



**Subject:**

**CLASS SIZES IN POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS -  
PRACTICAL SUBJECTS (as well as other subjects that  
include a practical activity).**

**Circular Number:**  
2016/11

**Date of Issue:**  
22 July 2016

**Target Audience:**

- Principals and Boards of Governors of all grant-aided Post-Primary Schools;
- Education Authority;
- Council for Catholic Maintained Schools;
- Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education; and
- Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta
- Governing Bodies Association
- General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland

**Summary of Contents:**

This circular provides information on the further flexibility that has been delegated to post-primary schools on class sizes in practical subjects as defined by the Department.

**Enquiries:**

Any enquiries about the contents of this circular should be addressed to:

Curriculum Team  
Department of Education  
Rathgael House  
Rathgill  
Balloo Road  
BANGOR  
BT19 7PR

Email: [curriculum.supportteam@education-ni.gov.uk](mailto:curriculum.supportteam@education-ni.gov.uk)

**Governor Awareness:**  
Essential

**Status of Contents:**  
Advice

**Related Documents:**  
DE Circular 2013/07  
DE Circular 2004/05  
DE Letter of 13 September 2010

**Superseded Documents:**  
None

**Expiry Date:**  
Not applicable

**DE Website:**  
<http://www.education-ni.gov.uk>

**Tel: 02891 279568**  
**Fax: 02891 279100**

## Background

1. Class sizes in post-primary schools are governed by the Secondary School (Grant Conditions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1973 which provide for a maximum class size of 35 pupils and, for those subjects defined as “practical”, a maximum class size of 20 pupils, except where approved by the Department.
2. The term “practical” can of course cover a number of subjects being offered by schools.

## Subjects defined as Practical by the Department of Education

3. The practical subjects defined by the Department of Education (DE) (detailed in DE Circular 2004/05) are Science, Technology and Design, Home Economics, Art and Design, Physical Education (PE) and Music.

## Flexibility for Class Sizes for Practical Subjects

4. DE Circular 2004/05 provides schools with some flexibility in determining class sizes for Science, Art and Design and PE where the school authorities have assessed the health and safety risks of practical activities in these subject areas and satisfied themselves that the activities are unlikely to present any risk to the health and safety of the pupils in the class. The maximum class sizes permitted are shown at Annex 1. There has been no change as regards these subjects.
5. **This Circular provides some flexibility in the further practical subjects of Technology and Design, Home Economics and Music.**
6. The Department is prepared to approve a class size in excess of 20 and up to a maximum level as set out in Annex 1, for Technology and Design, Home Economics and Music, in circumstances where the activities are unlikely to present any risk to the health and safety of the pupils in the class or the teaching and support staff involved in the class. Where a school is considering setting the class size in excess of 20 pupils it **must first carry out a health and safety risk assessment (see paragraphs 7 – 16 below).**

## Health & Safety Assessments

7. Under the Health and Safety at Work Order (Northern Ireland) 1978<sup>1</sup>, schools have a legal responsibility to ensure the health and safety of employees and other persons on their premises. Those in control of premises have a duty to ensure that the premises and any equipment or substance in the premises are safe and without risk to health. In determining class sizes it is therefore a matter

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1978/1039/contents>

for school authorities to assess the health and safety risks of activities in the various practical subjects.

