

Debate Pack

2 June 2023

Number CDP-0115

By Nerys Roberts,
Shadi Danechi,
Anastasia Lewis

Falling pupil rolls in England and school closures in London

1	Background	2
2	Parliamentary material	6
3	News articles	10
4	Further information	10

Summary

A Westminster Hall debate has been scheduled for Wednesday 7 June on pupil roll numbers and school closures in London. The debate will be opened by Florence Eshamoli MP.

1

Background

Nationally, after a sustained period of increasing demand for primary school places, pupil numbers are now starting to decline, which will lead to some schools having fewer pupils, ie, falling rolls. It will take a few more years for the reduced primary numbers to feed through to secondary schools.

There's been increasing interest in the implications of falling rolls and school closures in London.

School rolls in England

[The number of pupils on roll](#) is defined as the number of registered pupils attending a school as reported in the school census.

[In May 2022 there were 7.94 million pupils on roll in mainstream state-funded schools in England](#), this was a 1% increase compared with the previous year. [The overall number of pupils on roll has increased in each year since 2010](#).

However, the number of primary pupils on roll has declined from a peak of 4.44 million in 2019, to 4.40 million in 2022 (a 1% decline). Over the same period the number of secondary pupils increased by 7%.

Each local authority provides estimates to the Department for Education (DfE) for the number of mainstream pupils they expect in the coming years. [These are used to produce national estimates](#). The Department for Education cautions that these estimates are uncertain due to: the Covid-19 pandemic, the UK's exit from the EU, and recent migration developments (such as Ukraine). In addition, the DfE warns that "care should be taken when using forecasts from the later years".

[The estimated number of mainstream state-funded primary pupils forecast by local authorities in England shows a decline in each year of the forecast period](#) (academic year 2022/23 to 2026/27). The estimated annual decline was around 1% in each year from 2023/24 onwards.

[The estimated number of mainstream state-funded secondary pupils forecast by local authorities in England shows an increase in each year up until 2026/27](#) with small declines forecasted for the next two years after that. The table below provides more detail.

Local Authority estimated number of pupils

State-funded mainstream pupils in England

	Primary pupils		Secondary pupils	
	Number (Millions)	Annual % change	Number (Millions)	Annual % change
2021/22 (actual)	4.46		3.47	
Forecasts				
2022/23	4.45	-0.4%	3.56	+2.7%
2023/24	4.41	-0.8%	3.64	+2.1%
2024/25	4.37	-0.9%	3.68	+1.1%
2025/26	4.33	-0.9%	3.70	+0.6%
2026/27	4.28	-1.0%	3.71	+0.2%
2027/28	n/a	n/a	3.70	-0.1%
2028/29	n/a	n/a	3.68	-0.6%

Note: Estimates are uncertain and should be treated with caution, uncertainty increases in later years.

Source: Department for Education, School capacity: 2021/22, 24 March 2023 [[custom table](#)]

[Other estimates are also published by the Department for Education which include all school types.](#)

Why are school rolls predicted to fall?

There are local and national factors potentially affecting demand for school places. Nationally, these include birth rates that started to fall gradually from 2013, and then more sharply from 2016. Some also cite other factors as having an effect either nationally, or locally, including:

- changing immigration patterns
- children and young people not returning to school and missing education, following the pandemic
- an increase in the proportion of children in elective home education
- socio-economic factors, for example, “push” factors like cost-of-living and housing pressures displacing people to cheaper areas.

Why do falling rolls matter?

Falling pupil numbers can impact school budgets and financial sustainability, because school funding is strongly influenced by the number of pupils on roll.

Although there is now [a national funding formula \(NFF\) for core school funding](#), local authorities still retain key functions in deciding individual

schools' budget shares once they've received their block allocations from the DfE. [The DfE sets rules, underpinned by regulations](#), on how local authorities (LAs) draw up their local funding formulas.

LAs can use some of their block grant to support schools with falling rolls. Schools may also receive other protections via LA funding formulas designed to prevent large per-pupil year-on-year losses.

