

16 Planning for emerging school demand

16.1 The Department of Education and Youth (the Department) is responsible for the planning and delivery of first and second-level educational infrastructure. The Department's planning and building unit (PBU) has responsibility for identifying school accommodation requirements, prioritising the allocation of resources and overseeing the delivery of the school capital programme.

16.2 The Department publishes national projections of school enrolment numbers. Its most recent publication (December 2025) noted that primary school enrolments peaked in the 2018/2019 school year at 567,772, with post-primary enrolments expected to peak in the 2025/2026 school year at 429,350 pupils.^{1,2} By 2030/2031, primary school enrolments are projected to drop to around 521,000, while post-primary enrolments are expected to drop to around 410,000.^{3,4}

16.3 Changes in primary and post-primary school enrolments are directly related to changes in the populations of the school catchments. Residential development and inward migration can create pressure on enrolment in certain areas, even as enrolments in other areas are declining. The December 2025 projections note that enrolment trends at the local level may not align with national trends.

16.4 The Department uses a Geographical Information System-based demographic projection model (GIS) to inform its planning for school provision.⁵ The GIS supports demographic analysis and the forecasting of future demand for school places. Decisions about school capital project identification, inclusion in the Department's capital infrastructure pipeline and project prioritisation are informed by a broader planning process. This process considers other factors, including information obtained directly from schools and the condition of existing accommodation.

16.5 School infrastructure represents a significant area of public expenditure. The Department's capital expenditure has increased significantly in recent years. Capital expenditure over the period 2021 to 2025 totalled over €6 billion.⁶ The National Development Plan (NDP) includes a €7.55 billion capital infrastructure allocation for the education sector for the years 2026 to 2030. This includes €1.6 billion for each of the years 2026 and 2027.

Focus of this examination

16.6 This examination was undertaken to assess whether the Department has an adequate system in place for forecasting school place requirements which informs the prioritisation of areas for primary and post-primary school provision to meet demand.

16.7 The examination team interviewed Department officials, reviewed relevant available information and carried out walkthroughs of key school planning processes. The team also tested a sample of six school planning areas (SPAs) to understand the operation of the GIS-based model and the associated school planning processes.⁷

¹ [National projections of full-time enrolment](#) (primary and post-primary level — 2025/2026 to 2044/2045). Generally, only schools that receive State funding are included in the projections. The previous set of projections was published in March 2024.

² The national projections assume recent trends in fertility and migration will continue. Projections are presented for three migration scenarios.

³ These projections are based on the scenario that the Department considers is the most likely outcome for the 2030/2031 enrolment year.

⁴ Primary school enrolments are projected to continue to drop until 2040/2041 while post-primary enrolments are projected to continue to drop to at least 2044/2045.

⁵ The GIS-based demographic projection model is generally referred to as the 'GIS' or the 'GIS-based model' throughout this report.

⁶ This refers to capital expenditure under subhead A.15 primary and post-primary infrastructure under Vote 26 Education and Youth.

⁷ School planning areas are designated geographical zones used by the Department to analyse demographic data and identify future pressures on school capacity within each area.

The Geographical Information System

16.8 To analyse demand and plan for school provision at a local level, the Department has divided the country into 314 SPAs. The Department's GIS-based model produces annual demographic enrolment projections for both primary and post-primary school demand within each SPA.^{8,9}

16.9 These projections are informed by the following inputs

- data from sources which include Central Statistics Office (CSO) census data, enrolment data from the Department's primary online database (POD) and post-primary online database (PPOD), and child benefit data provided by the Department of Social Protection (DSP)
- a number of assumptions which include projected fertility and mortality rates (based on CSO data), and repeat student rates and transfers between public and private schools (based on enrolment data).

16.10 The Department (through its PBU) supplements the GIS-based demographic enrolment projections with further local analysis, informed by data on existing school capacity, enrolment trends and local developments (see Figure 16.1).¹⁰ Figure 16.2 presents a high-level overview of the planning process for emerging school demand.

8 The GIS is run by the Department's statistics section.

9 The statistics section shares the GIS-produced demographic enrolment projections with the Department's PBU via Microsoft SharePoint. The PBU assumes responsibility for the information on transfer.

10 Further detail on each dataset is included in Annex 16A.

Figure 16.1 Data used to inform planning for emerging school demand

Data	Source	GIS-based model ^a	Local analysis ^a	Purpose
Census information	Central Statistics Office	✓	✓	Population projections Sense checking enrolment data Occupancy data
Child benefit information	Department of Social Protection	✓	✓	Estimation of future school place demand
Eircode address database (ECAD) ^b	Eircode	✓	✓ ^c	Geographic matching of child benefit records
Enrolment data	Department of Education and Youth (POD/PPOD)	✓	✓	Current and historical enrolments and transfer patterns
Capacity inventory	Department of Education and Youth	✗	✓	Assessment of available school places
School profile data	Schools (self-reported)	✗	✓	Information on school type, patronage and existing provision
School condition surveys	Department of Education and Youth	✗	✓	Assessment of accommodation condition where relevant
Housing completion ^d	Central Statistics Office	✗	✓	Historical residential completions
Housing construction	Local authorities/Central Statistics Office	✗	✓	Planned residential development

Source: Department of Education and Youth. Analysis by the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

