



Department  
for Education

# Measuring school capacity

**A summary guide for local authorities**

**November 2023**

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## Summary

This document summarises already published guidance on measuring school capacity. It summarises the updated net capacity assessment method, the default method for measuring school capacity, and provides examples of alternative measures where appropriate.

For questions about this guidance or any issues you are unable to resolve, email the Pupil Place Planning Data Team at [SCAP.PPP@education.gov.uk](mailto:SCAP.PPP@education.gov.uk) for advice.

## Net capacity assessment method

The capacity of a school is the number of pupil places it can accommodate. This section summarises the 'net capacity assessment method' of assessing the capacity of all mainstream and special schools in England, which updates all previous methods of assessing the capacity of schools.

### The Purpose of Net Capacity

The net capacity assessment method is intended to provide a single, robust, and consistent method of assessing the capacity of schools. It results in a measure of capacity called the 'Net Capacity.' The Net Capacity figures can be used for a number of purposes. By comparison with the number on roll and future pupil forecasts, it can indicate the number of places that are surplus, or additional places that are needed, in a school. If it is divided by the number of year groups, it can indicate the approximate<sup>1</sup> admission number that can generally be accommodated or an appropriate number of planned places in special schools. It can also inform decisions about how capital resources are best deployed. In addition, it provides schools and responsible bodies with consistent and objective data for use in admission appeals, as well as supporting estate management and curriculum planning.

### Schools to which Net Capacity Applies

The net capacity assessment method will apply to all Community, Voluntary Aided, Voluntary Controlled, Foundation schools and Academies in England. The method will not apply to nursery schools, alternative provision (including pupil referral units) or further education colleges.

### How Net Capacity is Assessed

For all types of schools, the net capacity is based on the number, size and type of teaching spaces and the age range of the school. This is checked against the total usable space available, which must be measured, and ensures that there is neither too much nor too little space available to support the core teaching activities. The method also allows some flexibility to suit the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and admission arrangements within mainstream schools.

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<sup>1</sup> The admission number or planned places indicated by the Net Capacity of a school may need to be refined taking into account class size limits and need.

[Area guidelines and net capacity - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk)

Although the method of assessing net capacity is broadly similar, different assessment forms are used for mainstream and special schools. For special schools, there is an additional assumption that allows significantly more space per pupil.

The net capacity of a school should be assessed by the measurement of the available space and calculation, using the relevant assessment form available at

### **Assessing the Net Capacity of Schools**

Both assessment forms comprise three parts:

- Establishment Details;
- Room Details (steps 1 to 4);
- Net Capacity Calculation.

### **Responsibilities**

Local Authorities are responsible for assessing the net capacity of all local authority maintained schools in the Authority, based on the net capacity assessment method.

Responsible bodies for other schools including academies should also use this assessment method to ensure a consistent approach with maintained schools when supporting their requirement to keep their capacity figure accurate and up to date.

This will include identifying the Establishment Details, taking measurements for Steps 1-3 of the Room Details, and, at step 4 of the Room Details:

- designating any non-school or support facilities excluded from the capacity assessment of the school, including early years provision, adult learning facilities and specially resourced facilities for SEND (in line with the definitions in Part 4 of the Guidance);
- designating a chapel and/or parents/community room if applicable;
- designating the 'room use' for each room; and
- designating the rooms that are 'classbases' in primary schools, or teaching rooms in secondary schools, that are the basis of the capacity calculation.

For all schools, Steps 1 to 3 of the Room Details may be measured and assessed by independent assessors (such as the Valuation Office Agency), as they are based only on the physical attributes of the spaces available.

The Secretary of State requires all Local Authorities under Section 29(3) of the Education Act 1996 to annually inform the Department, via the School Capacity Survey, of the capacity of each mainstream and special school in its area, and any planned changes to a mainstream school's capacity in the coming 3 years. This includes academies. The

local authority may not centrally hold capacity data for all its academies and may have to collect this data from responsible bodies. Practices will differ across local authorities; this may involve responsible bodies having to inform the local authority of any new capacity figures or may involve responding to the local authority when it asks for the data. The School Capacity Survey should always reflect the most up to date capacity of an academy regardless of whether the funding agreement is still yet to be updated.

