



Department of
Education
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PUBLIC CONSULTATION DOCUMENT

Review of Temporary Variation (TV) Policy

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Introduction

1. The Department of Education is seeking views on a significant change in policy direction to reform the operation of the Temporary Variation (TV) policy. These proposals reflect a broader shift towards placing children and families at the centre of decision making, strengthening parental choice, and ensuring the education system is more responsive to demand.
2. A review of the 2026 admissions cycle identified that, in some cases, outcomes did not align with parental expectations. This included situations where capacity existed in a preferred school but could not be utilised. This consultation focuses on how a revised, more responsive approach should operate in practice.

Background

3. The TV policy provides a mechanism through which schools may request permission to admit additional named pupils where they are oversubscribed. Under the current framework, decisions have primarily been based on availability within a school sector rather than preference for a specific school.
4. Recent admissions data indicates that parental preference is often driven by a desire for a particular school rather than by school sector. This has highlighted a potential mismatch between how the system operates and how parents make choices.

Current Policy

5. The current TV policy is set out in the Department's guidance at - [Temporary Variation Circular 2026 03 3.pdf](#). This document provides the existing framework for how requests for additional places are considered, including the criteria and safeguards that apply.

Policy Context

6. The education system is entering a period of sustained demographic change, with declining pupil numbers expected to result in increasing surplus capacity across many areas. In this context, it is important that available capacity is used effectively and aligned more closely with parental demand.
7. The revised approach reflects a shift from a system that primarily manages capacity within sectors to one that responds more directly to parental preference. It also supports wider objectives relating to school improvement, accountability and the long-term sustainability of the schools' estate.
8. By allowing parental choice to be more clearly reflected in enrolment patterns, the system can better identify where provision is strong and where further action may be required.
9. Having regard to its statutory duties in relation to Irish-medium and Integrated education, in implementing any revised Temporary Variation policy, the Department will consider the potential impact of the policy on these sectors, alongside parental preference, area planning considerations and the efficient use of available school capacity.
10. The Department is also committed to ensuring that any revised Temporary Variation policy supports continued access to appropriate provision for children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and does not disadvantage these children in securing a suitable school place. Demand for SEN provision continues to grow, with approximately one in five pupils in the education system identified as having a Special Educational Need. While the proposed reforms seek to respond more directly to parental preference, it is important that these changes do not inadvertently reduce opportunities for children with SEN to access suitable placements. The Department is therefore seeking views on whether additional safeguards may be required to ensure that increased flexibility in the operation of the Temporary Variation policy does not adversely affect access to appropriate SEN provision

Proposed Approach

11. The Department is proposing to introduce a revised approach to TV requests that is more flexible, more responsive to parental preference, and more clearly focused on the needs of individual pupils. The revised approach is based on four key proposals:

Proposal 1 – Presumption of Approval at Primary Level

12. A presumption of approval will apply to TV requests from primary schools for additional places, where a school confirms it has sufficient capacity to safely accommodate the additional pupils and that doing so would not adversely affect its ability to continue to accommodate children with SEN who require placement.
13. This proposal reflects the principle that, where capacity exists and schools are able to accommodate additional pupils, greater weight should be given to parental preference. The current system has, in some cases, prevented children from accessing their preferred primary school despite available capacity, highlighting the need for a more flexible and responsive approach. By enabling more children to attend the school their parents believe best meets their needs, this proposal supports improved outcomes, strengthens confidence in the system, and ensures that provision is more closely aligned with local demand.

Proposal 2 – Presumption of Approval for Non-Selective Post-Primary Schools

14. A presumption of approval will apply to TV requests from non-selective post-primary schools, that is, post-primary schools that do not make use of academic selection within their admissions criteria, for additional places, where a school confirms it has sufficient capacity to safely accommodate the additional pupils and that doing so would not adversely affect its ability to continue to accommodate children with SEN who require placement.
15. This proposal builds on the recognition that parents choose individual schools rather than sectors, and that the education system should respond more directly

to those choices. Where non-selective post-primary schools have the capacity and willingness to admit additional pupils, it is appropriate to facilitate this, ensuring that more children can access their preferred school. This approach supports fairness, improves responsiveness to parental demand, and enables enrolment patterns to better reflect where confidence and demand lie, thereby contributing to school improvement and accountability across the system.