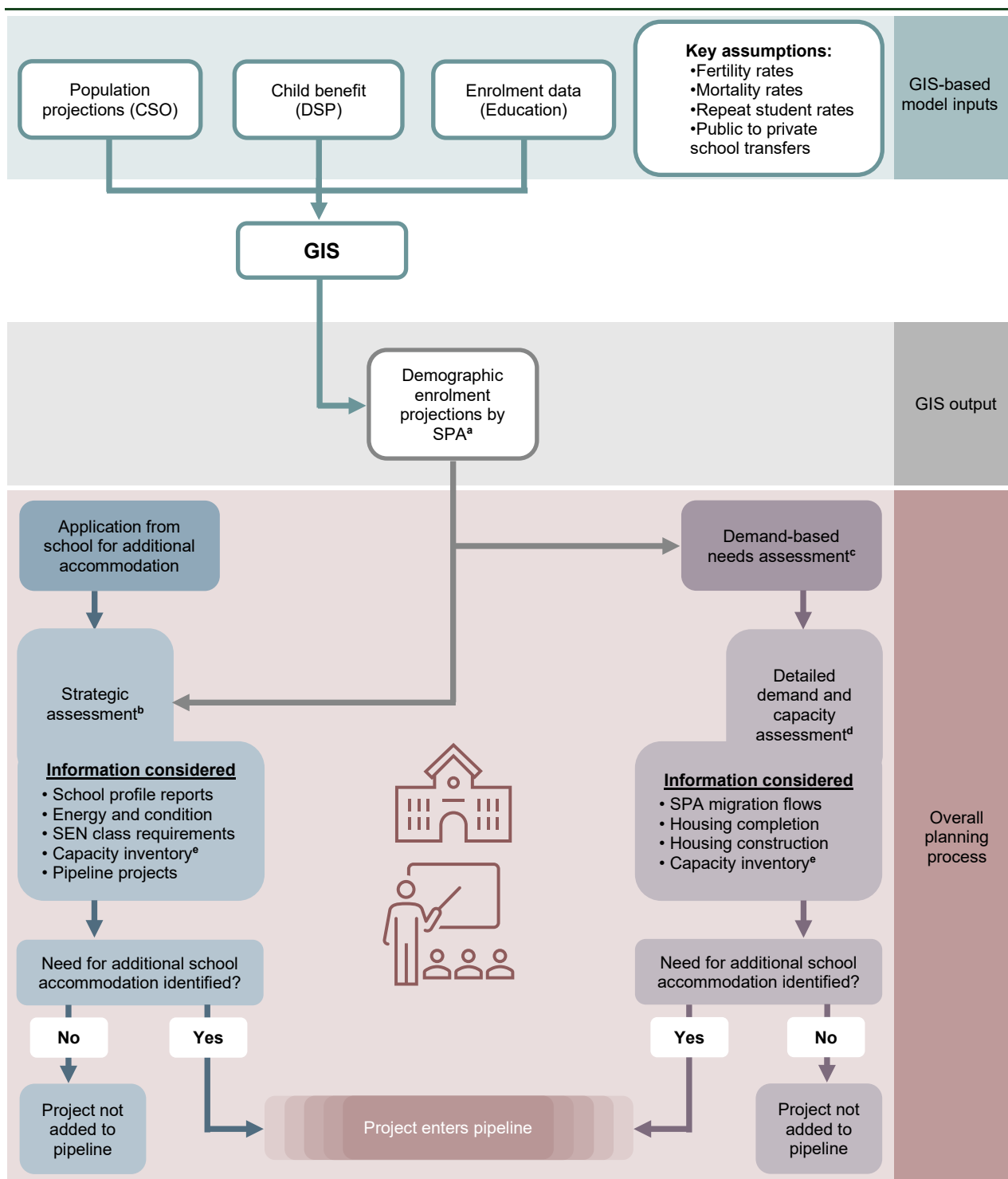
Notes: a The GIS-based model produces demographic demand projections only. These projections are then supplemented with local granular analysis to produce localised school needs' assessments.

b ECAD data is available [here](#). It includes the Eircode, postal address, geo-coordinates and alias address data.

c While the local analysis does not use ECAD data directly, the Department stated that it uses geographically matched records at a granular level.

d The Department also uses data from the Dublin Housing Supply Taskforce for housing completions in Dublin.

Figure 16.2 Overview of the planning process for emerging school demand



Source: Department of Education and Youth. Analysis by the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

- Notes:
- The GIS-based model projections assume zero net migration i.e. no population movement between SPAs. Potential impacts of local population movements due to new residential developments are considered separately during the planning process.
 - The Department undertakes a strategic assessment following receipt of an application from a school for additional accommodation. This assessment considers the current demand (mainstream and special education needs (SEN)), available capacity and school condition.
 - The Department undertakes a demand-based needs assessment on the GIS-based demographic enrolment projections to identify areas of potential high growth which require further analysis.
 - The Department undertakes a detailed demand and capacity assessment for high-growth areas as indicated by the GIS-based model projections. This assessment considers the impacts of migration and housing, demand projections and capacity considerations.
 - This covers the capacity of existing schools.

Assessing the requirement for additional school accommodation

- 16.11** The requirement for additional school accommodation may be identified either from the demographic analysis undertaken by the Department or arising from applications submitted by schools.
- 16.12** Housing construction data is a key input into the Department's local demographic demand analysis. The Department obtains housing construction information from local authorities. The examination team found that no formal data-sharing arrangements are in place between the Department and local authorities for the provision of standardised housing-related information.¹¹ The examination team's review of housing reports for two local authorities (one report for each authority) found that the reports varied significantly in format, content and level of detail.

Transparency of departmental analysis

- 16.13** The Department prepares more granular (SPA-level, town-level and school-level) analyses as part of its strategic and detailed demand and capacity assessments to inform its planning for emerging school demand. The examination team reviewed a sample of six of these analyses.¹² While the analyses contained detailed demographic assessments and projections, the basis for key inputs was not consistently documented.
- 16.14** The examination team found that in some instances
- the source of the demographic projections was not clearly identified
 - the source of specific figures and assumptions was not referenced or explained
 - housing occupancy rates, participation rates and migration adjustments were not explained¹³
 - the basis for housing-related assumptions and targets was not documented, and
 - the phasing of projected housing impacts was not explained.

- 16.15** The examination team also identified variations in the assumptions applied in housing occupancy analysis. In some instances, assumptions appeared to be based on local housing occupancy data, while national housing occupancy averages were applied in other instances.¹⁴ The rationale for selecting particular assumptions was not consistently documented.

- 16.16** Consequently, it was not possible to determine whether the granular-level demographic projections had been prepared on a consistent basis or how key figures had been derived.

Documentation/recording of processes

- 16.17** The Department was unable to provide documented procedures and process documents underpinning the operation of the GIS-based model or the analytical methodologies used to inform school planning decisions to meet emerging demand. The examination team found that key aspects of these processes primarily rely on the knowledge and experience of a small number of staff.

¹¹ Formal data-sharing arrangements are in place for the provision of DSP (child benefit) data. CSO data used is publicly available.

¹² The examination team reviewed one SPA-level analysis, two town-level analyses and three school-level analyses.

¹³ Participation rates refer to the percentage of the eligible child population in a specific area that attend school.

¹⁴ The CSO national housing occupancy average, based on the [2022 census](#), is 2.74 persons per private household.

16.18 The Department was also unable to provide documented procedures demonstrating or recording how projects are prioritised within the school building programme.

16.19 The Department informed the examination team that school project assessments are based on qualitative assessment rather than scoring or weighting-based assessments. It stated that many factors may be considered when assessing projects. These include demographic need, accommodation requirements, existing school condition, project readiness, procurement constraints and budget availability. Department officials also stated that decisions are made on a case-by-case basis.

Pipeline of school building projects

16.20 As at end 2025, the Department had identified a total 'pipeline' of 1,209 school building projects. This included the extension and/or refurbishment of existing schools (1,042) and new school builds (167).^{15,16}

16.21 The Department's pipeline of school projects is maintained on the GIS and downloaded daily to an Excel-based spreadsheet, primarily for backup, analysis and audit trail purposes.¹⁷ Information maintained on each project includes: the current project stage, the year the project was approved for inclusion in the pipeline and brief information on the type of project.

