Office of
the Schools
Adjudicator

Office of the Schools Adjudicator Annual Report

1 January 2025 to 31 December 2025

November 2026

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Introduction and executive summary

1. This report to the Secretary of State for Education (the Secretary of State) covers the work of the Office of the Schools Adjudicator (OSA) during the calendar year 2025 and the local authority reports made to us in accordance with the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 relating to the academic year September 2024 to August 2025. We hope that the findings drawn from adjudicator casework and from local authority reports will be of use to the Secretary of State, Ministers and officials, local authorities, faith bodies, academy trusts and school governing bodies.

2. Part 1 of the report deals with adjudicator casework. Part 2 of the report summarises the local authority reports. Where it seemed most helpful, we have drawn together under the headings in Part 1 observations derived from casework and local authority reports. We have also commented on some of the matters reported to in Part 2.

3. We took over the role of Chief Adjudicator on a joint and interim basis following the departure of the previous Chief Adjudicator in April 2024. We are very pleased to report that a permanent Chief Adjudicator, Nigel Genders, has been appointed and took up post on 16 February 2026. Nigel has a very strong background in education, having been Chief Education Officer, Church of England and Chief Executive of The National Society for over 11 years before taking up the Chief Adjudicator role. As the newly appointed Chief Adjudicator was not in post during the calendar year 2025, we have written this report.

4. In terms of OSA casework, the number of new cases submitted to the OSA in 2025 was 401. This was a 14 per cent increase on the 351 submitted in 2024. Over the past year, the changing pattern of our casework has continued. Previously, the bulk of our cases were objections to admission arrangements. These were received by the 15 May deadline and our determinations were largely completed during the period from May to October/November. This year, we have continued to receive large numbers of cases throughout the year. There was an increase in the number of objections to admission arrangements, although the focused workload during the summer months does not make up the bulk of the team's work. During 2025, the number of applications for approval of proposed variations to admission arrangements has again increased significantly. These have, most commonly, been requests to approve proposals to reduce published admission numbers (PANs) for primary schools. The number of requests for advice to the Secretary of State on directions to admit named pupils to academies fell from an all-time high of 61 cases in 2024 to 44 cases in 2025. It is to be hoped that this number will continue to fall. However, we have noticed a high number of direction advice requests being submitted at the beginning of this year (January / February 2026), including several relating to admissions to Year 11. It may, therefore, be that directions are being sought later in the school year. As in recent years, there were few statutory proposals referred to us (four in total), three appeals against school closure and one prescribed alteration.

5. During 2025, we were able to build the adjudicator team from a position of understaffing in the previous year, as noted in the 2024 report. We appointed five new adjudicators at the beginning of 2025; Emma Harrison, Jackie Liu, David Holland, Patrick Storrie and Philip Lloyd, all of whom have brought a wealth of experience to the team. A full training programme was provided for the new adjudicators in the early part of 2025. A further adjudicator, Miranda Barnett was appointed at the same time as the new Chief Adjudicator and took up post in February 2026. A full training programme has been timetabled for the new Chief Adjudicator and the new Adjudicator in early 2026. The authors of this report, Marisa Vallely and Tom Brooke are retiring from their adjudicator role in March 2026. Going forward, as well as the Chief Adjudicator, there will be 12 adjudicators.

6. As ever, we are very grateful for the support provided by our secretariat team, based in Darlington.

7. We are mindful of the challenges which schools and local authorities are facing. We are grateful to all the parties who have been involved in the cases which have come before us, for their time and their cooperation with our processes in the interests of the children who are the focus of all that we do.

Mr Thomas Brooke and Dr Marisa Vallely

Chief Adjudicators

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Part 1 - Review of OSA work in the period 1 January to 31 December 2025

8. We began 2025 bringing forward from 2024 a total of ten cases, comprising four objections to and referrals of admission arrangements, three requests for variations, two requests for advice on the admission of named pupils to academies and one statutory proposal. While there is a deadline for the making of objections to admissions arrangements, which means that this element of our work is seasonal and peaks in the summer, other types of case can be, and are, referred at any point of the year. It is, therefore, inevitable that some cases will be referred to us in one reporting year but completed in the next.

9. The numbers of direction and direction advice[1] cases this year have fallen in comparison to 2024. These cases continued to come in throughout 2025, with a peak in November. We have noticed, however, that we have received several new applications at the beginning of this year, which will be the subject of the next Chief Adjudicator's report. We are concerned that applications for directions are being made at a later point in the school year, particularly because several applications have been for directions involving children in Year 11. Since 2019, when the OSA first started taking on these cases, numbers have increased significantly overall.

10. The number of objections to and referrals of admission arrangements rose from 154 to 200, an increase of almost 30 per cent, with several 'multiple objections' (objections on the same point made by a large number of people). We continue to encourage multiple objectors to submit one form on behalf of all of the objectors as it is more time consuming to deal with large numbers of forms making the same point expressed slightly differently, and consequently decisions take longer.

11. There has also been an increase this year in the number of applications for approval of proposed variations. These rose from 132 new referrals in 2024 to 155 in 2025, an increase of more than 17 per cent. Again, almost all variation requests were applications to reduce the PANs of primary schools due to a fall in applications for school places. We have continued to receive requests for approvals of PAN reductions after the closing date for admissions to primary schools. This is some time after local authorities will have been aware of declining rolls. Despite warning applicants that we are inundated with approval applications and that we are not able to conclude cases as quicky as we have done in previous years, we receive emails asking us to speed up our decision-making processes. If local authorities want proposed variations approved more quickly, we strongly suggest they send in applications earlier in the year rather than wait until the position becomes urgent and expect adjudicators to process cases immediately, which

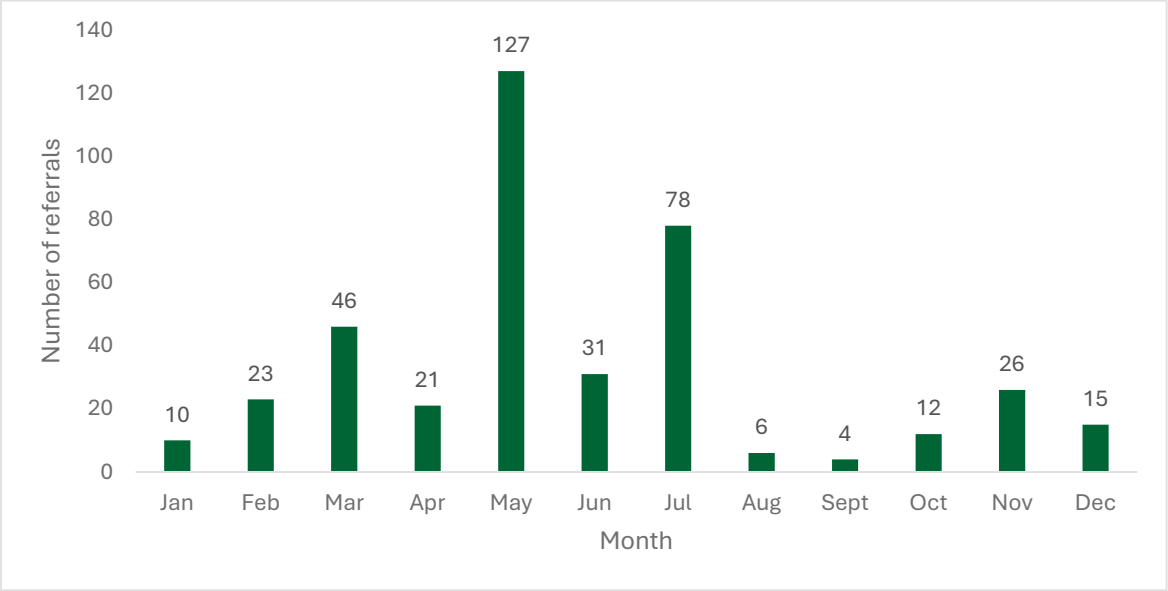
[1] Direction cases are referrals by maintained schools of a notification by a local authority of its intention to direct the school to admit a named pupil. Direction advice cases are requests by the Secretary of State for advice on whether she should direct an academy to admit a named pupil.

they are unable to do due to the high volume of applications in relation to the limited number of adjudicators. We are a small team, and adjudicators have worked hard in order to complete cases within good time.

12. We are also concerned that, where PAN reduction variation approval requests are made after the closing date for applications for places, parents will have ordered their preferences for a school place based upon an outcome which will become less favourable if approval is given. Parents may have formed an expectation that their child will be offered a place at a particular school based upon information from previous years. In cases where parents and children will be disappointed, adjudicators will be less likely to approve proposed PAN variations. That is not to say that applications will not be approved, but approval is only likely to be given where parents and children have reasonable alternative local schools and the adverse financial consequences for the school which is the subject of the variation are likely to be severe if the PAN is not reduced.