## Alternative measures for academy schools

**Where a net capacity assessment has not been carried out for a mainstream academy school**, we would usually expect the capacity of an academy to be the capacity recorded in the school's funding agreement, which in turn should have been based on the most recent net capacity assessment before the school converted.

Where a change has been or is to be made to the physical capacity of an academy, the trust should first consult the [guidance](#) for making significant changes and follow the process where required to gain approval for the change. Whether approval is needed or not, trusts should in all cases take action to amend the capacity figure in their funding agreement.

Where changes to an academy funding agreement have not yet been made following a capacity change, and a net capacity assessment has not been carried out, you may find the following examples helpful in determining its capacity.

**Example 1** - An academy has reduced its Published Admission Number (PAN) below that stated in the funding agreement, but no buildings have been removed or re-purposed/

The reduction or limiting of PAN should have been carried out in accordance with the admissions code but does not require a deed of variation to the funding agreement nor a change to the capacity.

The physical space continues to be available should it be required in future and the funding agreement capacity should therefore, in general, continue to be recorded as the capacity.

**Example 2** - An academy has its PAN set above that indicated by the funding agreement, but no buildings have been added. The number on roll continues to be lower than the funding agreement.

An increased or high PAN can be used to facilitate an overall increase in pupil numbers where these are low.

If the numbers on roll continue to be lower than the capacity in the funding agreement there could be uncertainty about whether the physical space could accommodate the total number indicated by the PAN multiplied by the number of year groups.

The funding agreement capacity should, in general, continue to be recorded as the capacity.

However, if the academy is confident that higher numbers could be accommodated, it may be useful to discuss with the trust if a net capacity assessment could usefully establish the position, and if needed, a deed of variation taken forward to amend the capacity figure in the funding agreement.

**Example 3** - An academy has its PAN set above that indicated by the funding agreement, but no buildings have been added. The number on roll reflects higher admission numbers.

The number on roll consistently reflects uptake of the higher PAN, and there is a high degree of certainty that the physical space can accommodate the total number indicated by the PAN multiplied by the number of year groups. This 'PAN multiplied by the number of year groups' can be taken to be the school's capacity.

**Example 4** - An academy's admissions are higher than the funding agreement capacity figure and PAN.

As in example 3, there is a high degree of certainty that the physical space can accommodate the total number indicated by the PAN multiplied by the number of year groups. This 'PAN multiplied by the number of year groups' can be taken to be the school's capacity.

As the academy is under no obligation to admit above PAN or the funding agreement capacity, the higher numbers reflected in number on roll are uncertain and should not be used to determine capacity.

**Example 5** - An academy with sixth form has its PAN set above the capacity indicated by the funding agreement but no buildings have been added. The numbers on roll continue to be lower than the funding agreement capacity figure.

If the numbers on roll continue to be lower than the total capacity in the funding agreement there is uncertainty on whether the physical space could accommodate the total number indicated by the PAN multiplied by the number of year groups plus sixth form.

The increased pre-16 PAN may only be accommodated by temporary use of sixth form capacity.

The funding agreement capacity should, in general, continue to be recorded as the capacity.

**Example 6** - An academy no longer admits to the sixth form, but the funding agreement still contains a 6th form capacity.



Removal of the sixth form provision should have been carried out in accordance with the admissions code and [significant change](#) process.

Where the sixth form is no longer operating, the sixth form capacity may be reduced to 0.

The full funding agreement capacity should, in general, continue to be recorded as the capacity.

## Alternative measures for specialist provision

As special schools sit outside the admissions code and have a duty to admit pupils for whom the school is named in their EHCP, we recognise that some special schools will not have previously attempted to assess or define their available capacity.