Even with access to this sort of funding, schools with sustained reductions in pupil numbers could need to make changes to their workforce or structure, and in some cases, may face restructure, amalgamation, or closure.

The situation in London

In January 2023, the membership body, [London Councils, published a report](#) that warned of “a significant and sustained period of reduction in demand for reception places, which has implications for school budgets and standards”. It said, on average:

- London boroughs are predicted to see a 7.3% decrease in reception pupil numbers from [academic year] 2022/23 to 2026/27 and London's total reception numbers are predicted to decline from 96,424 to 89,121
- Forecast demand for year 7 places in secondary schools across London is predicted to drop by a total of 3.5% between 2022/23 to 2026/27, representing a slower rate of decline than at the primary level. This amounts to a decrease from 92,722 to 89,510 children

Trends would not be uniform across London. By 2026/27:

- For reception places, Lambeth, Hillingdon and Ealing would see reductions of close to 15% at primary schools, whilst Kingston upon Thames would see a near 15% rise. Most others were likely to see decreases of between 5 and 10%
- For entry to secondary school (year seven), Enfield, Lewisham and Lambeth would see reductions between 10 and 15%, others of up to 10%, and seven boroughs would see rises of up to 10%

In May 2023, [FFT Education Datalab published analysis](#) of pupils joining and leaving school rolls up to January 2022 – so, taking account of pre-, during- and post-lockdown periods. For London, this summarised:

Schools [...] particularly primary schools, were badly affected during the pandemic. Between 2020 and 2021 for every pupil who joined a London school, 1.67 left. The situation improved markedly the following year although the rate at which primary-age pupils left the Capital for schools in other regions increased.

The Department for Education publishes the number of schools on an annual basis. [The most recent data is for January 2022](#) when there were 2,550 state-

funded nursery schools, primary schools, secondary schools, and special schools in London.

The highest number of state-funded schools recorded was in January 2020 (2,561 schools). The decline over this period was driven mainly by fewer primary schools, which was partially offset by increases in special schools. More detail is provided in the table below.

Number of state-funded schools in London					
January of each year					
	Nursery schools	Primary schools	Secondary schools	Special schools	Total
2016	80	1,813	484	138	2,515
2017	80	1,816	498	139	2,533
2018	79	1,817	505	143	2,544
2019	79	1,816	513	145	2,553
2020	79	1,814	518	150	2,561
2021	79	1,809	520	152	2,560
2022	78	1,798	518	156	2,550

Source: Department for Education, [Schools pupils and their characteristics: 2022](#), 5 April 2023 [[custom table](#)]

[London has a higher proportion of unfilled school places compared with the national average.](#) In May 2022, 14.5% of mainstream state-funded primary and secondary school places in London were unfilled, this rate was 15.5% for primary places, and 13.4% for secondary places.

In England 12.0% of primary and secondary school places were unfilled, this rate was 11.5% for primary places, and 12.5% for secondary places.

2 Parliamentary material

2.1 House of Commons Select Committees

House of Commons Education Select Committee, [MPs launch new inquiry into persistent absence and support for disadvantaged pupils](#), 12 January 2023

2.2 Parliamentary questions

Pupils: Absenteeism

4 Apr 2023 | Written questions | Answered | House of Commons | 174412

Asked by: Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi

To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether she has a target for reducing the number of pupils who are severely absent from school.

Answered by: Nick Gibb | Department for Education

Regular school attendance is vital for pupils' educational attainment, wellbeing, and wider development. For those pupils most at risk of harm, it is also an important safeguarding factor.

Most absence from school is accounted for by illness. Pupils who miss more than 50% of possible school sessions in a school year are considered to be severely absent. In the 2021/22 academic year, the severe absence rate was 1.7%.

As part of the drive to improve school attendance, the Department published the 'Working together to improve school attendance' guidance last year, which makes clear the importance of addressing the barriers to attendance through strong, multi agency working at school, multi academy trust, and Local Authority level. This includes a specific focus on identifying and supporting those pupils most at risk of persistent and severe absence from school to tackle absence early and put plans in place to improve attendance.

