



Department of  
**Education**  
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# **PUBLIC CONSULTATION DOCUMENT CHANGING SCHOOL NUMBERS**

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## Introduction

1. The purpose of this document is to seek your views on how the Department could change its approach to amending schools' approved admissions and enrolment numbers.

## Background

2. Any significant change to the approved numbers at a school is effected using a Development Proposal (DP) and is done so through The Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986.
3. Such changes when approved and implemented are permanent and any further changes at a school would need to be effected by another DP. Using the DP process in such a way is not sufficiently agile to cope with short to medium-term demographic changes.
4. Articles 11 and 12 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 permit the Department to determine an enrolment number and an admissions number respectively for every school, in consultation with Boards of Governors (BoGs) and having also considered any representations made by the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) (when the school is a Catholic maintained school) and the Education Authority (EA).
5. This power is used frequently each year to change a school's approved admissions and/or enrolment numbers via Temporary Variation (TV) for a given year. TVs address temporary population growth and enable localised pressures to be managed as they arise.
6. This power may be used to vary numbers for a single school year; however, the legislation does not limit the change in any time-bound way.
7. With the advent of area planning, the practice of making permanent changes to schools' approved numbers through use of the 1997 Order reduced, as greater consideration was given to strategic planning of where places needed to be. Area Planning is the process of strategic planning of primary and post-primary education provision and has been developed to support the implementation of the Sustainable Schools Policy. The aim of Area Planning is to ensure that all primary and post-primary pupils have access to a broad and balanced curriculum that meets their educational needs in schools that are educationally and financially viable and sustainable. Changes to schools' numbers were applied through the DP process by use of Article 14 of The Education and Libraries

(Northern Ireland) 1986 Order. DPs, however, can take several years from inception, to planning, consulting and to implementation.

8. This consultation proposes a more agile and flexible way of changing school numbers than at present, allowing changes to schools' approved numbers that the Department does not deem significant to be made promptly and efficiently, responding to evolving needs. All significant changes will still require a DP for consideration and implementation.

## Context

9. In recent years, the Department has developed a number of more agile processes to enable approval to increase a school's approved numbers without the requirement of a DP, three of which are detailed below. This was to allow more capacity for more meaningful and strategic proposals to come forward.

### (a) Resetting Numbers

10. The aim of the '*Resetting School Approved Admissions and Enrolment Numbers Pilot (2019)*' was to explore, develop and test a new process to permanently reduce a school's approved numbers to the established norm without the need for a statutory DP. It was proposed the change could be considered as 'non-significant'.
11. This pilot resulted in approved enrolment numbers at 30 schools being reduced, resulting in 4,043 available places being removed.
12. This was followed by '*Resetting School Admissions and Enrolment Numbers for Area Planning (decreases)*' in November 2020, which was informed by the first exercise and included a mandatory element. A total of 5,015 surplus available places were removed through the primary process.

### (b) Normalisation

13. This pilot process was designed to 'normalise' admissions and enrolment numbers where there was evidence demonstrating a historical pattern of enrolment in excess of a school's approved number through previous TVs.
14. The Department identified schools at primary and post-primary level that had higher actual admissions and enrolment numbers than their approved number after adjusting for pupils

with a statement of Special Education Needs (SEN) who are treated as supernumerary. Schools were only identified if their actual enrolment had been above their approved enrolment number in four out of the previous five years. A total of 20 primary and 28 post-primary schools met the criteria.

15. Following a comprehensive analysis there were 13 primary schools and 8 post-primary schools recommended for normalisation for admissions 2024-25. This amounted to an additional 1,291 places across 21 schools.

#### (c) Additional Year 8 Places Exercise

16. Since 2019 the Department has made frequent use of the 1997 Order to facilitate increases to post-primary schools' Year 8 increases in areas of ongoing demographic pressure. This has been a pro-active approach to address the challenge of over-subscription through the allocation of additional places in advance of the processes commencing where pressure on places is anticipated.

#### Agility

17. The three exercises listed above have demonstrated the ways in which the Department can utilise the 1997 Order to allow the system to flex as demand rises and falls. A key lesson from early versions of the Additional Year 8 Places Exercise is that schools want certainty in the level of their admissions and enrolment numbers over a period of time. This allows schools to forecast for the future, plan accordingly and allocate resources effectively.
18. A key advantage of using the 1997 Order is that there are inbuilt consultation mechanisms, and the Department can adjust (up or down) easily on foot of any demographic changes.
19. The Normalisation process demonstrated how established patterns of TV approvals can be regularised in a way that formalises increased numbers that are established and therefore not significant.

#### Benefits

20. If a change in numbers is agreed this will provide the school with a horizon of certainty on its numbers, allowing for appropriate planning and allocation of resources.

21. This will serve to be a more agile, efficient and responsive way to respond to changing needs than the statutory DP process and will allow for a proactive approach to managing demand.

### Proposal

22. It is proposed that the Department would, on an annual basis, identify all primary and post-primary schools that have exceeded their numbers through TVs in three out of the last four years and consider an appropriate uplift to the school's approved numbers.

23. The Department will then examine the following:

- a. The extent to which the school's admissions criteria adhere to the Department's guidance and whether they are driving the need for TVs;
- b. Alternative provision in the area (a four-mile radius for primary schools and ten-mile radius for post-primary) in the same sector and its sustainability;
- c. Whether additional places can be facilitated within existing approved accommodation;
- d. Any views on the proposed numbers provided by the EA and, in the case of a Catholic maintained school, CCMS;
- e. The pattern of placement of children with a statement of SEN at the school;
- f. The significance of the change and its likely impact on the wider area; and
- g. Any other relevant departmental educational policy that is applicable in the circumstances of the school.

