

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

AREA PLANNING

ANNUAL REPORT 2018/19

September 2019

A. INTRODUCTION - WHAT IS AREA PLANNING?

1. This is the second Department of Education (DE) annual report on Area Planning. The purpose of this report is to provide information on Area Planning activity and impact during the most recent planning year (April 2018– March 2019) and to contextualise this through reference to the impact of Area Planning since its inception in 2011.
2. Area Planning is a 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.

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/schools-future-policy-sustainable-schools>

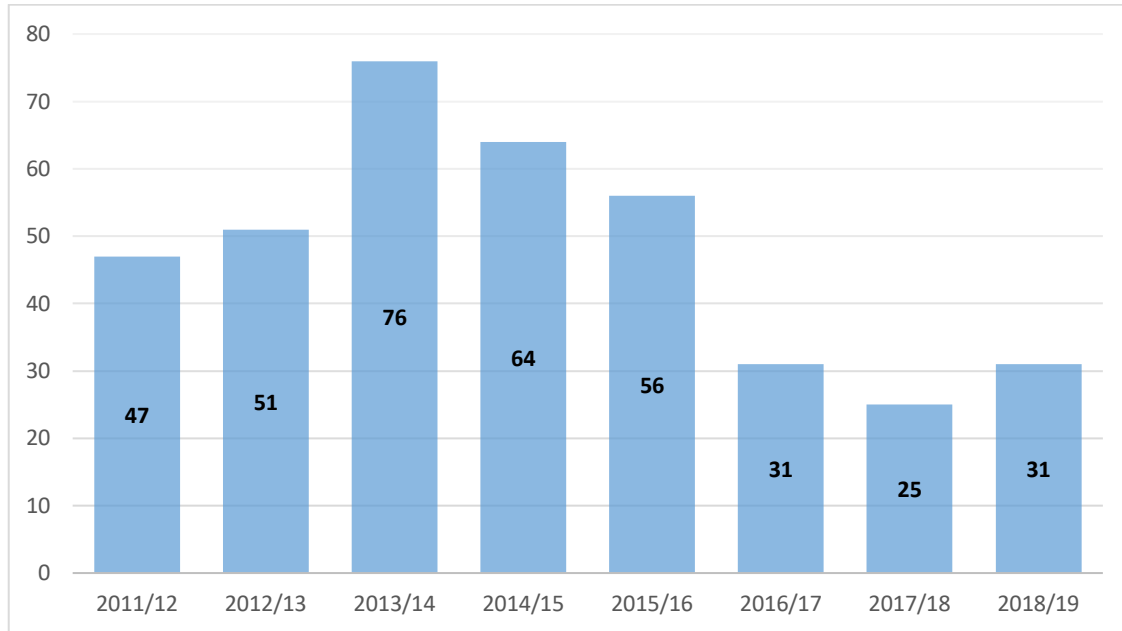
3. The aim of the SSP is to improve the quality of education offered to pupils of all ages and backgrounds through the development of a network of schools that are educationally and financially viable.
4. Area Planning seeks to ensure we have a network of viable and sustainable schools that are of the right type, the right size, located in the right place and have a focus on raising standards. Changes to the design of education provision are given effect through the approval of Development Proposals (DPs) which may be brought forward by the relevant authority as defined in education legislation.
5. A considerable amount of time and effort is expended by the planning authorities (the Education Authority and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools are statutory planning authorities, supported by a number of sectoral bodies reflecting the diverse nature of education provision in Northern Ireland) to identify area solutions to planning issues, and extensive targeted consultation takes place at this formative stage before a DP is published.
6. All DPs are published by the Education Authority, triggering a statutory two month period during which expressions of support or opposition may be submitted to the Department, reflected within advice that leads to a DP decision taken by the Education Minister, or the Permanent Secretary in the absence of a Minister. All advice provided, and the rationale for each decision taken, is published on the Department's website.
7. Further detail about Area Planning, and the structures which support it, can be found within the first Annual Report which is published on the Department's website.

