



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Research and Information Service Briefing Paper

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## Surplus school places

### 1 Introduction

This briefing paper details the basis on which surplus school places are calculated, highlighting differences between the approach used by the Department of Education (the Department) and the approach used by the Education and Library Boards (ELBs). It also briefly considers approaches to assessing school capacity in other jurisdictions.

In addition, it provides an overview of surplus places in primary and post-primary schools and a breakdown of vacant places by management type, Education and Library Board and on an urban/rural basis.

#### **Differences in approaches to measuring surplus places**

There are differences between the approach used by the Department and that used by ELBs to calculate and record available places within schools. Broadly, the approach used by ELBs is more accurate and up-to-date, while the Department's approach can be based on less recent information and may not correspond accurately to the actual physical capacity of some schools.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Information provided by the Department of Education, 26<sup>th</sup> October 2012

The Department states that the information gathered by ELBs is used within the area plans and in decision-making around individual schools (which are considered on a case-by-case basis on their own merits), rather than the departmental figures.

It notes that departmental calculations aim to provide an “*approximate estimate of the available places on the ground and can only give a general sense of the issue*”. The Department hopes to work towards using the information held by ELBs in the future, however this is subject to the outcomes of the area planning process.<sup>2</sup>

## 2 Calculation of surplus places: Department of Education

The Department calculates the number of surplus places in schools by comparing the approved enrolment number of the school against the actual enrolment at the annual census date in October in the same year. The figures exclude the following pupils, as they are admitted over and above a school’s approved enrolment number:<sup>3</sup>

- Pupils in receipt of a statement of special educational needs;
- Pupils admitted to pre-school on appeal;
- Pupils admitted to Year 1 (primary) on appeal;
- Pupils admitted to Year 8 (post-primary) on appeal; and
- Pupils in their first year at a post-primary school following their admission by the direction of the Exceptional Circumstances Body.

### **Approved enrolment numbers**

The approved enrolment number determines the maximum number of pupils who may be enrolled in the whole school in any school year. The Department is required to approve an enrolment number for each school and the numbers are approved after consultation with the Board of Governors, the ELB and in the case of Catholic maintained schools, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools.

### ***Determining the enrolment number***

When calculating the enrolment number the Department must have regard to the legal standards around school premises and teaching accommodation (see overleaf for details).<sup>4</sup> The Department uses information from questionnaires which schools complete regarding their physical capacity.

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<sup>2</sup> Information provided by the Department of Education, 26<sup>th</sup> October 2012

<sup>3</sup> Information provided by the Department of Education, September 2011

<sup>4</sup> Department of Education: *Chapter 10 pupil admissions of guide for school governors* [online] Available at: [http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/schools-and-infrastructure-2/schools-management/79-school\\_governors\\_pg/schools\\_79\\_governor-roles-and-responsibilities\\_pg/schools\\_79\\_chapter-10-pupil-admissions\\_pg.htm](http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/schools-and-infrastructure-2/schools-management/79-school_governors_pg/schools_79_governor-roles-and-responsibilities_pg/schools_79_chapter-10-pupil-admissions_pg.htm)

The Department does not reassess the physical capacity of schools regularly. It will do so where a major change has taken place requiring a development proposal (such as an extension or new build), and if a school approaches it seeking a re-evaluation of its capacity. In practice, this means that the Department's enrolment numbers for some schools will not be exactly in line with the physical capacity of the school.<sup>5</sup>

The Department only measures the designated teaching space. This is in contrast to the ELBs, which will also include space that has the potential to be used for teaching in carrying out its calculations.<sup>6</sup>

### **Primary schools**

In calculating the approved enrolment the actual floor space available for teaching purposes is considered, with the calculation of the enrolment number made in two stages:<sup>7</sup>

1. Each room with 50m<sup>2</sup> or more available for teaching purposes is regarded as having capacity for 29 pupils; and
2. For rooms with less than 50m<sup>2</sup> available for teaching purposes, the total area of those rooms (excluding storage) is aggregated and divided by 1.72. The resulting figure is rounded down and represents the capacity for those rooms.

