



**Oifig an Ard-Rúnaí**  
Office of the Secretary General

7 August 2018

Mr. Alan Guidon  
Clerk to the Joint Committee on Education and Skills  
Leinster House  
Dublin 2

Your Ref: JCES4/C/1/A/12/A

Dear Clerk,

I refer to your letter of 12<sup>th</sup> July regarding the invitation to my Department to make a written submission to your committee as part of its examination of school related matter, and we appreciate the opportunity to outline some considerations from a forward planning perspective in relation to the provision of schools within the wider development and place-making process.

**Context**

The physical format of urban development in Ireland is one of our greatest national development challenges. Analysis undertaken in the preparation of the National Planning Framework, shows that more than anything else, getting the physical form and location of future development right offers the best prospects for unlocking regional potential. Presently, the fastest growing areas are at the edges of and outside our cities and towns, which has resulted in:

- a constant process of infrastructure and services catch-up in building new roads, new schools, services and amenities and a struggle to bring jobs and homes together, meaning that there are remarkably high levels of car dependence and that it is difficult to provide good public transport in such newly developed locations, and
- a gradual process of run-down of city and town centre and established suburban areas as jobs, retail and housing move out, leaving behind declining school enrolments, empty buildings and a lack of sufficient people to create strong and vibrant places, both day and night.





As we plan for an additional 1 million people in Ireland by 2040, addressing the current model of school provision is likely to be required, particularly in relation to the range and choice of schools available (surplus provision and religious patronage) and their associated accessibility (both infrastructure and eligibility).

### **Demand Driven**

According to the CSO population projections data that have been adapted into a demographic and econometric model developed by the ESRI on behalf of my Department for the purposes of informing the National Planning Framework, the number of people aged 15 or under will continue to increase until the early 2020's and decline only slowly thereafter. This means that the continued provision and enhancement of facilities and amenities for children and young people, such as childcare, schools, playgrounds, parks and sportsgrounds, remains necessary and will need to be maintained at similar levels for the foreseeable future thereafter. It also means that, if a significant proportion of future population growth occurs within or close to the current built-up footprint of settlements as targeted, it will be possible to maximise the use of existing facilities near where children and young people live. It will continue to be a requirement that proposals for residential development make provision for children's play in accordance with local development plan policies.

Demand for school places is set to increase to 2025 and for third-level education places to peak in the years immediately thereafter. The schools system is experiencing significant pressures in catering for additional student numbers in certain parts of the country where a high level of population growth has occurred, which is projected to continue until at least 2025. Equally, the viability of some schools has been raised in other parts experiencing population decline.

This presents new challenges for school planning and associated provision but this cannot be addressed solely in relation to demographic planning and must be considered in the wider context of the role that schools play in the communities within which they are located and the factors that influence school provision.

### **Schools as Community Enablers**

Education has been critical to Ireland's transformation over recent decades. Education, training and life-long learning are key enablers, around which personal fulfilment, a fair society and a successful nation revolve. All are central to sustaining economic success and building strong communities and represent a strong dynamic that has a critical influence on the built environment.

In the context of urban development, schools in particular are an integral part of new communities, influencing their success and playing a significant role, not just as pieces of community infrastructure, but as strong community enablers. This is particularly relevant in the context of dual-income households, where commuting to



work and school is an integral part of daily life, with schools constituting a platform for engagement and interaction within and between communities.

In addition, schools have a huge influence on the physical functionality of places, related mainly to their location and how they are accessed which in turn impacts on students' health and safety and the overall capacity of an urban area to handle the associated multi-modal movements (e.g. car, bus, bicycle and pedestrian movement). These considerations in addressing any future change to Government policy also encompass wider challenges facing both the public health and the education systems in relation to obesity and religious patronage.

Strategic planning of, and investment in, the provision of childcare, education and training are central to reinforcing the delivery of sustainable communities, promoting inclusion and offering choice and accessibility to a high standard of education and employment. The National Planning Framework seeks to prioritise the alignment of targeted and planned population and employment growth with educational investment. National Policy Objective 31 of the NPF prioritises the alignment of targeted and planned population and employment growth with investment in:

- The provision of childcare facilities and new and refurbished schools on well-located sites within or close to existing built-up areas, that meet the diverse needs of local populations.

### **Future Considerations for School Provision**

To continue to ensure the role of the school in the community is protected but also enhanced and improved where required, it is worthwhile to consider new models for schools, particularly those located in urban settlements/compact developments, taking into account the need for:

- increased density, where appropriate,
- shared use for the wider community, of both the building(s) and playing facilities incorporating shared models for insurance purposes,
- the impact of any move away from religious patronage, and
- surplus provision.

I hope that these points are useful in your Committee's considerations.

Yours sincerely,

---

John McCarthy  
Secretary General  
Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government