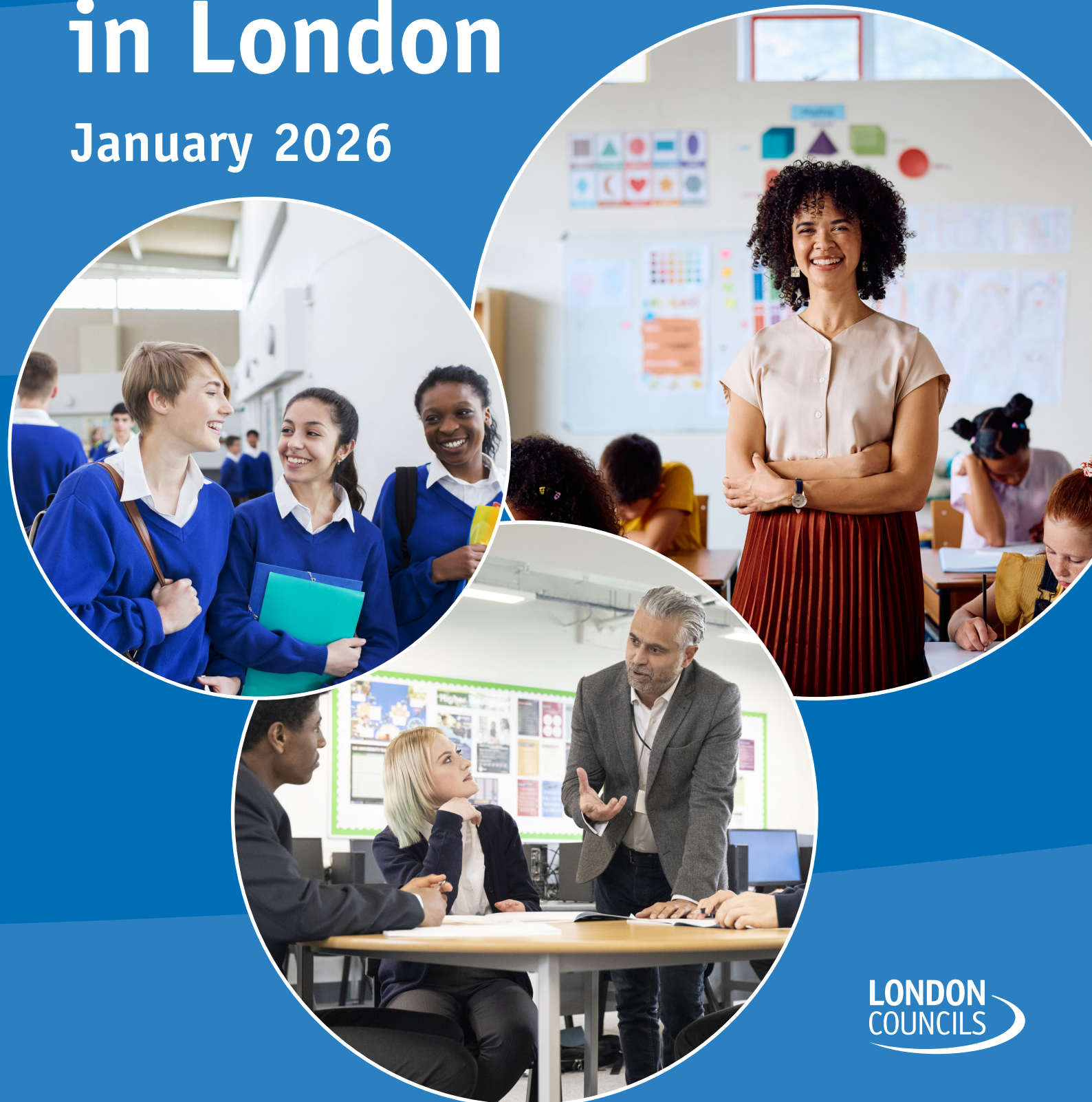


Managing school rolls and maintaining educational standards in London

January 2026





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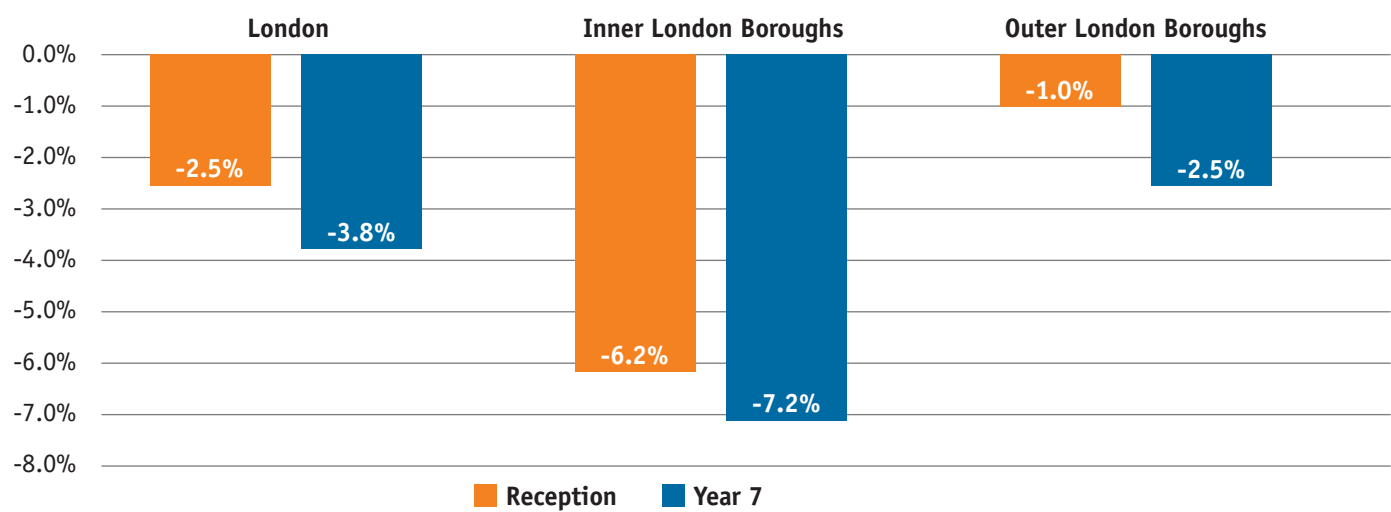
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Executive Summary

The London boroughs are forecasting a continued decline in demand for school places between 2025/26 and 2029/30. London Councils’ analysis of the four-year¹ school places projections from all 32² London local authorities shows an anticipated collective reduction of 2.5 per cent in demand for Reception, the main entry point to primary school, and 3.8 per cent for Year 7 (Y7), the point of entry to secondary school. While a small number of boroughs expect growth – eight for Reception and three for Y7 – the majority are predicting cumulative decreases.