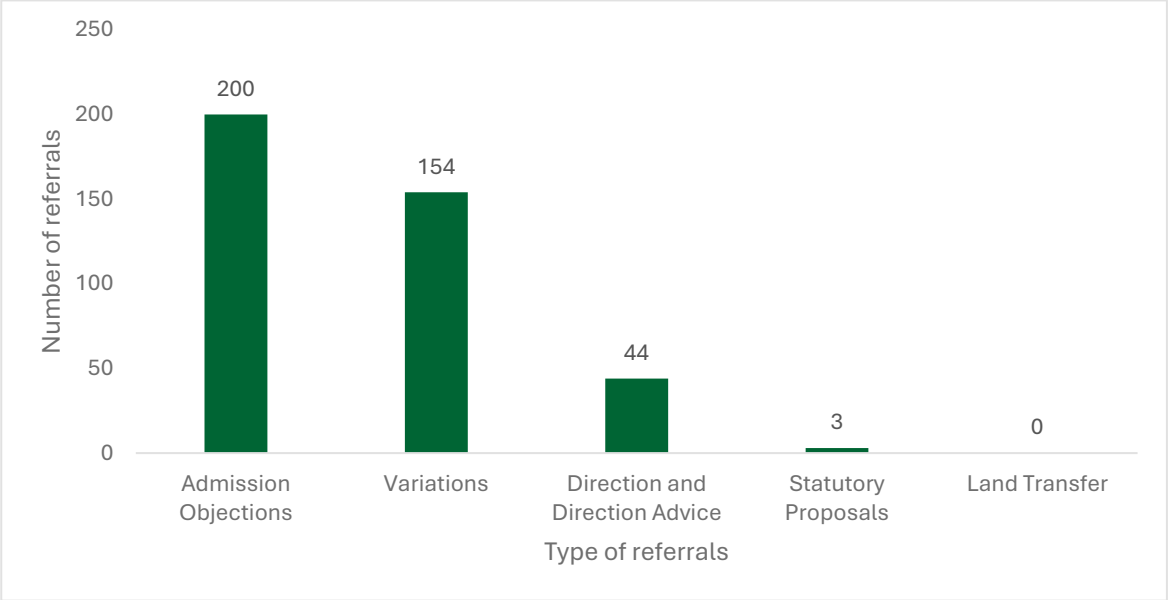
13. As figure 1 shows, the total number of cases referred was 401. May remained the month with the highest number of cases referred (127 or 32 per cent). However, 272 cases (68 per cent) were referred in other months.

Figure 1: New cases received each month in 2025



14. The number of cases of each type referred to the OSA during the year is shown in figure 2.

Figure 2: Numbers of each type of case received during the period 1 January 2025 to 31 December 2025



15. Throughout the year, we have attended the Department for Education (DfE) convened admissions group. We have also attended meetings and held discussions with other stakeholders, as have colleague adjudicators.

Objections to and referrals of admission arrangements

Table 1: Admissions cases by year and outcome

	1 January – 31 December 2025	1 January – 31 December 2024
Number of cases considered	204	164
Number of new cases	200	154
Cases carried forward from previous year	4	10
Number of individual admission authorities within new cases	73	85
Cases finalised	192	160
Objections fully upheld/found not to conform with requirements	73	45
Objections partially upheld	39	78
Objections not upheld/found to conform	17	30
Cases withdrawn	6	6
Cases out of jurisdiction	61	1
Cases carried forward into following year	8	4

16. We received 147 new objection cases by the 15 May statutory deadline for objections to admission arrangements and accepted jurisdiction for a further 53 referrals submitted after that deadline giving the total of 200 cases.

17. As in past years, new objections and referrals related to all categories of schools. Including the four cases brought forward from 2024, the figures were: nineteen cases related to the admission arrangements for community and voluntary controlled schools in ten local authorities; five to voluntary aided schools; two to foundation schools; and 178 cases related to 58 academy schools, including free schools. Parents and members of the public remained the single largest group of objectors. Local authorities and governing bodies of schools were also among those who made objections. Table 1 above gives the category of outcome for cases completed. In 17 of the cases where a conclusion was

reached by 31 December 2025, in the matter complained of the adjudicator found no fault in the arrangements. In seven of these cases, where the objection was not upheld or the matter originally complained of was found to comply with the relevant requirements of admissions law, other matters were found not to comply with those requirements. In 73 cases, the objection was upheld/arrangements found not to comply, of which 25 included other matters found not to comply with requirements. In 39 cases, the objections were partially upheld, of which 26 included other matters found not to comply with requirements. Six cases were withdrawn. 61 cases were found to be outside our jurisdiction, the majority of these being multiple objections to the same school's admission arrangements. These were out of jurisdiction because they raised issues which were the same, or substantially the same, as issues determined by an adjudicator in the preceding year in relation to the same school and consequently cannot be referred to the adjudicator.

18. Although five new adjudicators were appointed at the start of 2025, time for training, other professional commitments and some significant levels of sickness have meant that, at times, the cohort was not up to full capacity. In addition, the authors of this report were focussed on their interim Chief Adjudicator role. This has again resulted in some adjudicators working exceptionally hard in order to ensure that cases were completed within a reasonable timeframe. Despite an overall increase in cases, the increase in the number of admissions cases carried forward into 2026 has remained low. As in previous years, objections covered a wide range of matters. Unsurprisingly, many of those matters have arisen in previous years and have been covered in past reports. Those reports remain available at OSA annual report - GOV.UK.

19. We have again received a number of objections about arrangements for admissions outside the normal year group and deferred/ part-time admissions to Reception. These were based upon non-compliance with the requirements of the School Admissions Code (the Code) and DfE Departmental Guidance. Despite this issue being highlighted in previous reports, a number of admission authorities continue to state or imply in their arrangements that part-time attendance or deferred entry to school for children below compulsory school age is something parents need to secure agreement to from schools. Part-time attendance and deferred entry for children below compulsory school age are entitlements. They are not requests to be considered by schools and possibly refused. Paragraph 2.17 of the Code sets this out simply and makes it clear that this must be covered in the admission arrangements for schools admitting such children.

20. It may be that there is a lack of understanding of the difference between such part-time and deferred entry and the separate issue of **delayed admission of summer born children** whose parents wish them to join Reception at the time their age cohort is moving into Year 1. Delayed admission of summer born children is not a right but may be requested by parents. Decisions are then made in the best interests of the child (paragraphs 2.18-2.20 of the Code). There is guidance on this at Guidance on handling admission requests for summer-born children - GOV.UK. All admission authorities are strongly encouraged to check that they have set out these provisions clearly and accurately in their admission arrangements. In the hope that it may assist admission

authorities, and in time reduce the number of such matters referred to the adjudicator, we set out the position in more detail below.

21. In 2024, there were nine objections relating to the provisions in admission arrangements for requesting entry to school outside the child's normal age group. In 2025 there were 65, which was over a third of all objections received. The admission arrangements for the schools in one academy trust were the subject of 44 of these 65 objections. The admission arrangements for all community and voluntary controlled schools in three local authority areas also received objections in 2025 and so these cases covered a higher number of schools than is clear from the number of objections we have recorded as being received. The majority of these objections were upheld.

22. Children do not have to start school until they reach compulsory school age. Compulsory school age is set out in Section 8 of the Education Act 1996 and the Education (Start of Compulsory School Age) Order 1998. A child reaches compulsory school age on the prescribed day following his or her fifth birthday (or on his or her fifth birthday if it falls on a prescribed day). The prescribed days are 31 December, 31 March, and 31 August.

23. Therefore, a child born in November, does not have to start school until the January following his or her fifth birthday. However, children have the right to full time education in the September following their fourth birthday and most parents choose this option.

24. Paragraph 2.18 of the Code explains that: "Parents may seek a place for their child outside of their normal age group, for example, if the child is gifted and talented or has experienced problems such as ill health. Admission authorities must make clear in their admission arrangements the process for requesting admission out of the normal age group."

25. It is this requirement to "make clear in their admission arrangements the process" which is often the subject of objections. These vary from no information being provided at all to arrangements which appear to discourage a parent from applying. The discouragement alleged in some cases refers to tone which may suggest that the application is unlikely to succeed or that admission outside the normal age group is not in the child's interests.

26. Parents are most likely to wish to apply for admission outside their normal age group when their child is summer born. The Code defines a summer born child in footnote 57 as, "… all children born from 1 April to 31 August. These children reach compulsory school age on 31 August following their fifth birthday (or on their fifth birthday if it falls on 31 August)." Paragraph 2.18 of the Code says, "the parents of a summer born child may choose not to send that child to school until the September following their fifth birthday and may request that they are admitted out of their normal age group – to reception rather than year 1."

27. The guidance referred to above, which was updated in November 2024, says, “The government believes it is rarely in a child’s best interests to miss a year of their education, for example, by beginning primary school in year 1 rather than reception, or secondary school in year 8 rather than year 7.” An adjudicator would expect an admission authority to follow DfE guidance unless they had good reason to do otherwise.