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/annual-report-area-planning>

B. ACTIVITY – HOW MUCH DID WE DO?

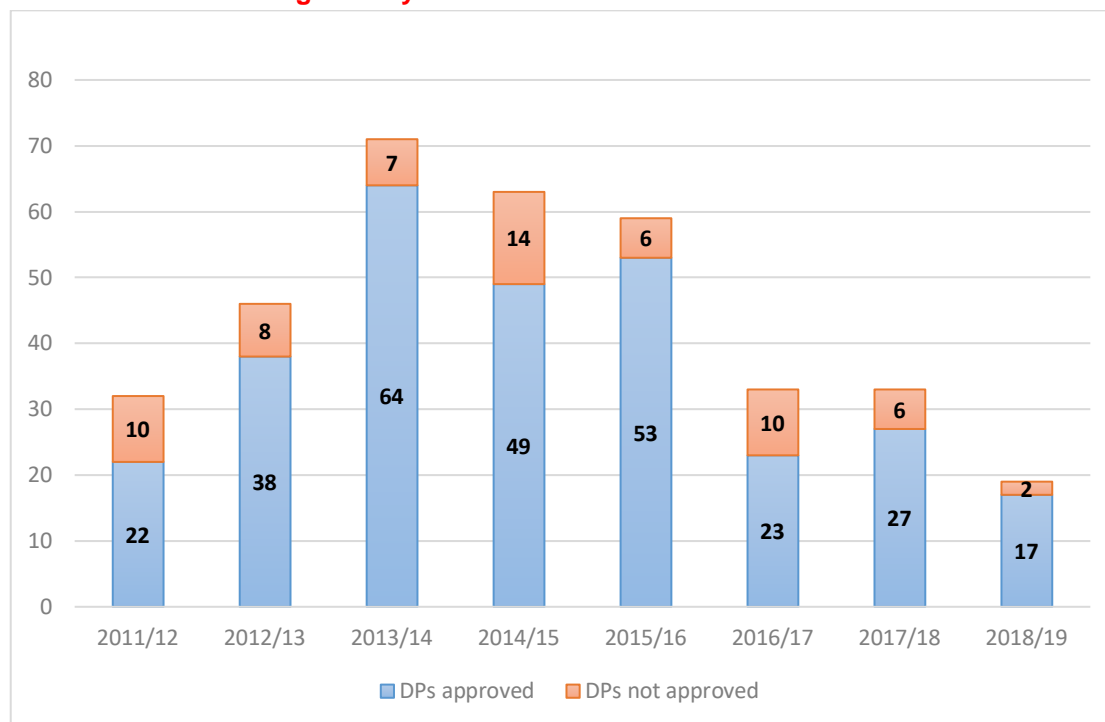
8. Chart 1 shows the number of DPs published in 2018/19 and presents this as a comparison against each of the previous years since 2011/12.

Chart 1 – Area Planning Activity – Published DPs



9. While this provides a snapshot of planning activity year on year, the formative work that leads to a DP may take several months, and the ensuing post-publication consultation, evidence gathering, analysis and decision making may also take several months, while full implementation of more complex proposals such as school amalgamations or the establishment of new school provision may ultimately take years to complete. Area Planning should therefore be viewed as a continuum of activity.
10. It is also the case that Area Planning has become more complex over time, and as the only means of appealing DP decisions is through judicial review, lessons learned from that experience need to be reflected within changes made to the DP process on an ongoing basis, which can lead to an increase in time required to bring forward and process DPs.
11. Chart 2 shows the number of DP decisions taken in 2018/19 and for each year from 2011/12. There is no correlation between the number of DPs published in a given year and the number of decisions taken that year, reflecting the points made in paragraphs 9 and 10 above and underlining how Area Planning generally is a continuum of activity which straddles reporting periods.