Schools and Local Authorities should agree a joint approach to supporting severely absent pupils, recognising that their needs are often more complex, and they are more likely to need support from a number of agencies locally.

The statutory guidance 'Working Together to Safeguard Children (2018)' emphasises that safeguarding is the responsibility of all professionals who work with children. Where a professional has concerns about a child, they should make an immediate referral to Local Authority children's social care. It is the responsibility of Local Authority children's services to assess children's risk of harm. The latest data from 2021/22, shows that domestic abuse

remains one of the most common factors identified in Children's Social Care Assessments.

While there have been no specific discussions with my right hon. Friend, the Home Secretary, on severe absence, the Home Office and the Department for Education have regular discussions on areas of joint interest. This includes the Support, Attend, Fulfil, Exceed (SAFE) taskforces in mainstream schools and the Alternative Provision Specialist Taskforces, which involve specialist support for children disengaged from education to improve their attendance and reduce their involvement in serious violence. The Secretary of State for Education chairs an Attendance Action Alliance of leaders of key frontline services that support families. Members from education, health, justice, the third sector, and parent organisations meet regularly and have collectively committed to use their roles and organisations to undertake activities to improve attendance and tackle persistent absence from school.

Pupils: Absenteeism

3 Apr 2023 | Written questions | Answered | House of Lords | HL6690

Asked by: Lord Mann

To ask His Majesty's Government how many children in England are currently not attending school regularly due to unauthorised absences.

Answered by: Baroness Barran | Department for Education

Schools are required to record in the register once in the morning session and once in the afternoon session whether or not a pupil is absent.

The attached table below shows the number of pupil enrolments in England with one or more sessions of unauthorised absence by academic year.

In the 2021/22 academic year, 366,042 pupil enrolments missed 10% or more of possible sessions due to unauthorised absence. This figure covers state-funded primary, state-funded secondary and special schools in England.

Unauthorised absence includes pupils who arrived late (after registration has closed), unauthorised holidays, reason for absence not yet provided, and other unauthorised absence.

The data used in this answer are published in the National Statistics release on pupil absence in schools in England, available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england>(opens in a new tab).

Schools: Finance

26 January 2023 | Written questions | Answered | House of Commons | 126835

Asked by: Munira Wilson

To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps she is taking to promote the financial sustainability of schools with falling pupil rolls.

Answered by: Nick Gibb | Department for Education

The 2022 Autumn Statement has provided an additional increase in the core schools' budget of £2.3 billion for both financial years 2023/24 and 2024/25.

Taking the Dedicated Schools Grant allocations and the additional funding announced in the 2022 Autumn Statement together, core schools funding is increasing by £3.5 billion in 2023/24, compared to 2022/23. This takes the total core schools budget for 2023/24 to £57.3 billion. The core schools budget will total £58.8 billion in 2024/25.

The 'lagged' funding system in the schools National Funding Formula, where schools are funded on the basis of their pupil numbers in the previous October census, helps to give schools more certainty over funding levels. This aids their planning, and is particularly important in giving schools that see year on year reductions in their pupil numbers time to re-organise their staffing and costs.

Local Authorities are also allocated growth funding, which they can use to support schools with falling rolls. This funding can be used to support good and outstanding schools with falling rolls where local planning data shows that the surplus places will be needed with the next three financial years. In 2022/23, 24 out of 150 Local Authorities chose to have falling rolls funds.

The Department has consulted on changes to the role of the Local Authority in managing pupil growth, and falling rolls, as part of our consultation 'Implementing the Direct National Funding Formula'. This included proposals on allowing some additional flexibility on how Local Authorities can operate their falling rolls funds.

The Department will publish the Government response to this consultation in spring 2023.

Schools: Admissions

21 Jun 2021 | Written questions | Answered | House of Lords | HL746

Asked by: Baroness Hayman

To ask Her Majesty's Government what is their estimate of the reduction in numbers of children on the rolls of (1) primary, and (2) secondary, schools in inner London since January 2020; and what reduction in funding for affected schools will result from these reduced numbers.