The school's enrolment number is determined by adding these two figures together. In determining the enrolment number, rooms not suitable for teaching purposes are excluded, for example storage rooms; the principal's office; assembly/ PE halls and the staff room.<sup>8</sup>

Where the enrolment number determined through this method is less than the actual number of pupils enrolled, the Department will take into account the approved enrolment number for the previous year, the accommodation available and the school's circumstances in deciding the enrolment number.

The Departmental guidance states that this approach only determines the enrolment number of the school, and that it is up to principals to decide the number of pupils in each class, taking account of the accommodation available, pupil needs; and the deployment of teaching staff.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 and Regulation 4 of the Class sizes in Primary Schools Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000 state that class sizes in the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 (Years 1-4) must be restricted to a maximum of 30 pupils.

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<sup>5</sup> Information provided by the Department of Education, 26<sup>th</sup> October 2012

<sup>6</sup> Information provided by the Department of Education, 26<sup>th</sup> October 2012

<sup>7</sup> Department of Education (2012) *Circular Number 2012/12 Open enrolment in primary schools* Bangor: DE

<sup>8</sup> As above

<sup>9</sup> Department of Education (2012) *Circular Number 2012/12 Open enrolment in primary schools* Bangor: DE

## Post-primary

At post-primary, the calculations outlined previously are used as a starting point; however other information is also used to determine the approved enrolment number. Another factor is the pressure for places within an area. For example, if there is increased demand additional temporary classrooms may be provided and the school can be given a higher enrolment number. Schools can be given a long-term enrolment number to be worked towards (either up or down).<sup>10</sup>

Pupil-teacher ratios are also considered in determining the approved enrolment number at post-primary (not at primary). This aims to take account of the fact that at post-primary, class sizes will differ as pupils move around the school, and it may not be possible to simply state that every class size will be 30 pupils.<sup>11</sup>

## Temporary variations

A Board of Governors may apply to the Department for a temporary variation in its enrolment number. Departmental guidance states that this flexibility can address short-term issues around the availability of places within an area; however it can lead to a school's actual enrolment being significantly greater than its accommodation-based enrolment. In such cases the Department considers enrolment trends and begins to bring enrolment back into line with the numbers appropriate for the school.<sup>12</sup>

The Department notes that while it wishes to be flexible around determining enrolment numbers, it will 'wish to be satisfied' that the enrolment number it determines is consistent with the ability of the accommodation to provide the necessary educational experiences.<sup>13</sup>

In cases where the actual enrolment exceeds the approved enrolment (so the school is operating over its capacity), the number of vacant places is noted as zero (rather than as a minus number).

## 3 Calculation of surplus places: ELBs

The Education and Library Boards use the broad approach outlined above in terms of calculating the physical capacity of schools. However, the capacity of individual schools is reassessed every five years through visits by ELB officers. In addition, ELBs tend to keep information up-to-date on any changes to school buildings or classroom space (for example, the provision of additional temporary classrooms).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Information provided by the Department of Education, 26<sup>th</sup> October 2012

<sup>11</sup> Information provided by the Department of Education, 26<sup>th</sup> October 2012

<sup>12</sup> As above

<sup>13</sup> Department of Education (2012) *Circular Number 2012/12 Open enrolment in primary schools* Bangor: DE

<sup>14</sup> Information provided by the Department of Education, 26<sup>th</sup> October 2012

ELBs use the Manhattan system to record the capacity available in individual schools. This is commercially available software which aims to help users track and detail buildings, furniture and equipment.<sup>15</sup> The Department currently does not have access to the Manhattan system.<sup>16</sup>

## 4 Approaches in other jurisdictions

### England: 'Net capacity assessment method'

A school's capacity is calculated using the 'net capacity assessment method'. This allows for assessment of admission numbers and to examine whether there are surplus places or additional places required. Local Authorities are responsible for assessing the net capacity of all maintained and mainstream schools in their area, and they must inform the Department for Education of their findings. The key features of the approach include:<sup>17</sup>