28. In addition, paragraph 2.19 of the Code explains the sort of information which an admission authority must take into account when considering a request for admission outside the normal age group. An adjudicator is likely to expect that when an admission authority meets the requirement of paragraph 2.18 of the Code to “make clear in their admission arrangements the process for requesting admission out of the normal age group” that the type of information that the admission authority expects to see in such a request, is clear. It is unlikely that simply putting ‘apply to the school’ or similar would meet the requirements of the Code. In addition, this is information which should be in the school’s admission arrangements, not is another document such as the co-ordinated admission scheme.

29. We received objections to various changes made by a local authority to the admission arrangements for its secondary schools. The main objection had the support of approximately 500 parents and attracted considerable local interest. We think this was the most complex and detailed objection ever received by the OSA and the adjudicator worked very hard to complete his consideration prior to the closing date for secondary applications.

30. We have dealt with a number of cases regarding the definition of catchment areas in admission arrangements. Paragraph 1.50 of the School Admissions Code requires admission authorities to publish a copy of their determined admission arrangements on the school’s website. Where an admission authority prioritises applicants on the basis of living within a designated catchment area, any such catchment area must be reasonable and clearly defined, as required in the Code (paragraph 1.14). As catchment areas are part of a school’s admission arrangements, they must be consulted upon, determined, and published in the same way as other admission arrangements.

31. A catchment area may be defined in a number of ways, and no particular method is specified in the Code or other legislation. The chosen method must clearly define the area so that it will be readily apparent whether a specific address falls, or does not fall, within the catchment area. Many admission authorities have chosen to use maps and indeed Adjudicators have encouraged the practice of maps being published on the website of the school in question. It has been drawn to our attention, however, that there are Ordinance Survey licencing restrictions for some schools relating to the publication of maps on the school’s website. We take this opportunity to make clear that we do not consider that providing a direct link to a clearly defined map which is hosted on a different website (i.e. a local authority or another third-party website), will be inconsistent with the requirements of the Code. This is provided that the link on the school’s website works and is a single link directly to the relevant map page, whereby the catchment area is clearly defined.

32. If an own admission authority school operates a catchment area in their oversubscription criteria, it still remains the responsibility of the admission authority to ensure that the link to the local authority (or any other third-party) website hosting the map continues to work for as long as the arrangements are required to be published, and that the map clearly displays the correct boundaries of the catchment area.

33. If a local authority is unable to or does not wish to provide a catchment area map on their website for an own admission authority school that operates a catchment area, then it is the admission authority's responsibility to ensure that it makes available, in an easily accessible way, a clear method of defining the catchment area in order to fulfil the requirements of the Code.

34. In last year's report, we noted that we had received letters before claim regarding potential judicial reviews of two determinations. One of these did not proceed. The other proceeded to a hearing in the High Court in July 2025. The outcome of that hearing was that all claims against the Office of the Schools Adjudicator were dismissed. A transcript of the judgement can be found at CKT & Anor, R (on the application of) v Twyford Church of England Academies Trust & Anor - Find Case Law - The National Archives. Permission for the appellant to appeal was refused by the High Court. A further application for permission to appeal has been allowed by the Court of Appeal. It is expected that the hearing before the Court of Appeal will take place later in 2026.

Variations to determined admission arrangements of maintained schools

35. Once determined for the relevant school year, admission arrangements can only be varied, that is changed, in limited, specified, circumstances. An admission authority may propose a variation if it considers that there has been a major change in circumstances. Such proposals for a maintained school must be referred to the adjudicator. Proposed variations to academy arrangements are a matter for the Secretary of State under the academy's Funding Agreement. Some variations, for example to comply with a mandatory requirement of the Code or to correct a misprint, do not require approval by either the adjudicator or the Secretary of State as the case may be.

Table 2: Variations to admission arrangements

Variation to admission arrangements	1 January – 31 December 2025	1 January – 31 December 2024
Total cases dealt with	157	142
Approved	126	96
Approved with modification	0	1
Not Approved	9	7
Out of Jurisdiction	1	0

Variation to admission arrangements	1 January – 31 December 2025	1 January – 31 December 2024
Withdrawn	0	35
Decisions outstanding	21	3

36. The total number of variations considered in 2025 was 157, of which 154 were referred in 2025 and three brought forward from 2024.

37. Following the pattern of recent years, the most common reason for seeking a variation was again to reduce the PAN in a primary school. There were only five requests to reduce the PANs in secondary schools. A total of 126 proposed reductions in PAN were approved, nine proposed reductions were not approved.

38. Variations were also proposed for other reasons. These included changes to admission arrangements due to expansion of a school's catchment area to include the catchment area of a school which was closing and the removal of a catchment area.

39. In last year's report, we highlighted our concern about requests for approvals of PAN reductions being lodged after the closing date for applications for admission. Specifically, in circumstances where it is clear that some parents who have applied for places at a school in good faith with virtual certainty that a place at the school will be offered, will not receive such an offer on National Offer Day if the requested PAN reduction is approved. We reiterate that approvals will only be granted in these circumstances in cases where refusal will cause severe adverse financial consequences for the school and where there are sufficient places for displaced children at other local suitable schools situated within a reasonable distance of the families' home addresses. We again strongly urge admission authorities to submit approval applications before the closing date for applications and in advance of applications being made.

Directions to maintained schools to admit a child and advice to the Secretary of State on requests to direct an academy to admit a child

40. Under sections 96, 97, 97A and 97B of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, the admission authority for a maintained school may, in certain circumstances, be notified by a local authority that it is to be directed to admit a child. The admission authority for that school can in turn refer the notification to the adjudicator and the adjudicator will then make the final decision. We refer to these as direction cases. For academy schools, where a local authority considers that an academy would be the most appropriate school for a child without a school place and the academy does not agree to admit the child in question, the local authority may make a request to the Secretary of State to direct the academy to admit the child. In such cases, the Secretary of State may seek advice from the adjudicator. We refer to these as' direction advice cases', and we understand that most, if not all direction applications received by the Secretary of State

are referred to the adjudicator. Table 4 shows the total number of such cases (covering both maintained schools and academies) dealt with by the OSA in 2025 and in 2024.

Table 3: Directions to maintained schools to admit a child and advice to the Secretary of State on requests for a direction to an academy to admit a child

Directions to admit	1 January – 31 December 2025	1 January – 31 December 2024
Total cases considered	46	69
Maintained schools – decision to: • Admit the child • Not admit the child • Withdrawn	2 0 1 1	4 2 2
Advice to Secretary of State to: • Admit the child • Not admit the child • No recommendation given	30 25 4 1	39 28 10 1
Out of Jurisdiction	0	0
Withdrawn	7	24
Decisions outstanding	7	2

41. In relation to maintained schools in 2025, we dealt with two referrals of a local authority's direction to a maintained school to admit a child. One of these cases was withdrawn; one was not upheld and the school was not required to admit the child.

42. For academies, the number of cases was, as in recent years, much higher than the number of referrals for maintained schools. This reflects the fact that most direction and direction advice cases concern secondary aged children and most secondary schools are academies. In 2025, we considered 30 requests for advice to the Secretary of State on whether an academy should be required to admit a child. In 25 cases we advised that the school should be directed to admit the child and in four that it should not. Seven cases were withdrawn and in one case no recommendation was given. Seven cases, referred in November or December, were carried forward into 2026.

43. Taking direction advice and direction cases together, the 44 new referrals in 2025 represented a significant reduction from last year's highest ever total. The number of local authority areas involved was 28, a decrease from the 31 in 2024. Of the cases considered in 2025 (that is the new referrals and those brought forward from 2024), 15

concerned Looked After Children. Ten of these cases related to children who were being looked after by one local authority but living in the area of another local authority – sometimes living many miles away from the area of the local authority looking after them. There were 30 cases concerning children who were not looked after. There was one case concerning a Previously Looked After Child. We completed 39 cases during the year and carried seven forward into 2026. Table 5 below gives some characteristics of the children involved in these cases.

Table 4: Children subject to Direction/Direction advice cases in 2025

	Looked after or previously looked after	Not looked after	Not known if looked after	Total
Primary	0	3	0	3
Secondary	14	27	0	41
All Through	2	0	0	2
Total	16	30	0	46

44. All direction and direction advice cases are given the highest priority by OSA case managers and adjudicators as they involve children and young people who may be missing education. In 2024, we worked closely with the Schools Complaints Compliance Unit (SCCU) of the DfE to revise the request for a direction form to make clear the basis upon which advice is given by the adjudicator and decisions are made by the Secretary of State. This has clarified the process. The form also sets out, in detail, the information local authorities are expected to provide at the time of application. We have found that the revised form is working less effectively this year than last year. The purpose of the form is to obviate the need for adjudicators to request the detailed information needed in order to provide advice and so reduce delays in the process. However, we are noticing an increasing number of cases where information requested on the form has not been provided. In particular, some local authorities say that they do not have information from schools a child has previously attended if those schools are outside that local authority's area. Such background information is often essential to the provision of informed advice to the Secretary of State. Consequently, local authorities must take all reasonable steps to obtain such information prior to submitting their request for a direction.

