

**Rural Proofing
New Post Primary Arrangements and Proposal for a Draft Education
Order**

Rural Development Council for Northern Ireland

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Introduction

Thank you for providing the opportunity to contribute to this important proposed draft order. Our comments are based on a rural proofing analysis primarily of the issue of admissions and are based on the details provided in the accompanying statement by Angela Smith which is most helpful. As such we are providing our own submission paper which we hope you will find kind enough to consider. The draft Order is, on its own, a difficult document to comment upon and the Response Booklet is as such difficult to use to respond to the complex issues entailed. We would envisage that a large number of interested parties may also find it challenging to respond constructively.

We hope you find these additional suggestions and comments helpful instead. We would be happy to clarify / discuss any as required.

The Northern Ireland Rural Development Council

The Northern Ireland Rural Development Council (RDC) was established in 1991 under the DARD Rural Development Programme. We summarise our role as being an independent regional rural organisation, which plays a key role in influencing rural development policy, developing and delivering practical programmes, conducting research and development, sharing information and building effective partnerships.

General Comments

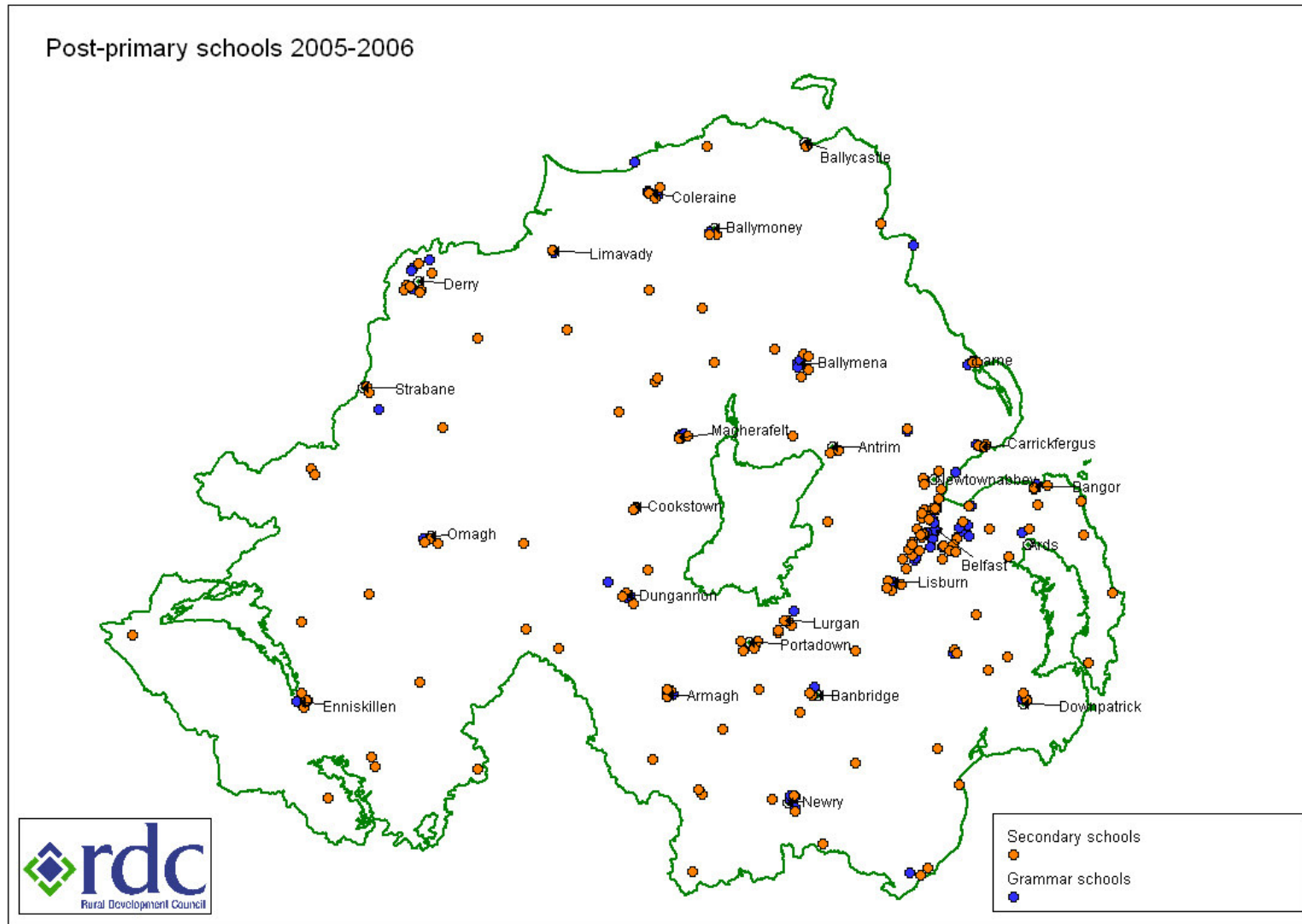
We note the main purpose of the reforms; to provide greater choice and to raise standards, and to develop closer working relations among schools and the FE sector. We endorse the scope this may provide for pupils to find their own career pathways, and to be able to access a wider network of specialist support additional to the school they attend. We have encouraged the concept of 'clustering' and associated networking as a key means to expand the capability of primary schools in our rural proofing scoping study on primary school education¹.

