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Mainstream free school applications: assessment of need and deprivation (wave 13 update)

Updated 5 November 2019

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How we assess need during application rounds

When we assess mainstream free school applications, we consider whether there is a need for new places. In previous waves, we would look at if there was either a projected need for extra school places and/or a need for additional high-quality school places in the local area (quality need), as well as whether the proposed school will add to local choice and diversity. For wave 13, applicants had to meet both a need for places and a quality need before us to approve them.

To assess places needed and quality need for wave 13, we first identified the local area of the proposed school. This allowed us to identify nearby open schools, as well as the pupil place planning areas covered by the proposed school.

We used details of local schools to assess the quality. We used pupil place planning areas to assess the places.

To calculate the local area, we took the 80th percentile of distance travelled by pupils in the area (the parliamentary constituency the proposed school is in) and used this as a radius around the proposed school. We use the 80th percentile for our proxy catchment area to account for the limitations of the 'straight-line' distance which may not reflect the actual travel distance and to capture the travel patterns of most pupils within the area.

Need for places data

Our need for places data came from the School Capacity Survey which includes:

- information on current school capacity (we used data from May 2018 for approving wave 13 applications)
- planned capacity due to be added (including extra capacity reported by local authorities up until September 2024)
- pupil number forecasts for primary and secondary aged pupils (for academic years 2022 to 2023 and 2024 to 2025)

We also factored in places that will be added (or removed) through other DfE programmes. This included:

- Condition Improvement Fund projects
- Priority Schools Building Programme 1
- Selective School Expansion Fund
- any free schools which opened in 2018 or were due to open by September 2019 with agreed terms in place
- any free school or academy closures

We published [School Capacity Survey](#) data from May 2018 in March 2019.

To make sure the assessment of need is as up to date, we also contacted local authorities to get updated information on the future need for places.

We used all this data to inform our assessment of the need for extra school places.

Where the application said that the need is related to a local housing development project, we checked this with the local authority.

Table 2 of the [summary statistics](#) shows the approvals (for waves 8 to 13) in relation to:

- places needed
- local authority intelligence
- standards of local schools

Assessing the need for places in the free schools context

For free school application waves prior to wave 6, the need for additional school places was calculated at the local authority district level. We moved to use planning areas from wave 6 because the data is more localised than a larger local authority district, to help us focus on the specific area a free school is most likely to get its pupils from. Planning areas are set by local authorities based on groups of schools that reflect:

- local geography
- reasonable travel distances
- patterns of supply and demand

Prior to the 2012 to 2013 School Capacity Survey data collection, we did not have robust data at the planning area level available which we could use to assess free school applications.

Applications had to show a need for a high proportion of the extra school places that the free school will provide. This meant showing the local area needs at least half the capacity of the proposed school in the short to medium term. This change allowed us to increase our focus on managing the level of surplus places in the system (and preventing an oversupply) and make the best use of the existing school estate.

You can find the data we used for assessing the need for places in the 'school place planning tables' (tables B5 and B6) of the [School Capacity Survey](#). The approach used in these tables allows for examination of school place pressure, taking into account the availability of places in other year groups within the planning area. This data allowed us to examine school place pressure and consider the availability of places in other year groups, making sure wave 13 approvals were in places most in need of new schools.

Previous waves used data consistent with the method in tables B3 and B4 which looks only at estimated shortfall and does not factor in estimated surplus, i.e. they allow for examination of school place pressure without offsetting any surplus against shortfall. This was consistent with the method used for basic need capital allocations.

When considering the need for places, we consulted local authorities to get their views. If local authority data suggested a need, the application would have met the need for places criteria, even if the School Capacity Survey data did not show a need.

All 21 approved wave 13 applications met the criteria for places needed, either through School Capacity Survey data or intelligence from the local authority. The one approved 16 to 19 application has a different assessment method.

Quality need source data

Our quality need data came from a range of sources including:

- indicator data on defining Achieving Excellence Areas
- information on Ofsted outcomes for all schools in the local area
- data on local schools being above or below the floor standards
- data on the progress measures of local schools and national averages
- data on the attainment measures of local schools and national averages

Table 2 of the [summary statistics](#) shows the approvals for wave 13 in relation to quality need.

Assessing the quality need in the free schools context

This is the first free school wave where we required proposers to meet quality need criteria.

To have the greatest impact on improving outcomes, we targeted wave 13 at the local authority districts we identified as having the lowest standards and lowest capacity to improve (categories 5 and 6 of the Achieving Excellence Areas).

If the application was not for a school in one of these local authority districts, then proposers needed to show that the school would be in a 'pocket' of low standards. To identify whether the free school was in a 'pocket' of low standards, we used:

- information provided in the application
- local Ofsted outcomes
- progress and attainment measures

All 21 approved wave 13 applications were either in a targeted local authority district or were in a 'pocket' of low standards. The approved 16 to 19 application has a different assessment method.