45. We are pleased to report that most schools and local authorities are cooperative with our processes. Where adjudicators ask for detailed, additional information from admission authorities about their reasons for refusing to admit the child in question, we impose short deadlines for a response as it is important that these cases do not suffer any unnecessary delay. For the most part, admission authorities meet these deadlines.

46. We determined that one direction case we received was out of jurisdiction. This was because the child had not been refused admission from all suitable schools within a reasonable distance of the child's home. This is a statutory requirement which applies to maintained schools but not academies. Because directions to maintained schools are rare, the local authority appeared to be unaware of the statutory requirements. We mention this by way of a reminder as it is with considerable reluctance that we reject these cases as being out of jurisdiction knowing that this may lead to delay in securing a school place for a vulnerable child.

Discontinuance and establishment of and prescribed alterations to maintained schools

47. We considered four sets of statutory proposals in three different local authority areas. Three concerned proposals to discontinue (close) maintained primary schools and one concerned a prescribed alteration. The closure proposals were not approved. This was due in all cases to significant procedural and legal flaws. Our decisions were not well received by the local authorities responsible, although none have been challenged in the courts. We appreciate that financial pressures due to falling rolls have led to the need for merger and closure of primary schools, and we urge local authorities considering merger and school closure to ensure that they follow the relevant legal requirements in order to avoid decisions being overturned on referral to the adjudicator. No cases were carried over into 2026.

Land matters for maintained schools

48. We had no cases in 2025 relating to land.

Part 2 - Summary of local authority reports September 2024/August 2025

49. Section 88P of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 (the Act) requires every local authority to make an annual report to the adjudicator. The Chief Adjudicator then includes a summary of these reports in the annual report to the Secretary of State for Education. The Code sets out the requirements for reports by local authorities in paragraph 6. Paragraph 3.30 of the Code then specifies what must be included as a minimum in the report to the Adjudicator and makes provision for the local authority to include any other matters. Paragraphs 6 and 3.30 of the Code require that each local authority publish its report locally.

50. We are, as ever, grateful to local authorities for the thoughtful comments made in their reports. The questionnaire completed by local authorities is reproduced in Appendix 4.

Admissions in the normal round

A. Co-ordination of admissions at normal points of entry

51. For the last two years, we have been reporting that it is the general view of local authorities that the co-ordination of school admission at the normal points of entry to schools works well for the children concerned. We are pleased to say that this has remained the case for the school year 2024/25. Last year we noted some initial effects of the decline in the birth rate which is now impacting the number of children in the school system. In 2024/25, this effect has been more pronounced, and it has been varied in nature across local authorities depending on geographical, demographic and other local factors.

52. Last year, we described a new approach which we had taken by asking local authorities directly whether the admissions process had been more or less challenging for the different normal points of entry to schools, compared to the previous year. We repeated that approach this year. Therefore, we are able to report again with some certainty the views of local authorities about the relative state of affairs for the most recent admission rounds of primary and secondary school admissions. Table 5 below shows the data supplied by 151 of 152 local authorities (one did not report its views by the various deadlines we had set and so these are not recorded here).

Table 5: The views of local authorities comparing the 2024/25 admission round with 2023/24 for each normal point of entry to schools (number of authorities reporting and percentage of those reporting in the different categories)

Admission year	Much less challenging	Less challenging	No change	More challenging	Much more challenging
Reception (total 151)	6 (4 percent)	24 (16)	110 (73)	10 (7)	1 (0)
Year 7 (total 151)	3 (2 percent)	21 (14)	103 (68)	22 (15)	2 (1)
Other points of entry (total 111)	3 (3 percent)	8 (7)	91 (82)	7 (6)	2 (2)

53. Building on the established baseline of previous years that the process had gone well, or very well, it is clear from the high percentage of local authorities who have reported no change in 2023/24 and 2024/25 that this continues. It is also possible to say, concerning 2024/25, that:

(i) There has been a slight increase in the number of local authorities who say that the most recent admission round for entry to Reception (in 2024/25) was less challenging than the previous year (20 authorities compared to 16).

(ii) There was a more notable increase in those who said the same thing for admissions to Year 7 (24 authorities compared to 18).

(iii) For other points of entry to schools, slightly more authorities than last year said matters had become more challenging than in the previous year (8 compared to 4), but also slightly more that said that they had become less challenging (7 compared to 5).

54. Those authorities which told us that the admission rounds had gone well again made reference to the high proportion of parents and children in their area who had been offered a place at either their first or second choice of school. One said:

> "We met a high level of parental preference for both primary and secondary rounds.
>
> This meant parents were generally more satisfied and fewer appeals. Even where parents had applied late sometimes vacancies meant that we were still able to offer the first preference school."

Another said:

> "The main admissions round for Reception, Year 7, Year 3 and Year 10 (school with an atypical age range) went smoothly. More than 97% of applicants were awarded the first preference school, with more than 99% of applicants being awarded their first to third preference school."

55. Reasons for the continued general positive picture given to us by local authorities were said to be:

(i) The good cooperation between the local authority and neighbouring local authorities and between it and schools (including schools which are their own admission authority). For example:

> "Significant process redesign and excellent stakeholder engagement means that allocation day is 'just another day'. Agreement between [region] LAs to exchange data on certain dates was adhered to. Own admitting authorities sent ranked lists by deadlines and notification to parents on allocation day ran smoothly. All children that applied were allocated a place (including late applications after the deadlines) and notified on national offer day."

Another said:

> "The Local Authority, own admission authority schools within the local authority area and neighbouring Local Authorities maintain good relationships which

helps to ensure effective co-ordination during the bulk allocation process for normal point of entry.

The locally agreed co-ordinated scheme was adhered to by all schools within the local authority area and timeframes were followed to achieve national deadlines in both the primary and secondary sector."

(ii) The continued effectiveness of the Pan-London scheme. As in previous years, the evidence is that this continues to have a major positive impact, and the authorities which participate in it are happy to tell us so. One local authority took the trouble to provide a thumb-nail sketch of the main elements of the scheme, which I repeat here:

"Both National Offer Days were delivered smoothly, with every [LA] child receiving a single offer at their highest eligible preference school or, in a small number of cases, the nearest suitable alternative. This was achieved despite the high volume of applications and the complexities of cross-borough coordination, made possible by the well-established and robust Pan-London Coordinated Admissions Scheme, which continues to provide a strong framework for managing school admissions efficiently and fairly.

Prior to the live admissions process, all participating local authorities undertake mandatory end-to-end testing to identify and resolve any issues in advance. During the live phase, there is rigorous cross-checking of data, with any discrepancies addressed locally before outcomes are communicated to applicants.

The London Grid for Learning (LGfL), which hosts the Pan-London Coordinated Admissions System, continues to work collaboratively with all participating local authorities to introduce system enhancements. These developments are aimed at improving the user experience for both applicants and professionals involved in the admissions process."

56. Falling pupil numbers as a result of the lower birth rate are now more evident in a few places at Year 7 than last year and have had the effect of easing the pressure on school places in some areas. As a result, some local authorities have experienced less difficulty, at all points of entry, in ensuring all children are allocated a school place or a higher preference school place depending on local circumstances. Examples of what local authorities said to us this year include:

"Continued decreasing demand for places in reception year have made it less challenging this year. This is due to falling birth rate and declining number of families with young children moving into our area between birth and entry to reception which has always previously been a significant factor for [LA]."

57. There have also been examples this year of the consequences for school admissions resulting from parental or school management reactions to these new circumstances, some of them somewhat unexpected. Local authorities have told us that:

> "Reception – Less challenging and more challenging in equal measure. Less challenging as we have a falling birth rate within the City and this has enabled more children to be allocated a preference school. But on the flipside, more challenging as more schools are struggling with the lack of children being offered to them, wanting to reduce their PAN, put in place operational CAPs for when the round becomes an in-year round and this has led to school leaders setting deficit budgets and struggling financially."
>
> "Disappointingly, preference satisfaction for [LA] residents decreased this year for both Primary and Secondary Transfer rounds, as well as the proportion of applicants who were not offered any of their preferred schools. In addition, the number of appeals lodged this year increased significantly across both phases with primary appeals rising by 12% (28 appeals compared to 25 last year) and secondary appeals rising by an astonishing 83% (42 compared to 23 last year). Both these outcomes are perhaps a result of applicants applying for schools they may not considered previously on the basis that the chances of securing a place at a 'long-shot' school had increased due to smaller transfer cohorts across London resulting from falling birth rates."
>
> "While all [LA] residents seeking admission at the normal round were offered places and non-[LA] residents seeking admission to [LA] schools were largely successful, lower PANs have impacted on parental preference. Some schools have responded to financial pressures to reduce their offer of places through consultation. [LA]'s Place Planning process has ensured sufficiency but the numbers of places available for late applications can be limited."