16.22 Pipeline projects are listed, by default, in order of entry on the pipeline — they are not listed in priority order or by their current stage. At end May 2026, just one-fifth of the 1,209 projects were at the construction or final account stage (see Figure 16.3). The Department stated that this reflects the multiannual nature for the rollout of a large capital programme.

Figure 16.3 Status of pipeline projects, by stage, at end May 2026^a

Current stage	Number of school projects in pipeline		
	Primary	Post-primary	Total
Project brief ^b	15	9	24
Stage 1: preliminary design	235	128	363
Stage 2a: detailed design	99	86	185
Stage 2b: planning	218	121	339
Stage 3: tender	17	30	47
Stage 4: construction	150	50	200
Stage 5: final account	42	9	51
All stages	776	433	1,209

Source: Department of Education and Youth. Analysis by the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Notes: a This reflects the status, at end May 2026, of the 1,209 projects in the pipeline at end 2025. The status of some projects has changed since end 2025.
b This involves the preparation of a written brief (agreed with the school) setting out the Department's requirements for the project and the scope of works to be undertaken.

15 The refurbishment of existing schools can include the change of existing facilities to SEN classes or purpose-built rooms for STEM (i.e. science technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects.

16 See Annex 16B for summary of pipeline projects per county, by project type. The pipeline includes all approved projects, including those under construction.

17 Pipeline projects can be filtered and reordered once downloaded to Excel.

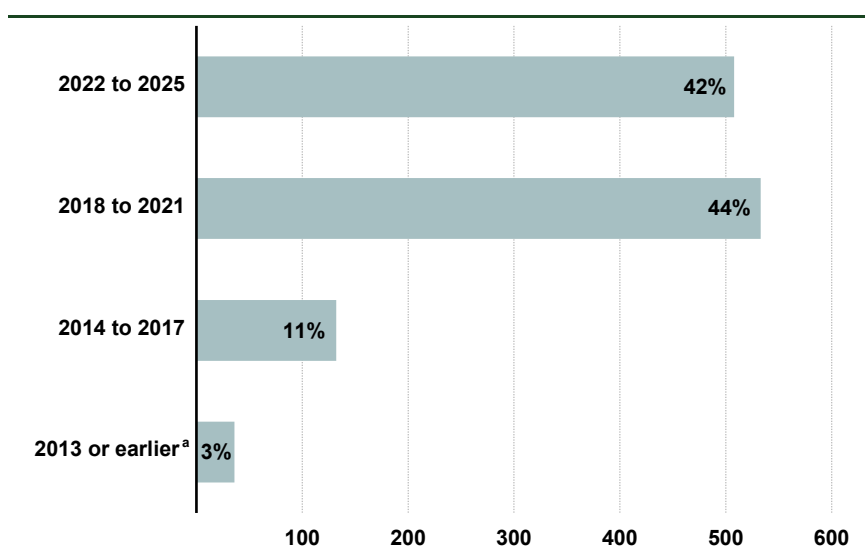
16.23 The Department has broadly split projects in the overall pipeline of projects into two categories

- **large scale projects** with expected expenditure > €1 million for the construction of new schools or the extension and/or refurbishment of existing schools
- **additional school accommodation** (ASA) projects, where an absolute need has been demonstrated, the need is immediate, and either the rental of temporary accommodation, the purchase of modular accommodation or construction of accommodation is the appropriate solution.

Aged analysis of project pipeline

16.24 Some 42% of the projects in the Department's project pipeline at end 2025 have been added since 2022, while 44% of projects were added between 2018 and 2021. The remaining 14% of projects were added in 2017 or before, with the earliest pipeline project dating back to 2006 (see Figure 16.4).

Figure 16.4 Aged analysis of project pipeline, as at end 2025



Source: Department of Education and Youth. Analysis by the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Note: a The oldest project in the pipeline dates back to 2006.

16.25 The Department stated that projects are formally reviewed when they move between stages and that PBU delivery teams monitor them on an ongoing basis. However, it noted that due to the number of projects in the pipeline, it is not currently feasible to undertake a formal exercise across every project.

Prioritisation of school building projects

16.26 In January 2026, the Department announced its first tranche of 105 school building projects under the NDP 2026 to 2030 rollout. These projects are intended to deliver almost 28,000 new and modernised school places in 22 counties, across 86 SPAs (see Figure 16.5). It is expected that these projects will progress to tender and/or construction over the period 2026 to 2027.

Figure 16.5 Breakdown of school places for the 105 projects prioritised for progression in 2026 and 2027

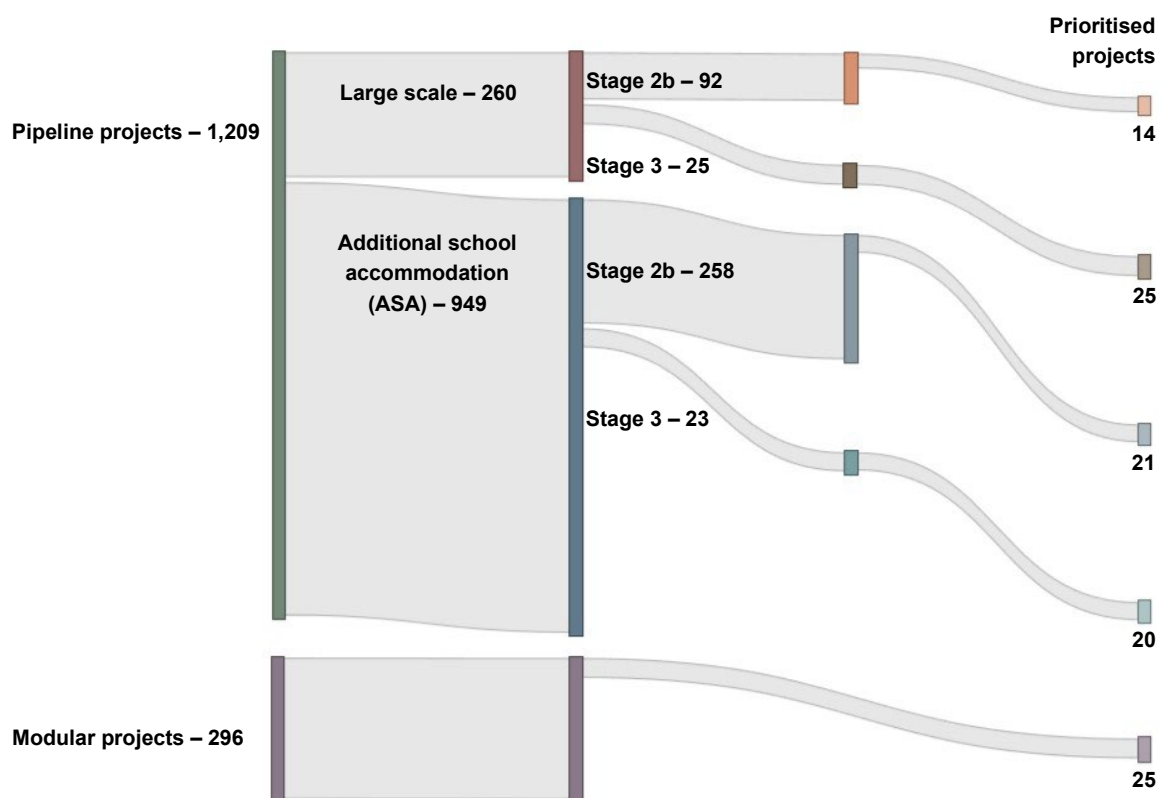
School place by type	Number of school places	Percentage of school places
New	9,973	36%
Modernised	15,317	55%
Special education needs (SEN) ^a	2,638	9%
Total	27,928	100%

Source: Department of Education and Youth. Analysis by the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Note: a The Department has confirmed that these are also new school places.