- **All usable spaces are measured** (both teaching and non-teaching) in order to present a fair assessment of the actual space available and to ensure there is sufficient space for ancillary accommodation such as staff rooms and storage;
- **The assessment is based only on the physical attributes of the space** (it is not affected by the number of pupils with a statement of SEN);
- **The capacity is divided by the number of year groups** to be accommodated giving an indicated admission number;
- **Realistic long-term allowances are made** for pupils with SEN or disabilities: there is flexibility to allow extra space for such pupils (for example, the intake of 30 could be reduced to 27, 28, or 29);
- **Permanent measure:** net capacity is only recalculated if physical changes are made to the usable space.

### *Primary schools*

The net capacity is calculated on the basis of the number and size of spaces designated as 'classbases': a classroom or area designated as the registration base for one class. This is checked against the total usable space available to ensure that there is neither too little nor too much space available for core teaching activities.<sup>18</sup>

The minimum area for a classbase for 30 pupils is 49m<sup>2</sup>, however this must be supported by a minimum of 14m<sup>2</sup> of ancillary area (not including the hall). This ancillary

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<sup>15</sup> Manhattan: *Asset Management* [online] Available at: <http://www.manhattansoftware.co.uk/index.php/solutions/property-occupiers/asset-management>

<sup>16</sup> Information provided by the Department of Education, 26<sup>th</sup> October 2012

<sup>17</sup> Department for Education and Skills (2002) *Assessing the Net Capacity of Schools* Nottingham: DfES

<sup>18</sup> Department for Education and Skills (2002) *Assessing the Net Capacity of Schools* Nottingham: DfES

area will be mainly for teaching (although it could include non-teaching spaces such as stores), either within the overall area of the classroom or in shared teaching areas.<sup>19</sup>

Under the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 schools are required to have a maximum class size of 30 at reception and Key Stage 1.

### ***Post-primary schools***

At post-primary, the net capacity is based on the number, size and type of teaching spaces and the age range of the school. Teaching spaces include all rooms available for teaching and learning, including halls, library and study areas.<sup>20</sup>

This is checked against the total usable space available to ensure that there is neither too little nor too much space available for core teaching activities. The smallest general classroom for 30 pupils must be 49m<sup>2</sup>.

### **Wales**

In Wales the approach to calculating capacity is broadly in line with that in place in England. Once the capacity is calculated, it is divided by the number of year groups to determine the admission number.

### ***Primary***

At primary level, the capacity is based on the size of rooms designated as 'classbases'. Specialist and support rooms such as libraries and staff rooms are not included within the calculation, but all must be measured. The spaces within classrooms are checked against the total usable space to support the core teaching activities. A standard classroom for 30 pupils is 56m<sup>2</sup> or more.<sup>21</sup>

### ***Post-primary***

While the capacity is based on the size of teaching spaces, all types of room which can be used for teaching or study are included. The calculation depends on the type of room, and more space per pupil is allocated for rooms with practical subjects. A utilisation factor is applied (depending on the ages of pupils at the school) to take account of the fact that not all rooms can be fully used all the time.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Department for Education and Skills (2002) *Assessing the Net Capacity of Schools* Nottingham: DfES

<sup>20</sup> Department for Education and Skills (2002) *Assessing the Net Capacity of Schools* Nottingham: DfES

<sup>21</sup> Welsh Government (2011) *Measuring the capacity of schools in Wales* Cardiff: Welsh Government

<sup>22</sup> As above

## 5 Surplus places overview

**It should be noted that the following is based on the Department of Education's figures.**

In the school year 2011/12, there were 82,342 surplus primary and post-primary school places in NI. This is in comparison to 84,486 surplus places in 2010/11. Table 1 provides a breakdown of these figures by phase.

