



Department
for Education

School Place Planning Estimates 2025: Technical Guidance

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About this document

This document sets out:

- the methodology used in estimating future school places needed;
- the data sources and how they are used;
- how to interpret the published outputs (including key limitations).

Background

Local authorities (LAs) have a statutory duty to ensure that they provide sufficient school places. Decisions on how to achieve this are taken at local level, based on forecast pupil numbers across the planning areas (PAs) in a local authority. These PAs are groups of schools, often (but not exclusively) in a similar geographic area, reflecting patterns of provision. The PAs for primary are different to the PAs for secondary.

Each year, local authorities in England submit data via the School Capacity (SCAP) Survey to the department. This data includes pupil forecasts for the next 7 academic years for secondary year groups and next 5 years for primary year groups, and the existing school capacity in all mainstream schools in their area.

Information about planned projects to deliver new school places and plans to permanently remove places, in the next 3 academic years, are also submitted. This information from local authorities is combined with information on projects that are centrally funded by the department.

The department uses the combined information to arrive at estimates of future school places needed or are spare, up to 2029/30 for primary and up to 2031/32 for secondary. The estimates are shown in two different ways, the first giving an assessment of places needed only, and the second showing where there are spare places as well.

Changes to Method for 2025

None.

Overview of Method

A simple approach to determining school places still needed would be to compare the projected demand for places with existing capacity. The model inputs primary

planning area level data for Reception to Year 6 and secondary PA level data for Year 7 to Year 11.

For each Year Group, within each PA, the simple places needed can be calculated as:

$$\text{simple school places needed} = \text{forecast demand} - \text{existing school capacity}$$

Where forecast demand is greater than capacity, a need for places results (shown as a positive figure); where capacity is greater than demand a spare capacity results (shown as a negative figure).

The method however uses a more sophisticated approach, which also considers firm plans to change capacity:

$$\text{school places needed} = \text{forecast demand} - (\text{existing capacity} + \text{planned additional capacity} - \text{planned removal of capacity})$$

Planned additional capacity are increases to school places through local authorities' projects or centrally funded projects by the department. Only places that are confirmed as having a high degree of certainty of going ahead are included. Planned removal of capacity are permanent removal of school places, including those planned by local authorities and through projects funded centrally by the department, and confirmed future academy closures. For more information on future additional capacity, see the data sources section.

There are two approaches to estimating future places needed:

- where any spare places beyond the specific year group and PA are set aside. This allows for examination of school place pressure under the strict criteria of places being provided in a specific year group and specific PA.
- where spare places in other year groups or PAs are allowed to offset demand. This allows for examination of school place pressure bearing in mind the availability of places in other year groups or PAs

A worked example showing the difference is given in the methodology section.

Data sources

There are two main data sources used: School Capacity (SCAP) data and Central Programmes data.

SCAP Data

The SCAP data include pupil forecasts, school capacities and future planned places. Guidance provided to local authorities for the completion of this data collection can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/school-capacity-survey-guide-for-local-authorities>

The data has undergone a significant programme of cleaning after receipt to determine that it has been completed according to the guidance.

The SCAP planned places data consists of local authority firm plans to change the number of mainstream places in PAs over the next 3 academic years. Planned additional places includes both permanent additions and temporary bulge classes (used to accommodate large cohorts)¹. Planned permanent removals to capacity are now included in the model.

DfE Central Programme Data

The approach accounts for changes in capacity provided through:

a) Free Schools

This is based on the expected number of open year groups in each academic year for free schools that are:

- already open (opened from 2019) and included in the SCAP May 2025 data (centrally funded and LA presumption free schools);
- those that opened in September 2025 (centrally funded);
- those due to open by September 2026 with agreed terms in place (centrally funded).

More information on Free Schools can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/free-schools-open-schools-and-successful-applications>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/establishing-a-new-school-free-school-presumption>

b) Schools Re-building Programme (SRP)

This reflects changes in capacity between May 2025 and September 2027, because of these projects (both increases and decreases), attributing it to the future academic

¹ Places are intended to move through the school with the cohort. For example, a project to accommodate a one-off additional form of entry which would provide 30 places in Year 7 in 2023/24 would then be reflected in the data as Year 8 places in 2024/25 and so on.

year according to the completion schedule for the project. More information on SRP can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-rebuilding-programme/school-rebuilding-programme>

c) Voluntary aided school (VA)

This is based on the expected number of open year groups in each academic year for Voluntary aided schools that opened from 2019. More information on VA projects can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/voluntary-aided-schools-capital-scheme>

d) Academy (and Free School) closures

This reflects decreases in capacity because of an academy or Free School closing after 1 May 2025 which therefore no longer provides the capacity reported in the School Capacity data. Their capacity has therefore been excluded.