Answered by: Baroness Berridge | Department for Education

The department publishes pupil numbers in the annual 'Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics' statistical release. The most recent figures for January 2021 are available here: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics>(opens in a new tab).

Between January and October 2020 the number of pupils in state funded primary schools in Inner London decreased by 8,106 from 249,818 to 241,712. Over the same period the number of pupils in state funded secondary schools increased by 4,820 from 181,758 to 186,578. This gives an overall decrease across both phases of 3,286 pupils.

Core school funding increased by £2.6 billion in financial year 2020/21 and will increase by £4.8 billion and £7.1 billion in 2021/22 and 2022/23 respectively, compared to 2019/20. Schools in London will receive an additional £124.5 million this year, 2021/22, taking total funding to £6.7 billion. On average, schools in London will receive £5,914 per pupil this year, far greater than the national average of £5,228.

The schools national funding formula (NFF) continues to distribute this funding fairly, based on the needs of schools and their pupil cohorts. The vast majority of funding is distributed on the basis of pupil numbers and pupils' characteristics, which ensures that resources are delivered where they are needed most. In addition, schools in more expensive areas, like London, have higher funding per pupil than other parts of the country to reflect the higher costs they face. All schools also attract a lump sum of £117,800, irrespective of their size.

The funding system is "lagged" - this means that schools' allocations in any given year are based on pupil numbers from the previous autumn school census. The lagged funding system gives schools certainty over their budgets, as they know how many pupils they will receive funding for in the next year. This means that when pupil numbers fall, schools have time to respond before this starts to affect their budgets.

3

News articles

[Falling rolls fund will open to schools with lower Ofsted grades](#)

Times Education Supplement

26 April 2023

[School closures are a warning sign for London](#)

The Times

14 April 2023

[Primary schools in London 'may need to merge or close' as intakes dwindle,](#)

Guardian

12 January 2023

2023

[Falling pupil numbers require an urgent policy response](#)

Schools Week

18 July 2022

[Pupil numbers in England set to shrink by almost 1 million in 10 years](#)

Guardian

15 July 2022

4

Further information

FFT Education Datalab, [Pupils joining and leaving the state-funded school system before and after the start of the pandemic](#), 18 May 2023

London Councils, [Managing surplus places in London schools](#), 11 January 2023

Localgov.UK, [Falling pupil numbers force school mergers as numbers fall](#), 6 January 2023

Full Fact, [We don't know how many children aren't on school rolls](#), 8 February 2022

Disclaimer

The Commons Library does not intend the information in our research publications and briefings to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. We have published it to support the work of MPs. You should not rely upon it as legal or professional advice, or as a substitute for it. We do not accept any liability whatsoever for any errors, omissions or misstatements contained herein. You should consult a suitably qualified professional if you require specific advice or information. Read our briefing '[Legal help: where to go and how to pay](#)' for further information about sources of legal advice and help. This information is provided subject to the conditions of the Open Parliament Licence.

Sources and subscriptions for MPs and staff

We try to use sources in our research that everyone can access, but sometimes only information that exists behind a paywall or via a subscription is available. We provide access to many online subscriptions to MPs and parliamentary staff, please contact hoclbraryonline@parliament.uk or visit commonslibrary.parliament.uk/resources for more information.

Feedback

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in these publicly available briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that briefings are not necessarily updated to reflect subsequent changes.

If you have any comments on our briefings please email papers@parliament.uk. Please note that authors are not always able to engage in discussions with members of the public who express opinions about the content of our research, although we will carefully consider and correct any factual errors.

You can read our feedback and complaints policy and our editorial policy at commonslibrary.parliament.uk. If you have general questions about the work of the House of Commons email hcenquiries@parliament.uk.

The House of Commons Library is a research and information service based in the UK Parliament. Our impartial analysis, statistical research and resources help MPs and their staff scrutinise legislation, develop policy, and support constituents.

Our published material is available to everyone on commonslibrary.parliament.uk.

Get our latest research delivered straight to your inbox. Subscribe at commonslibrary.parliament.uk/subscribe or scan the code below:



 commonslibrary.parliament.uk

 [@commonslibrary](https://twitter.com/commonslibrary)