



Submission on the National Development Plan

Prepared for:

The Department of Education and Youth

August 2026

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The Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Department's work on planning for future education sector requirements as part of the National Development Plan.

As IPPN is not a patron body or a management body; we do not have any input regarding the selection or prioritisation of individual schools in the various categories outlined. We include observations and recommendations that align with our remit as a network of principals and deputy principals.

1. Admissions Process

IPPN agrees that well-coordinated admissions policies can support the optimal use of capacity across an area, and can help ensure that local children, whether in mainstream or special classes, can be accommodated in their local school.

While admissions policies and procedures are a matter for patron and management bodies, IPPN offers here a school leadership perspective.

Dublin 15 Pilot Project – Common Application Process

There was a pilot project in Dublin 15 for a number of years, exploring how a common applications process could maximise school places and avoid building new classrooms where there is existing capacity in local schools. The project was very successful, and one key learning point is that schools need support with the process and someone to drive it.

In Dublin 15, the facilitator was a parish priest. The development of an Admissions Officer along the lines of the Redeployment Officer model could be looked at to make this work nationally. IPPN would be happy to link in the pilot principals with the DEY

and/or the NDP project team to explore this further and would be happy to discuss the D15 pilot project and our recommendations below in further detail.

Recommendations

- a) With reference to the Programme for Government commitment to *‘Roll out nationwide common application systems to reduce stress on parents and students during application periods’* by 2029, include this in the NDP.
- b) Develop a nationally agreed framework, including criteria for enrolment and a process for all schools to agree a common applications process for parents seeking a place in a local school. The Dublin 15 pilot project mentioned above offers a well-established approach to be developed into a national framework.
- c) Appoint an Admissions Officer in each planning area (or group of planning areas) to assist schools with this process locally.
- d) Create a robust, centrally managed online system for all schools and parents to manage the applications process.
- e) Provide support for schools to ensure that all admissions policies are compliant with legislation.

2. Special Education

Suitable Accommodation

The NDP should ensure funding is made available for suitable spaces for SEN provision according to the Department of Education’s guidelines - [Link](#).

Establishing Special Classes

With specific reference to the process of establishing new special classes in areas where demand exceeded capacity, the following perspectives emerged from our engagement with school leaders:

- Expedience has been a determining factor in the identification of several schools approached to open special classes. These were schools who had an available space/room and/or had a teacher or teachers to be redeployed, even though they may already have opened special classes previously and had no applications from children in their catchment area for placement in a special class.
- There was a sense that other schools were avoiding their responsibilities, particularly schools who had not previously opened a special class, despite the fact that there were children awaiting placement in a special class who lived within the catchment areas of those schools.
- Some of the spaces/rooms that had been identified as being able to accommodate a special class were wholly unsuitable and would compromise the quality of provision to children in those classes. See point above re. suitable accommodation.
- Some schools were being asked to prioritise external applicants for places in special classes over children already enrolled in the school who met the criteria for placement in the special class.
- Concern was also expressed that schools were being asked to accommodate more than 6 pupils in a special class for children with autism spectrum disorders.
- There is a sense that applications made for support, in particular with regard to challenging behaviours, can be very slow to process and result in school staff struggling to manage pupils in special classes and special schools.
- There is a concern about a lack of understanding by parents of the school system and how it works, resulting in parents thinking that the only way to get specific resources for their children is through diagnosis and specialist provision, putting more pressure on the system.

- School leaders feel that a missing piece of the jigsaw is being without NEPS support in the school and a poor Scheme for the Commissioning of Psychological Assessments (SCPA) system, leaving them without assessments and psychological support for pupils.

Meeting Actual Demand

In January 2026, IPPN conducted a survey on *Meeting Additional Education Needs in Mainstream Schools* to which over 1,000 school leaders responded, an exceptionally significant sample size which ensures high confidence in the accuracy of the results.

The responses of those school leaders clearly highlight the extent to which the conducive conditions for effective inclusion do not currently exist:

- Only **11.90%** agreed that the budgetary allocation for special education is based on accurate, up-to-date data in relation to the level of additional needs presenting in schools.
- **78.44%** said the school's allocation of SET hours was not sufficient to meet the needs of the children who present with additional learning needs.
- **61.58%** said the school's allocation of SNA posts was not sufficient to meet the needs of the children who present with identified care needs.