58. No doubt these latter kinds of effect will become more common as falling rolls continue to have their impact across the school system in coming year.

59. Some local authorities told us that an increase in the supply of places (rather than falling rolls) resulted in a smoother admission round in 2024/25. For example, two large urban authorities said:

> "This year has been less challenging in comparison to 23/24, which we attribute at least partly to increased provision of secondary places, with nearly 600 places created for Year 7 2025 entry. We work closely with our Pupil Place Planning colleagues to understand proposed areas/schools for additional places, and to minimise displacement for any children who have not met the criteria for any of their preferred schools. Last year 689 children fell into this category, and 175 of those received a placement at over 5,000 metres from their home address. This year 449 children fell into this category, with just 6 receiving a placement at over 5,000 metres."
>
> "Year 7 – Secondary school previously on temporary site opened on permanent site. An increased number of pupils were offered their first preference, and more were offered one of their preferences."

60. However, this is not a universal picture, and a number of local authorities continue to report problems (especially at year 7) because of an ongoing undersupply of school places, as in the following examples:

> "Secondary Transfer challenging due to continuing bulge/high numbers coming through and ensuring sufficiency of places."
>
> "Year 7 intake cohort sizes remain high, with several schools agreeing to admit pupils above their Published Admission Number to accommodate demand."
>
> "Secondary – 87.1% secured their 1st preference, 97.4% achieved one of their 3 preferences. We experienced a shortage of places in particular areas due to high migration in [LA] and also 1 FE of children coming back to the state system from Private schools."

61. In some localities it is evident that the school system can struggle to keep pace with rapid demographic change, with a consequent impact on school admissions. One local authority told us:

> "Reception entry was more challenging as we have extensive new housing developments and delays to the construction of two new primary schools. Secondary was less challenging as two secondary schools agreed to have breach classes."
>
> Another said:
>
> "We have engaged in a programme to expand 3 secondary schools due to the large scale house building in the borough. We still have a very polarised system which leads to large oversubscription in certain schools. This expansion programme will be completed for the 26/27 admissions round, however, schools are admitting up to their future revised PAN to help with the allocation of places."

62. Local authorities also told us that there had been particular difficulties caused either by delay in the provision of new academy schools, or by these schools providing insufficient places to meet local need.

63. Other sources of difficulty reported this year have been:

(i) Data exchange problems with neighbouring authorities. As in previous years, some authorities have called for the creation of a national framework and common timetable for local authorities to follow. One large shire county said:

> "There continues to be a challenge for the LA with receiving application and offer files in good time as part of the LA file transfer (coordination) process, which delays the LA's process. It would be helpful for the DfE to provide some statutory deadlines for these file transfers to take place to ensure these delays are addressed."

(ii) The late naming of schools in Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP), particularly for Year 7 transfers. One said:

"Continue to experience difficulties with delays in naming schools for children with an EHCP adding to the challenges faced particularly at year 7."

There were, however, some examples of this issue having been addressed, leading to an improved process for the children concerned:

"The previous year the SEND [Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities] outcomes were not received before iterations started at the beginning of February. ……. The collaboration with

the SEND team this year was much improved."

(iii) The complexities of the school system resulting in parental confusion (in a local authority with both two-tier and three-tier schooling) and parental lack of awareness of the school admissions system:

"…… since (national offer day) [the LA] has received more than 182 late applications so far from parents who were; unaware of the application process, did not know there was a closing date for applications, assumed their child would automatically transfer from their nursery class to the reception class or had moved into the borough since January 2025."

"As seen last year, a significant number of parents submitted only a single school preference rather than using all three options available. This has resulted in more placements needing to be determined by the admissions team, often leading to allocations outside of preferred schools."

One authority has tried to act to counter such problems, telling me:

"The Local Authority has observed a slight reduction in late applications submitted after the 31 October deadline. This improvement is attributed to the ongoing implementation of initiatives designed to enhance communication regarding application timelines. These initiatives include strengthened engagement with local primary schools and the strategic use of social media platforms to highlight the importance of submitting applications on time."

(iv) The process which is required concerning the admission of summer-born children to primary school.

64. A number of parents, and parent representation groups, lodged objections about the provisions made in schools' admission arrangements relating to admissions outside of the normal age group and summer born children. Local authorities told us:

"The only element of the process that continues to be a challenge is summer born, as the legislation does not support a simple process for families."

"As in previous years, the co-ordination process is not assisted by the need to consult every school applied for in respect of all applications for summer-born children to be admitted out of year group at compulsory school age, and it is disappointing that legislation has not been taken forward as intended. This increases the administrative burden on schools, LA staff and parents, and creates

unnecessary anxiety for families, particularly given the high proportion which are agreed. Some of these children are now moving into the secondary sector which requires repetition of the process and compounds the anxiety for parents who are not guaranteed continuity in this situation."

B. Looked After Children (LAC) and Previously Looked After Children (PLAC) at normal points of entry

65. We are told that looked after and previously looked after children have again been well served, or very well served by the admissions system in the school year 2024/2025. Virtually all authorities have said this was the case, across each of the categories of child concerned. The data are set out in the table below. In 2023/24, marginally more authorities had categorised the effect of the admissions system as serving children "well" as opposed to "very well" compared to the previous year for all categories of child included in the return. This year, this trend has continued for looked after children in the home local authority or another local authority but has been reversed for previously looked after children and for the admission to school of children looked after by another local authority.

Table 6: How well looked after and previously looked after children were served by the admissions system at normal point of admission in 2024/2025 compared to 2023/2024. Response of authorities (percentage reporting for each category).

Group of children	2024/2025 Not well	2024/2025 Well	2024/2025 Very well	2023/2024 Not well	2023/2024 Well	2023/2024 Very well
Looked after children in home LA	0	7.2	92.8	0	6.6	93.4
Looked after children in another LA	2.7	28.0	69.3	0	25.8	74.2
Looked after children from another LA	0	11.3	88.7	0.7	15.4	83.9
Previously looked after children in home LA	0	12.6	87.4	0	16.6	83.4

66. It is important to be aware of these changes, but they should be kept in perspective. The overwhelming response from local authorities speaks again of a system which continues to work well, or very well, for all categories of looked after children and previously looked after children. Year-on-year changes represent small shifts in the number of authorities responding in the different categories. Nevertheless, we have sought to understand some of the underlying trends in the comments made by local authorities as part of their return.

67. Four authorities (compared to one in 2022/2023 and three in 2023/24) said that they considered that children for whom they were the home authority were not well served by the admissions system in other local authorities. Of these, two have provided me with their comments. I have also reviewed the responses of local authorities who had said that these children had only been served well (as opposed to very well) in 2024/2025. Very few have offered any comment, and the only description of a specific problem came from one outer London borough who told us that:

> "……. around 50% of children that are looked after by [LA] reside outside of the borough. As the home authority we notify the authorities where our children are placed. The admissions to school/s for these children can depend on how many other looked after children are placed there. In some local authorities there appears to be greater delay due to there not being enough school places."

68. It is similarly difficult to identify from local authority comments specific reasons for the increased proportion saying this year that the admissions system in their authority worked very well for looked after children placed in the schools of another authority, as opposed to well. However, clues can again be found in what authorities have told us works well, such as:

> "[LA's] School Admissions team has a dedicated admissions officer who supports the processing of new round applications for children who are looked after or previously looked after, liaising with other professionals such as the Virtual School and Children's Services as necessary, to ensure these children are given priority for admission in accordance with the School Admission Code. The approach is consistent, no matter whether they are in care to [LA] or to a different local authority."
>
> And:
>
> "……. our engagement with neighbouring local authorities has been consistently constructive and effective, supporting smooth transitions for pupils across borders."

69. We made a comment last year about the number of authorities reporting difficulties verifying the status of children claiming previously looked after status, particularly where this involved a child from a neighbouring authority. Authorities continue to identify this as a problem area.

One said:

> “Parents/guardians sometimes encounter difficulty in acquiring the verification of their child’s looked after status especially for previously looked after children. We are able to assist if they were looked after by [LA] but find challenges requesting information from other local authorities.”

Some authorities have reported their efforts to address this situation. One local authority told us that:

> “We have robust verification processes in place to ensure that all claims relating to looked after and previously looked after children are thoroughly checked. Where sufficient evidence has not been provided, we follow up with parents, carers, or social workers to ensure that priority under the school’s oversubscription criteria is appropriately awarded.”

70. One authority (that made the same comment last year) reported continuing poor relationships with neighbouring authorities concerning looked after and previously looked after children:

> “The practice in other local authorities concerning the admission of [LA] Children Looked After varies considerably by area. In some, the process and procedures work well, and children are placed quickly and efficiently at a suitable school. In others, considerable difficulties occur in getting Children Looked After places at suitable schools, or within a reasonable timeframe.”