- 16.27** The Department stated that the 2026 tranche of prioritised projects included almost all pipeline projects at the tender stage (stage 3) and some projects at the planning stage (stage 2b). It noted that projects at the planning stage were subject to further prioritisation, with a particular focus on the 132 projects which already had planning permission. Of those projects with planning permission, 35 (27%) were included in the 2026 tranche of prioritised projects. This represented just 10% of the 350 stage 2b projects in the pipeline at end 2025.
- 16.28** In total, 39 large-scale projects and 41 ASA projects are included in the 2026 tranche of prioritised projects (see Figure 16.6).
- 16.29** Separately, from a discrete listing of 296 planned 'modular' projects, the Department selected 25 projects, for prioritisation, which the Department has approved for the delivery of urgently needed accommodation, in particular for SEN for the 2026/2027 school year.¹⁸ These projects are not included in the Department's overall pipeline of projects.
- 16.30** The Department stated that the prioritisation of projects considered a range of factors including school accommodation requirements, school conditions, SEN requirements, project readiness, procurement considerations and available budgets. It noted that these factors were considered through workshops, discussions and prioritisation meetings involving PBU staff. The Department also stated that detailed business cases were prepared for the 39 large-scale projects and for the ASAs with a projected cost of over €5 million each.

¹⁸ At the time of selection, around 40% of the planned modular projects were near completion or at the final account stage. Modular projects are largely constructed offsite.

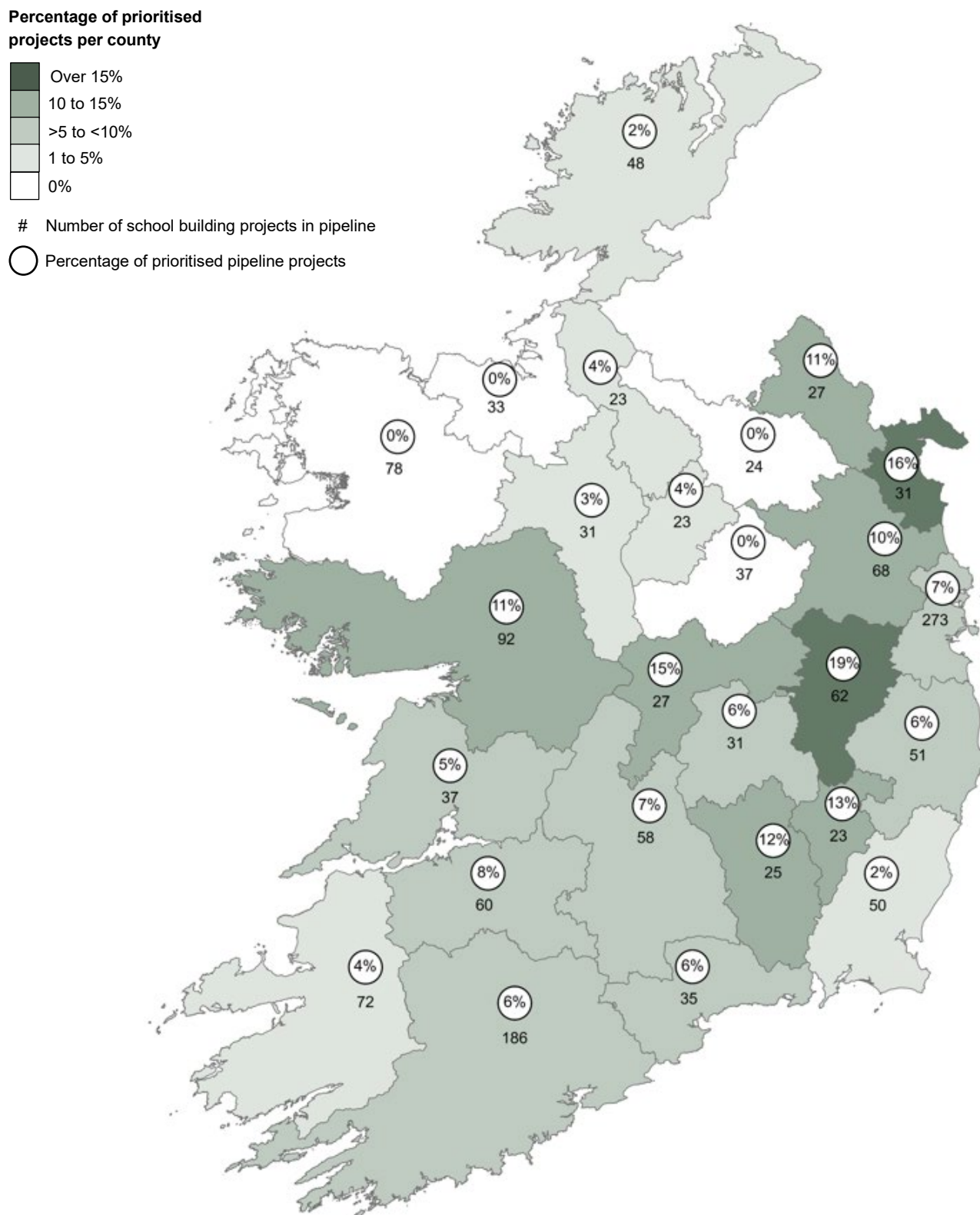
Figure 16.6 Pipeline of projects/modular projects at end 2025 to 105 project prioritisation tranche^a

Source: Department of Education and Youth. Analysis by the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Note: a The 2026 tranche of prioritised projects was published in January 2026.

- 16.31** None of the planned school building projects in four counties (Cavan, Mayo, Sligo and Westmeath) have been prioritised for progression in the 2026 tranche. The combined pipeline and modular planned projects for these counties is 172 (or 11%).
- 16.32** For the remaining counties, the percentage of projects that have been prioritised varies (see Figure 16.7). Louth and Kildare have the highest percentages of projects prioritised for progression, which may reflect a response to rapid growth in demand for school places related to broader population growth.