Graph 1: Percentage change in London school places, 2025/26 to 2029/30



The combined effect of this falling demand is substantial, particularly in relation to school budgets, and has already resulted in many primary schools reducing their

Published Admission Numbers (PANs)³, with some having to close⁴. The forecasted drop in demand equates to a loss of £15 million in funding for primary schools and £30 million

1 Years refer to the academic year, which runs from September to September.
2 The City of London receives a separate grant for schools and have been excluded from the pan-London analysis.
3 A school’s Published Admission Number (PAN) sets out how many places it must offer in intake years (Reception and Year 7) each year. PANs are set by the admission authority and form part of a school’s published admission arrangements. Any change to a PAN must be subject to public consultation.
4 Between 2019 and the summer of 2025, there have been approximately 90 school closures or mergers in London as a result of reduced demand, and further closures are expected in the coming years.

in funding for secondary schools, amounting to a total loss of £45 million for London schools over the next four years.

Local authorities have a duty to ensure that sufficient high-quality school places are available in their local area. In a period of declining rolls, this requires close collaboration with schools to actively manage the consequences of reduced demand to avoid adverse impacts on children's outcomes.

London local authorities remain concerned about the implications of falling rolls on school standards and pupil attainment. Although pupil numbers are decreasing, the need for additional support continues to rise. Schools are seeing increased demand for mental health and wellbeing support, higher levels of school avoidance and persistent absence, and growing numbers of children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). At the same time, schools experiencing falling rolls face diminishing budgets to meet these rising needs. Attainment gaps relating to ethnicity, SEND and socio-economic disadvantage also persist, placing further strain on schools' ability to deliver equitable outcomes.

It is therefore essential that the government ensures school funding is sustainable and sufficient, enabling schools to meet increasing levels of need and ensuring that all children are able to thrive. In February

2025, London Councils published Managing school places and admissions in London⁵, setting out a series of key asks of government aimed at supporting local authorities and schools during this challenging period. We welcomed the proposals within the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill to deliver a fairer, more coherent and less bureaucratic school places planning and admissions system⁶, but remain concerned about the consequences of declining pupil numbers in primary schools and the recent drop in the number of pupils entering Year 7 in secondary schools.

Projections for secondary school pupil numbers have worsened, with Year 7 demand now expected to decline faster than reception demand for the first time in recent years. Over the next four years, reception places are forecast to fall by 2.5 per cent, while Year 7 places are projected to drop by 3.8 per cent. This reverses last year's pattern, when the projected decline was steeper in reception than in Year 7 (3.6 per cent compared with 2.9 per cent).

Reducing pupil numbers in secondary schools has significant implications for the quality and breadth of education they are able to offer. As rolls fall, schools face smaller budgets and are forced to narrow their curriculum, reduce subject options, and limit extra-curricular activities. This comes at a time when the government's response to the independent curriculum review⁷ sets out a

5 [Managing school places and admissions in London - report | London Councils – Home](#)

6 The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill proposes a fairer, more joined-up and less bureaucratic approach to place planning and admissions. It introduces new duties for schools and local authorities to co-operate on admissions and for schools to work with local authorities on place planning. The Bill also gives the Schools Adjudicator the power to set a school's Published Admission Number (PAN) when an objection is upheld, and extends local authorities' ability to direct a maintained school to admit a child so that this power also applies to academies. In addition, it removes the current legal presumption that new schools must be academies, allowing local authorities and others to propose alternative types of school where new provision is needed.

clear expectation for a broad, knowledge-rich curriculum with strong provision in the arts, cultural education, and wider enrichment. The review also emphasises the need for ambitious and inclusive curricula for all learners, including those with SEND. However, sustained financial pressures make it challenging for schools to maintain specialist teaching, protect less popular subjects, or deliver the full range of experiences that underpin a broad and balanced curriculum. Without additional support, there is a risk that reductions in pupil numbers and associated funding could exacerbate inequalities, restrict pupils' opportunities, and undermine the government's ambitions for a high-quality, inclusive education system.

The government has announced that it plans to publish a Schools White Paper in 2026 which could be significant in shaping national policy on supporting schools during this difficult period of constrained budgets and falling rolls in some areas. Its proposals will be central to understanding how local authorities and schools can respond to falling demand as well as tackling other significant challenges including rising levels of need.

We will continue to work closely with the Department for Education's (DfE) regional office and other key education partners in London to develop a strategic approach to managing the consequences of falling school rolls across the region. As our data shows, pupil numbers are likely to continue declining in the medium term, making it essential that we collaborate effectively, share good practice, and minimise disruption for schools and children across London, ensuring they can continue to thrive.

Recommendations

To further enable local authorities to meet their statutory duties, we recommend the DfE takes forward the following:

1. Ensure adequate funding for the education system, enabling local schools to work collectively to meet needs and support all children to thrive and achieve.
2. Work with London Councils and key education partners to support all schools to mitigate the impact of falling rolls, with a particular focus on maintaining a broad and balanced curriculum, sustaining enrichment opportunities, and protecting inclusive SEND provision.
3. Ensure that local authorities and the DfE have the necessary levers to secure effective cooperation from all schools in relation to school place planning, as referenced in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill.
4. DfE London regional team to take into account cross-borough planning and liaise with affected local authorities when making strategic decisions about new schools, including special provision.
5. Provide local authorities with greater decision-making powers, capital funding to adapt sites as appropriate, and the flexibility to retain and manage closed school buildings locally, so that they can balance the immediate needs of their area with longer-term planning for education provision.
6. Reform secondary legislation governing in-year admissions to create a fairer, more efficient, and less bureaucratic process, helping to minimise the impact of falling rolls on children's outcomes.
7. Adjust core funding based on the January school census to reflect in-year admissions, including more immediate funding for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), to ease the financial pressures on schools taking children mid-year.

