

Department for Education

Guidance

Net capacity assessment: programme guide

Published 28 October 2026

Applies to England

Contents

Overview
About the NCA programme
Schools included in the NCA programme
Information collected by the NCA programme
Delivery of the NCA programme
How the NCA process works
Reports and feedback
Additional information
Contact us

Overview

This guidance provides a high-level overview of the net capacity assessment (NCA) programme and how it is delivered.

It is for:

- schools
- responsible bodies
- local authorities and other interested parties

Throughout this guidance, the words ‘school’ and ‘schools’ refer to all educational establishments covered by NCA, including academies and free schools.

About the NCA programme

The NCA programme ensures that data on the pupil capacity of schools is accurate and up to date. It supports decision-making by the Department for Education (DfE) and our stakeholders about how to use the school estate and target capital funding.

Additional information is included on why the NCA programme matters, how the results are used and on assessment visits.

> The capacity of a school is the number of pupil places available.
>
> A net capacity assessment provides a single, robust and consistent method of assessing the capacity of schools.

The NCA tool and methodology calculate the number of children a school can accommodate, based on the size and use of spaces available. It was originally developed in 2001 and has since been used predominantly by local authorities.

The NCA programme runs between 2025 and 2029. The Valuation Office is visiting primary schools in England to collect data on pupil capacity using the updated tool – see the section on the role of the Valuation Office.

Phase 1 of the NCA programme ran from 2023 to 2025. The Valuation Office visited approximately 4,200 schools in England to collect data on pupil capacity in secondary schools (including academies) and special schools.

The Valuation Office has public-sector property experts with extensive experience and the required specialist skills and capacity to deliver a data collection of this nature. Property assessors are based in more than 30 regional offices, ensuring full geographic coverage.

Benefits of the NCA programme

Accurate data on existing capacity within the school estate is essential for schools and responsible bodies to support decision-making on:

- published admission numbers
- admission appeals
- the use of their school buildings for curriculum and estate planning

The NCA programme:

- supports high-quality school place planning by local authorities, which have a statutory duty to provide sufficient school places
- allows DfE to best target capital for new school places and make good decisions regarding new schools, expansions and closures

These decisions are part of the process of driving up education standards by increasing places in high-quality schools.

Access to local high-quality school places helps support families, especially the most disadvantaged, who may have limited travel options and therefore need school places close to home. Accurate, up-to-date information on room size and use can also help schools review their compliance with health and safety and building regulations.

Accurate capacity data also supports decisions about school expansions, reductions in capacity, closures and the establishment of new schools.

Why the NCA programme matters includes further information.

Schools included in the NCA programme

Government-funded primary schools will be contacted by the Valuation Office during the NCA programme.

Standalone nursery schools and other early years establishments will not be visited, but the NCA of a primary school will record the spaces used for nursery and pre-school provision. All the establishment types in table 1 will be in scope for the NCA programme, regardless of age, condition or ownership.

Table 1: educational establishments included in the NCA programme, and their responsible bodies

Establishment type	Responsible body
Community schools	Local authority
Foundation and trust schools	Local authority
Voluntary-aided schools	Governing body and charitable trust (relevant diocese or diocesan board of education for Catholic or Church of England church schools)
Voluntary-controlled schools	Local authority
Academies, including free schools	Academy trust (and diocese board of education for Catholic or Church of England church schools)

Information collected by the NCA programme

All usable spaces are included in the net capacity measurement. Every space in the school buildings will be listed and measured, including:

- separate stores
- garages
- temporary buildings

This ensures that there is enough support space allowed for staff, storage and other ancillary accommodation.

The following will be measured:

- all buildings on any site used by the school
- other buildings used by the school for at least 80% of the school week
- circulation space
- open-plan areas

The following are measured but will not be included in the NCA calculation:

- early years and childcare facilities
- adult learning and skills facilities
- special educational needs resource units
- parents' or community rooms and chapels

Delivery of the NCA programme

Delivery schedule

The Valuation Office is visiting schools in England between 2025 and 2029.

Between July and September 2025, the Valuation Office undertook a number of pilot visits to schools. This helped to identify good practice in carrying out NCA in primary schools, including practical arrangements and making the best use of schools' time.

Site visits to schools are allocated in batches, known as tranches, on a quarterly basis.

Check the tranche list to identify when your school is scheduled for inclusion in the programme. This shows:

- the quarterly tranche dates between 2025 and 2029
- a master list of every primary school, indicating the proposed tranche or year for the scheduled visit by the Valuation Office
- lists of schools where the visit occurred in previous tranches
- lists of schools to be visited in each quarterly tranche for the coming year between April and March
- lists of schools to be visited in subsequent years

The lists can be filtered by local authority, academy trust and diocese. We will review the schedule in October and March each year and publish any changes.

The exact date of each school's visit within a quarterly tranche will be agreed by the Valuation Office and the school.

Table 2: tranche dates

Tranche	Dates
Year 1	-
Tranche 1	September to December 2025
Tranche 2	January to March 2026
Year 2	-
Tranche 3	April to June 2026
Tranche 4	July to September 2026
Tranche 5	October to December 2026
Tranche 6	January to March 2027
Year 3	-
Tranche 7	April to June 2027
Tranche 8	July to September 2027

Tranche 9	October to December 2027
Tranche 10	January to March 2027
Year 4	-
Tranche 11	April to June 2028
Tranche 12	July to September 2028
Tranche 13	October to December 2028
Tranche 14	January to March 2029

How the NCA process works

The NCA programme follows a 5-step process:

1. Communications and engagement phase: information about the programme, including the programme guide and schedule of school visits (tranches), is published. The Valuation Office will contact schools.