Figure 16.7 Distribution of planned school building projects and percentage prioritised, by county^{a,b}



Source: Department of Education and Youth. Analysis by the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Notes: a The information reflects the distribution of the total projects (1,209 pipeline and 296 modular) at end 2025 and the 105 projects (by percentage) prioritised for progression under tranche 1 of the NDP 2026 to 2030 rollout published by the Department in January 2026.

b The population of projects includes projects at all stages, including those at the construction, near completion and final account stages.

Transparency of priority decisions

- 16.33** The Department provided the examination team with two summary documents setting out the rationale for 80 of the 105 projects included in the January 2026 tranche of school building projects. One document summarised the rationale for the 39 large-scale projects, while the other document summarised the rationale for the 41 ASA projects.¹⁹
- 16.34** These documents set out the need for the individual projects and generally included, where relevant, information on the following
- addressing urgent need — to meet current mainstream and SEN demand
 - replacement of inadequate facilities — buildings in poor condition or temporary accommodation
 - future-proofing capacity — capacity to be added/replaced by project
 - enhanced education provision — new specialist classrooms and modernisation of facilities
 - responding to growth — future housing targets.
- 16.35** In effect, the rationale presented in the documents makes the case for the individual projects that are selected for progression. The examination team found that the summary documents did not demonstrate how projects were comparatively assessed or selected from the overall pipeline of projects. Similarly, the examination team's review of prioritisation meeting minutes and related documentation found that they did not clearly demonstrate how competing priorities were assessed or balanced when selecting projects for progression.²⁰
- 16.36** The Department explained that
- special school and SEN class projects are prioritised over other school building projects
 - projects for schools operating in interim accommodation are also prioritised
 - remaining projects are considered on a case-by-case basis, taking account of factors such as demographic demand, school condition and available funding.
- 16.37** At the time of the examination, the Department had not formally documented the criteria to be applied in assessing and determining projects to be prioritised. Consequently, it was not possible for the examination team to independently verify the basis by which projects were selected from the overall project pipeline for progression.
- 16.38** The Department stated that the recently established Capacity and Pipeline Management Group is considering how comparative assessments could be more formally documented.²¹

19 The rationale supporting the 25 modular projects was not provided to the examination team.

20 The examination team reviewed the minutes for nine meetings covering the period 7 August 2025 to 12 February 2026.

21 The Capacity and Pipeline Management Group was established in March 2026.

School planning area (SPA) level assessments of demand

16.39 The examination team reviewed a sample of six SPAs (three urban and three rural areas) to assess how the Department's demographic enrolment projections inform planning for emerging school demand decisions (see Figure 16.8).²²

16.40 At end 2025, a total of 19 projects were included in the project pipeline for the sampled SPAs. Of these

- seven are already under construction (stage 4) or at final account stage (stage 5)
- two are at the tender stage (stage 3) and have been included in the 2026 tranche of prioritised projects
- three are at the planning stage (stage 2b), albeit none of these have been included in the 2026 tranche of prioritised projects
- four are at the detailed design stage (stage 2a), two of which have been in the pipeline since 2015
- three are at the project brief stage (stage 1), one of which has been in the pipeline since 2018.

16.41 The examination team reviewed the analysis prepared by the Department's PBU for each of the sampled SPAs (see Figure 16.9).

²² The examination team reviewed projects from the overall pipeline for the sampled SPAs. This review did not include modular projects.

Figure 16.8 Sample SPAs examined and associated pipeline school project information

SPA name	Sample area	Prioritised Y, N, or n/a	Education level	Number of pipeline projects	Project type	Year entered pipeline	Current stage ^{a,b}
Carpenterstown	Urban	N	Primary	1	Extension and/or refurbishment	2018	1
		n/a	Post- primary	2 ^c	Extension and/or refurbishment	2023	4
		N			Extension	2023	1
Rathkeale	Rural	N	Primary	2	Extension	2019	2b
		N			Extension	2022	2b
		N	Post- primary	—	—	—	—
Newcastle Rathcoole	Urban	Y ^a	Primary	4 ^c	New school building ^{c,d}	2015	3
		n/a			Extension and/or refurbishment ^c	2025	5
		n/a			New school building	2018	4
		N			New school building	2018	2b
		n/a	Post- primary	2	New school building	2018	4
		n/a			New school building	2013	4
Killenale	Rural	N	Primary	2 ^c	Extension and/or refurbishment	2024	2a
		n/a			Extension and/or refurbishment	2025	5
		Y ^d	Post- primary	1	Extension ^d	2019	3
Celbridge	Urban	n/a	Primary	2	Extension and/or refurbishment	2024	5
		N			New school building	2015	2a
		N	Post- primary	2	Extension	2024	1
		N			New school building	2015	2a
Bawnboy	Rural	N	Primary	1	Extension	2020	2a
		N	Post- primary	—	—	—	—

Source: Department of Education and Youth. Analysis by the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Notes: a This reflects the stage of each project as at May 2026.

b Projects at stages 4 and 5 are already under construction or at final account stage.

c Two projects relate to one school.

d One project in this SPA was included in the tranche of prioritised projects announced in January 2026.

Figure 16.9 Sample summary table of SPAs reviewed by the examination team

SPA	Education level	GIS — zero migration projection peak ^a		Adjusted demand projection peak ^b		Projected planned capacity ^c		Current enrolment ^d Current capacity ^e		Local factors considered in analysis		
		No. of pupils	Year	No. of pupils	Year	No. of pupils	By year			SPA migration flow	Housing construction	Housing completion
Carpenterstown	Primary	2,069	2024	2,277	2026	2,135	2029	2,187	2,111	✓	✓	✓
	Post-primary	1,581	2029	1,838	2031	2,500	2030	2,345	2,200	●	✓	✓
Rathkeale	Primary	992	2024	996	2025	951	2029	844	920	●	◆	✓
	Post-primary	703	2030	763	2030	550	2030	537	550	▲	✓	✓
Newcastle Rathcoole	Primary	2,941	2024	3,568	2028	3,604	2029	3,273	3,189	✓	✓	▲
	Post-primary	2,241	2029	2,739	2032	2,300	2028	1,756	1,756	●	✓	▲
Killenaule	Primary	321	2027	330	2027	461	2030	307	461	●	◆	✓
	Post-primary	285	2024	320	2030	350	2030	360	388	▲	◆	✓
Celbridge	Primary	3,121	2024	3,091	2025	3,137	2029	3,000	2,929	●	✓	✓
	Post-primary	2,449	2024	2,612	2032	2,730	2030	2,438	2,444	●	✓	✓
Bawnboy	Primary	426	2025	431	2025	478	2030	424	455	✓	◆	▲
	Post-primary	321	2029	342	2032	N/A	N/A	310	400	✓	◆	▲
✓ Consistent approach observed ▲ Variation in approach observed ◆ Source data not identified ● Not applied												

Source: Department of Education and Youth. Analysis by the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

- Notes:
- a The GIS-produced peak enrolment numbers are based on enrolments in the 2024/2025 academic year and do not take account of local factors in each SPA.
 - b The Department's projections take account of local factors i.e. inward/outward flows of pupils between SPAs, housing projections, etc.
 - c The Department's projected planned capacity is based on the projected number of mainstream and SEN classrooms multiplied by the relevant pupil-teacher ratio.
 - d Reflects the Department's published enrolment numbers for the 2025/2026 academic year.
 - e The Department's current capacity is based on the actual number of mainstream and SEN classrooms multiplied by the relevant pupil-teacher ratio.