We expressed our concern about this in last year’s report. More positively, we are able to say this year that no local authority reported that previous difficulties with schools that are their own admission authority had been repeated in 2024/25.

71. As in previous years, by far the largest number of comments from local authorities about why the admissions system is generally so effective for looked after and previously looked after children centred on the work of their authority’s Virtual School. Close collaboration between the Virtual School and the authority’s admissions team, with the needs of looked after and previously looked after children being understood and prioritised by all concerned, is the common theme. One large urban authority expressed what many have said:

> “Officers from the School Admissions Transfers Team and the [LA] Virtual School meet on a regular basis throughout the application window to share updates and discuss issues relating to any cases. Reports are also regularly shared to effectively track and monitor applications for looked after and previously looked after children, to ensure they are submitted on time and the children receive an offer of a school place to support their educational outcomes. There is an agreement that cases for looked after and previously looked after children are prioritised by the transfer officers, and this approach has been singled out for praise by colleagues in the Virtual School, who have confirmed the support has led to positive outcomes for some very complex cases.

The Placement Officer team within the [LA] Virtual School collaborates with the normal points of admission round team to work on individual complex cases and those with exceptional circumstances. This support is invaluable to promote better outcomes and ensure that every child has a suitable school place."

72. As last year, the good co-operation experienced with neighbouring and other local authorities was pointed to by a number of local authorities, with the work of the Pan-London network receiving its usual deserved praise. A large shire county said:

"…….. our engagement with neighbouring local authorities has been consistently constructive and effective, supporting smooth transitions for pupils across borders."

One London borough said:

"The normal admissions process is coordinated very well across London with all LAs using the same application system and regular meetings and guidance outlining how LAs should process LAC applications."

73. It is very pleasing to be able to say that the outcome for this group of children is that, in a very large number of cases, places are secured at first-preference schools, sometimes for all relevant children placed by the local authority. The comments of two authorities in the north of England are typical of many reports this year:

"This year 22 children in care were in the secondary transfer group and all received their first preference. For primary we received 9 applications, and all received their first preference. As all children in care received their first preference in normal round, the Virtual School were satisfied with the placements for their pupils."

"All schools and Academies prioritise the admission of LAC and previous LAC in their Admissions criteria including those from abroad. We work closely with our Virtual school with regard to applications for [LA] LAC and also have a single point of contact for LAC from outside the Authority so that applications can be processed quickly. This means that LAC and Previously LAC are always accommodated at the preferred school of the Carer where they are made on time."

74. One exception to this remains the effect of faith-based oversubscription criteria of schools in some areas, although this was mentioned by fewer authorities than in 2023/24. As we said last year, this appears to be a localised, but persistent issue. One authority reported:

"100% of schools in [LA] give highest priority to Children in Care/Previously in Care of/ or in the Care of an authority outside of England in their admission arrangements, unless they are faith schools. In relation to faith schools, we have not seen any impact where applications are made on time. However, due to the movement of children in the care system, late applications can sometimes mean that Children in

Care not of the faith, have not been offered a place. Exception cannot be not made, as they are not being ranked sufficiently high enough against over-subscription criterion. In those cases, alternative school places have been secured."

C. Children with an EHCP at normal points of entry

75. As last year, authorities were invited to say how well they thought children possessing an EHCP were served at normal points of entry. Table 7 shows the response.

Table 7: The number and percentage of authorities saying how well children who had an EHCP were served in 2024/2025 at normal points of entry

Not at all well	Not well	Well	Very well
0 (0)	7 (5 per cent)	84 (55)	61 (40)

76. It is pleasing to note that there has been a slight improvement from last year - with a higher percentage of local authorities (95 per cent compared to 92 per cent in 2023/24) saying that children with an EHCP were either well served or very well served by the admissions system.

77. Local authorities were invited to provide their comments and many set out reasons for the high level of performance of the admissions system on behalf of these children. Those mentioned by a significant number of local authorities (with examples of what was said) were:

(i) The effective collaboration between school admissions and special education (often referred to as SEND) teams within the local authority;

"Officers in Admissions liaise with colleagues in the SEND Operations Team to identify and confirm which schools are to be named on EHC Plans as early as possible in the allocation year."

"Where a child has an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) naming the school, we work closely with SEND colleagues to ensure admission is in accordance with the requirements set out in paragraph 1.6 of the School Admissions Code."

(ii) The existence of a dedicated team of officers to manage the admission to schools of children with an EHCP;

"The local authority has a dedicated SEND Admissions team that organises EHCP admissions and the additional support packages given to schools as a result of the specific needs of individual students as defined in their EHCP."

"There is a specialist SEN(D) team who have responsibility for educational provision for pupils with SEN(D) and their admission into mainstream

schools. The team works closely with the school admissions team to ensure that the appropriate educational establishment is secured for pupils with an Education Health and Care Plan even when a school is at its PAN."

(iii) An improvement in the timing of the completion of EHCP reviews for children making the transition to secondary school (generally Year 7);

"We always work closely with colleagues in SEND who oversee admission applications on behalf of children with an EHCP at statutory points of transition. SEND undertake the annual reviews during the final year before transition and share information on allocated schools with the Admissions Team, whether mainstream or Special School. We in turn share this information with the School Adaptations Team in case specific adjustments have to be put in place at allocated schools. This provides time to liaise with the school and to implement any plans, equipment and training ahead of the start of the school year."

and

(iv) The cooperation of schools with the process of EHCP admissions.

"All children with an EHCP that have requested a place within mainstream education have been processed well and have received an offer of a place at their 1st preference school, if the school was named on the EHCP plan."

78. Other positive aspects of what had happened in 2024/25 which local authorities reported were:

(i) An increase in local specialist provision, either in new schools or new units attached to mainstream schools;

"There is a [ ] local area Special School Organisation to deliver over 150 new inclusive mainstream places in SEN Units and Additionally Resourced provision. There are also robust and multi-agency processes to ensure the timely placement of pupils with EHC Plans."

and

(ii) Improved early years links to support children entering Year R.

"The Early Years Co-ordinator identifies pre-school children who have SEND to ensure places at preferred schools. There is emphasis on early identification, and the Council have an inbox link to Health in order to identify early year's children who have complex or significant needs."

79. We have looked specifically at the comments provided by the small number of local authorities (seven) who said that children were not well served. Very many other

authorities, in spite of their assessment of “well” or “very well”, also commented on these same problems. These were (with examples from both groups):

(i) The continuing increase in the number of EHCP assessments;

“The significant and unprecedented rise in the number of children receiving an EHCP has led to some primary and secondary pupils not being placed at the beginning of the academic year in Reception and Year 7. Despite the expansion of several [LA] special school places and the opening of SEN units at a number of mainstream schools, the demand continues to outstrip supply.” (large shire county)

“The SEND assessment team has experienced a significant rise in the volume of EHCPs issued for the 2024/2025 period. Demand remains high during the standard admissions round for secondary school placements, particularly for pupils undergoing EHCP assessments.” (large urban LA)

(ii) Continuing problems caused by the short period between the last date for the finalisation of EHCPs specified in SEN Code of Practice (mid February) and the national offer day for secondary school places (1 March);

“The statutory deadline for the SEND department to finalise the process of naming schools in the pupils transitioning to secondary school in 28 February each year. Due to the workload within the SEND team many places are finalised close to or after this date.”

“There are still instances of EHCPs being finalised after the 15 February deadline, resulting in these families having less time to plan for the integration and transfer of their child from their current setting to the new setting. This has created practical difficulties for the admissions team in being able to plan for enough school places, especially in areas of pressure. It also creates difficulties for schools who are being forced to exceed their PAN because it is too late for these children to have been included in the co-ordination process leading up to offer day. This creates pressure on schools in terms of classroom management/staffing and affects relationships between the schools and the admissions team.”

(iii) The insufficiency of available specialist school places;

“The ongoing shortage of specialist placements is also placing additional pressure on mainstream secondary schools, which are increasingly required to accommodate pupils with EHCPs within their existing PAN. For context, on national allocation day in 2021, [LA] held 284 secondary school places for children with EHCPs. This year, that number rose to 610, representing a 115% increase.”

"A lack of sufficient specialist provision within the borough has led to an increase in number of children/young people (CYP) receiving home tuition."

(iv) The increasing demand by parents for specialist provision;

"The Local Authority's view of a suitable school place (e.g. local mainstream) is different to that of parent/ carers', leading to tribunals and largely tribunals are found in favour of parental preference."

and

(v) Schools increasingly saying they are unable or unwilling to admit a child in spite of being named in the EHCP;

"Schools report facing increasing difficulty in delivering inclusive education as a result of ongoing financial pressures and larger numbers of children with complex SEND. This has led to greater reluctance in admitting children with an EHCP, particular of those with Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs." (London borough)

"Phase transfer from Year 6 to Year 7 can be pressured where secondary schools are stating that they cannot meet need for mainstream EHC plans. We are working with our schools to support them to develop their inclusive practice and feel confident to return a positive consultation response." (Shire county)

"It is increasingly challenging to secure positive consultations from schools for children and young people with EHCPs, even when the provision outlined in the plan is appropriate for a mainstream setting."

