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Mainstream free school applications: assessment of need and deprivation (wave 15 update)

Updated 15 December 2023

Applies to England

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Mainstream free schools wave 15: assessment of need to be met by wave 15 approvals and deprivation in areas where free schools are located

This release covers how we assess:

- the need for mainstream free school approvals including an update for the wave 15 approvals
- deprivation in areas of open free schools, updated to include those that opened in September 2023

Wave 15 announcement

The outcome of wave 15 mainstream free school applications comprised 15 applications being approved into the pre-opening phase. The breakdown of the 15 applications approved for pre-opening is as follows:

- 1 primary school
- 1 all-through (primary and secondary) school
- 1 secondary school (no sixth form)
- 1 secondary school with a sixth form
- 2 university technical colleges (14 to 19 phase)
- 9 post-16 provision

How we assess need during application rounds

When we assess mainstream free school applications, we consider whether there is a need for new and higher quality places.

Prior to wave 13, we considered whether there was either a projected need for extra school places in general or a need for additional high-quality school places in the area where the school was proposed (quality need), as well as whether the proposed school would add to local choice and diversity. Since [wave 13](#), applicants have been asked to demonstrate both a need for places and a quality need.

In wave 15, to assess the need for places and quality need for a new school, we first identified the likely catchment area of the proposed school, allowing us to identify open schools nearby, as well as the pupil place planning areas covered by the proposed school (for pre-16 only). We used pupil place planning areas to assess the need for places at pre-16 and details about the performance of existing local schools to assess the quality need.

For applications with a pre-16 phase, we took the 80th percentile of distance travelled by pupils in the area (the parliamentary constituency in which the proposed school is located) and used this as a radius around the site of the proposed school. We use the 80th percentile to capture the travel patterns of most pupils within the area. This was calculated separately for primary and secondary phases.

For post-16 phase, we looked at the local authority in which the application is located and any relevant neighbouring local authorities/planning areas that would form part of the expected catchment area.

For applications with a pre-16 and post-16 phase, we assessed the need for places and the quality need for both phases.

Need for places data

Our data on the need for places (for primary and secondary phase) is taken from the school capacity survey which includes:

- information on current school capacity (we used data from May 2022 for approving wave 15 applications)
- planned capacity due to be added (including extra capacity reported by local authorities to 2022 to 2023)
- pupil number forecasts (projections up to 2026 to 2027 for primary schools and 2028 to 2029 for secondary schools)

For post-16 phase we considered:

- information from the school capacity survey on the forecast number of pupils completing key stage 4
- ONS forecasts of changes in the 16 to 19 population
- current participation rates in different Level 3 qualification routes

The need for places data also factored in places that will be added (or removed) through other Department for Education (DfE) programmes, including, but not limited to:

- condition improvement fund projects
- the former selective school expansion fund
- any free schools which opened in 2022 or were due to open by September 2023 with agreed terms in place
- Schools Rebuilding Programme
- voluntary aided schools that opened in September 2022 with agreed terms in place
- any free school or academy closures
- post-16 capacity fund projects
- FE capital transformation fund projects

We published [school capacity survey](#) data from May 2022 in March 2023.

To make sure the assessment of need is as up to date as possible, we contacted local authorities to get the latest information on the future need for places. Where the application said that need is related to a local housing development project, we checked the detail of this with the relevant local authority. We also published details

of all the [wave 15 applications received](#) and invited any additional evidence on the need for the places proposed in an application from interested parties.

We combined all this data, alongside the evidence provided in the application form, to inform our assessment of the need for extra school places.

Assessing the need for places in the free schools context

Applications with a pre-16 phase

For free school application waves prior to 2013 (wave 6), the need for additional school places was calculated at the local authority district level. We moved to using planning areas from wave 6 because it provides more localised data than a larger local authority district, helping us to focus on the specific area from which a free school is most likely to get its pupils. Planning areas are set by local authorities based on groups of schools that reflect:

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

From wave 13 onwards, pre-16 applications were asked to show the need for a high proportion of the extra school places that the free school would provide. This meant showing need in the local area for 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.

The school capacity survey was used as the starting point to assess the need for places. You can find the data we used in the '[Estimates of future school place demand – places needed, spare places \(place planning\)](#)' download of the school capacity survey publication. Within this table, 'additional need minus spare places' shows the level of need in each planning area that has been used in the assessment process. This allows for examination of school place pressure, taking into account the level of spare capacity as well as places needed within the planning area, and

ensures new school approvals are in places most in need of new schools.

Post-16 applications

We do not publish estimates of the need for places for ages 16 to 19. The post-16 sector is more complex, with increased emphasis on student choice and larger catchment areas of many 16 to 19 providers, which can span local authority boundaries. The criteria on which we based our assessment of the need for additional 16 to 19 places is set out in the published application guidance: [Free schools: how to apply](#).