2. Preparation phase: the Valuation Office will request any previous NCA data and site plans. The school and Valuation Office will confirm the visit.

3. Data capture phase: the school should provide access to the Valuation Office for a site visit and answer any queries.

4. Quality-assurance phase: the school should check room data, and the Valuation Office and DfE will quality assure the data – the quality assurance section includes further information.

5. Report phase: the NCA report and feedback questionnaire are issued to all parties.

The role of the Valuation Office

The Valuation Office is responsible for:

- arranging site visits
- visiting the school sites
- collecting and recording the information on room size and usage

All Valuation Office assessors hold enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service status, and evidence is provided before starting the site visit.

At the start of the site visit, the property assessor will meet with the school's nominated representative to:

- plan the visit
- arrange access to all rooms and spaces
- ensure safeguarding measures are adhered to

The role of schools during the NCA programme

Before the site visit, the school will be contacted by the Valuation Office. They will be asked to:

- confirm the site visit date and time
- provide existing floor plans
- meet with the Valuation Office property assessor at the start and end of the site visit
- confirm room usage with the property assessor

Most site visits are expected to take up to half a day, although this will depend on the size and complexity of the school site.

The role of DfE

DfE is responsible for the:

- development and refinement of the NCA tool
- strategic direction and overall management of the programme, including the performance of the data collection organisation (Valuation Office)

DfE will also ensure that information about the programme is communicated effectively to stakeholders and will collect feedback throughout the programme to help make improvements.

The role of responsible bodies

Responsible bodies for schools are listed in table 1. They may be the admissions authority for the school or responsible for ensuring the suitability of the premises.

They include:

- local authorities
- multi-academy trusts
- charitable trusts and foundations
- dioceses or diocesan boards of education

Responsible bodies will receive a copy of the NCA report at the same time as the school.

The role of local authorities

All local authorities have specific responsibilities for sufficiency of school places and effective pupil place planning. They have a duty to report pupil capacity for all schools in their area through the annual school capacity survey.

Local authorities will receive a copy of the NCA report in all cases.

Quality assurance

The NCA data include many quality assurance and data integrity measures, ensuring that the programme runs as intended and that the quality of the collected assessments is of a high standard.

Published admission number and capacity

The NCA of a school will provide up-to-date and accurate data, which will help schools set an appropriate capacity figure and published admission number.

Schools and responsible bodies should use the NCA outcome to inform decisions about the capacity figures they report. Where a different capacity figure is reported, there may be legitimate reasons for this, and organisations should be prepared to explain the rationale.

Academy trusts are responsible for ensuring that pupil capacity figures in funding agreements remain accurate. NCA outcomes can help trusts review and maintain these figures.

Floor plans

The Valuation Office will collect any existing floor plans from the school, responsible body or local authority in advance of the site visit to prepare for the data collection on site. These will be sent out with the final NCA report to help schools and responsible bodies interpret the report.

In exceptional circumstances where no floor plan of any kind exists, the Valuation Office may commission a new plan to be created. This would involve a visit to the school from an organisation that will take detailed measurements and generate floor plans.

Reports and feedback

The NCA report will typically be available within 3 to 4 months of the site visit.

The report will be shared with the school, responsible body, local authority and

diocese where appropriate.

All parties will be able to respond if they identify any inaccuracies in the report and will be invited to complete and return an online questionnaire about the NCA programme, including their site visit and report.

The NCA report for every school includes:

- establishment details, including number of year groups and planned admission number
- data on every room, including size, room type and room use
- a summary of how many workplaces are available based on the number, size and use of rooms
- how the number of workplaces is adjusted to allow for appropriate timetabling needs
- the maximum and minimum capacity for the school – the capacity range
- a final net capacity figure – based on a formula that takes account of the capacity range and the published admission number of the school

Guidance on how to read your NCA report is available for:

- special schools
- primary schools (mainstream)
- secondary schools (mainstream)

Additional information

Why the NCA programme matters

Accurate pupil capacity information helps ensure informed decision-making across the education sector. It supports:

- local authorities in planning school places, identifying where additional capacity is needed, managing surplus places and supporting estate planning

- responsible bodies and schools in setting admission numbers, managing admission appeals, planning estates and supporting timetabling and curriculum delivery
- DfE in allocating basic need funding and planning for free schools
- all stakeholders when considering school expansions, reductions in capacity, closures or the establishment of new schools

Using NCA results

Reporting pupil capacity

Where an NCA identifies a change in pupil capacity, the findings should inform discussions between the responsible body and the local authority about the capacity figure reported in the next school capacity (SCAP) survey.

In some cases, a different figure may still be appropriate. In these cases, DfE may ask for further explanation, recognising that there can occasionally be valid reasons for a different reported capacity.

Funding agreements

Academy trusts are responsible for ensuring that the pupil capacity figures recorded in their funding agreements are accurate.

NCA outcomes can help trusts review and maintain the accuracy of these figures.

Assessment visits

Visit duration

Most NCA primary school visits can be completed within half a day, although the exact duration will depend on the size and complexity of the school.

Programme duration and future use

The current DfE-led NCA programme is intended as a one-off exercise to update capacity information nationally. Alongside this work, DfE is promoting greater awareness of the importance of reviewing capacity following building changes and encouraging the use of the NCA methodology for future assessments.

Copies of the NCA tool and accompanying guidance are available at Net capacity assessment tool to support schools and responsible bodies in carrying out future assessments where needed.

Contact us

Contact dfe.ncaprogramme@education.gov.uk for further information.

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