All the information acquired to make the above adjustments in respect of centrally funded programmes has undergone a data quality assessment and is correct as at January 2026. The net effect of all these strands is reflected in a single figure in the underlying data, identified as “central_programme_places”

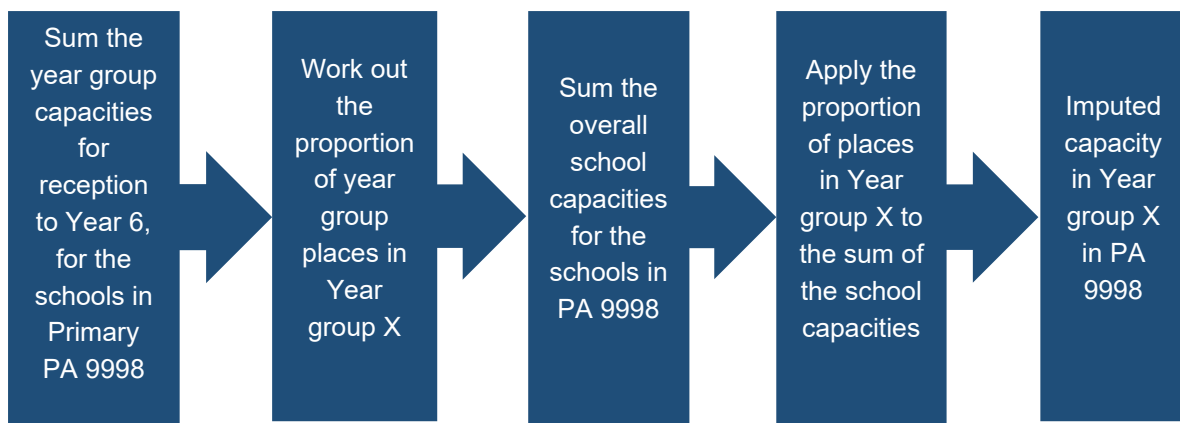
Methodology

Apportioning the existing SCAP capacity

The existing primary and secondary capacity reported through SCAP is distributed between year groups according to the following calculations. It is important to understand that the SCAP collection asks for an overall capacity (based on a physical assessment of the building for local authority maintained schools, or the overall capacity set out in Funding Agreements for academies) as well as individual year group capacities related to the Published Admission Numbers (PANs). The year group capacities do not necessarily add up to the overall capacity, for example, where a school has a sixth form or where a school chooses to admit pupils at a different level to that which the physical space suggests. The published place planning estimates use the re-distribution of overall capacity in the calculations.

Primary: Imputing the available capacity in PA 9998 for Year Group X

Figure 1: Diagram showing the steps involved in calculating the primary capacity in Primary PA 9998 for a year group.

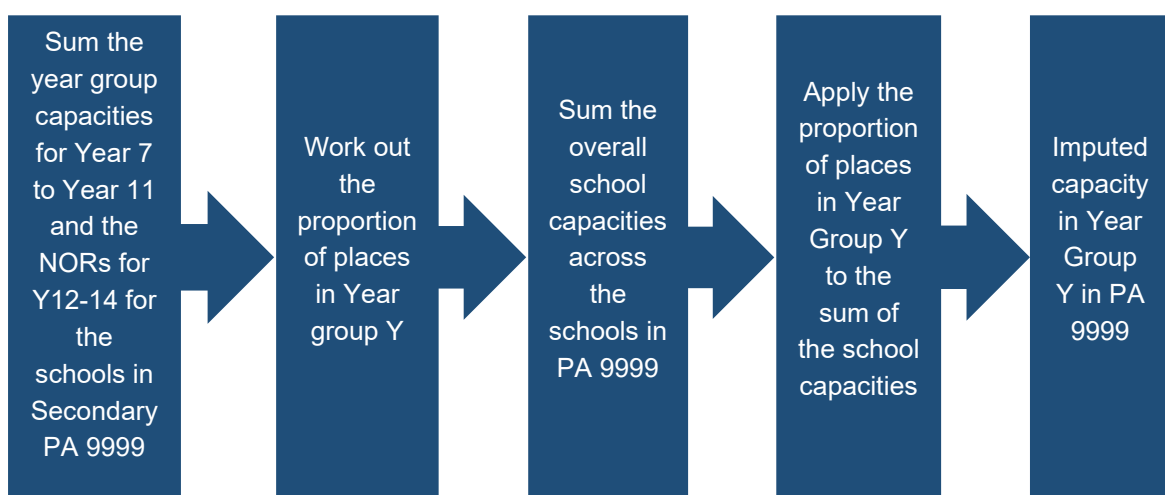


The same calculation is repeated for each year group, from reception through to Y6, and for each PA.

Secondary: Imputing the available capacity in PA 9999 for Year Group Y

A very similar process is applied but adjusted to account for the overall school capacity, including sixth form accommodation. Although separate capacities are now collected comprehensively for sixth form, the data are not yet used in the modelling. Instead, the numbers of pupils on roll (NOR) from the January school census for year groups 12, 13 and 14 are used as a proxy for sixth form capacity.