The primary sector has the greatest number of surplus places, representing 29.6% of overall provision in 2011/12. Table 1 shows that the total number of vacant places in schools dropped by 2,144 places between the school years 2010/11 and 2011/12. In regard to the total number of schools in Northern Ireland, in 2010/11 there were 1,080 primary and post-primary schools; this reduced to 1,070 schools in 2011/12.<sup>23</sup>

**Table 1: Surplus school places by phase in 2010/11 and 2011/12**

Phase	Number of surplus places/ % of total places	
	2010/11	2011/12
Primary	66,705 (31.0%)	62,867 (29.6%)
Post-primary	17,781 (11.1%)	19,475 (12.2%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>84,486 (22.7%)</b>	<b>82,342 (22.6%)</b>

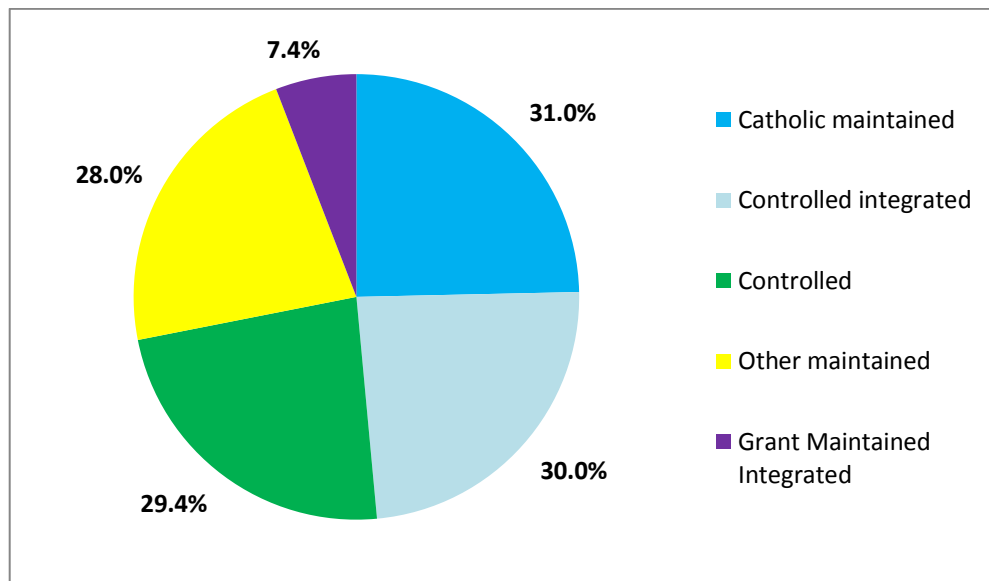
## 6 Surplus places by school management type

### Primary

At primary level, surplus school places are spread relatively evenly across the different school management types, with the exception of the Grant Maintained Integrated sector.

Figure 1 and Table 2 show that Catholic maintained schools had the highest proportion of surplus places (31.0%), followed by controlled integrated schools (30.0%). Grant Maintained Integrated schools had the lowest proportion of vacancies (7.4%).

<sup>23</sup> Department of Education: Northern Ireland summary data [online] Available at: [http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/facts-and-figures-new/education-statistics/32\\_statistics\\_and\\_research-numbersofschoolsandpupils\\_pg/32\\_statistics\\_and\\_research-northernirelandsummarydata\\_pg.htm](http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/facts-and-figures-new/education-statistics/32_statistics_and_research-numbersofschoolsandpupils_pg/32_statistics_and_research-northernirelandsummarydata_pg.htm)

**Figure 1: Surplus primary school places within each school management type****Table 2: Surplus primary school places within each school management type**