Proposal 3 – Continued Case-by-Case Consideration for Academically Selective Schools

16. Requests from academically selective post-primary schools will be assessed on a case-by-case basis under the existing Temporary Variation criteria, [Temporary Variation Circular 2026 03 3.pdf](#) including whether suitable alternative places are available within the pupil's chosen sector and within reasonable distance of their home address. The Education Authority, and where appropriate the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, will be consulted before a final decision is made.
17. This proposal recognises the distinct nature of academically selective schools and the need to maintain a balanced and considered approach to admissions in these settings. Retaining case-by-case assessment ensures that decisions will take account of school capacity, the availability of alternative provision and wider system impacts. At the same time, it reflects the importance of ensuring that flexibility is applied appropriately, without undermining the overall stability or sustainability of the education system.

Proposal 4 – Increased flexibility to allow children who already hold a school place to transfer to another school, where places are available, in response to parental preference

18. Greater weight will be given to parental preference for individual schools, including allowing children who already hold a school place to transfer more easily to another school where capacity exists, and this reflects parental choice.
19. This proposal is central to the broader reform objective of placing children and families at the heart of decision-making. It seeks to address situations where the current system has limited the ability of children to access their preferred

school, even where capacity exists. By allowing greater flexibility, including for children who already hold a place, the system can respond more effectively to parental choice and better reflect real demand.

20. Taken together, these four proposals represent a clear and deliberate shift in policy approach. Decision-making will move away from prioritising institutional or sectoral considerations and towards a model that makes fuller use of available capacity and responds more directly to individual pupil needs and parental choice.

Managing Implementation Challenges

21. The Department recognises these proposals represent a significant change in the operation of the TV policy and that successful implementation will require careful planning and oversight. The aim is to ensure that greater responsiveness to parental preference is delivered in a way that continues to support high-quality, sustainable educational provision for all children.

22. The Department has identified a number of important issues that will require consideration as the revised approach is implemented. These include:

- ensuring that schools experiencing increased demand can accommodate additional pupils safely and without diminishing their educational experience;
- supporting schools and area planning processes to respond effectively to changing patterns of parental preference, ensuring the long-term sustainability of educational provision;
- maintaining appropriate provision and access for children with SEN.
- ensuring that the admissions framework remains responsive, fair and fit for purpose in the context of changing demographics and increasing surplus capacity.

23. The Department believes these challenges can be successfully managed while delivering a system that better reflects parental preference and makes fuller use of available school capacity. This consultation therefore seeks views not

only on the proposed policy approach, but also on the practical measures that may be required to support its effective implementation.

Purpose of Consultation

24. This consultation seeks views on the proposed policy and how it should be implemented.

Consultation

Thank you for taking the time to participate in the TV policy review survey. Your feedback is incredibly valuable in helping us understand the needs and preferences of those directly involved with schools.

Where a school is oversubscribed with applications, it may apply to the department to admit additional, named children. The TV Policy (circular 2026/03) sets out the basis on which such applications are considered. The forthcoming review will ensure that the policy remains robust, fit for purpose, and continues to serve the best interests of child(ren).

This review of TV Policy will not cover Sixth Form TV Policy or Temporary Flexibility Policy which is a temporary increase in the approved enrolment numbers for statutory pre-school settings. It also does not cover special schools, which do not have approved admissions and enrolment numbers set by the department. As children with a statement of special educational needs are currently supernumerary for the purposes of school admission in mainstream schools, it does not affect their placement. The Department wishes to ensure that any increased flexibility through the Temporary Variation policy supports parental preference while continuing to protect and promote access to appropriate provision for children with SEN. Consultees are therefore invited to suggest practical measures that may help achieve these objectives.

The Department would like to hear your views and feedback on this proposed change.

Completing the Survey

Duration

The survey should take no more than 10 minutes to complete and will remain open for responses until 11 November 2026 at 23.59.

Your responses will be treated in the strictest confidence, and the report of the survey will not identify any individual. Rather, your responses will be added to those of others to make summaries of the responses of people that take part. The survey complies

with the [Data Protection Act 2018](#) including [The UK GDPR | ICO](#). The [Privacy Notice](#) for this survey explains the legislative basis for the survey and your data protection rights.

How to Respond to this Consultation

The preferable method of response is [through the online survey](#). This approach allows for the most efficient analysis of responses and by limiting the use of paper and printing, minimises the environmental impact.

