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Guidance

High needs place process: alternative provision (AP) free school guidance for 2026 to 2027

Updated 17 December 2025

Applies to England

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1. Introduction

This guidance is for alternative provision (AP) free schools and sets out the process for agreeing high needs place funding for the 2026 to 2027 academic year with the Department for Education (DfE). It explains how you should determine place numbers and the information we will take into consideration. It also explains supporting evidence you may need to provide, including commissioning from local authorities and schools.

2. What you need to do now

You must complete and return the 2026 to 2027 place template we emailed to you. This includes schools seeking funding for the same number of places as in the 2025 to 2026 academic year. Templates must be returned to High.Needs@education.gov.uk on or before 11:59pm Friday 9 January 2026.

You should complete and submit a template confirming your requested place numbers for the 2026 to 2027 academic year. Where these numbers are different to the starting point, we may require evidence to support your request.

Where you do not submit a template, or do not provide sufficient evidence to support requested place numbers, the starting point in the template may be used as a basis for the 2026 to 2027 allocation.

3. Change for 2026 to 2027 academic year

The [post 16 starting point](#) will be set to zero for 2026 to 2027. Any requests for post 16 special educational needs (SEN) places will require supporting evidence.

4. Place funding principles

You should use the principles set out below when considering the appropriate number of place numbers for the 2026 to 2027 academic year.

AP free schools' requests should be based on local authorities' and schools' recent commissioning activity and strategic planning decisions. Early discussion with local authorities and schools is important when agreeing appropriate 2026 to 2027 allocations. This is because local authorities will bear the cost of a number of those places from the third year an AP free school is open.

Some AP free schools may provide education to pupils not attending the school, for example to pupils at home due to medical needs or at a school where they are main-registered. In such cases these should be funded as a service through a local arrangement with the commissioner and not funded as places.

4.1 Pre-16

AP places are funded at £10,000 per place. Place numbers should reflect the expectation that a place will generally be occupied by a full-time equivalent (FTE) pupil. A place does not need to be filled by the same individual throughout the year - for example, where schools commission short-term placements.

It is important that AP settings are not overfunded where places are not required. The total capacity of a school should not automatically be used as the basis for the total number of funded places. For example, a school with a capacity of 150 should not expect to be funded for 150 places if the highest number pupils in attendance at any given time is 100. We accept that places may remain unoccupied during some periods to accommodate fluctuations in demand.

Place numbers should not necessarily represent the highest occupancy point, where this is not consistent with the average across the year.

Further information on funding arrangements for AP settings is available in section

The following example in table 1 shows how you may wish to calculate the number of places to be funded. It shows the average number of pupils (FTE) attending the school across the year as 75, this would be a reasonable number of places to fund.

Table 1: example of calculation of number of funded places

Month	Average number of pupils
September	63
October	64
November	65
December	66
January	68
February	71
March	74
April	76
May	85
June	94
July	100
Total	826
Average number of pupils/places funded (826/11 months)	75

Some AP settings also have a SEN unit or resourced provision. Pre-16 SEN places are also funded at £10,000 and will be commissioned by local authorities. The same principles for determining place numbers apply as for AP places.

4.2 Post-16

AP is for compulsory school aged pupils only. Sixth forms in AP settings are, therefore, funded in the same way as mainstream school sixth forms and receive per student funding through the post-16 funding formula. High needs places are funded at an additional £6,000 per place for students with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND). To be eligible for post-16 high needs place funding, the additional costs required to meet the needs for a student must exceed £6,000 and the school will receive top-up funding from the commissioning local authority.

More information is available at Section 9.2.2 of the [2025 to 2026 high needs funding operational guide](#).

5. Starting point

You should use the principles set out above when considering the appropriate number of places for the 2026 to 2027 academic year. As in previous years, we have provided a 'starting point' in the template to assist you with this process.

This starting point has been calculated for pre-16 places using actual occupancy data and funded place number data. Where requested numbers are higher than the starting point, we are likely to require evidence of planned commissioning to support the requested number of places.

Schools may consider changes in local commissioning arrangements, infrastructure changes or more recent occupancy data when deciding whether or not to submit changes to their place numbers that differ from their starting point. We recognise that in some cases the numbers returned by schools will differ from the starting point.