80. Other areas causing difficulty which have been mentioned by local authorities were:

(i) Some schools being named in many EHCPs:

"We continue to see parental preference naming schools in their EHCPs, impacting a small number of schools receiving more than their fair share of children with additional needs."

(ii) Poor communication between local authorities;

"Liaison with the borough's own SEND team works well; however, other boroughs do not coordinate applications through the local authority and tend to apply directly to schools. This way of consulting on school places for children with EHCPs makes it extremely difficult to keep track of all SEND children being admitted to our schools. In some cases, schools are then expected to allocate above their PAN to accommodate children; admissions had not been made aware, so the children were not included in the initial

allocation process by the local authority. There needs to be legislative clarity on who should be informed of EHCP school allocations. Some LAs local to us do not always communicate effectively, with one stating 'the law doesn't say we have to, and if the law doesn't say it, we aren't going to do it.' They then refuse to communicate with both our SEND team and school admissions staff, resulting in confrontations and delays."

and

(iii) Confusion on the part of parents;

"Parents also get confused over who to submit applications to if their child has an EHC plan as in our authority parents have to submit to the EHC team."

81. Several local authorities have told us that schools in their area have resisted the admission of children who have an EHCP naming their school, citing provisions within the Children and Families Act, 2014 and the DfE SEN Code of Practice which one local authority summarised as:

"Where a school is named in Section I of the EHCP and is one of those described in Section 38(3) of the Children & Families Act 2014, the school is legally required to admit the child, regardless of whether it is oversubscribed. Oversubscription criteria do not apply in these cases. The only lawful grounds for a school to refuse to be named are those set out in the SEND Code of Practice and relevant legislation, such as where admission would be incompatible with the efficient education of others and no reasonable steps could overcome that incompatibility."

Local authorities have said:

"We have a very small number of schools that use the SEND Code of practice to refuse to admit children."

"The Local Authority has had to issue direction notices in cases where schools have indicated they are unable to meet the needs outlined in a pupil's Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). Over the past 12 months, there has been a rise in the number of such notices issued."

In one case, a local authority told us:

"For those with an EHCP, school places are secured through the SEND Consultation process. The local authority continues to see an increase in objections from mainstream schools due to difficulties with recruitment and increasing numbers of young people with EHCPs in each school. Where no legal grounds have been provided on which to refuse the placement, the Local Authority would direct the school to admit if the school is parental preference."

D. All children with special needs/disabilities at normal points of entry

82. As in previous years, comments were also invited concerning the admission to schools of the wider group of children with special needs and/or disabilities - those who do not have an EHCP. We report here the observations of those local authorities which made specific reference to them this year.

83. Paragraph 1.9 h) of the Code says that admission authorities must not in their admission arrangements:

> "…discriminate against or disadvantage disabled children, those with special educational needs…."
>
> A number of authorities were happy simply to report that admission authorities in their area complied with this requirement in 2024/25. For example:
>
> "For children and young people with SEND who do not have an Education Health Care Plan (EHCP), families apply for a school place through the usual admissions process. There are no concerns in relation to places for these children."
>
> "All children without an EHCP are included in mainstream admissions, any additional needs identified are catered for by schools after a place is allocated."

84. Some authorities told us that the strong working practices reported on above benefit all children with special educational needs. Examples were:

> "We have good working relationships across services to support the placement of pupils. This includes those receiving assessment who may / may not require an EHCP."
>
> "[LA] is working hard across all partners both internal and external to further improve the transition offer for families with SEND – looking to initiate transfer reviews during the penultimate year so that school SEND families have plenty of time to prepare for transition."
>
> "This LA operates a process so that once a child has been offered a place at a school (at normal point of entry), the school is given prior notification of any known additional needs the child may have in the absence of an EHCP. This is to enable a smooth transition for the child when s/he starts at the school. [LA]'s Fair Access Protocol is used to support fair admission of children with SEND with no EHCP across schools where appropriate."

85. For children who do not have an EHCP, many authorities have told us that admissions to schools are prioritised in schools in their area under an oversubscription criterion in their admission arrangements for "medical/social need" (or similar), and that they, therefore, take place without difficulty. For example:

> “Parents/carers of children with disabilities and/or special educational needs who do not have an EHCP may apply under the social/medical criterion. In such cases, parents/carers are asked to provide written professional evidence confirming that there is an exceptional medical or social need and that the specified school is the only one able to meet the child’s defined needs. Applications are considered by a panel of officers who determine whether the evidence provided is sufficiently compelling to meet these requirements. For some own-admission-authority schools, an admissions committee comprising governors undertakes this assessment for applications under the social/medical criterion.”

> “For children who have disabilities and/or special educational needs but who do not have an EHCPs, most admission authorities have an exceptional social/medical need criterion if there is an exceptional need to attend a particular school.”

86. Where such oversubscription criteria are not present, other helpful practices can be available, for example we were told:

> “A robust communication process between Local Authority SEND and School Admissions Services is essential to meet the best interests of both the child and the school in a situation where oversubscription may arise.”

> Another local authority said:

> “[LA] schools do not have a criterion for children with disabilities and/or special educational needs who do not have an Education Health and Care Plan. These children are allocated places in the same way as any other child. All mainstream schools are equally able to manage children with additional needs. If these children cannot travel to their school due to their additional needs, they may appeal to the Council’s Transport Appeal Panel for assistance.”

87. As previously, the difficulties which authorities have told us about concerning SEN admissions more generally are interconnected, and this has been evident again this year. The difficulties pointed to were, unsurprisingly, the same as those listed above for children with an EHCP. For example:

> “There continue to be instances post national offer day of schools advising they are unable to meet a child’s needs due to a lack of resource or finance, especially where the child in question has additional needs but no EHCP. These cases can be labour intensive to resolve, and often require collaboration with colleagues from other services who have the necessary knowledge and expertise to offer the relevant support to the school to secure admission.”

> “We have also experienced some resistance from schools to admit into the reception class children who do not have an EHCP who have SEND, which we had challenged, and admission was secured. Schools have requested and/or sourced additional support from the LA for SEND in these cases.”

88. Difficulties specific to Year R admissions exist because children are not necessarily known to local authorities. Some have said:

> "There remains an ongoing challenge of children coming through at nursery and reception age, who have additional needs (whether SEND or not). These needs are not always known to professionals and therefore cannot be shared with schools. This impacts on behaviour, social interaction and communication, inc. speech and language, which can be a challenge for schools to address in the current climate. "

> "Any difficulties chiefly arise in respect of the cohort of children who do not yet have a finalised EHCP at the time of application for reception. Where a nursery has identified that a pre-school child requires a plan at a point in the year where the 20 weeks process means the plan will not be finalised in advance of the allocation process, this leads to schools being required to admit over numbers later on in the process, which can be challenging for the smaller schools which have limited physical space. "

89. Encouragingly, local authorities also report initiatives which have mitigated such problems. For example:

> "Our Early Years' Service supports pre-school settings to identify additional needs early in order to minimise the number of children affected by late application for an EHC Needs Assessment."

Admission other than at normal points of entry (In-year admissions)

A. Overall Level of Challenge

90. We asked local authorities about the level of challenge they experienced regarding in-year admissions in 2024/25 compared to that in 2023/24. Table 8 summarises the responses.

Table 8: The views of local authorities comparing the challenge of in-year admissions during 2024/2025 for primary and secondary admissions (number of local authorities and the percentage of those reporting in brackets). Please note that out of a total of 153 local authorities, 152 answered the questionnaire.

	Much less challenging	Less challenging	No change	More challenging	Much more challenging
Primary Admissions (152)	1 (1)	15(10)	78 (51)	54 (35)	4 (3)
Secondary Admissions (152)	0 (0)	7 (5)	63 (41)	72 (47)	10 (7)

91. For both primary and secondary in-year admissions, the majority of local authorities reported a greater level of challenge in 2024/25 than that communicated to us in 2023/24, including in areas where the number of in-year applications had decreased. This was due to factors including more complex pupil need and increased resistance from schools to admit pupils in-year, set against a background of limited surplus capacity. This situation often required greater use of the Fair Access Protocol (FAP), which we discuss below. One local authority stated:

> "Although the number of in-year admission applications decreased by approximately 6% in 2024/25 compared to 2023/24, the level of challenge has remained similar. In primary, pressure remains high in specific districts where school places are limited, particularly in densely populated town centres. This has led to more children needing placements further afield, often requiring transport arrangements, which adds complexity to the process. In secondary, challenges have intensified for children who are not suitable for home education but face barriers to accessing school places – often due to mental health or emotional needs. Placement difficulties are further compounded where schools or Trusts are reluctant to admit pupils, even when capacity exists, particularly for those with additional needs or complex histories. These factors have contributed to a more resource-intensive and complex admissions landscape, despite the overall reduction in application volume."