In general we support and applaud the ambitions of the revised curriculum and the associated use of continuous assessment in the form of a pupil profile to assist in choosing the right next steps in post primary education. We also support the ambition of the Entitlement Framework but, as noted in the statement (page 5) would encourage innovative approaches to ensuring the few rural post primary schools are able to provide the appropriate number and range of courses either through investment in school buildings and teaching staff or by making the

¹ Study commissioned by DARD but guided and submitted to DENI

appropriate linkages to other providers. This latter is particularly challenging as the option of working with neighbouring schools and FE colleges will be limited to urban locations. Map 1 illustrates that neighbouring amongst post primary schools is mainly a feature of urban centres.

Map 1: location of Post Primary Schools
(data kindly provided by DENI)



We do have some concerns that, on the one hand, “Schools can choose the 24 or 27 courses which they feel are most suitable for their pupils” (page 4) whilst on the other, “pupils will choose the courses best suited to their needs” - this suggests a ‘marketplace’ situation may well develop, schools perhaps attempting to position themselves in the market in part by their course profile. How might this square with accessibility ? for example, if schools seek to differentiate themselves by the course or approach they adopt, then choice of school becomes more than a matter of location. Should this be the case, then selection criteria based on distance could be unfair if all children are to have equal choice.

Tie Breakers

Ideally, of course, the broader approach to education should mean no school is significantly better than its neighbours and that there is sufficient provision locally so that there are be limited situations where there is greater demand than there are places at any given school. Given the problem of surplus places we might hope that too robust a process of ‘removing schools that have become too small’ does not create this problem, rather, we would emphasise the need to look at other means to sustain as many post primary schools in rural areas in particular as possible given the challenges faced in travel to provide a service in other ways. We would again refer to our scoping study in this regard, and particularly, on the potential of extended services. The focus on raising standards noted as a key part of the education reforms must also be a priority. We would urge a climate of cooperation and collaboration rather than competition.

Given the scope for competition between schools around the ‘choice agenda’ we share concerns expressed by others about the use of a measured distance criterion from the school. In principle this may be seen as a measure of last resort but if schools have flexibility in determining which criteria they apply this may not in fact be the case. We note in this regard that geographic / community criteria are not yet available for comment making it difficult to assess the overall potential impact on rural areas and families – in particular, we are uncertain what a ‘child-centred catchment’ and a school centred catchment might look like or how these will work. Presumably a child-centred catchment examines likely travel times to a school. **It is vital these are properly rural proofed before introduction.**

On the same basis more clarity is needed on how a distance measure might be used to properly assess this. For example, what would be the basis of the distance measure ? How will it be used ? Will schools be obliged to justify their choice of selection criteria to DENI ?

If geographic or distance criteria help to avoid competition between schools where catchment areas might otherwise overlap there could be merit. However, if they act to effectively exclude pupils from schools offering courses best suited to

them because they live beyond a tightly defined area then they may be counter to the spirit of the admissions policy and of the draft education order as a whole.

