

<p>Subject:</p> <p>CHANGING SCHOOL NUMBERS</p>	<p>Circular Number: 2026/04</p> <p>Date of Issue: 21 January 2026</p>
<p>Target Audience:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principals and Boards of Governors of all Grant-Aided Primary Schools and Grant-Aided Post Primary Schools; • Education Authority; • The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools. • Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG); • Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE); • Controlled Schools Support Council (CSSC); • Governing Bodies Association (GBA); • Catholic Schools Trustee Service (CSTS); and • Transferor Representatives Council (TRC). 	<p>Governor Awareness: Essential</p>
<p>Summary of Contents:</p> <p>The purpose of this circular is to introduce the policy that enables the Department to make use of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 to change a school's approved numbers where there is sufficient evidence to do so without the need for a Development Proposal (DP).</p>	<p>Status of Contents: Guidance / Advice</p> <p>Related Documents: Circular 2026/03 (Admissions and Enrolment Numbers - Temporary Variation Requests)</p>
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CHANGING SCHOOL NUMBERS

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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The purpose of this circular is to explain how the Department of Education (the Department) will operate a process that permits amendments to a school's approved admissions and/or enrolment numbers through the 'Changing School Numbers' process.
- 1.2 The Area Planning process implements the Department's 'Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools', known as the Sustainable Schools Policy (SSP). The purpose of the policy 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. Development Proposals (DPs) are the statutory means by which proposed changes of significance to education provision can be effected in line with the requirements of The Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986.
- 1.3 The legislation covering DPs, meanwhile, states that a DP should be brought forward for grant-aided schools (this applies to grant-aided nursery, primary, post-primary and special schools) in the following circumstances:-
 - i. to establish a new grant-aided school;
 - ii. to amend the status of an existing grant-aided school;
 - iii. to discontinue an existing grant-aided school;
 - iv. to make a significant change in the character or size of a grant-aided school; and
 - v. to make any other change in a school which would have a significant effect on another grant-aided school
- 1.4 This process is appropriate where a change is significant, however the DP process is not sufficiently agile to cope with short to medium-term demographic changes where time-bound changes to schools' approved numbers are required, or where the change is not significant or will not have a significant impact on other schools in an area.

2. CONTEXT

- 2.1 In recent years, the Department has developed a number of more agile processes to facilitate changes to a school's approved numbers without the requirement for a DP in order to allow more capacity for significant and strategic proposals to come forward. These are set out as follows:

(a) Resetting Numbers

- 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.

- This pilot resulted in approved enrolment numbers at 30 schools being reduced, resulting in 4,043 available places being removed.
- 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

- 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 Temporary Variations (TVs).
- The Department identified schools at primary and post-primary level that had higher actual admissions and enrolment numbers than their approved numbers after adjusting for pupils with a statement of Special Education Needs (SEN) who have been 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.
- Following a comprehensive analysis there were 13 primary schools and eight post-primary schools recommended for normalisation for admissions in 2024-25. This amounted to an additional 1,291 places across 21 schools.

(c) Additional Year 8 Places Exercise

- Between 2019 and 2025 the Department made frequent use of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 to facilitate temporary increased Year 8 intakes in areas of demographic pressure.

3. THE LEGAL POSITION

- 3.1 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) (where the school is a Catholic maintained school) and the Education Authority (EA).
- 3.2 Any significant change to the approved numbers at a school is effected using a DP as required by The Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986. Since 2010, almost one third of all DPs have been to either increase or decrease a school's approved numbers.

- 3.3 Using the DP process where the proposed change is not significant is not sufficiently flexible and agile to cope with demographic change.
- 3.4 The power at Articles 11(3) and 12(3) of the 1997 Order to vary school numbers is not limited in any time-bound way, therefore changes may take effect for one year, for a number of years, or permanently.
- 3.5 The 'Changing School Numbers' process allows changes to schools' approved numbers that the Department does not deem significant, or that will not have a significant impact on another school, to be made promptly and efficiently, responding to evolving needs. All significant changes will still require a DP for consideration and implementation.

4. THE 'CHANGING SCHOOL NUMBERS' PROCESS - INCREASES

- 4.1 The Department will, on an annual basis, identify all schools that have exceeded their approved admissions and/or enrolment numbers through TVs in three out of the most recent four years and these schools will move forward for consideration of a change.
- 4.2 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 five-mile distance by road for primary schools and ten-miles for post-primary) in the same sector and its sustainability;
 - c. The pattern of placement of children with a statement of SEN at the school. Consideration will also be given to the implications of any increase on the school's capacity to facilitate any future specialist provision classes;
 - d. The significance of the change and its likely impact on the wider area; and
 - e. Any other relevant departmental educational policy that is applicable in the circumstances of the school.
- 4.3 If, following this analysis, the Department believes that a change is appropriate, it will consult on proposed numbers with the school itself, the EA and, in the case of a Catholic maintained school, CCMS. In accordance with Section 3 of the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022, when making changes to approved numbers of Integrated schools, the Department will also consult with the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE), the Integrated Education Fund (IEF) and the Controlled Schools Support Council (CSSC). As part of this consultation, the Department will confirm whether additional places can be facilitated within existing approved accommodation. Where additional accommodation is required, it is unlikely any proposed increase will be progressed.
- 4.4 If a change is to be made, this will be for a period of three years, before it is reviewed. This is to provide schools with a horizon of certainty of their numbers. After three years the position will be reviewed, and the change may be extended

for another three-year period or considered permanent. Alternatively, the approved numbers may return to their previous level.