24. If a change is to be made, it is intended that this will be for a period of three years, before it is reviewed. This is to provide schools with a horizon of certainty on their numbers. After three years the position will be reviewed, and the increase may be extended for another three-year period, considered permanent, or the approved numbers will revert to previous levels.

25. Where a school's numbers are not amended, it will be considered again in the following year if it meets the requirement of being on TVs for three of the past four years at that time.

26. The Department will still consider applications from schools or managing authorities outside of this process for increases or decreases to approved numbers. No school that

is below sustainability levels will be considered for a decrease to its approved numbers. The proposal does not relate to pre-school settings or special schools.

### Consultation

The Department would like to hear your views and feedback on this proposed change.

### Completing the Survey

#### Duration

The survey should take no more than 10 minutes to complete and will remain open for responses until 23 June 2025 at 23.59:

Your responses will be treated in the strictest confidence and the report of the survey will not identify any individual. Rather your responses will be added to those of others to make summaries of the responses of people that take part.

The survey complies with the [Data Protection Act 2018](#) including [The UK GDPR | ICO](#). [The Privacy Notice](#) for this survey explains the legislative basis for the survey and your data protection rights.

### How to Respond to this Consultation

The preferable method of response is **through the online survey**. This approach allows for the most efficient analysis of responses and by limiting the use of paper and printing, minimises the environmental impact.

However, we understand that a paper-based response via e-mail or post will be the preference for some. If this is the case, you are encouraged to respond as early as possible as our timeline could be impacted by postage delivery times and the additional analytical processing required.

The primary response method for this consultation is through the online survey on the [Citizen Space Hub](#). You can also access the online survey from the DE consultation webpage.

This document is also available on the DE website at:

<http://www.education-ni.gov.uk/consultations>

Alternative formats are available, to request the survey in an alternative format please contact us via the details below.

**Email:** [changingschoolnumbers@education-ni.gov.uk](mailto:changingschoolnumbers@education-ni.gov.uk)

**Telephone:** 02891 279472 and talk to one of the Consultation Team.

**Post:** Changing School Numbers Consultation  
School Admissions Team  
Rathgael House  
Balloo Road  
Bangor  
BT19 7PR

## Consultation Survey

About you

**Question 1. Please tick the box that best describes the capacity in which you are responding: (Please tick one option only).**

*Please select only one item.*

- As a member of the public
- As a parent/guardian
- As a pupil
- As a school or as a pre-school leader
- As a teacher or as an educational practitioner
- As a school governor or as a member of pre-school management committee
- As a Sectoral or Other Body

**Question 2. Please specify which Sectoral or Other Body.**

\*Please do not include any personal data in your response

Please specify which Sectoral or Other Body.

**Question 3. What type of school are you or are your children involved in? (Please tick all that apply).**

*Please select all that apply.*

- Pre-School
- Primary School (including Schools with Pre-School provision)
- Post-Primary School
- Special School

**Question 4. Do you agree the current process to amend school numbers through the Development Proposal process is too long?**

- Yes
- No

**Question 5. Do you agree there is a need for the Department to adopt a more agile process to amend approved school numbers?**

- Yes
- No

\*Please do not include any personal data in your response

Comments

If no, please give details

It is proposed that the Department would, on an annual basis, identify all schools that have exceeded their numbers through Temporary Variations in three out of the last four years and consider whether a change to schools' numbers is appropriate.

**Question 6. Do you agree with the proposed approach detailed above?**

- Yes
- No

\*Please do not include any personal data in your response

Comments

If no, why

**Question 7. In deciding whether or not to increase school's numbers please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following:**

- a. The Department will assess how the admissions criteria adhere to the Department's guidance and whether they are driving the need for TVs
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neither agree nor disagree
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree

- b. The Department will examine alternative provision in the area (a four-mile radius for Primary Schools and ten-mile radius for Post-Primary) in the same sector and its sustainability;
- Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neither agree nor disagree
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree
- c. The Department will examine whether additional places can be facilitated within existing approved accommodation;
- Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neither agree nor disagree
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree
- d. The Department will examine any views on the proposed numbers provided by the EA and, in the case of a Catholic maintained school, CCMS;
- Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neither agree nor disagree
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree
- e. The Department will examine the pattern of placement of children with a statement of SEN at the school;
- Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neither agree nor disagree
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree
- f. The Department will examine the significance of the change and its likely impact on the wider area;
- Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neither agree nor disagree

- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

g. The Department will examine any other relevant departmental educational policy that is applicable in the circumstances of the school.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

\*Please do not include any personal data in your response

Comments

If you have answered disagree or strongly disagree to any of the questions above, please let us know why:

**Question 8. Do you think there are other approaches the Department should consider in deciding if school numbers are amended?**

- Yes
- No

\*Please do not include any personal data in your response

Comments

If yes, please provide details

**Question 9. If approved numbers are amended, when do you think this decision should be reviewed?**

Please select one option

- After 1 year
- After 2 years
- After 3 years
- The decision should not be reviewed

**Question 10. Do you foresee any issues/risks with the Department's proposal?**

- Yes
- No

\*Please do not include any personal data in your response

Comments

If yes give details.

**Question 11. Do you have any alternative proposals you think the Department should consider?**

- Yes
- No

\*Please do not include any personal data in your response

Comments

If yes, please give details

If you have any further comments please use the comments box below. The Department may use your comment(s) verbatim in a report of this consultation. If you do not wish the Department to do so, please indicate by ticking the box below and your comment(s) will only be used with those of other respondents to create an aggregate picture of all comments made.

I do not wish my comment(s) to be repeated verbatim in any report of this consultation.

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\*Please do not include any personal data in your response

Comments