The starting point is based on:

5.1 Pre-16

The **lower** of:

- 2024 to 2025 academic year school census data (highest of October 2024,

January 2025 and May 2025 pupil numbers)

- 2025 to 2026 funded places

An example of how the pre-16 starting point is calculated is shown in table 2 below:

Table 2: an example of a pre-16 starting point calculation

	October 2024 school census	January 2025 school census	May 2025 schools census	Highest 2024 to 2025 school census	2025 to 2026 funded places	Starting point
AP free school	20	25	30	30	25	25

5.2 Post-16

For 2026 to 2027 academic year, the post-16 starting point is zero.

6. How to complete the template

The template includes 2 worksheets for completion. All schools must complete the 'APFS_Place_Review' worksheet, otherwise their allocation will be based on the starting point. Please complete the evidence and named 'Commissioners' worksheet if requested numbers are higher than the starting point.

6.1 APFS place review worksheet

Schools must complete the sections marked on the 'APFS_Place_Review' worksheet and include:

- contact details – including contact name, position, contact number and email

address

- requested place numbers – the number of places requested for the 2026 to 2027 academic year, including where numbers requested are in line with the starting point
- additional comments/evidence – provide information to support the requested numbers, where they are different to the starting point (for example, due to a move to permanent premises or change in commissioning arrangements). This may also include email evidence from commissioning local authorities and schools, where required

6.2 Commissioners worksheet

You must complete this where the requested place numbers are higher than:

- the starting point, or
- the 2024 to 2025 academic year census data, where this is higher than the starting point

Please list all local authorities commissioning places, or individual schools commissioning places directly, on the ‘Commissioners’ worksheet. This must also include the number of FTE places commissioned by that local authority or school. As explained below, we may also require supporting evidence from local authorities commissioning places, or commissioning panels on their behalf.

7. Supporting evidence required with the template

We will require supporting evidence where:

- pre-16 place numbers requested are higher than the starting point or 2024 to 2025 census data; and/or
- post-16 high needs place funding is requested

The type of evidence required for pre-16 and post-16 places is explained below. If you are unsure whether supporting evidence is required, or the type of information

required, please contact High.Needs@education.gov.uk.

7.1 Pre-16 places

We require an email or letter from those local authorities commissioning places, or commissioning panels on their behalf, confirming the total number of FTE places they plan to commission in the 2026 to 2027 academic year. We will consider 2025 to 2026 commissioning information where 2026 to 2027 information is not yet available. The evidence should support the numbers requested and included in the 'Commissioners' worksheet of the template.

Where a school is commissioning more than 10 places, please include an email from the school confirming the number and that this reflects the FTE pupils that will attend the AP free school.

7.2 Post-16 places

You must include an email or letter from each local authority planning to commission post-16 high needs SEN places as part of your request. This must confirm the number of places in 2026 to 2027 and state clearly that it relates to high needs students:

- aged 16 to 18 years, or 19-year-olds completing a secondary education course started before they were 18 years old
- with high levels of SEND, each with additional support costs of over £6,000 for which the school will receive top-up funding from the local authority's high needs budget in the 2026 to 2027 academic year

8. Important dates

The timeline for 2026 to 2027 academic year place numbers at AP free schools is as follows:

9 January 2026

Deadline to submit the completed template, including the 2026 to 2027 requested place numbers and supporting evidence (where needed) to High.Needs@education.gov.uk.

Guidance on how to complete the template is included in the 'Notes' worksheet of the template sent to AP free schools.

January 2026

We will review returned templates. We will consider the requested 2026 to 2027 place numbers alongside the evidence provided and the data available. We may contact schools if the template is not completed correctly or evidence to support the submitted numbers is unclear or insufficient.

February 2026

We will write to AP free schools and the relevant trust confirming funded 2026 to 2027 high needs place numbers.

March 2026

We expect to issue the 2026 to 2027 academic year funding allocations.

9. Further information

For more information about the high needs funding arrangements for alternative provision, see section 10 on 'Alternative Provision' in the [2025 to 2026 high needs operational guide](#).

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