



Department
for Education

Mainstream free schools: assessing the need for a new school in a local area

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How need is assessed during application rounds

As set out in the published document [Free school applications: criteria for assessment](#) the Department for Education assesses whether there is need for a proposed mainstream free school by considering available evidence on three factors:

- [basic need for places in the local area](#);
- [parental demand](#);
- [the standards of local schools](#).

The rest of this document refers to the assessment of need for mainstream free schools excluding 16-19 free schools, where the need criteria is different.

Proposers of free schools are required to demonstrate parental demand. In addition the department also assesses whether there is either a need for additional school places or a need for additional high quality school places in the local area. This formal process for assessing the need for a free school was introduced for the fifth wave of free school applications.

Prior to the fifth wave, proposer groups were required to demonstrate parental demand. Basic need for places and the standards of local schools were taken into account as contextual factors but were not a part of the assessment criteria.

When assessing both the basic need in the local area and the standards of local schools, we define local schools as those that fall within the 'straight-line' distance within which 80%¹ of the pupils in the district travel to school (at the relevant phase). This is intended to act as a proxy catchment area for the new free school.

For example, if a secondary free school is proposed in Westminster, we find the distance that 80% of pupils travel to school in this district is 3.8 miles or less and we select all the schools within that distance of the proposed free school site postcode (up to a maximum of 15 schools) for assessment of basic need and quality.

¹ We considered several alternatives to the 80% distance to construct our proxy catchment area including the median. We decided on the 80% distance to account for the limitations of the 'straight-line' distance which may not reflect the actual travel distance and to capture the travel patterns of the vast majority of pupils within the district.

Basic need for places in the local area

The methodology for assessing the need for additional school places, termed 'basic need', is set out in the document [Free schools: Location in areas with need for additional places](#) which was published at the same time the department announced the successful Wave 7 free school applications.

The assessment relies on school capacity data (SCAP) which is collected in May each year and is published towards the end of the same year or early the following year². This can mean that the SCAP data are more than a year old during some free school application rounds.

In order to ensure the assessment of need is as up to date as possible, free school assessors within the Department contact local authorities directly in some cases. This intelligence is then used to inform our assessment of the need for additional school places. In addition where the free school proposers cites that it is part of a section 106 agreement related to a local housing development project³, the Department will contact the LA to confirm this development.

Parental demand

Proposer groups need to be able to demonstrate that they have interest from a sufficient number of parents of potential pupils to take pupil numbers close to the school's capacity for each of the school's first two years of operation. They must show:

- how many parents agree that they would select the school as their first choice for the first two years;
- demonstrate that they have provided parents with relevant information to enable them to make an informed choice (i.e. leaflets or other promotional material); and
- provide a map which shows that the potential pupils live within commuting distance of the school.

² [SCAP 14 data](#), on which the assessment of need has been based for Wave 8 applications, was published on 12th February 2015.

³ A section 106 agreement falls under the [Town and Country Planning Act 1990](#)

The standards of local schools

If there are more pupils at underperforming existing schools in the local area than the capacity of the proposed school, then the local area is classified as being in need of additional high quality school places. Underperforming schools will usually be defined as schools rated as 'requires improvement' or 'inadequate' by Ofsted.

Additionally a school will be classified as underperforming if its overall attainment is below the LA average for the most current year and its value added score⁴ is not above the national average. Where the average for the entire LA is below the national average, the school will instead be compared to the national average because we would not want to judge the performance of a school by the standards of an unperforming LA.

⁴ Value Added (VA) measures how far each child has progressed, between the end of key stage 1 and the end of key stage 2 compared with similar ability children for primary schools, and between key stage 2 and key stage 4 for secondary schools.

Annex A: Summary statistics

Table 1: Basis of need for approved Wave 8 mainstream free school⁵ applications*

Basis of need	Number of applicants	Percentage of applicants
Basic need	35	90%
Local authority intelligence	2	5%
Standards of local schools	2	5%

*Parental demand is not included in the table because all applicants must meet this criterion to be approved.

⁵ This table excludes 16-19 free schools because the assessment of need for 16-19 free schools differs from other mainstream free school.



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