School leaders consistently report that allocations of SET and SNA support are insufficient to meet identified needs. The consequence is that schools are forced into impossible decisions regarding prioritisation and the deployment of resources. The data is compelling:

- The average percentage of children in schools who are availing of support from a Special Education Teacher is **30.64%**.
- This is far in excess of the **25%** estimated figure used by government to inform the budgetary allocation for Special Education.

- As a result of this insufficient allocation, **83.75%** reported that there were children in the school who required the support of a Special Education Teacher but were unable to avail of such support.
- A **22.05%** increase in hours would be required to sufficiently meet the needs of the children who present with additional learning needs.
- This would indicate that 18,000+ SET posts are required to meet the actual level of need that presents in schools as opposed to the 15,000+ SET posts that are sanctioned for 2026/27.

The impact of this operational deficit is reduced intervention time, delayed support, compromised outcomes for children and increasing pressure on school staff.

It is a similar picture when it comes to the allocation of SNAs:

- Schools report that the percentage of children who have an identified care need with which they need support from a Special Needs Assistant is **23.38%**.
- **85.76%** reported that there are children in the school who require the support of a Special Needs Assistant but who are unable to avail of such support.
- The average increase in the number of SNA posts that would be required to sufficiently meet the identified care needs of the children in schools is **1.85 posts**.

The impact of this operational deficit is a lack of capacity to meet core care needs, to promote engagement and participation, to support transitions and to respond appropriately to behaviours of concern.

NCSE Data

As at 1st June 2026, the total referrals to the NCSE for a determination of eligibility amount to **9,762** children/young people for 2026/27 school year. This compares to a total of 4,200 children for 2025/26 and a **132.4%** increase on 2025/26 eligibility rates.

Key Recommendation

The NDP needs to factor in the projected demand for special needs provision in schools based on an accurate dataset, not on the 25% assumed rate of SEN used until now.

3. Other Recommendations

Minor Works

IPPN considers an increase in the Minor Works Scheme payment to be urgent and essential to support schools in maintaining safe, functional and appropriate school buildings.

The current level of funding is placing significant pressure on school leaders and Boards of Management, who are increasingly required to manage rising maintenance costs while operating within very limited resources.

Schools are doing their utmost to maintain their buildings and address necessary repairs, but the level of funding available does not adequately reflect the increasing costs associated with building maintenance, repairs, servicing and compliance.

An increased annual allocation would allow schools and Boards of Management to plan proactively for maintenance, rather than relying on limited resources to address issues as they arise.

Underfunding of the Minor Works Scheme can result in schools having to defer essential maintenance or use already constrained school budgets to meet costs that should reasonably be supported through dedicated capital funding. This places additional financial and administrative pressure on school leaders and Boards of

Management and can ultimately impact the quality and condition of the school environment.

Emergency Funding

IPPN supports the Department's continued commitment to health and safety through school maintenance and the Emergency Works Scheme, particularly where urgent repairs or adaptations are required to ensure the safe and continued operation of schools.

However, schools require a swift response and timely decision-making in relation to Emergency Works funding applications. Where an issue presents an immediate risk to the health and safety of pupils, staff or the wider school community, delays in assessing and approving applications can create significant challenges for school leaders and may impact on the school's ability to operate safely.

We would therefore encourage the Department to consider how the Emergency Works application and approval process could be simplified and streamlined. This could include reducing administrative requirements where appropriate, providing clearer guidance on the evidence required, and establishing quicker response times for applications involving immediate health and safety concerns.

Physical Education Facilities

IPPN strongly supports the commitment to improving Physical Education (PE) halls, General Purpose (GP) rooms and wider sporting facilities across schools. Investment in these facilities is essential not only to support the delivery of the curriculum but also to promote pupil health, wellbeing, inclusion and participation in school and community life.

However, we believe that the current level of provision at primary level requires significantly greater urgency and prioritisation. While approximately 70% of primary schools report having access to a GP Room, this means that more than 30% of primary schools do not currently have access to a dedicated indoor PE facility. This represents a substantial number of schools and pupils who do not have access to appropriate facilities for physical education, indoor activities and whole-school wellbeing.

The absence of an appropriate PE/GP facility has a significant impact on schools. Primary schools are expected to provide a broad and balanced curriculum, including Physical Education, yet school leaders and teachers are frequently required to deliver PE in unsuitable spaces such as classrooms, corridors or outdoor spaces that are dependent on weather conditions.