- 16.42** The sampled areas have differing levels of projected demographic enrolment growth. The GIS-produced demographic enrolment projections indicate growth at post-primary level for four of the sampled SPAs (Carpenterstown, Rathkeale, Newcastle Rathcoole and Bawnboy), with no projected growth at primary level. For the remaining two SPAs (Killenaule and Celbridge), the GIS-produced demographic projections indicate minimal or no growth.
- 16.43** However, when local adjustments are factored in, the adjusted projections indicate growth at post-primary level for all six SPAs and also indicate growth at primary level for two of the SPAs (Carpenterstown and Newcastle Rathcoole).²³
- 16.44** The examination team found that the underlying GIS demographic projections were produced using a consistent methodology. However, it noted some variation in the application of local adjustments for SPA migration flow and housing completion information. In particular, the examination team noted that SPA migration flow was not applied on a consistent basis.
- In one SPA (Celbridge) migration flow was not applied at all.
 - In four of the SPAs (Carpenterstown, Rathkeale, Newcastle Rathcoole and Killenaule), migration flow was only applied for either the primary or the post-primary level analysis. In two of these instances (Rathkeale and Killenaule), a variation in approach was noted, whereby there was no evidence supporting the flows used, and growth was applied to a specific year only. In other analyses reviewed, the migration flows were supported by the inflows to and outflows from the SPA, and growth was applied annually for the years covered by the projections.
- 16.45** The examination team found that different calculation methods were used in two SPAs (Newcastle Rathcoole and Bawnboy) for average annual housing completions. However, no documented rationale for the variation was available, and the supporting analysis did not explain the differing approach.
- 16.46** Separately, the source of the housing construction figures was not included in the local analysis for two SPAs (Killenaule and Bawnboy) and was only partially included in another SPA (Rathkeale).
- 16.47** The application of local adjustments results in amended enrolment demand projections. Consequently, inconsistencies in their application may ultimately impact the Department's decision to prioritise (or not) projects in the sampled areas.
- 16.48** The Department stated that migration flow is considered for every analysis, but that for some SPAs where the flow is low, for example <3%, it is discounted as it does not impact the overall school needs' assessments. It also stated that where migration flow is relevant, it is applied across all years under consideration. Regarding the housing construction activity, the Department stated that it obtains this data from many sources and that all calculations are informed and data-based.

23 The adjusted projections also indicate a further marginal growth at primary level in Killenaule.

- 16.49** The examination team also noted that current enrolments in one SPA (Carpenterstown) at both primary and post-primary level exceeded the Department's calculated current capacity, while in another two SPAs (Newcastle Rathcoole and Celbridge), primary-level enrolments exceeded current capacity. This may indicate an element of overcrowding.
- 16.50** The Department stated that the post-primary school population in the Carpenterstown area is significantly less than the post-primary school capacity and that a large number of pupils travel into the area to attend school. It stated that this is being addressed by increasing the school capacity in the areas where the pupils live. It also stated that primary school capacity is based on an average class size of 23 (or 19 for DEIS UB1).^{24,25}
- 16.51** The Department further stated that the management of a school's enrolment and admission arrangements, including the determination of the number of students that can be accommodated, is a matter for each school's governing body having regard to the accommodation available, health and safety requirements, staffing resources and the school's admissions policy.

Newcastle Rathcoole SPA — primary school new school building

- 16.52** The prioritised project in the Newcastle Rathcoole SPA has been in the pipeline since 2015. The Department informed the examination team that analysis carried out in 2017 was used to inform the decision to progress this project. The Department has calculated the SPA's current capacity of 3,189 at primary level to be lower than its current primary enrolment numbers of 3,273, potentially indicating some overcrowding.
- 16.53** The projected primary school planned capacity of 3,604 by 2029 includes three school building projects — the prioritised project, another project (new school building) already under construction (stage 4) and a further new primary school project. The latter project, although at the planning stage (stage 2b), was not included in the Department's 2026 tranche of prioritised projects.
- 16.54** The Department noted that the project was considered during the prioritisation discussions (as it was a stage 2b project). However, no detailed rationale setting out why it was not prioritised was provided to the examination team. The Department has stated that the project received planning permission in May 2025 and will be considered for future NDP tranches.

Killenaule SPA — post-primary school extension

- 16.55** The extension of a post-primary school in Killenaule is included in the Department's 2026 tranche of prioritised projects. The project is at the tender stage (stage 3). The examination team found there was no recorded source for the housing figures used in the Department's local demographic analysis for this school. A variation in the application of the SPA migration flow was also noted. The local analysis resulted in an adjusted projected peak demand of 320 pupil enrolments by 2030 compared with a projected peak demand of 285 in 2024 using the GIS projections.

²⁴ [Circular 0011/2025](#) *Staffing arrangements in Primary Schools for the 2025/2026 school year* sets out that the average pupil-teacher ratio in mainstream schools is 23:1.

²⁵ In *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools* (DEIS) Urban Band 1 (UB1), the average pupil-teacher ratio reduces to 17:1, 19:1 and 21:1 for junior, vertical and senior schools respectively. Vertical schools cover junior infants to sixth class.

- 16.56** The Department's calculated current capacity for this school is 388 with current enrolment numbers of 360 based on the Department's published enrolment returns for the 2025/2026 academic year. However, the Department has projected the planned capacity for this school at 350 by 2030 following completion of the extension project. This represents a reduction of 10% on the existing school's capacity.
- 16.57** The Department stated that the existing capacity of 388 reflects historic enrolment and that the current project will replace old prefabricated accommodation and provide for SEN classes. It stated that the revised capacity will be sufficient to meet local demand. It also stated that not all school projects involve the provision of additional capacity, and that some projects involve refurbishment of existing or replacement of substandard accommodation.