However, we understand that a paper-based response via e-mail or post will be the preference for some. If this is the case, you are encouraged to respond as early as possible as our timeline could be impacted by postage delivery times and the additional analytical processing required.

The primary response method for this consultation is through the online survey on the [Citizen Space Hub](#). You can also access the online survey from the DE consultation webpage.

This document is also available on the DE website at:

[Review of Temporary Variation Policy Consultation](#)

Alternative formats are available. To request the survey in an alternative format, please contact us via the details below.

Email: tvreview@education-ni.gov.uk

Telephone: 02891 279212 and talk to one of the Consultation Team.

Post: Temporary Variation (TV) Policy Review
School Admissions Team
Rathgael House
Balloo Road
Bangor
BT19 7PR

Consultation Survey

About you

Question 1. Please tick the box that best describes the capacity in which you are responding: (Please tick one option only).

Please select only one item.

- ☐ Member of the public
- ☐ Parent/guardian
- ☐ Pupil
- ☐ School leader
- ☐ Teacher
- ☐ Governor
- ☐ Sectoral body (please specify): _____
- ☐ Other (please specify): _____

Question 2. What type of school are you or are your children involved in? Please select all that apply.

- ☐ Pre-School
- ☐ Primary School (including Schools with Pre-School provision)
- ☐ Post-Primary School
- ☐ Special School
- ☐ Not involved with a school

Question 3. To what extent do you agree or disagree that Temporary Variation requests for additional places at primary schools, should normally be approved where a school confirms it has sufficient capacity to safely accommodate additional pupils?

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Agree

☐ Neither agree nor disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly disagree

Question 4. To what extent do you agree or disagree that Temporary Variation requests for additional places at post-primary schools that do not make use of academic selection, should normally be approved where a school confirms it has sufficient capacity to safely accommodate additional pupils?

☐ Strongly agree

☐ Agree

☐ Neither agree nor disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly disagree

Question 5. To what extent do you agree or disagree that post-primary schools that use academic selection in their admissions criteria should be assessed individually under the existing Temporary Variation principles?

☐ Strongly agree

☐ Agree

☐ Neither agree nor disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly disagree

Question 6. To what extent do you agree or disagree that children who already hold a school place should be allowed to transfer to another school, where places are available, in response to parental preference?

☐ Strongly agree

☐ Agree

- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

Question 7. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the education system should become more responsive to parental demand, particularly in the context of declining enrolments and increasing available capacity?

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

Question 8. To what extent do you agree or disagree that before a Temporary Variation is approved, the Board of Governors of a school should be required to provide a formal declaration confirming that it has considered the health and safety implications of admitting additional pupils, including the school's ability to continue accommodating children with Special Educational Needs (SEN), and is satisfied that they can be safely accommodated within the school's existing accommodation?

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

Maintaining access to appropriate provision for children with SEN is a key consideration in this review. Demand for SEN provision continues to grow and the Department wishes to ensure that greater flexibility in the operation of the Temporary Variation policy does not unintentionally reduce opportunities for children with SEN to access suitable school placements. Consultees are

therefore invited to provide views on whether additional safeguards should be introduced.

Question 9. To what extent do you agree or disagree that a “SEN-first approach” should be adopted when considering Temporary Variation requests, ensuring that approval of additional places does not disadvantage children with SEN in accessing appropriate school placements?

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

Question 10. To what extent do you agree or disagree that additional safeguards should be introduced to ensure children with SEN are not disadvantaged in accessing suitable school places where Temporary Variations are approved?

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

Question 11. Which, if any, of the following safeguards should be considered to protect access to appropriate provision for children with SEN? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Formal Board of Governors’ declaration confirming that approval would not adversely affect the school’s ability to accommodate children with SEN.
- ☐ Restriction or suspension of Temporary Variation approvals where a school has been unable to admit a child with SEN due to accommodation challenges.

☐ Other (please specify)

☐ None of the above

Question 12. To what extent do you agree or disagree that repeated Temporary Variation approvals at a school should trigger a review of the school's approved admissions and enrolment numbers?

☐ Strongly agree

☐ Agree

☐ Neither agree nor disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly disagree

Question 13. Do you have any further comments on the proposed reforms to the Temporary Variation policy?

[Open response]

Question 14. Please provide any comments or suggestions you have on how the school admissions framework could be improved to better meet the needs of children and families?

[Open response]

Thank you for completing the survey.