Chart 2 – Area Planning Activity – DP Decisions

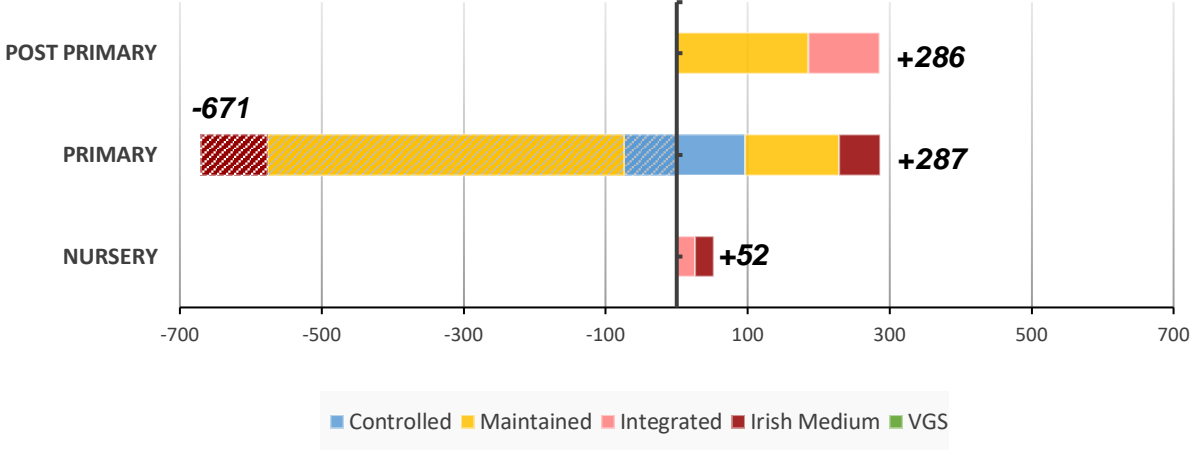


C. IMPACT – WHAT DIFFERENCE DID OUR 2018/19 DECISIONS MAKE?

12. Of the 19 DP decisions taken during the reporting period, Chart 2 shows that 17 resulted in an approval decision, the effect of which was as follows:
- Two post-primary schools were granted a permanent increase to their approved admissions/enrolment numbers;
 - Two new nursery units were opened at primary schools;
 - Three primary schools were granted a permanent increase to their approved admissions/enrolment numbers;
 - Three primary schools were granted a permanent reduction in their approved admissions/enrolment numbers;
 - One primary school was granted approval to relocate its provision;
 - One primary school was closed; and
 - Four further primary schools were closed in order to establish one new (amalgamated) primary school.
13. Chart 3 illustrates one of the key measures of impact for 2018/19, noting that the planning activity which produced this impact may in some instances have been initiated in advance of 2018/19. The net number of places taken out of the system (46, compared to 2,352 the previous year) is small in relative terms, with removal of over-provision (or unsustainable provision) concentrated on primary

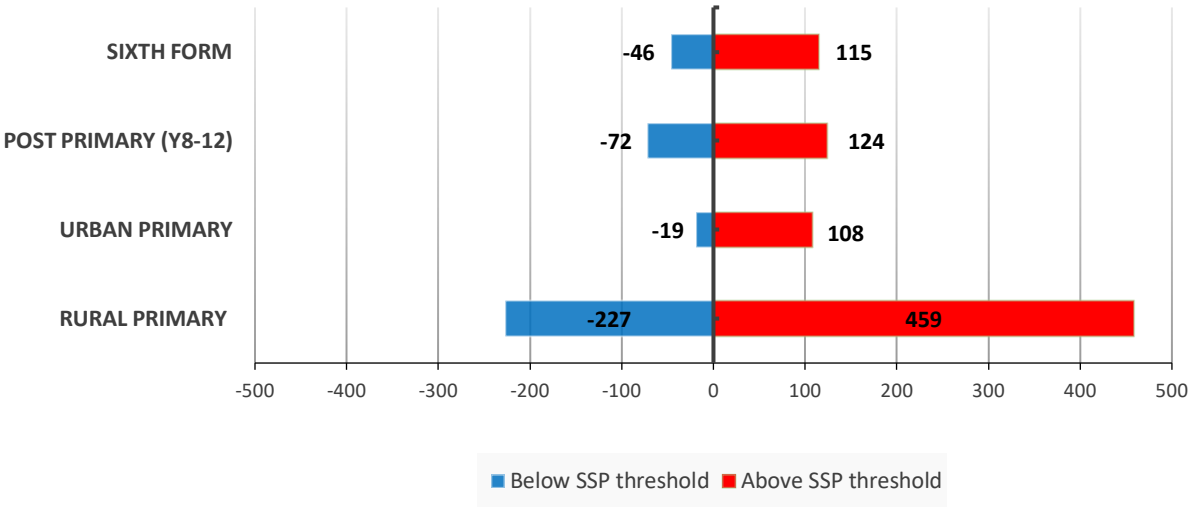
schools. Increases in provision may be justified where Area Planning seeks to respond to changing parental preference, and sometimes in support of relevant statutory duties that apply to Integrated and Irish-medium education.