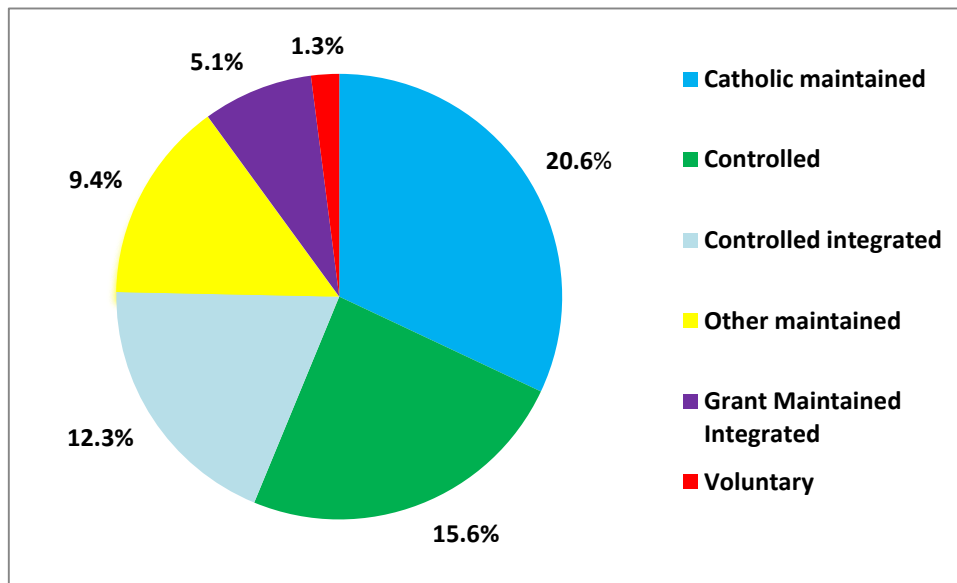
	Number of Approved Places	Number of Vacant Places	%
Catholic maintained	101,077	31,344	31.0
Controlled integrated	4,468	1,342	30.0
Controlled	98,156	28,863	29.4
Other maintained	3,254	910	28.0
Grant Maintained Integrated	5,526	408	7.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>212,481</b>	<b>62,867</b>	<b>29.5%</b>

### Post-primary

At post-primary level, there is greater variation in the proportion of surplus places by school management type. Figure 2 and Table 3 show that the highest proportion of surplus places is in the Catholic maintained sector (20.6%), followed by the controlled sector (15.6%). The lowest proportion is in the voluntary sector (1.35%).



**Figure 2: Surplus post-primary school places within each school management type**



**Table 3: Surplus post-primary school places within each school management type**

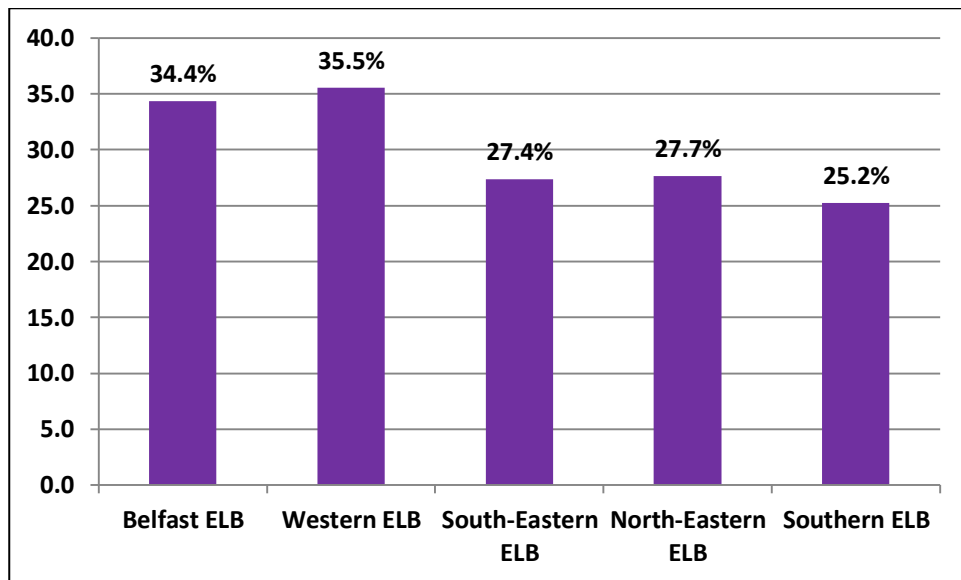
	Number of Approved Places	Number of Vacant Places	%
Catholic maintained	48,298	9,928	20.6
Controlled	51,719	8,050	15.6
Controlled integrated	2,885	354	12.3
Other maintained	585	55	9.4
Grant Maintained Integrated	9,205	473	5.1
Voluntary	47,101	615	1.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>159,793</b>	<b>19,475</b>	<b>12.2%</b>

## 7 Surplus places by Education and Library Board

### Primary

The highest proportion of surplus places is found in WELB (35.5%), followed by BELB (34.4%). SELB has the smallest proportion of vacant places (25.2%); see Figure 3 and Table 4.