School places forecasts



Introduction

Every year, local authorities respond to the Department for Education's (DfE) School Capacity Survey (SCAP) with detailed forecasts for the next four years. These returns are derived from detailed analysis, incorporating both local and regional intelligence to produce the most accurate demand forecasts for mainstream school places. London Councils has compiled and analysed these SCAP returns to gain a deeper understanding of projected demand across the region for the next four years. We received SCAP returns for mainstream schools from all 32 London boroughs.

Demand for reception places

Graph 2 shows that the majority of London boroughs are expecting a decline in the number of reception pupils between 2025/26 and 2029/30. Over this four-year period, the demand at reception level is forecasted to

decline by an average of 2.5 per cent across London—this masks some significantly larger decreases, but also includes a number of areas of growth. The eight areas of growth are forecasting an average increase of 3.7 per cent; when these are excluded from the analysis, the average reduction across the remaining boroughs increases to 6.1 per cent.

In comparison to last year's analysis based on the 2024 SCAP returns, the overall four-year forecast for reception places shows an improvement from the previously projected decline of 3.6 per cent. However, it remains too early to confirm any shift in trends, given the significant local variations within these figures, including differing growth projections. Last year's analysis showed that eight boroughs projected no change or growth; when these were excluded from the analysis, the overall reduction in demand was 6.1 per cent, marking no change this year.

Graph 2: Percentage change in London Reception school places, 2025/26 to 2029/30

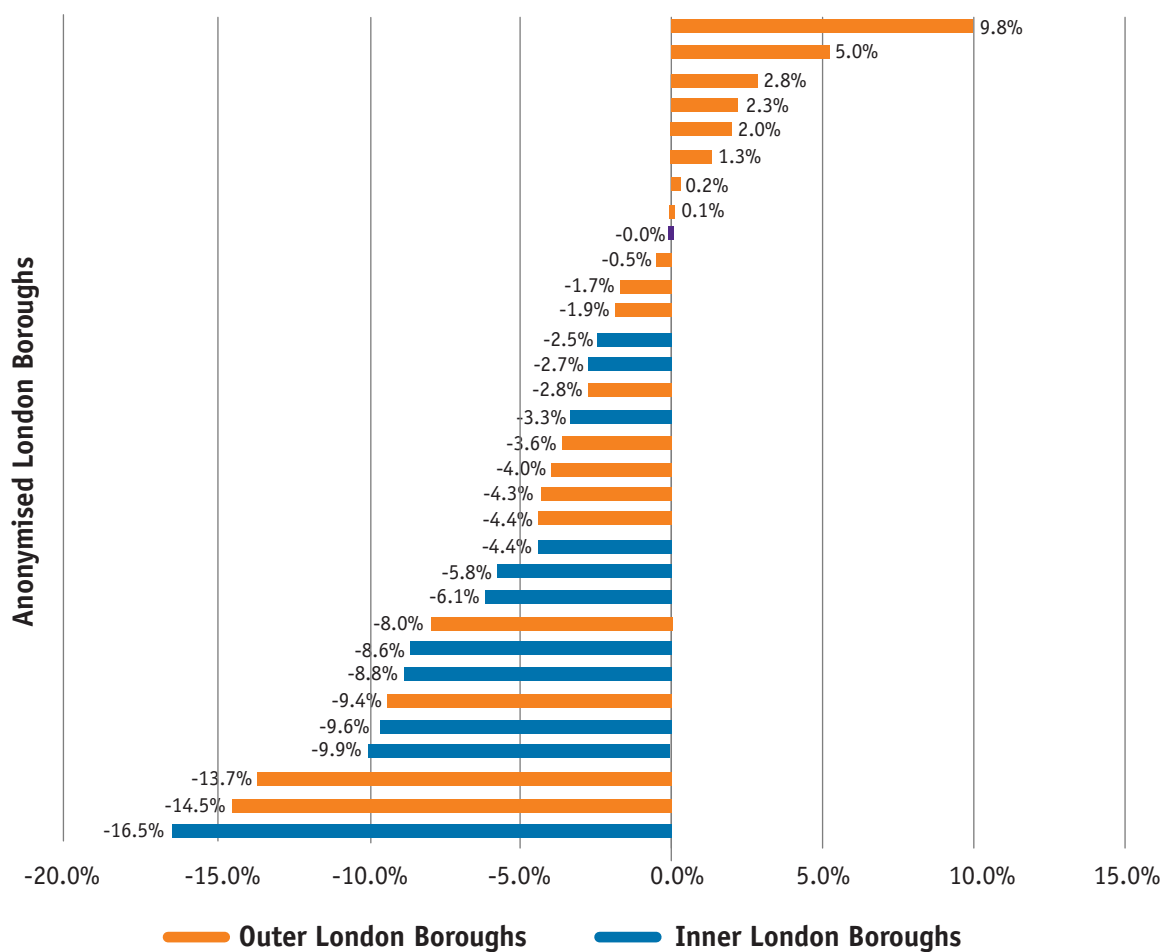


Table 1 shows a sub-regional breakdown of the projected decline in demand for reception places⁸. It indicates that inner London Boroughs are expected to see the sharpest decrease, with an estimated average drop of 6.2 per cent compared to 1.0 per cent for outer London boroughs⁹. It also shows that boroughs in South West London are expected to see the sharpest decrease, with an estimated 7.3 per cent drop. This marks a shift from the 2024 SCAP returns, where boroughs in South East London were forecast to be the most affected over the next four years, with a decrease of 8.2 per cent. Conversely, boroughs in North West London are expected to be the least affected, forecasting no change across the four-year period.

Table 1	
	Reception student number change from 2025-26 to 2029-30
London total	-2.5%
Inner	-6.2%
Outer	-1.0%
North East	-0.2%
North Central	-3.1%
South East	-4.5%
North West	-0.0%
South West	-7.3%

Demand for Year 7 places

Graph 3 shows that most London boroughs are forecasting a decline in Year 7 (Y7) pupil numbers between 2025/26 and 2029/30. Across the region, there is an average forecast drop in demand for Y7 school places of 3.8 per cent—as with reception places, this masks some significantly larger decreases, but also includes a number of areas of growth. The three areas of growth are forecasting an average increase of 5.3 per cent; when these are excluded from the analysis, the average reduction increases to 5.5 per cent.