Chart 3 – Impact of Area Planning Activity – Places Removed or Added (2018/19)



14. Chart 4 provides a snapshot of how sustainable (in enrolment terms, referenced to the SSP¹) schools are at this point in time. This indicates the scale of the challenge presented to the planning authorities in seeking to achieve sustainability across the board.

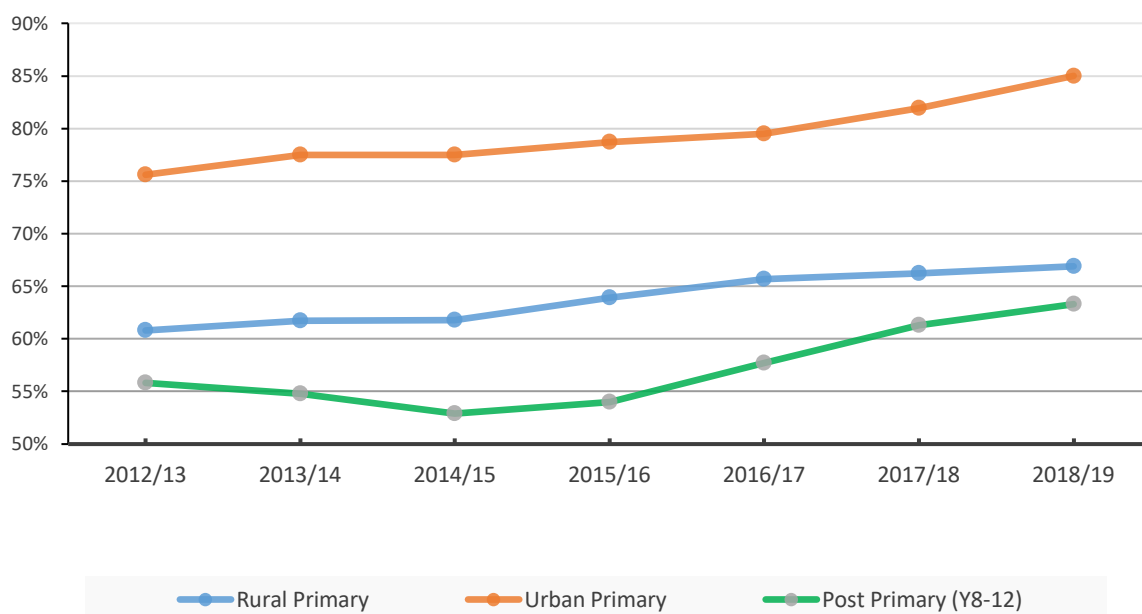
**Chart 4 – Impact of Area Planning Activity
Number of Schools Above or Below (Enrolment) Sustainability Thresholds (2018/19)**



¹ Sustainability under the SSP is assessed according to six criteria, one of which is enrolment.