If a special school net capacity assessment is not available, LAs can rely on other sources of data when measuring the capacity of special schools. In rough order of preference, these data sources might include:

- Any capacity figure for the school that may have been agreed as part of a significant change request, either as a [prescribed alteration to a maintained school](#) or as part of request for [a significant change to an open academy](#).
- The school's 'planned number of places' as per the schools funding agreement (academies only)
- The number of 'funded places' as agreed as part of ESFA's High Needs Place Funding process (academies and institutions funded by ESFA directly only)<sup>2</sup>
- Typical operating figure – any capacity figure that may be used or understood locally e.g., to help inform pupil placements and local strategic planning.
- A school's self-reported capacity as captured in [Get information about Schools](#)

### SEN Units & Specially Resourced Provision in Mainstream Schools

SEN Units & Specially Resourced Provision are forms of specialist provision found within mainstream schools. However, they are distinct from instances where pupils with or without an EHCP may be receiving special educational provision **solely in mainstream classes** (with or without additional SEND support or the with the assistance of High Needs revenue top-up funding). Some LAs may not locally make a clear distinction between SEN units, Specially Resourced Provision, or other forms of support in mainstream classes, or may use alternative terms for equivalent types of provision (Enhanced Resource Bases etc.). For the purposes of this guidance, formal SEN Units and Specially Resourced Provision are defined as follows:

- SEN units are units in a mainstream school which are recognised by the local authority in whose area the school is located as specially organised for pupils with SEN who are to be taught mainly inside that unit. Specially Resourced Provision are units in a mainstream school which are recognised by the local authority in

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<sup>2</sup> Only where funded places are reflective of capacity. If using 'places funded' LAs should ensure that this does not result in a reported capacity higher or lower than that which could be accommodated in practice.

whose area the school is located as specially organised for pupils with SEN who are to be taught mainly outside that unit.

- SEN Units and Specially Resourced Provision will generally:
  - receive funding of £6,000 or £10,000 per place, and usually top-up funding for any additional costs of support required by individual pupils.
  - cater for a specific type or types of SEN (e.g., autistic spectrum disorders, severe learning difficulties etc.).
  - are usually for pupils with an EHC plan (but may also provide support for pupils on SEN Support).

LAs will need to determine the capacity of any SEN units and Specially Resourced Provision within mainstream schools, though utilising a full net capacity assessment may not be appropriate unless the SEN unit operates in practice as a fully self-contained unit. Key sources of capacity information for SEN units and Specially Resourced Provision are likely to include:

- The recorded capacity of any SEN unit or Specially Resourced Provision that may be recorded in the academy's funding agreement (academies only).
- The number of 'funded places' agreed with the local authority as part of the LA's high needs place funding process.
- A typical operating figure – any capacity figure that may be used or understood locally e.g., to help inform pupil placements and local strategic planning.
- The maximum number of EHCP pupils the provision could accept before it would impact the school's ability to admit pupils without EHCPs up to its stated mainstream PAN.
- The capacity of any SEN units or Specially Resourced Provision as captured in [Get information about Schools](#).
- Alternatively, local authorities may need to request this information from schools directly.

## **Middle or all-through schools**

Where a school (mainstream or special) provides both primary and secondary education, capacity can be assessed for both of these phases separately using the methods mentioned in this guidance.

The combined primary and secondary capacity figures must equal the total capacity of the school.

## Capacity by year group

Capacity by year group should relate to the number of places available in each year group. Usually, this will be the published admission number (PAN) for mainstream schools or planned places for special schools, for that year's cohort. It can include any temporary bulge classes (whether they were added at the point of entry or later). If a small number of additional pupils were admitted over PAN through appeals, this is not usually added to the capacity by year group figure.

The sum of capacity by year group will not necessarily equal exactly the total capacity, for a variety of reasons. For example:

- A PAN reduction is unlikely to reduce the capacity in the funding agreement but will be reflected in the capacity by year group(s) total.
- A bulge class accommodated in space not intended for long-term teaching, such as a library, would be reflected in the capacity by year group total but may not increase net capacity.



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