Figure 2: Diagram showing the steps involved in calculating the secondary capacity in Secondary PA 9999 for a year group.



The same calculation is repeated for each year group, from Y7 through to Y11, and for each PA.

Adding in additional future places and planned removals of places

The data on planned additional future places and planned removals of places by local authorities, is collected at school level, by academic year of delivery, and by year group.

The data on planned additional future places and planned removals of places by centrally funded programmes is either collected by academic year of delivery, and by year group, or can be imputed as such during collection and validation (see the data sources section).

The future additional places and places to remove are combined with the existing capacity at PA and year group level to give a combined profile of capacity for the forecast years.

Comparing capacity with forecasts

The following tables use illustrative data to show how the calculation works. The same calculations would be repeated for all forecast academic years and all PAs.

Capacity (existing combined with future changes)	R	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
PA 9997	400	400	400	300	300	300	300	2400
PA 9998	170	150	120	200	200	200	200	1240
LA primary total	570	550	520	500	500	500	500	3640

Forecasts 2025/26	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
PA 9997	410	390	400	290	270	280	280	2320
PA 9998	190	160	130	200	180	180	170	1210
LA primary total	600	550	530	490	450	460	450	3530

A subtraction of capacity from forecasts results in the places needed (a positive figure is additional places needed; a negative figure represents spare places):

Places needed 2025/26	R	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
PA 9997	10	-10	0	-10	-30	-20	-20	-80
PA 9998	20	10	10	0	-20	-20	-30	-30
LA primary total	30	0	10	-10	-50	-40	-50	-110

The published outputs display two versions of the model. In the “additional need only” version, any spare places are zeroed before summation.

Places needed 2025/26	R	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
PA 9997	10	0	0	0	0	0	0	10
PA 9998	20	10	10	0	0	0	0	40
LA primary total	30	10	10	0	0	0	0	50

In the “additional need minus spare places” version, the spare places are retained, and factored into the totals.

Places needed 2024/25	R	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
PA 9997	10	-10	0	-10	-30	-20	-20	-80
PA 9998	20	10	10	0	-20	-20	-30	-30
LA primary total	30	0	10	-10	-50	-40	-50	-110

Interpretation of the model outputs

Specific limitations of the modelling

Users of these outputs should note the following specific limitations:

1. Using number of pupils on roll as a proxy for capacity in sixth form year groups can understate capacity in the sixth form, which then pushes more capacity onto year 7 to year 11, which in turn can lead to understating of need in those year groups.
2. Many local authorities model their future demand based on the Published Admission Numbers (PANs) for the school. Where the overall school capacity differs from the sum of the year group capacities, this will result in a different imputed year group capacity to PAN, and consequently different views on the level of available capacity.
3. Forecast pupil number data for the next 5 academic years for primary and the next 7 academic years for secondary. Planned capacity data is generally reported more strongly in the immediate future, since only places for which there are firm plans are including, with no data collected beyond the next 3 academic years. The places needed will therefore naturally grow with time (or equivalently, the level of spare places will reduce).

4. The data provide a snapshot in time at 1 May 2025 – local authorities will be approving new projects to add more places during the year, and reviewing their forecasts in response to new population data.

Using the model estimates

Users of these outputs should be mindful that these are estimates. Local practice will differ from the constraints set in the model. It is common for local authorities to reasonably and successfully allocate school places outside a PA where the travel distances remain acceptable, or, particularly in rural areas, for schools to operate with mixed year group teaching.

The “additional need only” version of the model suggests that on aggregate, at May 2025, around 14,000 primary places and 12,000 secondary places were still needed to meet forecast demand in England for September 2025 (‘additional_need_only_places’ column in the underlying data). As well as school place offers in a different PA or in a mixed year group, there will be places in newly created accommodation added after 1 May 2025 to address this need. The estimated places needed figures in the published underlying data should be taken as indicative of the relative future place needs faced by local authorities.

The “additional need only_places” version of the model, showing places needed only and setting aside pockets of spare capacity, is the principal model. This acknowledges that pressure in one part of a local authority (or year group) cannot necessarily be offset by spare places in another area (or year group). This was the presumption behind the introduction of PAs, replacing the use of larger district areas that were masking local pockets of demand. However, it is useful to know the extent of any spare capacity in neighbouring PAs (or year groups) when making an overall assessment of the places required in an area – hence the inclusion of the “additional need minus spare places” version.

The “additional_need_minus_spare_places” version, showing the level of spare capacity as well as places needed, has most validity at PA level where the supply of places is matched to the appropriate local demand. Aggregating across PAs to LA level can give the impression of significant levels of spare places. Whilst in some LAs the prospect of dispersal of pupils across PAs is reasonable, in others it would be unlikely. Aggregation to LA level is included to demonstrate the overall position at that geography and to guide the reader through the table, rather than being an expected approach to place planning.



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