Conclusions and recommendations

- 16.58** In December 2025, the Department of Education and Youth (the Department) published its latest national projections for school enrolment numbers. By 2030/2031, primary school enrolments are projected to drop by around 8% from a peak in 2018/2019; and post-primary enrolments are projected to drop around 5% from an expected peak for 2025/2026. It is also projected that primary school enrolments will continue to drop until 2040/2041 and that post-primary enrolments will continue to drop until at least 2044/2045. However, the Department's projections note that local enrolments may not align with national trends, particularly in areas of residential development and inward migration.
- 16.59** The Department uses a Geographical Information System-based demographic projection (GIS-based) model for forecasting demographic enrolment projections. To analyse demand and plan for school provision at a local level, the Department has divided the country into 314 school planning areas (SPAs). The GIS-based model produces annual demographic projections for both primary and post-primary school demand within each SPA.
- 16.60** The GIS demographic projections are informed by a number of data sources which include population projection data, census data, child benefit data and Department-own data. This data is combined with certain assumptions which encompass projected fertility and mortality rates, repeat student rates and transfers between public and private schools.
- 16.61** The demographic projections are a key component in the Department's overall planning for emerging school demand. However, decisions regarding school project identification, inclusion in the Department's capital infrastructure pipeline and prioritisation are informed by a broader planning process. This process considers other factors, including information obtained directly from schools, the condition of existing accommodation and local developments.
- 16.62** Formal data-sharing agreements are not in place for all data sources used by the Department in its school planning process. In particular, information received from local authorities on housing developments is not provided on a formalised basis. The examination team's review of a sample of housing reports found that the information varied significantly. The absence of formal arrangements limits assurance over the completeness, consistency and timeliness of housing information used by the Department in its local demand analysis.

Recommendation 16.1

The Department should strengthen the governance arrangements for the data used in its school planning and demographic analysis process. This should include establishing formal arrangements, where appropriate, with key external data providers and documenting the minimum information requirements to support planning decisions.

Accounting Officer's response

Agreed.

The Department would welcome a formal arrangement whereby all local authorities would routinely provide relevant data on new residential housing development in a standardised and consistent format. The Department will continue its work on strengthening current arrangements through its engagement with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Department of Housing) and the local authorities. The Department of Housing has recently developed a Housing Information Hub (HIH) — a central repository for housing activity data. Scope to use the HIH as a mechanism to support data-sharing arrangements will be examined for both local authorities and other key stakeholders such as the Land Development Agency (LDA), etc.

The Department will also document the minimum information requirements for key datasets used in the school planning process, including housing development data. It will also review existing governance arrangements to ensure that data quality, validation processes and update frequencies are appropriately defined and monitored.

The Department's representation on the National Housing Activation Delivery Group, together with ongoing engagement with the Housing Activation Team, local authorities, the LDA and other key stakeholders, will support the implementation of these measures.

Timeline for implementation

December 2027

Documentation of processes

- 16.63** Notwithstanding the key role played by the Department's GIS-based model in supporting its assessment of future demand for school places, documentation underpinning the operation of the model is lacking. The Department was unable to provide documented procedures and process documents for the GIS-based model or the analytical methodologies used to inform school planning decisions.
- 16.64** Key aspects of the processes primarily rely on the knowledge and experience of a small cohort of staff. This heightens the risk of the loss of corporate knowledge where staff leave the Department.

Recommendation 16.2

The Department should document the operation of the GIS-based model and associated analytical processes. This should include the methodologies involved; key data sources and assumptions; roles and responsibilities; data quality, validation, review and assurance arrangements; and the arrangements to support knowledge transfer and business continuity.

Accounting Officer's response

Agreed.

Work on this has already commenced. The school planning model which is supported by the Department's GIS has recently been significantly enhanced and it is timely to reflect this in relevant documentation and to formalise the associated procedures and processes for the benefit of all staff.

Timeline for implementation

June 2027

Transparency of departmental analysis

- 16.65** The Department undertakes detailed analysis to inform decisions on planning for future school demand at a local level. However, the examination team's review of a sample of analyses for six SPAs found that the basis for key inputs was not consistently documented within the analyses.
- 16.66** Data sources underpinning projections were not clearly referenced in all instances and assumptions regarding housing developments, housing occupancy and school participation rates were not always evidenced or explained.
- 16.67** An inconsistent approach in the application of assumptions regarding housing occupancy data was also identified. In some instances, assumptions were based on local housing occupancy rates, while in others, national housing occupancy average rates were used. In the absence of documented methodologies, it was not clear to the examination team why different approaches might be adopted in the application of assumptions. Consequently, it was not possible to determine how different approaches might impact the decision-making process.

Recommendation 16.3

The Department should establish standard frameworks for key aspects of demographic analysis and capacity assessments to ensure consistent decision-making and project prioritisation. Where departures from these methodologies occur, the rationale should be clearly documented.

Accounting Officer's response

Agreed.

Much of the focus in recent years has been on developing the GIS and the demographic model, and on enhancing the central inventory of data on school capacity. The recently developed 'school profile' reports provide data in a standardised format and are being rolled out to relevant teams within the Department's planning and building unit (PBU) in tandem with updated decision-making frameworks. This work is being overseen by the PBU's Capacity and Pipeline Management Group as part of its ongoing programme to enhance school planning processes and will deliver fully on this recommendation.

Timeline for implementation

March 2027

Pipeline of school building projects

- 16.68** By end 2025, the Department had identified a total pipeline of 1,209 school building projects. Separately, a further 296 projects had been selected for delivery using modular construction methods. The process underpinning the selection of the latter projects for this specific delivery model is less clear.
- 16.69** Around 86% of the pipeline projects are for the extension and refurbishment of existing schools, while the balance are for new builds (14%). Pipeline projects are listed, by default, in order of entry on the pipeline, rather than priority order or their current stage. At the time of the examination fieldwork, just one-fifth of pipeline projects were in construction or at final account stage.
- 16.70** Some 42% of projects were added to the pipeline over the period 2022 to 2025, while a further 44% were added between 2018 and 2021. The oldest project in the pipeline dates back to 2006. The Department has indicated that projects are formally reviewed when they move stage and are monitored on an ongoing basis. However, it also noted that due to the number of projects in the pipeline, it is not feasible to undertake a formal review across every project. In the absence of regular formal reviews of the total project pipeline, there is a risk that some projects may no longer be required or may have been superseded by subsequent projects.

Recommendation 16.4

The Department should undertake a periodic formal review of projects in the pipeline to confirm the ongoing need for each project, with a particular focus on projects that have been in the pipeline for a significant period and/or have not progressed between stages within a reasonable timeframe. This review should be signed off at an appropriate level. Where it is considered that a project is no longer required, the project should be removed from the pipeline and the rationale for its removal documented for audit trail purposes.

Accounting Officer's response

Agreed.

This work forms part of the remit of the PBU's Capacity and Pipeline Management Group, which is supporting a more systematic approach to project prioritisation, pipeline management and oversight of project progression. These arrangements will complement the existing stage gate review process, which is aligned with the Capital Works Management Framework and Infrastructure Guidelines and provides for ongoing assessment of project need, scope, priority and readiness to proceed.