There are also wider implications for pupil wellbeing, physical activity and inclusion. A suitable indoor facility provides opportunities for structured physical activity, movement, school assemblies, wellbeing initiatives, sensory and therapeutic activities, and inclusive participation for pupils with additional needs. The lack of such facilities can therefore impact far beyond PE provision itself.

We therefore believe that the development of PE halls and GP rooms in existing primary schools should be treated as a specific priority rather than relying primarily on the delivery of new schools and large-scale projects already in the pipeline. We would encourage the Department to develop a clear, funded programme for addressing the existing deficit in primary PE/GP room provision, with priority given to schools that have no access to an appropriate indoor facility. An approach similar to the Pathways project for deep energy retrofitting in schools might be worth considering.

Digital Strategy and AI

IPPN strongly supports the vision of the Digital Strategy as outlined in NDP, to empower schools to harness the opportunities presented by digital transformation and to build digital competence within an effective digital education ecosystem.

Investment in digital literacy and, in particular, Artificial Intelligence (AI) is now essential to achieving this vision. Schools have a critical role in ensuring that pupils are not only confident users of digital technologies but are also able to understand, question and critically evaluate the information, content and technologies they encounter. Digital literacy is increasingly fundamental to learning, communication, employment and full participation in society.

AI in particular presents significant opportunities for education, including supporting personalised learning, improving accessibility, assisting teachers with planning and administrative tasks, and providing new ways of engaging pupils. However, these opportunities must be accompanied by appropriate education around the responsible and ethical use of AI, including issues such as accuracy, bias, privacy, digital safety, intellectual property and the ability to distinguish reliable information from misinformation. This investment must extend beyond the provision of technology.

Schools require appropriate funding, infrastructure, professional learning and ongoing support for school leaders and teachers to ensure that digital technologies and AI can be integrated effectively into teaching and learning. Staff need the confidence and expertise to understand both the opportunities and limitations of emerging technologies and to guide pupils in their responsible use.

Other Considerations

In addition, IPPN strongly recommends that the following needs to be taken into account in the development of the NPD - its scope, remit, metrics and in the prioritisation of funding allocations:

1. The Programme for Government **commitment to reduce class sizes (PTR) to 19:1** – this needs to be the basis for the metrics in the plan, not the status quo.
2. **Minimum specification for new builds** developed by the DEY Planning and Building Unit - so that all schools are brought to that same standard over time
3. Climate action goals require progress in **retrofitting for all schools with ageing infrastructure**, which will also help to reduce energy and other costs. There needs to be alignment between the climate action goals and the NDP.
4. **Multiannual funding is needed for all schools to maintain their existing infrastructure**. Focusing only on resolving issues in the most serious cases is ‘kicking the can down the road’. It means that far more significant capital projects will be needed to resolve issues that would be more cost effective to resolve sooner.
5. **A Project Manager needs to be appointed for capital projects of any size** being brought to schools. School boards of management and school leaders do not have the expertise or the capacity to carry out this role. This would alleviate what is a significant concern and challenge for schools. The tendering process for each element of capital projects is a key challenge; it can be very onerous and complex. The requisite expertise is not readily available to school boards. This work should be done by a design consultant or project manager and funding for same needs to be provided to schools.
6. There is currently no mention of **rented prefabricated classrooms** and other spaces in the documentation. The NDP should seek to eliminate the use of financial resources for such structures, other than when temporary accommodation is needed during a building project. If capacity is needed in a school, permanent accommodation needs to be prioritised.

Consultation

IPPN supports the NDP's commitment to strengthening communication and engagement with patrons, school leaders and other stakeholders as part of the

implementation of the National Development Plan (NDP). We would particularly value opportunities for meaningful and ongoing engagement as areas are progressed. IPPN is well placed to provide practical insight into the capacity and pressures within schools, local enrolment requirements, special education provision and the challenges arising from projected demographic changes. We are keen to engage with the Department on:

- maximising existing capacity across the schools, informed by the operational realities experienced at school level
- enrolment policies and admissions processes, ensuring that local needs, including special education and mainstream provision, are appropriately reflected
- project prioritisation and the phased rollout of projects throughout the NDP period and beyond
- providing greater clarity and transparency regarding the tranches of projects being progressed to construction.

Structured, regular engagement would assist in ensuring that the implementation of the NDP is informed by the experiences and needs of schools and their communities. IPPN is keen to contribute constructively to this process and would appreciate the opportunity to participate in appropriate engagement forums, consultations and discussions as these initiatives develop.