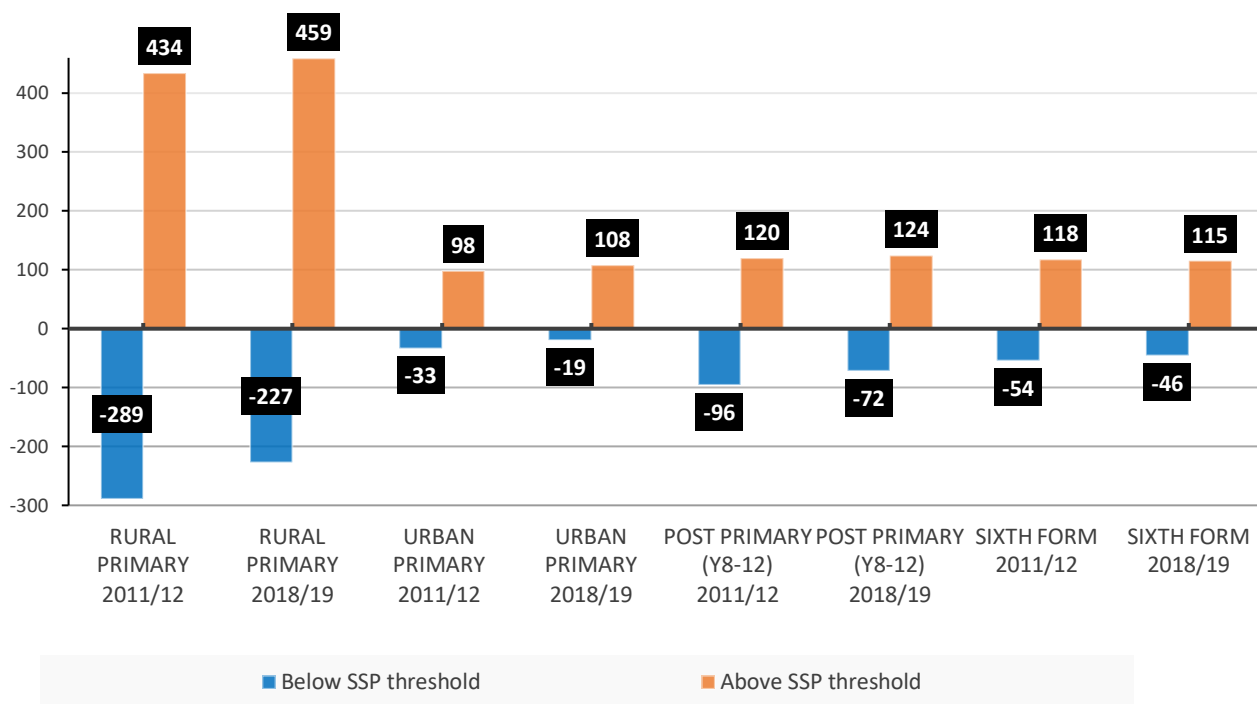
15. Chart 5 sets this in the context of sustainability (in enrolment terms, referenced to the SSP) measured over a period of time, showing that there has been a gradual improvement.

**Chart 5 – Impact of Area Planning Activity
Improvement in the Percentage of Schools that are Sustainable**



16. Chart 6 shows how the 2018/19 position compares to the baseline (2011/12) position for each of the four measures of sustainability (in enrolment terms) that apply under the SSP.
- Rural primary schools should have a minimum of 105 pupils to be considered sustainable;
 - Urban primary schools should have a minimum of 140 pupils to be considered sustainable;
 - Post-primary schools (Years 8-12) should have a minimum enrolment of 500 pupils to be considered sustainable; and
 - Sixth forms should have a minimum enrolment of 100 pupils to be considered sustainable.