When comparing this data to last year's analysis based on the 2024 SCAP returns, the four-year forecast demand for Y7 places has worsened from a drop of 2.9 per cent to 3.8 per cent. Last year's analysis showed that five boroughs projected growth; when these were excluded from the analysis, the overall decline in demand across the remaining boroughs was 4.3 per cent, marking a further decline of 1.2 per cent this year.

8 The five sub-regions are: North Central (Camden, Haringey, Islington, Barnet, Enfield), North East (Barking & Dagenham, Havering, Redbridge, Newham, Tower Hamlets, Waltham Forest, Hackney, City of London), North West (Hillingdon, Harrow, Hounslow, Ealing, Brent, Hammersmith & Fulham, Kensington & Chelsea, Westminster), South East (Bromley, Bexley, Greenwich, Lewisham, Lambeth, Southwark) and South West (Kingston, Merton, Richmond, Sutton, Croydon, Wandsworth).

9 The inner London boroughs are: Camden, Hackney, Hammersmith & Fulham, Islington, Kensington & Chelsea, Lambeth, Lewisham, Newham, Southwark, Tower Hamlets, Wandsworth, Westminster. The outer London boroughs: Barking & Dagenham, Barnet, Bexley, Brent, Bromley, Croydon, Ealing, Enfield, Greenwich, Haringey, Harrow, Havering, Hillingdon, Hounslow, Kingston, Merton, Redbridge, Richmond, Sutton, Waltham Forest

Graph 3: Percentage change in London Year 7 school places, 2025/26 to 2029/30

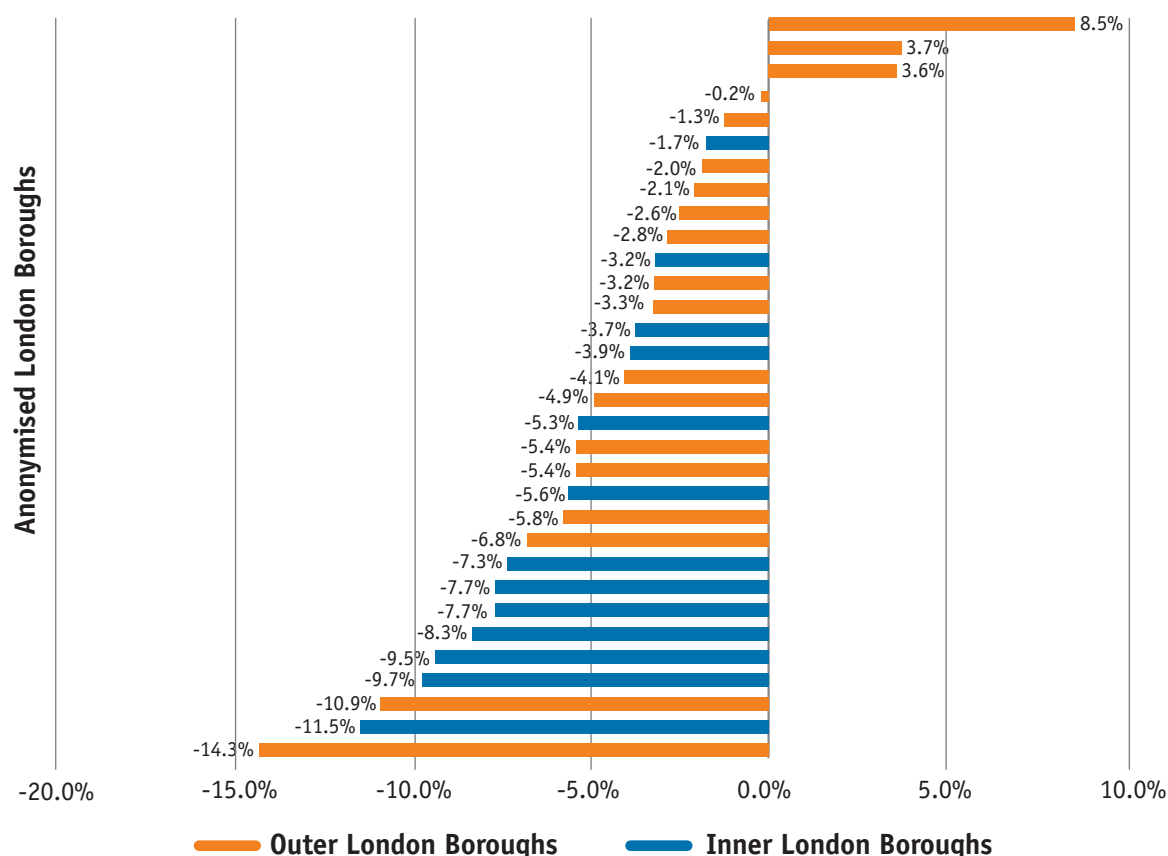


Table 2 shows the sub-regional breakdown of the projected decline in demand for Y7 places. As with reception places, it indicates that inner London boroughs are expected to feel the challenge of falling rolls more acutely, with an average fall of 7.2 per cent compared to 2.5 per cent for outer London boroughs. It also shows that, as with reception, boroughs in South West London are expected to face the greatest decline in demand, by an average of 6.9 per cent. Conversely, boroughs in North East London are expected to be the least affected, with a drop of 0.3 per cent.

Table 2	
	Y7 student number change from 2024-25 to 2029-30
London total	-3.8%
Inner	-7.2%
Outer	-2.5%
North East	-0.3%
North Central	-3.2%
South East	-6.4%
North West	-3.6%
South West	-6.9%