The outcomes of these reviews will be documented and subject to appropriate management oversight and sign off. Where a review identifies that the circumstances, scope, priority or delivery approach for a project have changed, this will be considered through the Department's established project governance and approval processes, and the rationale for any decisions taken will be appropriately recorded.

In practice, it is anticipated that projects are more likely to be re-scoped, re-prioritised or have their delivery arrangements adjusted to reflect evolving requirements and available resources, rather than being discontinued altogether.

Timeline for implementation

June 2027

Prioritisation of school building projects

- 16.71** In January 2026, the Department announced a tranche of 105 prioritised school building projects — 80 pipeline and 25 modular projects — intended to deliver almost 28,000 new and modernised school places in 22 counties, across 86 SPAs. The Department informed the examination team that the priority tranche included almost all of the pipeline projects already at the tender stage and some projects at the planning stage. It expects that the 105 projects will progress to tender and/or construction during 2026 and 2027.
- 16.72** The Department provided summary documentation setting out the rationale for three-quarters (80) of the prioritised projects. In general, the documentation set out whether the project was required due to one or more of the following — addressing an urgent need, replacement of inadequate facilities, future-proofing capacity, enhanced education provision and responding to growth. However, the documentation did not demonstrate how projects were comparatively assessed or selected from the overall project pipeline.
- 16.73** Also, the examination team's review of prioritisation meeting minutes and related documentation found that they did not clearly demonstrate how, or why, the selected projects were prioritised relative to other competing projects. Consequently, it was not possible to determine why particular projects are progressed ahead of others with similar characteristics.
- 16.74** The Department explained that many factors influence the prioritisation of projects. Key among these is the prioritisation of projects for special schools and special education needs, and projects operating in interim accommodation. Other projects are considered on a case-by-case basis and have regard to demographic demand, school condition and available funding.

Recommendation 16.5

The Department should retain evidence of the comparative assessments undertaken when prioritising projects. This should clearly document the basis by which projects are selected to progress ahead of similar competing projects.

Accounting Officer's response

Agreed.

The approach to documenting project prioritisation will be further developed and formalised for the next tranche of projects progressing under the NDP implementation plan. This work commenced earlier this year and is being managed and overseen by the PBU's Capacity and Pipeline Management Group.

The Department set out its overall approach for NDP rollout in its NDP sectoral investment plan 2026 to 2030 published in January 2026. This included the identification of priorities, for example, special schools, new builds for schools with no permanent accommodation, existing schools with significant demographic requirements or condition issues, etc. To strengthen communications on the NDP rollout, the Department published, for the first time, the initial tranche of prioritised projects for rollout over the course of 2026 and 2027.

Preparatory work and stakeholder engagement is currently underway for the next tranche of the NDP rollout. This next tranche will build on the foundation work done for the initial tranche and will also include enhanced documentation of the comparative assessments, assumptions and decision-making considerations used to prioritise projects.

Timeline for implementation

March 2027

Annex 16A Summary of key data sources used in GIS-based model and planning analysis

Data	Source	Used in	Description	Notes
Census of population	Central Statistics Office	GIS-based model	Provides the population baseline for demographic projections	Updated following each census
DSP child benefit	Department of Social Protection	GIS-based model/planning (granular analysis)	Used to estimate future school demand	Child benefit records are matched to the Eircode address database (ECAD) using 'fuzzy' matching techniques due to data not containing Personal Public Services Numbers (PPSNs) ^a
Eircode address database (ECAD)	Eircode	GIS-based model/planning (granular analysis)	Geographic address database used during matching of child benefit data	Supports allocation of records to school planning areas (SPAs)
Primary online database (POD)	Department of Education and Youth	GIS-based model/planning (granular analysis)	Primary school enrolment database	Administrative dataset maintained by the Department
Post-primary online database (PPOD)	Department of Education and Youth	GIS-based model/planning (granular analysis)	Post-primary school enrolment database	Administrative dataset maintained by the Department
Capacity inventory	Department of Education and Youth	Planning (granular analysis)	Existing school accommodation	Capacity calculations are undertaken separately from demographic modelling
School profile information	Schools	Planning (granular analysis)	School characteristics including patronage, and self-reported capacity and accommodation profiles	Considered where relevant to planning for school demand decisions
School condition information	Department of Education and Youth	Planning (granular analysis)	Building condition and accommodation requirements	Considered on a project-by-project basis
Housing	Central Statistics Office; Dublin Housing Supply Taskforce; and local authorities	Planning (granular analysis)	Current housing completions and planned developments	CSO data nationally; Dublin Housing Supply Taskforce data for Dublin; future growth informed through engagement with local authorities
Population and planning assumptions	Central Statistics Office; Department of Education and Youth	GIS-based model/planning (granular analysis)	Assumptions used to project future demand	Includes fertility, migration, repeat pupils, private school transfers, mainstream/SEN split and other planning assumptions

Source: Department of Education and Youth. Analysis by the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Note: ^a Fuzzy matching is a technique used to match addresses to records in the absence of other identifiers (such as PPSNs or Eircodes).

Annex 16B Pipeline projects per county, by project type as at end December 2025

	Number of SPAs	Primary		Post-primary		Total pipeline projects per county	Total modular projects per county ^a
		Extension and/or refurbishment	New school building	Extension and/or refurbishment	New school building		
Carlow	5	6	1	11	—	18	5
Cavan	7	8	—	14	—	22	2
Clare	12	8	1	16	5	30	7
Cork	37	52	5	87	11	155	31
Donegal	15	14	2	22	3	41	7
Dublin	42	51	21	102	36	210	63
Galway	21	28	3	33	10	74	18
Kerry	13	19	—	32	3	54	18
Kildare	17	12	6	25	6	49	13
Kilkenny	7	7	2	10	—	19	6
Laois	7	5	2	11	—	18	13
Leitrim	6	5	—	13	1	19	4
Limerick	11	7	3	39	1	50	10
Longford	5	9	—	12	1	22	1
Louth	5	7	—	16	2	25	6
Mayo	18	19	1	40	4	64	14
Meath	9	14	6	35	5	60	8
Monaghan	5	8	—	14	1	23	4
Offaly	7	6	2	15	—	23	4
Roscommon	10	8	—	15	1	24	7
Sligo	9	10	—	14	1	25	8
Tipperary	16	18	1	29	—	48	10
Waterford	6	7	2	17	—	26	9
Westmeath	7	10	1	13	—	24	13

	Number of SPAs	Primary		Post-primary		Total pipeline projects per county	Total modular projects per county ^a
		Extension and/or refurbishment	New school building	Extension and/or refurbishment	New school building		
Wexford	9	16	3	21	2	42	8
Wicklow	8	10	7	22	5	44	7
Total	314	364	69	678	98	1,209	296

Source: Department of Education and Youth. Analysis by the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Note: a This includes both primary and post-primary schools.