Drawing on the data listed above, assessments took account of a range of factors, including:

- forecast changes in the 16 to 19 population in the school's proposed catchment area – and any existing plans to meet forecast growth.
- evidence of demand for the proposed school's offer – including evidence from the applicant on unmet demand, data on current student choices and the views of local authorities and existing providers on the sufficiency of the current local offer. While recognising longer travel to learn patterns at post-16, assessments took account of potential demand from students currently having to travel for longer than average to access provision, including any evidence that decisions on post-16 options may be being skewed by a lack of access to appropriate places

Location of free schools in areas with a need for additional school places (pre-16 phase applications)

Based on the estimated need at the time we approved the application, using the most up-to-date school capacity survey data available at the time, 85% of the 344 mainstream free schools which we approved in waves 5 to 15 were in areas where there was a need for additional school places. This figure is calculated using school capacity data only. Schools that were identified on the basis of additional information are not included, for example where an LA supplied data on need arising from new housing not included in their SCAP 22 return. This figure relates to the time of

approval only, meaning that schools which were approved but have since been cancelled or withdrawn are included. Note that location may also change when identifying specific sites, during the pre-opening stage.

Quality need source data

Our quality need data came from a range of sources.

In line with our commitment in the Schools White Paper, we prioritised applications located in [Education Investment Areas](#) (and in particular Priority Education Investment Areas) where the department is focusing its funding and support. These are the areas identified in the [Levelling Up white paper](#) where educational outcomes were the weakest, based on sustained low performance across key stage 2 and key stage 4 in the period 2017 to 2019.

For local school performance, we looked at:

- information on Ofsted outcomes for all schools in the local area
- data on the attainment and progress of local schools and post-16 providers compared with national averages, including for disadvantaged pupils
- data on the educational track record of academy trusts involved in applications compared to performance in the local area

Approvals of post-16 applications included consideration of specialist academic schools with the aim of supporting talented children from disadvantaged backgrounds progress to leading universities, as set out in the [Levelling Up white paper](#). Regardless of prior attainment, disadvantaged students have lower average attainment at key stage 5 and lower levels of progression to top universities. Among Level 3 students from disadvantaged backgrounds who completed KS5 in 2019, only 10.0% progressed to top-third universities in the following two years, compared to 18.8% of students from non-disadvantaged backgrounds.

For these applications, we also assessed local performance using the following:

- progression during KS5 within the LA among high achieving KS4 students from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- progression after completing KS5 provision in the LA to top third universities among high achieving KS5 students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Assessing the quality need in the free schools context

This is the third free school wave (after waves 13 and 14) where we asked proposers to demonstrate a quality need (as well as a need for places) in their application. Using the data sources listed under [quality need source data](#), along with information in the application, we concluded that all 15 of the approved wave 15 applications were in an area where there was a need for quality places.

Summary statistics for wave 15

Pre-16 application assessment of need

Table 1a: breakdown of the need for places for the pre-16 mainstream free school applications approved in wave 15

Need for places	Number of approved pre-16 applications meeting the basis of need	Number of approved pre-16 applications
Based on SCAP 22 and additional local intelligence	5	6
Published forecasts of places needed (school capacity survey data 2022)	2	6
Additional local authority and other intelligence on the need for places (for example plans of housing developments not captured in the SCAP 22 forecasts)	3	6

Table 1b: breakdown of the quality of need for the pre-16 mainstream free school applications approved in wave 15

Quality need	Number of approved pre-16 applications meeting the basis of need	Number of approved pre-16 applications
Application is in an education investment area/priority education investment area or in an area of low standards	6	6
Application in an education investment area or priority education investment area	5	6
Application not in an education investment area or priority education investment area, but is in an area of low standards	1	6

Post-16 application assessment of need

Table 2a: breakdown of the need for places for post-16 mainstream free school applications and applications with a post 16 phase approved in wave 15

Need for places	Number of approved post-16 applications meeting the basis of need	Number of approved post-16 applications
Based on forecasts of growth in potential post-16 pupils in the catchment area and evidence of demand for the proposed	12	12

school's offer

Forecast increase in the year 12 population greater than the proposed intake of the school in the catchment area.	10	12
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Evidence of demand for the proposed school's offer/gap the in the current offer to students that the schools would meet.	2	12
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Table 2b: breakdown of the quality need for post-16 mainstream free school applications and applications with a post 16 phase approved in wave 15

Quality need	Number of approved post-16 applications meeting the basis of need	Number of approved post-16 applications
Application is in an education investment area/priority education investment area or in an area of low standards	12	12
Application in an education investment area or priority education investment area	10	12
Application not in an education investment area or priority education investment area, but is in an area of low standards	2	12

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 [English](#)

[indices of deprivation data in September 2019](#).

These statistics measure the relative deprivation in small areas in England called lower-layer super output areas (LSOAs). Each LSOA is ranked from 1 (most deprived area) to 32,844 (least deprived area).

There is no 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 located. 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. As of September 2023, 38% of the 701 free schools open are in the most deprived 30% of areas in England. For schools in temporary accommodation, the LSOA may change on moving to the permanent site, any changes will be incorporated into the next update of this document.

Based on the preferred site postcode provided by the applicant, 12 out of the 15 free schools (including the UTCs) approved in wave 15 will open in the most deprived 30% of areas in England. Note that postcodes may change when identifying specific sites, during the pre-opening stage.

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