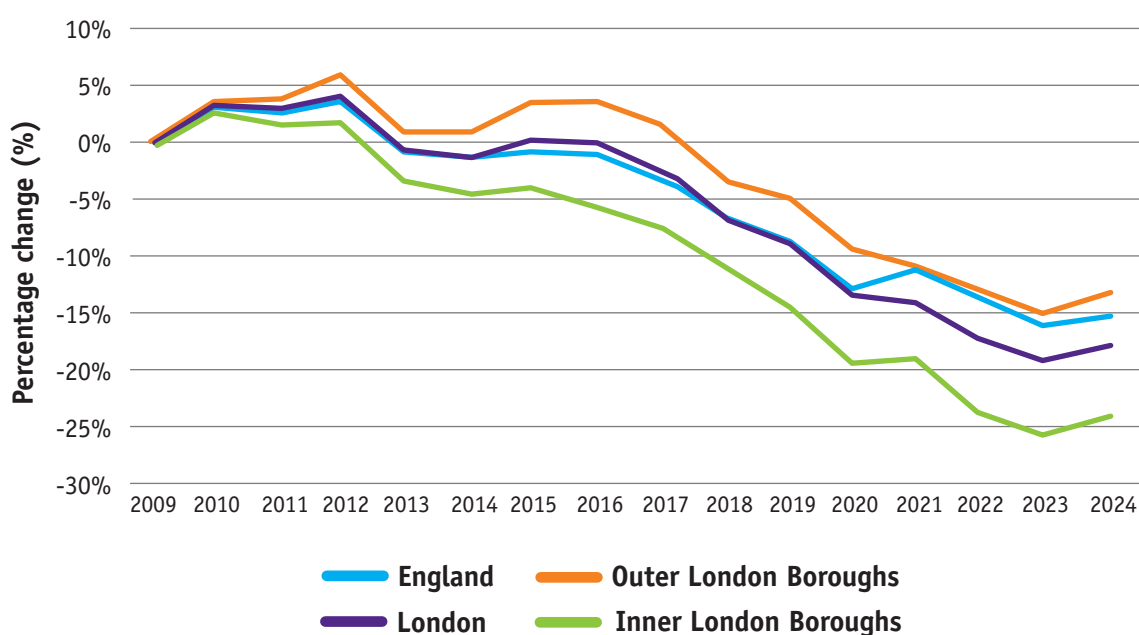
Drivers behind decrease in demand for school places

As noted in previous years, a range of local factors continue to influence decisions by families to move out of London or to delay or forego having children altogether. As Graph 4 shows, in 2020, London recorded a smaller percentage change in the total number of live births than the rest of England for the first time since 2009, and London's rate has continued to remain below the national average ever since¹⁰. The average age of first-time mothers in the capital is rising: in 2024, the standardised mean age in London reached 32.5 years, the highest among English regions, and fertility in younger age groups (especially 25-29) is declining, while rates for women in their 30s are increasing¹¹.

This delay in childbearing can be attributed to various structural pressures, most notably high housing costs and economic uncertainty—both of which suppress short-term fertility and consequently reduce the number of young children in the system¹².

Although falling birth rates remain a significant factor, analysis shows there is also significant net domestic out-migration, especially from inner London, as families seek more affordable housing elsewhere¹³. More than 183,000 Londoners are estimated to be homeless and living in temporary accommodation arranged by their local boroughs, the highest level ever recorded and equivalent to at least one in every 50 residents¹⁴. Within this, almost 90,000 are children. London Councils estimates that this

Graph 4: Percentage Change in Total Numbers of Live Births Compared to 2009



¹⁰ Births in England and Wales - Office for National Statistics

¹¹ Births in England and Wales - Office for National Statistics

¹² Social and economic barriers, not choice, driving global fertility crisis: UNFPA | UN News

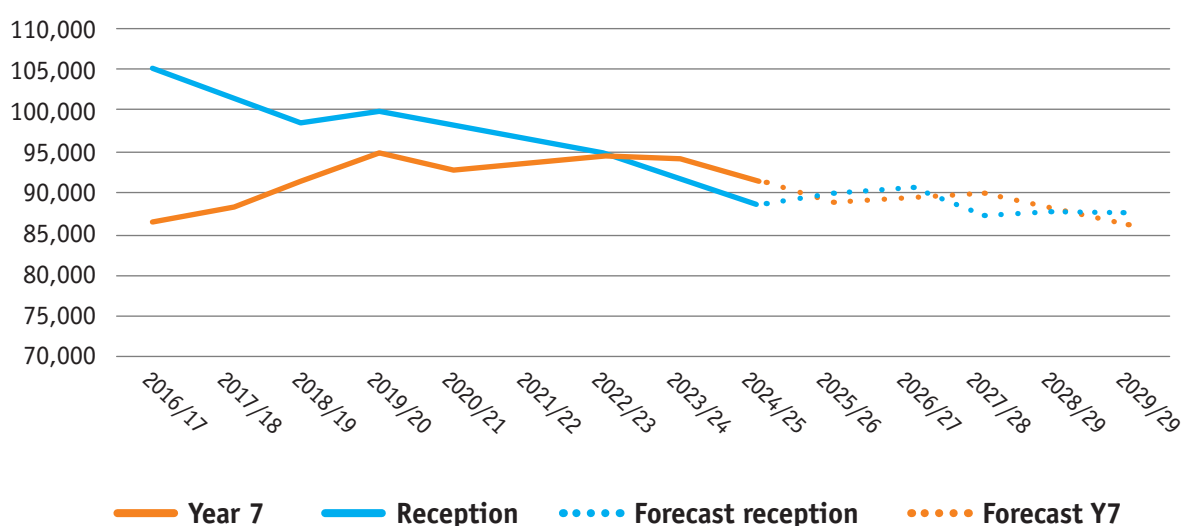
equates to roughly one in every 21 children in the capital, meaning that, on average, at least one child in every London classroom is experiencing homelessness.

These housing pressures are contributing to more families relocating out of the capital, a trend reflected in pupil movement patterns. Approximately 17 per cent (around 17,500) of pupils who started reception in 2012/13 had left London by Year 6; for the 2017/18 reception cohort, this rose to 20 per cent (around 20,000)¹⁵. Notably, similar shifts in pupil mobility are not observed across other regions of England. For example, The East Midlands recorded only a marginal 0.2 per cent increase in the proportion of primary pupils leaving the region, while the South East

remained unchanged, with 11.8 per cent moving out in both cohorts. All other regions saw little to no variation in pupil movements.

Over the past eight years, the steady decline in demand for reception places led to a point where, by 2023/24, the number of children in reception had fallen below the number in Year 7 for the first time. As illustrated in Graph 5, this shift marked the end of the surge in reception-age pupils that local authorities and schools had been managing since 2008. Although the most recent data show a marginal increase in live births in both England and London, it remains too early to determine whether this uptick will become a trend.

Graph 5: London Pupil Headcount from School Census



13 [The English Housing Survey 2023-24](#): rented sectors reveals that private renters in London face both the highest rents and the greatest financial pressure, spending an average of £368 per week and 46 per cent of their income on housing costs. ¹³This is significantly higher than the amounts paid by social renters in the capital, who spend £157 per week on average and 31 per cent of their income, and mortgagors, who spend 24 per cent. Elsewhere in England, the proportion of income spent on private rent ranges from 25 per cent in the North West to 33 per cent in the South West and South East.