**Chart 6 – Impact of Area Planning Activity
Number of Schools Above or Below (Enrolment) Sustainability Thresholds**

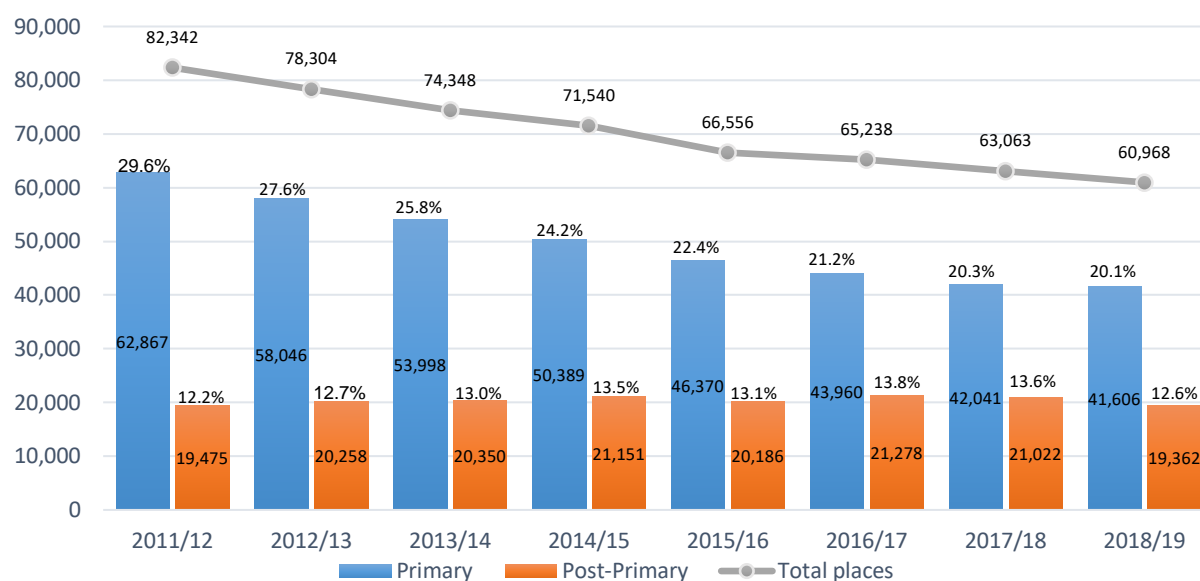


17. While it is evident that Area Planning is contributing to a reduction in the number of unsustainable schools expressed as a percentage of all schools, the rate at which it is doing so is not evenly distributed.
 - a. Rural primary schools – from 40% to 33% (7 percentage points);
 - b. Urban primary schools –from 25% to 15% (10 percentage points);
 - c. Post-primary schools (Years 8-12) – from 44% to 37% (7 percentage points); and
 - d. Sixth forms – from 31% to 29% (2 percentage points).

18. Chart 7 examines the impact of Area Planning with reference to the number of available places in the system, which are places that may be applied for through the competitive admissions processes, but have not been taken up. This is used to assess the extent to which there is under or over-provision across the education system, calculated using available places as a percentage of approved places. The SSP indicates that excess capacity should not exceed 10%, which accepts that there needs to be a degree of excess capacity in order to satisfy to the maximum extent possible the ever changing pattern of parental preference for different forms of education provision at different settings. Chart 7 shows system wide excess capacity to be 16.9% presently.

19. Chart 7 also shows that Area Planning has contributed to a 26% reduction in available places since inception. While the reduction is most visible across the primary phase of education, it is here where the greatest challenges of over-provision remain. It is, however, important to note that schools are funded on the basis of the actual number of pupils who are enrolled rather than on the basis of available places.

Chart 7 – Area Planning Impact – Available Places



D. CONCLUSION AND FORWARD LOOK

20. While recognising the positive impact that Area Planning has made, both in 2018/19 and since its inception, concerns persist about the pace of change.
21. During 2018/19 this was not aided by uncertainties surrounding the authority of the Department's Permanent Secretary to take DP decisions in the absence of an Education Minister, pausing the decision making process between July 2018 and January 2019 while the implications of the ARC21 legal judgment and application of the provisions of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018 (the Act) were clarified.
22. The fundamentals of how Area Planning operates are currently under review as part of the Department's wider Transformation programme, and the EA received approval from the Department to extend the currency of its latest Annual Action Plan from April 2019 through to March 2021. This move is intended to allow space for slippage in earlier plans to be addressed (evident in the significant number of actions carried forward from one plan to the next) and for a review of the existing 2017-2010 strategic Area Plan (*Providing Pathways*) during autumn 2019 to inform its successor.

Additional Area Planning Context

2018/19



Settings



Enrolments

	Funded pre-school*	Primary	Grammar	Non-grammar	Special
Settings	770 ↓ 3	813 ↓ 4	66 → 0	130 ↓ 3	39 → 0
Enrolments	23,576 ↑ 76	174,523 ↑ 779	62,862 ↑ 44	79,377 ↑ 1,650	5,959 ↑ 224

* Voluntary and private pre-school settings, nursery schools and units and reception classes

↓ → ↑ Change on last year

91.7% of all three year olds in funded pre-school education



28,072 pupils in
sixth form in
schools

↓ 423
on last year



Geographical Distribution (by District Council) of Available Places 2018/19