8. DE approval for these higher class sizes can be assumed **subject to the school authorities first undertaking a health and safety risk assessment and the Board of Governors being content that any practical activities are unlikely to present a risk to the health and safety of pupils in the class or the teaching and support staff involved in the class.** The school must determine the maximum class size based on the findings of the risk assessment and within the limits detailed in Annex 1.
9. The risk assessment should be carried out by a competent and trained person(s).
10. The assessment should include, amongst other issues, the task being carried out, the complexity of and/or the risk presented by the equipment being used, the size of the accommodation and circulation (see also 11 below) and whether there is sufficient equipment available for all the pupils in the class.
11. Some pupils may have specific needs that require equipment such as wheelchairs or the presence of classroom assistants to provide support. In conducting health and safety risk assessments school authorities should consider the implications of accommodating additional support staff (including their health and safety) and any equipment such as wheelchairs etc.
12. Schools should have regard to the advice and guidance on health and safety issues. If there are any doubts or concerns raised as a result of the assessment, further advice can be obtained from the relevant Health and Safety Officer in the Education Authority (EA) – list of contacts at Annex 2. Advice is also available from the Health and Safety Executive <https://www.hseni.gov.uk/topics/education>
13. DE's Building Handbook sets out details of the recommended accommodation and equipment for Music (Part 9), Home Economics (Part 16) and Technology and Design (Part 18) - <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/building-handbook>. In the subject areas of Home Economics and Technology & Design schools should pay particular attention to the sections on 'Teacher Supervision' in the Building Handbook (Part 16.8.5 for Home Economics and Part 18.9.7 for Technology & Design). For reference, the recommended accommodation, based on a maximum class size of 20, is detailed in Annex 1.
14. Schools have access to CLEAPSS <http://www.cleapss.org.uk> and <http://science.cleapss.org.uk/> through the EA. CLEAPSS is an advisory service providing support in science and technology for a consortium of local authorities including the EA and their schools, including establishments for pupils with special needs. CLEAPSS provides risk assessment guidance, guidance on health and safety issues and examples of good practice.
15. There are particular risks involved in Technology and Design classes due to the nature of the practical activities involved and schools should be aware that industrial legislation applies due to the manufacturing activity. The risk assessment advice within CLEAPSS states that "*the Health and Safety Executive*

*has indicated that it would have no hesitation in prosecuting an employer if it believed that overcrowding was a contributory cause of an accident”.*

16. There are serious health and safety implications arising from larger classes in practical subjects and compensation claims for any injury sustained by a pupil are more likely if class sizes exceed the approved maximum.

### **Classes in Practical Subjects not involving practical activities**

17. As detailed in paragraph 4 of DE Circular 2004/05 when a class of pupils is under instruction in a practical subject and **are not involved in practical activities**, DE is prepared to approve a class size in excess of 20.

### **Other Practical Subjects or Other Courses of Study that include a practical element**

18. Paragraph 14 of DE Circular 2004/5 recognises that it is not possible to define in a circular, all subjects or courses that might be considered as “practical”, or which may include a practical element, and set a class limit for these. In such instances, it is a matter for schools to have regard for the health and safety of their pupils and ensure that any other class that includes a practical activity is limited based on findings of a health and safety risk assessment.

### **Available Advice/Guidance**

19. Schools can approach the Health and Safety Officer within the EA for advice. Contact details for the Health and Safety Officers are provided in Annex 2.

20. The key legislation:

Health and Safety at Work (Northern Ireland) Order 1978

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1978/1039/contents>

Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations (NI) 1993

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisr/1993/37/contents/made>

Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (NI) 2000

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisr/2000/388/contents/made>



**KIERON MOORE**  
Head of Curriculum Team

## CLASS SIZES IN PRACTICAL SUBJECTS (SCIENCE, ART & DESIGN, PHYSICAL EDUCATION, MUSIC, TECHNOLOGY & DESIGN AND HOME ECONOMICS)

1. DE Circular 2004/05 provides schools with some flexibility in determining class sizes for **Science, Art and Design and PE** where the school authorities have assessed the health and safety risks of practical activities in these subject areas and satisfied themselves that the activities are unlikely to present any risk to the health and safety of the pupils in the class.
2. The Department is prepared to approve a class size in excess of 20 in **Music, Technology & Design and Home Economics** subject to the school authorities first undertaking a health and safety risk assessment and being content that any practical activities are unlikely to present a risk to the health and safety of pupils in the class or the teaching and support staff involved in the class. The school must determine the maximum class based on the findings of the risk assessment.
3. The maximum class sizes for all six practical subjects are set out below:

<u>Practical Subject</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>Max Number of Pupils</u>
<b>Science</b> (see Note 1)	8-10	26
	11-12	24
	13-14	20
<b>Art &amp; Design</b> (see Note 1)	8-10	26
	11-14	20
<b>PE</b> (see Note 2) (Gymnasium and Assembly Halls)	8-10	25
	11-14	20
	(Playing Pitches and Sports Halls)	All years
<b>Music</b>	8-10	26
	11-12	24
	13-14	20
<b>Technology and Design</b>	8-10	26
	11-12	24
	13-14	20
<b>Home Economics</b>	8-10	26
	11-12	24
	13-14	20

**Note 1:** *Assumes that the class is conducted in a standard size laboratory/studio (at least 83 sq m). For laboratories/studios of less than the standard size the number of pupils who can be accommodated safely should be reduced in direct relation to the size (in square metres) of the accommodation. For example in a laboratory of 75 sq m in Years 11-12 the maximum number of pupils would be 22 in science classes. In the event that accommodation is available which is **larger** than the 83 sq m schools should note that class sizes must **not** exceed the specified maximum, i.e. 26 in Years 8-10 and in science only 24 in Years 11-12. For years 13-14 in science, approved class sizes remain at 20.*

**Note 2:** *Safe Practice in physical education, sport and outdoor adventure activities is **not** solely a matter of class size. The assessment of risk by teachers will be strongly influenced by the nature of the activity, pupils' age, maturity and needs, teachers' and pupils' competences in the activity and the safety of the environment in which the activity is taking place. For example, the safety of an assembly hall for some activities will change when a piano or chairs are stored in the corner or along one side of the hall. For outdoor adventure activities a much lower pupil to teacher ratio than 20:1 is necessary.*

## **RECOMMENDED ACCOMMODATION AS SET OUT IN THE DE BUILDING HANDBOOK** <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/building-handbook>

### **MUSIC (Part 9 of the Building Handbook)**

#### **Part 9.3 - Maximum Class Size**

Maximum class sizes are normally 20. Other recommended class sizes are:

For GCSE examination classes: 15 pupils

For AS/A2 examination classes: 12 pupils

#### **Part 9.7.2 – Room Size**

Standard music studio - 83 m<sup>2</sup>

Circulation areas within music studios must be wide enough to accommodate larger instruments being transported.

### **TECHNOLOGY & DESIGN (Part 18 of the Building Handbook)**

#### **Part 18.3 – Maximum Class Size**

The recommended accommodation is based on a maximum class size of 20 pupils. Consequently 20 pupils should be provided for in a manufacturing room and a systems/design room. Planning rooms with a minimum of 45m<sup>2</sup> floor area should accommodate up to 20 pupils.

#### **Part 18.9.2 – Minimum Room Size**

Manufacturing Room - 93m<sup>2</sup> (including heat treatment area)

Systems/Design Room - 83m<sup>2</sup>

Planning Room - 45m<sup>2</sup> (55m<sup>2</sup> hybrid suites)

### **HOME ECONOMICS (Part 16 of the Building Handbook)**

#### **Part 16.3 – Maximum Class Size**

Accommodation should be furnished to accommodate 20 pupils in each classroom.

#### **Part 16.8.2 – Room Size**

Classroom Area - 90m<sup>2</sup> plus secure coat/bag storage

**Contact details for EA Health and Safety Officers**

<b><u>EA Region</u></b>	<b><u>H&amp;S OFFICER</u></b>	<b><u>TEL. NO.</u></b>	<b><u>EMAIL</u></b>
Belfast	Brendan O'Reilly	028 9056 4162	Brendan.O'Reilly@eani.org.uk
Western	Owen Doody	028 8241 1377	Owen.Doody@eani.org.uk
North Eastern	Orla Martin	028 2565 5366	Orla.Martin@eani.org.uk
South Eastern	Brendan O'Reilly	028 9056 4162	Brendan.O'Reilly@eani.org.uk
Southern	David Orr	028 3751 2429	David.Orr@eani.org.uk