14 [London's homelessness emergency | London Councils – Home](#)

15 [So Long, London – An analysis of London primary pupil movements - Education Policy Institute](#)

School deficits

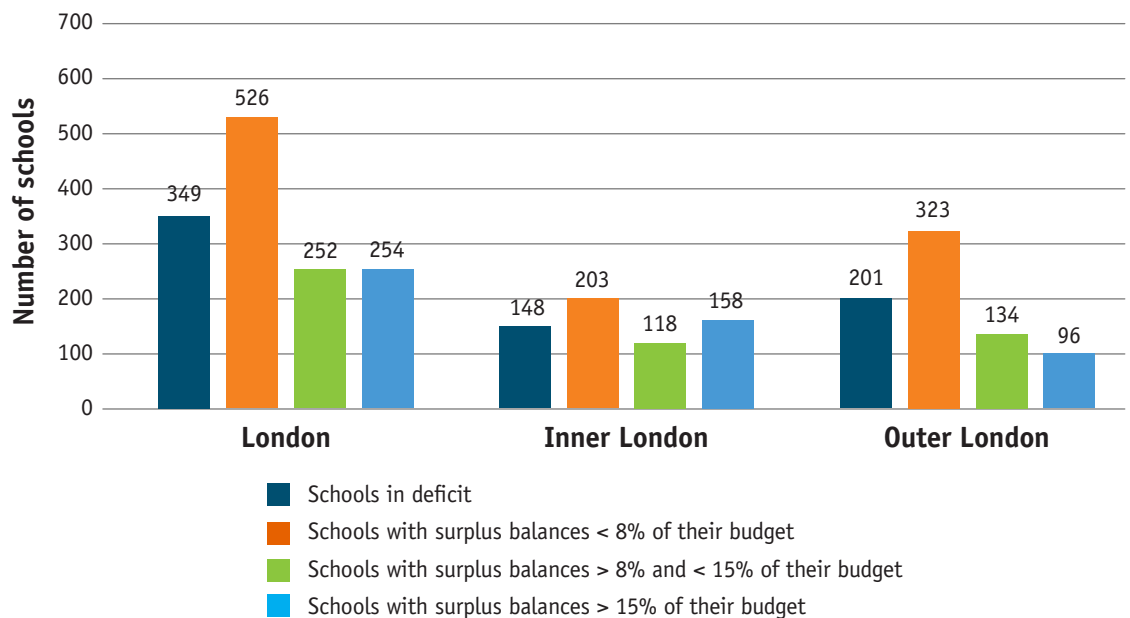
The main consequence of declining pupil numbers for schools is the strain placed on their financial stability. Because school funding is allocated on a per-pupil basis, any fall in enrolment results in a direct reduction in income. Given the considerable effect that falling rolls have on school finances, London Councils carried out a survey in Autumn 2025 to explore funding pressures across London's schools and to gain a clearer understanding of the factors driving them. 29 out of 32 boroughs responded.

Graphs 6 and 7 show that just over one quarter of all local authority maintained¹⁶ schools in London were in deficit in 2024/25.

This is consistent across both inner and outer London boroughs. The majority of London's maintained schools are either in deficit or have surplus balances equating to less than 8 per cent¹⁷ of their budgets.

Maintained primary schools in outer London boroughs are facing greater budgetary strain than those in inner London, with 38 per cent of outer London schools holding reserves of less than 8 per cent of their budget, compared with 32 per cent in inner London. These figures indicate a slight improvement compared with last year, with the proportion of schools holding reserves below 8 per cent falling by around 9 per cent in outer London and 4 per cent in inner London.

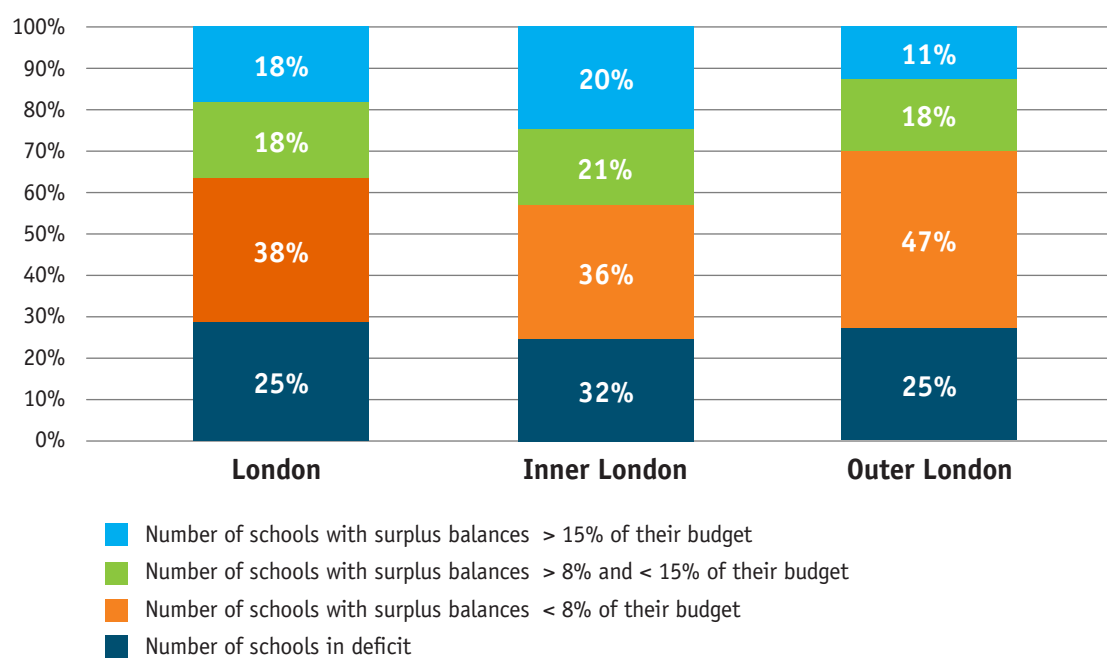
Graph 6: Number of London Maintained Schools in Deficit or with Surplus 2023/24



¹⁶ Local authorities do not have access to academy financial data, meaning that London Councils can only analyse the budgets of local authority maintained schools. However, as academies are funded via the same national funding formula, they are subject to the same financial pressures, and many are likely to be facing similarly serious budgetary challenges.