**Figure 3: Surplus primary school places within each ELB**



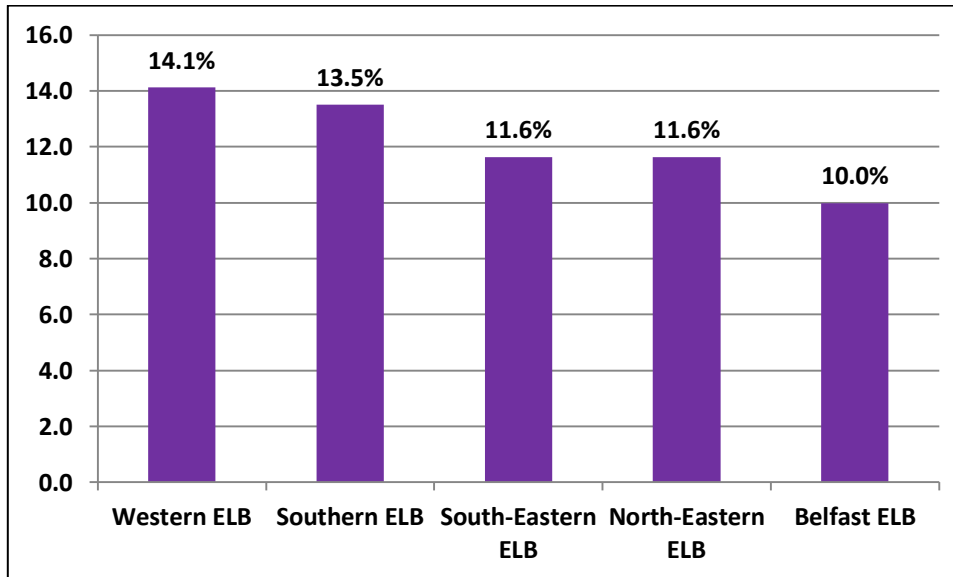
**Table 4: Surplus primary school places within each ELB**

	Number of Approved Places	Number of Vacant Places	%
Western ELB	41,123	14,611	35.5
Belfast ELB	32,215	11,066	34.4
North-Eastern ELB	47,716	13,196	27.7
South-Eastern ELB	43,039	11,784	27.4
Southern ELB	48,388	12,210	25.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>212,481</b>	<b>62,867</b>	<b>29.6%</b>

## Post-primary

At post-primary level, the highest proportion of surplus places is in the WELB area (14.1%), followed by SELB (13.5%). At 10%, BELB has the lowest proportion of vacant places; see Table 5 and Figure 4.

