ 0.2 Percentage Points	17.5%

DEVELOPMENT PROPOSAL ACTIVITY 2017/18				
	PUBLISHED PRE 2017/18 - outstanding at 1.4.17	PUBLISHED 2017/18	TOTAL	OUTSTANDING AT 31.3.18
DPs	19	30	49	16
APPROVED	11 3 primary closures; 1 post-primary amalgamation following 2 closures; 5 enrolment changes – all increases,	16 3 closures (2 primary, 1 post- primary); 1 amalgamation following 3 post-primary closures; 7 enrolment changes (6 increases, 1 decrease); 1 LSU; and 1 nursery established	27 6 closures (5 primary, 1 post- primary); 2 amalgamations following 5 post-primary closures; 12 enrolment changes; 1 LSU; and 1 nursery established	
PLACES ADDED/REMOVED	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Net total of 388 primary places removed (467 added/855 removed) • Net total of 1990 post-primary places removed (2965 added/4955 removed) 			
NOT APPROVED	5 1 primary closure; 1 post-primary enrolment increase; 1 IM post-primary; 2 nursery units	1 1 primary (phased transition to whole school curriculum delivery in Irish)	6	
WITHDRAWN		1 post-primary closure		

Key: LSU – Learning Support Unit, IM – Irish medium

Development Proposals- Key Statistics 2017/18

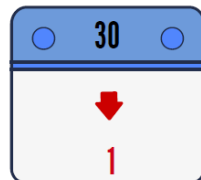
(for the Area Planning cycle April 2017 to March 2018)

Published- Development Proposals

Published during 2016/17,
pending 2017/18



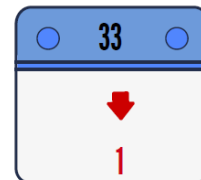
Published during 2017/18



Withdrawn by the Proposer
during 2017/18



Decisions made during
2017/18



Change on last year ↓ → ↑

Outcome of DP Decisions

Approved ⁽¹⁾

27



↑ 3



Not Approved

6



↓ 4

(1) Includes approvals subject to a modification

Impact of DP Decisions



Create a new school
e.g. by amalgamating
two or more
schools
↑ 2



Increase approved
numbers at an
established school
↑ 1



Remove provision from
an established school
e.g. removing a
Nursery Unit,
Learning support
or sixth form
provision
→ 0



Create a new provision
at an established school
e.g. the addition
of a Nursery
Unit, Learning
support or sixth
form provision
↓ 3



Decrease approved
numbers at an
established school
↓ 2

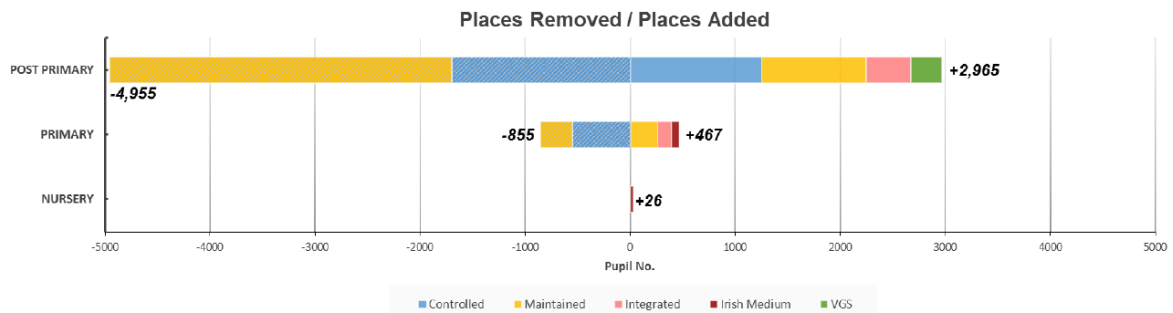


Other reason
e.g. changing a
school's
management type,
removing academic
selection, or
relocating a school
↓ 3



Close a school
↑ 8

Impact of DP Decisions on the Number of Places at Schools



Appendix E

TRENDS IN DP ACTIVITY LEVELS

Development Proposals Published

	DPs published	DPs awaiting a decision
2017/18 (April '17-March '18)	25	4
2016/17	31	2
2015/16	56	0
2014/15	64	2
2013/14	76	0
Total	252	8

Development Proposal Decisions

	DPs approved	DPs not approved	DPs withdrawn	Total DP decisions
2017/18 (April '17-March '18)	27	6	1	33
2016/17	23	10	0	33
2015/16	53	6	4	63
2014/15	49	14	0	63
2013/14	64	7	5	71
Total	216	43	10	263

Note - a decision on a proposal published in a particular year may be accounted for in a different year.