¹⁷ Eight per cent of a school's annual budget is approximately equivalent to one month of operating costs.

Graph 7: Maintained school deficit by percentage



Unexpectedly, there is currently no clear correlation between demand for school places and the areas experiencing the greatest deficits at a regional level. This suggests that additional factors are contributing to schools falling into deficit, including rising inflationary costs, shortages of teaching and support staff that increase reliance on costly agency workers, and the impact of a significant staff pay award. Differences between inner and outer London reflect varying local pressures, including demographic change, housing patterns and parental preference. Despite this, discussions with boroughs confirm that falling rolls remain a major factor driving schools into deficit. As a result, there is widespread concern that many primary schools currently

holding surplus balances of less than 8 per cent of their budgets will soon move into deficit without timely intervention.

Additionally, local authorities are facing wider deficits within the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG), which amounts to a cumulative total of £542.3 million across London boroughs for 2025/26¹⁸. We project that this will rise to £744.7 million by 2026/27. This is largely due to the deficits accumulated within the High Needs Block, which are projected to amount to £267.1 million in 2025/26 and rise to £363.0 million by 2026/27.

18 These figures are based on data received by 29 London boroughs following London Council’s annual DSG Deficits Survey.

Discussion and recommendations



Impact of falling rolls on schools

While some schools face significant deficits, the scale of these pressures can be mitigated through early leadership action and strong governance; however, the response by school leadership and governance varies across the system.

London's schools have undergone a highly successful improvement journey over the past 20 years and continue to achieve the strongest Key Stage 2 and GCSE outcomes in the country¹⁹. In August 2024, official government statistics revealed that 96 per cent of London schools are now rated good or outstanding by Ofsted²⁰.

However, the fall in the child population is creating significant challenges for schools. As outlined above, many school budgets are now in deficit, and further budgetary reductions are expected as pupil numbers continue to decline. The forecasted drop in demand equates to a loss of £15 million in funding for primary schools and £30 million in funding for secondary schools over the next four years in London. This amounts to a total loss of £45 million for London schools over the four-year period, reducing funding from £1,371 million to £1,327 million²¹.

As the majority of a school's expenditure is spent on staffing, there is limited room

¹⁹ In 2024/25, London had 68 per cent of pupils meeting the expected standard in reading, writing and maths (combined) at KS2 compared to 61 per cent nationally (the highest performing region). In 2024/25, 70 per cent of pupils in London achieved grades 4 or above in English and Mathematics GCSEs, compared to 65 per cent nationally (highest performing region). [Key stage 2 attainment, Academic year 2024/25 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

²⁰ [State-funded schools inspections and outcomes as at 31 August 2024 - GOV.UK](#)

²¹ Funding impacts are estimated by applying projected changes in pupil numbers to the primary and secondary per-pupil funding rates derived from published Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) allocations for 2026–27.

for savings before workforce reductions become unavoidable. Such reductions can affect school standards and pupil outcomes, for example by limiting access to specialist interventions for children with additional needs or reducing the range of extra-curricular activities on offer.

For many primary schools in London, falling school rolls create a financially vulnerable position, particularly for those operating with only one Form of Entry.

Many secondary schools are also already having to scale back their provision in order to manage tightening budgets. Over half of secondary school leaders in England have reduced teaching or support staff, with a growing number also limiting GCSE option choices, enrichment activities and school trips as cost-saving measures²².

Growing financial pressures have left some schools unable to maintain a sufficiently supportive pastoral provision, as well as investment in inclusive practices and activities aimed at narrowing attainment gaps. As a result, a number of schools are finding it increasingly difficult to provide adequate support for pupils with additional needs. For instance, if schools are required to cut teaching assistant posts to balance their budgets, this may significantly limit their capacity to provide appropriate support for pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and undermine efforts to promote inclusion.

These pressures come at a time when the government's response to the independent curriculum review outlines a renewed commitment to a "curriculum rich in knowledge and broad in scope" with a greater focus on cultural, sporting, and artistic development²³. Notably, the government has stated that arts education should be "the entitlement of every child", and not treated as an optional add-on. However, with school funding largely determined on a per-pupil basis, falling rolls are directly reducing the financial resources available to schools and making it increasingly difficult to reach these targets. The curriculum review also emphasises the importance of ensuring that the curriculum is inclusive and ambitious for all learners, including those with SEND. Yet, in the context of rising demand and tighter budgets, there is growing concern about the capacity of mainstream schools to maintain inclusive practices and deliver the full breadth of provision expected.

It is important to note that, although student numbers are falling, demand for additional support continues to rise. This includes increased need for mental health provision, higher levels of school avoidance and persistent absence, and growing rates of SEND²⁴. Attainment gaps linked to race, SEND, and disadvantage also remain a concern.

²² [School Funding and Pupil Premium 2025 - The Sutton Trust](#)

²³ [Government response to the Curriculum and Assessment Review](#)

²⁴ The number of pupils in London receiving SEN support (without EHCP) increased in by 2.5 per cent in 2025 to 189,608 from 184,980 in 2024. The number of Education, Health and Care (EHC) Plans in London in January 2025 was 100,917, an increase of 7.9 per cent from 93,539 in 2024.

Recommendation 1: The government needs to ensure that schools receive sustainable and adequate funding so they can build the capacity required to meet these additional needs and support all children to thrive and achieve.

Recommendation 2: The government needs to work with London Councils and key education partners to support all schools to mitigate the impact of falling rolls, with a particular focus on maintaining a broad and balanced curriculum, sustaining enrichment opportunities, and protecting inclusive SEND provision.

Mitigating the impact of falling rolls on schools and children

Differences between Inner and Outer London reflect varying local pressures, including demographic change, housing patterns and parental preference. While some schools face significant deficits, the scale of these pressures can be mitigated through early leadership action and strong governance by governors; however, practice is mixed, and the quality of school leadership and governance varies across the system.

Mitigating the impact of falling rolls on schools and children

Local authorities are duty-bound to promote high educational standards in their local schools. They have a statutory obligation to ensure that sufficient school places are available for every child in the area, including those with SEND. They support schools

experiencing falling rolls to remain financially viable while maintaining high standards and continuing to offer families choice.