**Figure 4: Surplus post-primary school places within each ELB**



**Table 5: Surplus post-primary school places within each ELB**

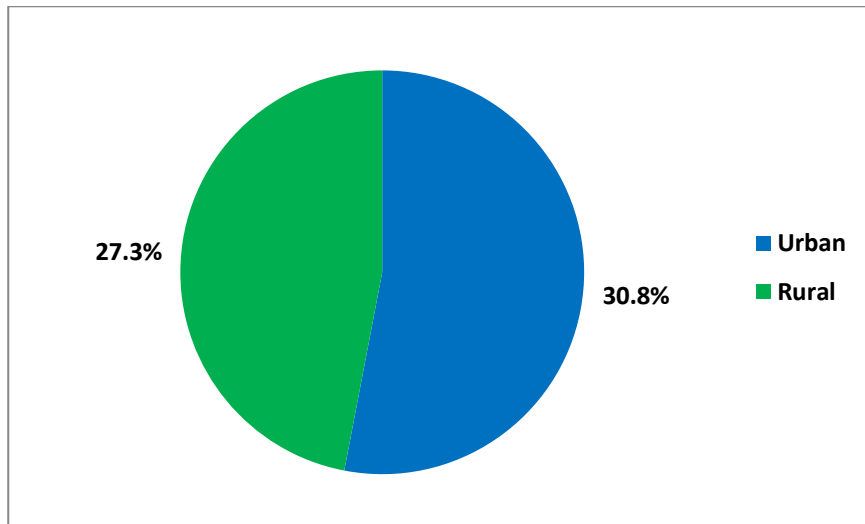
	Number of Approved Places	Number of Vacant Places	%
Western ELB	29,330	4,142	14.1
Southern ELB	36,031	4,871	13.5
South-Eastern ELB	27,367	3,184	11.6
North-Eastern ELB	35,145	4,089	11.6
Belfast ELB	31,920	3,189	10.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>159,793</b>	<b>19,475</b>	<b>12.2%</b>

## 8 Surplus places by urban/ rural location<sup>24</sup>

### Primary

In urban schools, almost a third (30.8%) of all approved places are vacant, somewhat higher than the proportion in rural schools (27.3%), see Figure 5 and Table 6.

**Figure 5: Surplus primary school places as a percentage of all urban/ rural places**



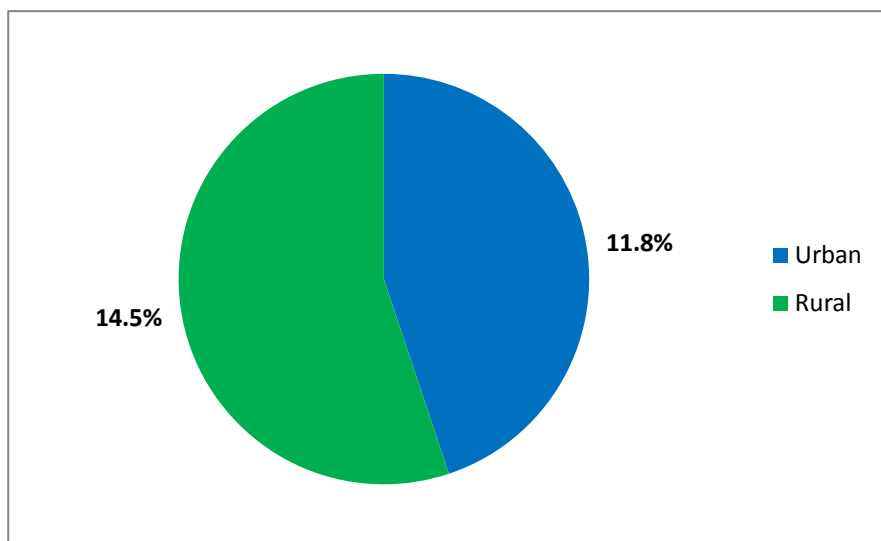
**Table 6: Surplus primary school places as a percentage of all urban/ rural places**

	Number of Approved Places	Number of Vacant Places	%
Urban	140,020	43,088	30.8
Rural	72,461	19,779	27.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>212,481</b>	<b>62,867</b>	<b>29.6%</b>

### Post-primary

In contrast, at post-primary level, rural schools have a slightly higher proportion of vacant places (14.5%) compared with urban schools (11.8%).

<sup>24</sup> Urban / Rural classification boundaries are defined from Settlement Development Limits (SDLs) which are a statistical classification and delineation of settlements. As a general rule, DE considers schools falling within settlements of 4,500 and over as being in urban areas

**Figure 6: Surplus post-primary school places as a percentage of all urban/ rural places****Table 7: Surplus post-primary school places as a percentage of all urban/ rural places**

	Number of Approved Places	Number of Vacant Places	%
Rural	22,927	3,320	14.5
Urban	136,866	16,155	11.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>159,793</b>	<b>19,475</b>	<b>12.2%</b>