



Department
for Education

Net Capacity Assessment (NCA)

Programme Guide

September 2025

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Introduction

About the net capacity assessment programme

The net capacity assessment (NCA) programme will ensure data on the pupil capacity of schools is accurate and up to date, to support decision making by the DfE and our stakeholders about how to use the school estate and target capital funding.

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

The original NCA tool has been updated by the DfE to reflect more modern curriculum requirements and a wider range of school types.

The NCA programme will run between 2025 and 2029, subject to final approval expected in autumn 2025. The Valuation Office Agency (VOA) will visit primary schools in England to collect data on pupil capacity using the updated tool.

Phase 1 of the NCA programme ran for 2 years from 2023-2025. The Valuation Office Agency (VOA) visited approximately 4,200 schools in England to collect data on pupil capacity in secondary schools (including academies) and special schools.

VOA are public sector property experts, with extensive relevant experience and the required specialist skills and capacity to deliver a data collection of this nature. They are also easily able to provide full geographic coverage with property assessors based in more than 30 regional offices.

About this document

This document provides a high-level overview of the NCA programme and how it will be delivered. It is intended as a guide for schools, responsible bodies, and other interested parties.

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

The net capacity assessment programme

The net capacity assessment (NCA) programme will ensure accurate, up to date data on the pupil capacity of schools, to support decision making by the DfE and our stakeholders about how to use the school estate and target capital funding efficiently.

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 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, and the use of their school buildings for curriculum and estate planning.

The NCA programme will support high-quality school place planning by local authorities who have a statutory duty to provide sufficient school places, as well as allowing the 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 and up-to-date information on room size and usage can also help schools review compliance with health and safety and building regulations.

Schools included in the NCA programme

Government funded primary schools will be contacted by the Valuation Office Agency (VOA) during the NCA programme.

Standalone nursery schools and other early years establishments will not be visited, but the net capacity assessment of a primary school will record the spaces used for nursery and pre-school provision.

All the establishment types in the table below will be in scope for the NCA programme, regardless of age or 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 or diocesan board of education for Catholic or Church of England church schools)

Information collected by the NCA programme

All usable spaces will be included in the net capacity measurement. Every space in the school buildings will be listed and measured, including separate stores, garages, and temporary buildings. This is to ensure that there is enough support space allowed for staff, storage, and other ancillary accommodation.

What 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

Measured but not included in the NCA calculation:

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

Delivery of the NCA programme

Delivery schedule

The Valuations Office Agency (VOA) will visit schools in England between 2025 and 2029, subject to final approval expected in autumn 2025.

Between July and September 2025, VOA 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' valuable time.

All other site visits to schools are allocated in batches, known as tranches, on a quarterly basis. During the early tranches we will focus on schools where up to date information on capacity is most important: for example, areas where demand for primary places is highest; and some early adopter schools offering breakfast clubs. As local authorities have statutory duties for sufficiency of school places, we will also invite them to nominate priority schools.

We have published the list of schools to be visited between September and December 2025 in the first tranche. Once final approvals are received we will publish another update with a full tranche list. Following this we will publish an up-to-date list of schools by tranche at least once a year.

Schools and responsible bodies will be able to check which of their schools are scheduled for inclusion in the programme by checking the tranche lists published on the NCA page on GOV.UK. The timing of each school's visit within this period will be agreed by VOA and the school.

Table 2: Tranche dates

Tranches	Dates
Tranche 1	October 2025 – December 2026
Tranche 2	January – March 2026
Tranche 3	April – June 2026
Tranche 4	July – September 2026
Tranche 5	October – December 2026
Tranche 6	January – March 2027
Tranche 7	April – June 2027
Tranche 8	July – September 2027
Tranche 9	October – December 2027
Tranche 10	January – March 2028
Tranche 11	April – June 2028
Tranche 12	July – September 2028
Tranche 13	October – December 2028
Tranche 14	January – March 2029

Net capacity assessment process

1. Communication and engagement phase

- Information about the programme – publication of programme guide and schedule of school visits (tranches)
- VOA contacts school

2. Preparation phase

- Send previous data – VOA requests any previous NCA data and site plans
- Confirm site visit – VOA and school confirm site visit

3. Data capture phase

- Site visit – school provides access and answers queries from VOA
- VOA measures and records size, type and use of all rooms

4. QA phase

- Check data – school checks room data; VOA/DfE carry out quality assurance

5. Report phase

- NCA report and feedback questionnaire is issued to all parties

The role of the data collection organisation

We have commissioned the Valuation Office Agency (VOA) to collect the data required for the NCA programme. They are responsible for arranging site visits, visiting the school sites, and collecting and recording the information on room size and usage.

All VOA property assessors hold enhanced DBS status, and evidence will be provided before commencing the site visit. At the start of the visit, the property assessor(s) will meet with the school's nominated representative to plan the visit, arrange access to all rooms and spaces, and ensure safeguarding measures are adhered to.

The role of schools during the NCA programme

Prior to the site visit, the school will be contacted by VOA. They will be asked to:

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

The role of the Department for Education (DfE)

As well as development and refinement of the NCA Tool, DfE is responsible for strategic direction and overall management of the programme, including the performance of the data collection organisation. DfE will also make sure 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 above, and 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, and dioceses/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, and a duty to report pupil capacity for all schools in their area through the annual school capacity (SCAP) survey. Accordingly, local authorities will receive a copy of the NCA report in all cases.

Quality assurance

The NCA data includes many quality-assurance (QA) 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 (PAN) and capacity

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

Floor plans

VOA will collect any existing floor plans from the school, responsible body and/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 it.

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

Reports and feedback

The NCA report will normally be available within 3 to 4 months of the site visit. The report will be shared with the school, the responsible body, the local authority, and the 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, 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 can be found on the GOV.UK page [here](#).

Frequently asked questions

Q. Why have a NCA programme?

A. Accurate information on pupil capacity is important as it enables effective decision making for:

- local authorities – strategic school place planning, additional places needed, managing surplus places, estate planning
- responsible bodies and schools – admission number setting, admission appeals, estate planning, timetabling and curriculum delivery
- DfE – basic need funding for additional places, free schools planning
- all – expansions, reductions in capacity, closures, new schools

Q. Does a school or responsible body (RB) have to update or change their capacity figure if the NCA reports a change in pupil capacity?

A. We would expect the NCA to inform a discussion between the responsible body and the local authority regarding what would be an appropriate figure to report in the next annual school capacity (SCAP) survey. If this is different to the NCA outcome, we may ask for an explanation of this but do accept that there can occasionally be circumstances where this is appropriate.

Q. Do responsible bodies need to change the capacity figure in the Funding Agreement if the NCA reports a different figure?

A. Academy trusts are responsible for ensuring funding agreements contain accurate pupil capacity figures. Outcomes from NCAs will help trusts ensure that this is the case.

Q. Why can't the visits for condition data collection (CDC) and NCA happen at the same time?

A. The skills and knowledge required to carry out assessments of school condition are quite different to those required for NCAs. Accordingly, the visits will be carried out by different personnel and organisations.

Q. How long will a site visit take for an NCA?

A. Most assessments will be completed within half a day, depending on the size of the school.

Q. Is this a rolling programme?

A. This programme led by the DfE is only intended as a one-off update. We are also raising awareness of the importance of assessing capacity following building changes and how the NCA method can help with that. Copies of the NCA tool and guidance on its use can be found [here](#).

For any queries, contact dfc.ncaprogramme@education.gov.uk.



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