- 4.5 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.
- 4.6 Where the Department acknowledges a need for numbers to be increased at a primary school it will aim for an optimum number where possible. For primary schools an optimum number is an intake that is a multiple of 30.
- 4.7 The Department will also consider requests from schools or managing authorities outside of this process for increases to approved numbers.
- 4.8 The process is limited to changes which the Department considers to be non-significant. Any question over whether a potential change is a significant change will be determined by the Department.
- 4.9 A list of schools where changes have been approved for the following September will be published annually (in December) on the Department's website.

5. THE 'CHANGING SCHOOL NUMBERS' PROCESS - DECREASES

- 5.1 While the Department will not undertake an annual process to identify schools for potential reductions in their approved admissions and/or enrolment numbers, the Department will consider requests from schools or managing authorities for decreases to approved numbers.
- 5.2 When considering such a request, the same process will be applied as set out in paragraphs 4.2 – 4.4 and 4.6 – 4.9.
- 5.3 No school that has an approved number below the minimum sustainability thresholds will be considered for a decrease to its approved numbers¹.
- 5.4 A list of schools where changes have been approved for the following September will be published annually (in December) on the Department's website.

6. STATUTORY DUTIES

- 6.1 The Department acknowledges its statutory duties in respect of Irish-medium education and Integrated Education. The policy recognises four school sectors; denominational (maintained schools and denominational grammar schools); non-

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The Bain Review minimum sustainability thresholds, as stated in Schools for the Future: [A Policy for Sustainable Schools](#), are enrolment numbers of 140 pupils in an urban primary school, 105 pupils in a rural primary school, 500 pupils in years 8-12 in a post-primary school and sixth forms with a minimum of 100.

denominational (controlled schools and non-denominational grammar schools); Integrated; and Irish-medium (including Irish-medium Units). The Changing School Numbers policy ensures that when changes are being considered to approved numbers in the Integrated or Irish-medium sector, only alternative provision within the same sector will be considered. Only in exceptional and rare cases, and where a compelling and demonstrable justification is established, will the Department look at provision beyond the four recognised sectors.

- 6.2 As stated above, in accordance with Section 3 of the Integrated Education Act (Northern Ireland) 2022, when making changes to approved numbers of Integrated schools, the Department will also consult with NICIE, IEF and CSSC or any other body the Department considers appropriate.

7. BENEFITS OF THE ‘CHANGING SCHOOL NUMBERS’ PROCESS

- 7.1 Changing a school’s approved numbers through this route will provide greater certainty for those schools that are likely to require ongoing TVs to plan for the future. It should also reduce the number of area planning workstreams aimed at changing schools’ approved numbers thereby allowing more strategic workstreams and DPs to be brought forward.
- 7.2 The process will also allow for non-significant changes to be facilitated more expeditiously and allow for changes to be implemented for a specified time period and reverted when the environment and educational landscape changes.
- 7.3 Finally, it will remove the need for some schools which consistently receive TV approvals to rely on TVs with the associated bureaucracy for schools and the Department.

8. SCOPE OF THE CIRCULAR

- 8.1 This circular applies to grant-aided primary and post-primary schools only. It does not extend to pre-school settings or special schools. Any changes to approved admissions and enrolment numbers for these excluded categories will continue to be considered through existing processes, including DPs where applicable.
- 8.2 While the Changing School Numbers process examines the pattern of TVs at schools, the process is separate from TV policy. Schools may utilise TV policy to seek additional places for individual, named children, in any given year, without the need to apply for increased approved admissions and/or enrolment numbers through this process. Equally, the success or otherwise of any proposed increase or decrease to a school’s approved numbers through the Changing School Numbers policy does not prevent the school from requesting additional places through TV policy. They remain separate policies.

9 IMPLEMENTATION

- 9.1 The review process will be undertaken each year following the conclusion of the school admissions processes. Schools which meet the necessary criteria and which proceed to the consultation stage, will be contacted, alongside the EA and CCMS, by the Department in the Autumn term with proposed numbers. Any changes agreed by the Department will be effective from the following September.
- 9.2 Schools may request changes at any point of the year; however they will be considered in line with the timescales set out above.



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