As Map 1 shows a significant proportion of post primary schools are located in urban centres and as such, it is inevitable that any negative effect arising from the use of post codes will affect rural families more often than urban ones. To the extent that it is perceived to be a possible threat to successful enrolment in particular schools it is not beyond possibility that this could act to inhibit people from choosing to live in rural settlements.

Map 2 was prepared by RDC as part of its scoping study to rural proof small schools policy. The map examines catchment area sizes for primary schools based on a theoretical minimum number of pupils– it is based on a sample of schools which already exist and which represent different rural situations across the region, particularly in relation to density of population. The schools are chosen purely for illustrative purposes and not as examples where amalgamation is required. For each school, the approximate number of households was calculated to provide around 100 (inner circle) and 200 (outer circle) children of primary school age (4-11).² The circles demonstrate the spatial area required to encompass the required number of households based on the density and pattern of location of households in each area.

The sample shows the extent to which catchment area increases from East to West, in other words, a school in the rural west of the region away from a district town will require a significantly larger catchment area than ones in the East, increasing the travel times for those on the margins of the catchment area and increasing the challenge for the school in maintaining strong connections to the catchment community.

This information can be overlaid onto other spatial information such as road networks, religious breakdown and population change data to consider the spatial implications of school size.

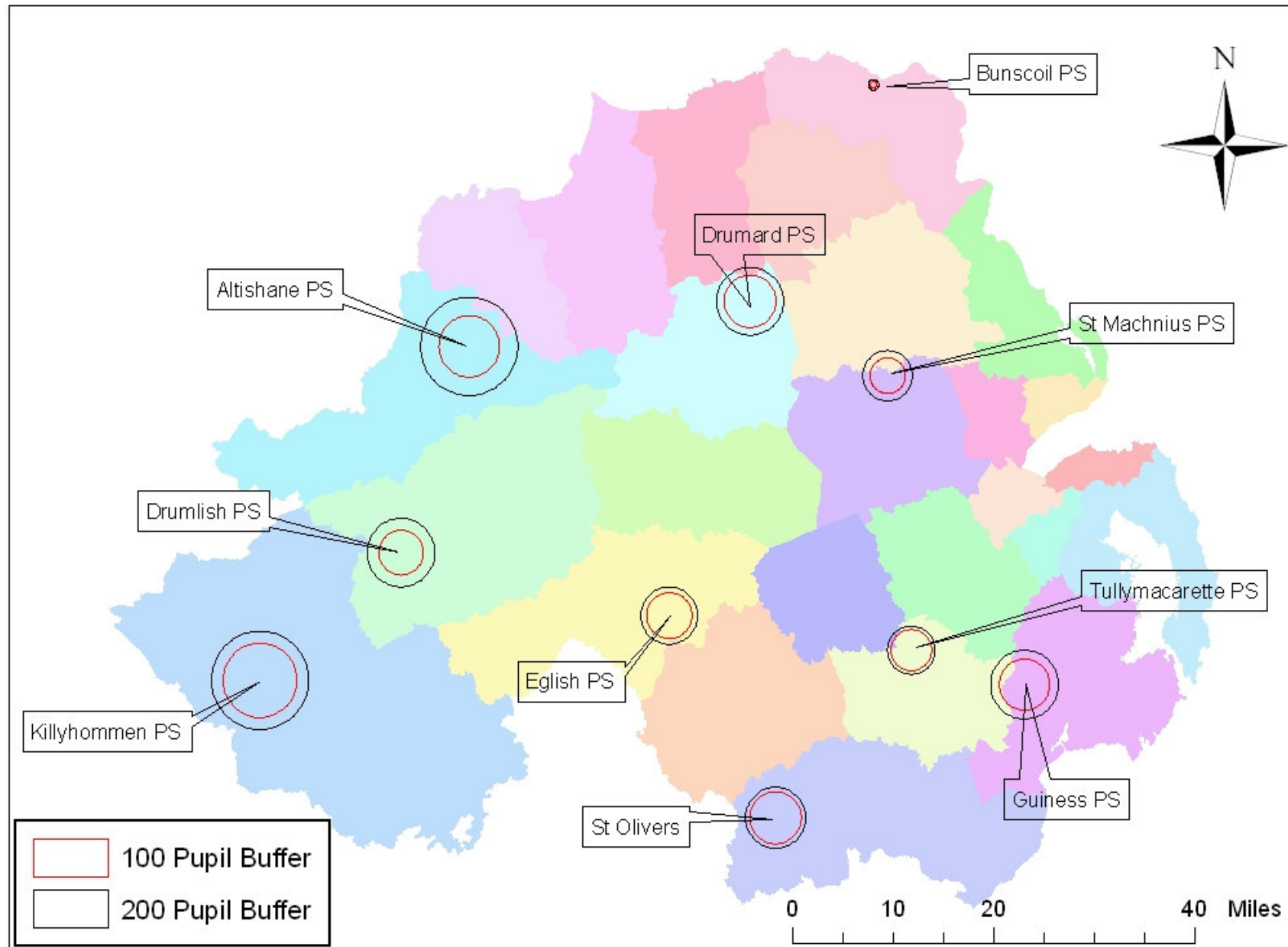
As Table 3.2 shows, the number of households and therefore the size of catchment area of a school can be significantly increased if the different religious affiliations of households is taken into account.