However, a number of challenges within the current system make this difficult. While some of these issues are addressed in the proposals set out in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, many barriers remain that prevent local authorities from taking a fully strategic approach across the whole local education system to planning school places and developing new provision, ensuring that admissions decisions align with local needs, and facilitating the effective redesignation or repurposing of surplus buildings.

In some instances, a local authority's duty to ensure the overall sustainability and high standards of local schools may result in decisions to close schools. Several primary schools in London have already closed due to falling demand²⁵, and more closures are expected in the future. Decisions on which schools to close are informed by a range of factors, including parental preference (i.e. the popularity of schools), Ofsted ratings, travel routes, projected demand, and financial sustainability.

Local authorities recognise the disruption to a child's education that a school closure can create, so they work very closely with affected families and other local schools to identify suitable alternative schools and to avoid disadvantaging particular groups of children as a result of school closures.

²⁵ Between 2019 and the summer of 2025, approximately 40 schools in London closed as a result of reduced demand, including those closed during mergers, and further closures are expected in the coming years. Many more schools have reduced class sizes.

Approaches include reducing the Published Admissions Number (PAN) or developing Additional Resourced Provision for children with Special Educational Needs to make use of surplus capacity while generating additional funding. However, local authorities also have to take forward plans to close schools that have become financially unviable, particularly when there are no forecast increases in the local child population. Keeping these schools open would have a detrimental impact on the quality and sustainability of the local school system.

Our data reveals that school rolls are likely to continue to decrease for the medium term in the majority of boroughs in London, so it is vital that we recognise the need to work collaboratively to minimise disruption to schools and children across London so that they can continue to thrive. However, local authorities are currently unable to take a collective strategic approach to place planning across all schools in the local area.

In many cases, academies work constructively with local authorities and recognise their statutory responsibilities within the local school system. However, some academies remain unwilling to engage, operating in isolation without regard for local needs. This is why we have been lobbying the government for legislative changes that would give local authorities clearer duties over all schools in relation to place planning. We therefore welcome the proposed provisions in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill that seek to strengthen cooperation between schools and local authorities, enabling admissions and place planning to be managed more fairly across all state-funded schools.

Nevertheless, we remain concerned that the current wording in the Bill may not be strong enough to allow the DfE to enforce compliance with local authority plans.

Recommendation 3: We urge the DfE to strengthen the language and introduce appropriate levers, as referenced in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, to ensure that these measures are enforceable in practice

Localised increases in demand

Although the overall trend across London is one of declining rolls, a number of boroughs are forecasting increases in pupil numbers over the coming years. These pockets of growth, particularly at the reception level, could lead to the creation of new provision to meet rising demand. Secondary school pupils typically travel further to attend school, meaning that changes in one borough's population can generate pressures in its neighbours. As a result, effective cross-borough collaboration becomes especially important to ensure that new places are planned strategically and that provision is located where it is most needed.

Growth in demand also extends to specialist provision, with several boroughs indicating rising numbers of children requiring SEND places. Ensuring that these new places are delivered appropriately across borough boundaries will be essential to minimise travel distances and maintain high-quality, inclusive provision.

Recommendation 4: DfE London regional team should take into account cross-borough planning and liaise with affected local authorities when making strategic decisions about new schools, including special provision.

Future proofing the education system

Schools that are no longer required because of falling rolls present an opportunity for alternative temporary uses that can support families and local communities. For example, these spaces can be used to deliver services such as nurseries, family hubs and special school provision, in line with local needs.

Some local authorities have already been able to successfully redesignate primary schools scheduled for closure into special schools. In addition, the government's School-Based Nursery Capital Grant will enable some primary schools to repurpose surplus space to establish or expand nursery provision.

Local authorities are also considering the need to protect the school estate for future generations. London's birth rate has fluctuated over time, and the city may once again become a more popular place to raise a family, resulting in renewed demand for school places particularly if the Government's new housing targets are met.

At the national level, the Government has set an objective to deliver 1.5 million new homes over the course of this Parliament to address acute housing demand and support economic growth. London will need to plan for around 880,000 new homes over the next decade – equivalent to roughly 88,000 homes per year – to align with national policy and population

pressures. This requirement underscores the need to safeguard and strategically manage education sites; without careful planning and protection of these sites, there is a risk that growth pressures could encroach on space needed for schools and other community services.

Recommendation 5: Local authorities therefore need greater decision-making powers, capital funding to adapt sites as appropriate, and the flexibility to retain and manage closed school buildings locally, so that they can balance the immediate needs of their area with longer-term planning for education provision.

In-year admissions

London's local authorities are also facing a significant rise in in-year admissions. For admissions outside the usual entry points, parents and carers have to navigate different processes depending on the school and local authority. This can result in lengthy delays, leaving many children waiting for a school place and potentially harming their future life chances.

While many headteachers work closely with local authorities to admit children wherever possible, the lack of levers for local authorities to direct in-year admissions means that less inclusive practices can go unchecked. For example, some boroughs have reported examples of schools choosing not to fill vacancies to avoid admitting children with additional needs. They have also shared instances of schools discouraging families from applying, directing them towards other local schools, or delaying decisions in the hope that another school makes an offer²⁶.

26 London Councils (2023) [Seeking School Places.pdf](#)

All of this contributes to children missing out on education.

As such, we welcome the proposed measure in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill that would give local authorities the power to direct the admission of a child to either a maintained school or an academy. This will support the fair allocation of in-year admissions for vulnerable children and help ensure that admissions decisions better reflect local needs.

That being the case, this change does not address the issue of children missing out on education while they navigate the lengthy admissions process. Local authorities require improved access to data on school rolls and changes to the Admissions Code that would speed up the process, such as removing the requirement to wait four weeks before referring a case to the Fair Access Panel (FAP)

and setting an expectation that children should be admitted within two weeks of a decision.

Recommendation 6: Reform secondary legislation governing in-year admissions to create a fairer, more efficient, and less bureaucratic process, helping to minimise the impact of falling rolls on children's outcomes.

Recommendation 7: Additionally, London Councils is urging the DfE to adjust core funding based on the January School Census so that schools receive funding for in-year admissions, and to consider more immediate funding for children with SEND admitted in-year. This would help reduce the financial pressures on schools when taking on additional pupils mid-year.



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