Assessing the need for 16 to 19 provision

With the [further education area reviews](#) showing that in many areas of the country the availability and quality of existing 16 to 19 provision is good, for wave 13 we only approved new 16 to 19 free school provision (including proposals for a sixth

form as part of a secondary school) by exception.

We assessed the need for places using pupil projections and information on the quality of existing provision in the area.

To assess the quality need, we checked if the proposed application was in the local authority districts we identified as having the lowest standards and lowest capacity to improve (categories 5 and 6 of the Achieving Excellence Areas), and if not whether the proposers demonstrated the provision was in a 'pocket' of low standards.

For wave 13, we approved 4 applications for 16 to 19 provision in areas with low availability and poor quality (3 sixth forms attached to secondary schools and one 16 to 19 college).

Location of free schools in areas with a need for additional school places

We based the following figures on the estimated need at the time we approved the application, using the most up to date capacity data available.

For wave 13, we used data from tables B5 and B6 of the School Capacity Survey 2018, looking at projections up to 2022 to 2023 for primary schools and 2024 to 2025 for secondary schools. We can give longer projections for secondary schools as they are based on children already in the school system.

86% of all 314 mainstream free schools which we approved in waves 5 to 13, were in areas where there was a need for extra school places. At the time of approval, these schools were set to create over 219,000 additional places. We have given a breakdown of the need for places for each of these application waves in table 1 of the [summary statistics](#).

Some schools which we have approved may be withdrawn or cancelled before opening. The proposed capacity of schools may also change between the point of approval and the point of opening. The estimate of additional places includes expected capacity in sixth forms at the time of approval.

Deprivation source data

We used the [English indices of deprivation](#) to determine the relative deprivation level of a free school location. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government produces these statistics and published the most recent data in 2015.

These statistics measure the relative deprivation in small areas in England called Lower-layer Super Output Areas (LSOA). Each LSOA is ranked from 1 (most deprived area) to 32,844 (least deprived area).

There is no definitive cut-off at which an area is described as 'deprived'.

Assessing deprivation

For each open free school, we identify the LSOA where the proposed school will be. We use the information reported on [get information about schools](#) which includes mainstream, 16 to 19, special and alternative provision but excludes University Technical Colleges and Studio Schools. We then use the published indices of deprivation tables to identify the deprivation decile of the free school's LSOA.

For free schools, we report on how many are in the most deprived 30% of LSOAs.

38% of the 507 free schools open in October 2019 are in the most deprived 30% of areas in England. One free school had an unidentified LSOA so we have excluded them from the statistic. For schools in temporary accommodation, the LSOA may change on moving to the permanent site.

Summary statistics

Table 1: need for places for approved mainstream free school applications (excluding 16 to19) by wave

Wave	Number of approved applicants	Percentage of approved applicants in area with a need for additional school places	Data source
Wave 5	9	100%	school capacity survey 2012
Wave 6	30	83%	school capacity survey 2013
Wave 7	25	72%	school capacity survey 2013
Wave 8	39	90%	school capacity survey 2014

Wave 9	11	73%	school capacity survey 2014
Wave 10	17	94%	school capacity survey 2015
Wave 11	83	81%	school capacity survey 2015
Wave 12	79	94%	school capacity survey 2016
Wave 13	21	81%	school capacity survey 2018
Waves 5 to 13	314	86%	school capacity survey 2012 to 2018

For wave 5 applicants the basic need area was the local authority district. From wave 6, this refers to the local area (which covers the planning areas in which local schools are situated).

These figures relate to the time of approval only. This means that schools which were approved but have since been cancelled or withdrawn are included.

We approved one studio school in wave 11, in previous waves we assessed studio schools separately and so have not included them in the figures.

Table 2: need for places for approved mainstream free school applications (excluding 16 to 19) in waves 8 to 13

Wave	Basis of need	Number of approved applicants	Percentage of approved applicants
Wave 8	need for places	35	90%
	local authority intelligence (on the need for places)	2	5%
	standards of local schools	2	5%
Wave 9	need for places	8	73%
	local authority intelligence (on the need for places)	1	9%
	standards of local schools	2	18%

Wave 10	need for places	16	94%
	local authority intelligence (on the need for places)	0	0%
	standards of local schools	1	6%
Wave 11	need for places	67	81%
	local authority intelligence (on the need for places)	9	11%
	standards of local schools	2	2%
Wave 12	need for places	74	94%
	local authority intelligence (on the need for places)	2	3%
	standards of local schools	3	4%
Wave 13	need for places		
	places needed (school capacity survey data)	17	81%
	local authority and other intelligence on the need for places	4	19%
	quality need		
	application in a targeted local authority district	18	86%
	application not in a targeted area, but is in a 'pocket' of low standards	3	14%

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