² As we do not know which specific households include families with children of primary school age the number of households required is based on an estimated rate. This rate was calculated by 1. sampling the local population of children in the area around the school by selecting the ward in which each school was located and using the number of primary school age children recorded in population census data. 2. Dividing this by the total number of households in the ward. 3. Using the rate to then calculate the total number of households required to achieve 200 pupils (the same test could be done for different numbers of pupils). 4. Using 'Pointer' data (which provides the exact location of all households) to determine a radius encompassing the required number of households.

For post primary schools connection to community may not be as significant an issue as it is for primary school children and travel time is likely to be the more substantive issue. However we can envisage that catchment areas for post primary schools will be significantly larger than those shown here, and it would be important to examine how far areas are likely to overlap and as such, what potential there may be for competitiveness between schools. Where competition could occur or where distances increase the significance of a distance measure for outlying populations use of such criteria may be detrimental.

Use of school rolls to examine the shape of catchment areas across a sample of rural schools would be invaluable in providing a better understanding of this issue. Such a sample should control for different levels of school performance and/or facilities so that as far as possible like is compared with like.

In conclusion, we would ask that any consideration of the development and use of spatial criteria is fully rural proofed, and consideration should be given to providing limits on when and how such criteria might be applied. We would ask that selection and admissions patterns are carefully monitored as part of the roll-out of the new arrangements to capture and address any emerging inequalities. This may help ensure good cooperation and support for what are important reforms.



School	All persons in Ward	Persons Protestant	Persons Catholic	% Protestant	% Catholic	Required Households (i.e. 200 Hholds Equil)	Households required for 200 pupil Protestant school	Households required for 100 pupil Protestant school	Households required for 200 pupil Catholic school	Households required for 100 pupil Catholic school
Altishane P.S.	2055	1084	967	52.75	47.06	1530	2901	1450	3251	1626
**Bunscoil P.S.	938	57	875	6.08	93.28	1537	25293	12647	1648	824
Drumard P.S.	2072	1521	529	73.41	25.53	1764	2403	1202	6909	3455
Drumlish P.S.	2098	648	1450	30.89	69.11	1461	4730	2365	2114	1057
Eglish P.S.	2218	1025	1186	46.21	53.47	1434	3103	1552	2682	1341
Guinness P.S.	2518	1457	974	57.86	38.68	1692	2924	1462	4374	2187
Killyhommen P.S.						1706				
St Machinius P.S.	2095	1281	763	61.15	36.42	1722	2816	1408	4728	2364
St Olivers P.S.	2414	828	1581	34.30	65.49	1478	4309	2155	2257	1128
Tullymacarette P.S.	2079	1764	268	84.85	12.89	1890	2228	1114	14662	7331

Table 3.2 ; Effect Of Religious Affiliation On Catchment Size.

For this exercise we are ignoring the actual religious affiliation of the example schools. Although simplified, the exercise illustrates the large potential catchment area required for a school serving the minority religion in a particular area (Bunscoil or Drumard for example).