92. This comment reflects the practice we see when giving advice to the Secretary of State in directions cases. This year we have seen cases where schools, which are below capacity, are refusing to admit looked after children when there is no sustainable argument that the admission of the child in question would cause serious prejudice. This should never be the case.

93. Where local authorities experienced greater demand for in-year places this was often attributed to inward migration, from the UK and abroad, with one LA stating that "the securing and tracking into admission of these has led to an increase in CME [children missing education] considerations". Some local authorities reported a rise in the numbers of asylum seeker families being placed in hotels within their areas, with more school places required as a result. However, there were authorities which experienced a fall in applications due to decreases in these same factors. This included lower migration as a result of changes to immigration rules which had previously allowed overseas students to travel with their families.

94. Some local authorities reported choices made by parents which contributed to the number of in-year applications, including requests to transfer schools within the same area. One LA noted that "falling rolls give parents the opportunity to change schools more frequently when issues arise. The move is not always in the best interests of the child". Last year we noted that a small number of local authorities had identified that some children educated in independent schools had returned to the state school system due to

changes in VAT and associated increases in school fees. This matter was mentioned by very few local authorities this year.

95. Children seeking a return to school following a period of elective home education (EHE) continued to contribute to the demand for in-year places, and many local authorities reported that there was an increased number of EHE returners. This included children for whom the standard of education provided at home was judged to be unsuitable, and those whose parents chose EHE whilst awaiting a place at their preferred school. One LA stated:

> "A significant number of pupils currently being electively home educated are seeking admission back into mainstream schools. Applications are handled through the standard process; however, securing a placement for these pupils can be challenging. Schools often have reservations related to possible challenging behaviour, concerns that the child was withdrawn to circumvent permanent exclusion, or a reluctance to readmit pupils who have previously attended their school due to safeguarding concerns. A substantial proportion of these cases have been referred to the fair access panel for further consideration."

96. Local authorities expressed concerns regarding the impact of EHE on the children involved. For example:

> "Many EHE cases are initiated due to difficulties encountered in school, such as low attendance or breakdowns in the parent-school relationship. Typically, these children are home educated for a short period before seeking re-entry into the school system through in-year applications at a new institution. This pattern may result in gaps in educational continuity and affect students' ability to develop personal resilience."

97. One LA reported an issue of secondary schools illegally off rolling children to EHE. Direction advice cases we have dealt with this year have included several examples of children being withdrawn from school, almost certainly to avoid permanent exclusion, and where the child subsequently receives no education at home. It appears to take some local authorities a long time to identify these children as missing education and there is a considerable delay in finding an alternative school.

98. Some local authorities have policies of sending these children back to the school which they had previously attended. Whilst we can see that this might discourage 'off-rolling', there may be many reasons why this is not in the best interests of the child or other children at the school who will be educated alongside them.

99. We have also noticed that some local authorities, when assessing whether a particular school has admitted a disproportionately high number of hard-to-place children compared to other local schools will take into account not just the number of children admitted but also whether the school has permanently excluded a disproportionately high number of children. Whilst we see the logic in adopting this practice, it is at odds with the

factors taken into account by the Department for Education in directions cases. The Department may wish to give consideration to whether a more nuanced test should be adopted.

100. Local authorities reported CME and safeguarding concerns in respect of EHE, in some cases expressing frustration regarding a lack of information from families. We note that The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill seeks to establish Not in School registers in each local authority area. One local authority described why, in its view, mandatory registration of EHE is required:

> "The complexity in in-year admissions is continuing to have a significant knock-on effect on EHE. A growing number of parents and carers are opting for EHE while awaiting a school place. However, many within this cohort lack the capacity to provide suitable home education and frequently decline to share details of their provision when requested, instead citing their need for a school place. In some cases, families have confirmed to colleagues in Admissions or Education Welfare - Child Missing Education (CME) that they are home educating yet deny this when engaging with the EHE team.
>
> This situation is placing considerable strain on resources, as officers must spend increasing amounts of time verifying EHE status, requesting educational information, and making referrals to CME where appropriate.
> Additionally, there is a rising trend of families applying for school places, rejecting the school offered, opting for EHE, and subsequently leaving the country. This pattern further intensifies the workload, requiring extensive follow-up through emails, phone calls, council tax checks, border checks, home and CME referrals for further investigation and home visits.
> There is currently no legal obligation on parents to provide notification of EHE, either in writing or otherwise, or their reason for withdrawing their child from school in favour of EHE. Implementing mandatory registration especially given the rise in EHE post-Covid, would improve visibility, potentially reduce the misuse of EHE as a temporary solution whilst awaiting a preferred school place, enable earlier intervention where education is unsuitable and support resource planning."

101. An increased reluctance from schools to admit pupils in-year was widely reported, with local authorities recognising the often complex needs of children seeking a school place as well as among those already on roll, and the financial difficulties faced by many schools. Again, this reflects what we see when considering directions cases. As one LA stated:

> "Schools are continuing to struggle supporting students with SEND and having the financial ability to admit extra students and provide the extra support that they have been unable to budget for."

102. Children in older year groups were reported to be especially difficult to place, with one LA stating:

> "Securing places in Year 11 continues to be complex and difficult, due to the issues around matching exam courses and boards, the impact it may have on a school's results and the potential disruption it may cause a year group within a school."

103. From what we have seen in directions cases, schools are reluctant to admit any in-year applicants to Year 11. We did wonder whether consideration should be given to the Code imposing a cut-off date for Year 11 admissions. There must be a point in time at which it will become difficult for a school to deliver any meaningful education to a Year 11 child unless the child is admitted to a lower year group. It would be helpful for schools if the Code provided clear guidance on what is expected of schools in respect of applications made in the second and third terms of Year 11.

104. Increases in the number of children arriving from abroad with complex learning or medical needs was an issue reported by many local authorities. These children would not, of course, have an EHCP, and local authorities described the attendant difficulty of securing places for them. Schools are often reluctant to admit these pupils, for whom specialist provision may be required. Where such a pupil is in Year 11, placement can be especially difficult. One LA told us:

> "We have had over the past few years several families with children with significant additional needs moving into the area from other countries and often having limited documentation to support what their needs are.
>
> These children's needs are such that placement into a mainstream school would not be the right provision for that child/young person. These children do not have an EHCP and the SEN Team will not become involved in their placement into school.
>
> We do have a new to country protocol and arrange for officers to visit the family and give advice as to what can be provided going forward but the provision that is available to refer these children to is limited whilst an EHCP assessment is completed. These officers will support the family with a request for an EHCP if this is appropriate.
>
> Families can however find this frustrating that there is not an appropriate school place which can admit their child."

105. The refusal to admit in-year applicants due to their behaviour continues to be a concern reported by local authorities, and many told us of increases in such refusals. One stated that "This trend is compounded by pressures on school funding, which heightens the perceived difficulty for schools in meeting the needs of pupils requiring intensive support." Refusals due to an applicant's challenging behaviour are, in certain circumstances, allowed under paragraph 3.10 of the Code which states:

> "Where an admission authority receives an in-year application for a year group that is not the normal point of entry and it does not wish to admit the child because it

has good reason to believe that the child may display challenging behaviour, it may refuse admission and refer the child to the Fair Access Protocol."

106. The Code defines challenging behaviour as follows:

> "For the purposes of this Code, behaviour can be described as challenging where it would be unlikely to be responsive to the usual range of interventions to help prevent and address pupil misbehaviour or it is of such severity, frequency, or duration that it is beyond the normal range that schools can tolerate. We would expect this behaviour to significantly interfere with the pupil's/other pupils' education or jeopardise the right of staff and pupils to a safe and orderly environment."

107. We return to this matter in later sections of this report, but remind all admission authorities of the following paragraphs of the Code, which must be considered alongside the provisions in paragraph 3.10:

> 3.11: "An admission authority should only rely on the provision in paragraph 3.10 if it has a particularly high proportion of either children with challenging behaviour or previously permanently excluded pupils on roll compared to other local schools and it considers that admitting another child with challenging behaviour would prejudice the provision of efficient education or the efficient use of resources."
>
> 3.12: "The provision in paragraph 3.10 cannot be used to refuse admission to looked after children, previously looked after children; and children who have Education, Health and Care Plans naming the school in question."
>
> 3.13 "Admission authorities **must not** refuse to admit a child thought to be potentially disruptive, or likely to exhibit challenging behaviour, on the grounds that the child is first to be assessed for special educational needs."

108. Many local authorities reported difficulties due to a lack of school places, especially in particular year groups or localities, leading to an increase in the number of appeals as families seek admission to oversubscribed schools. Local authorities also reported greater requirements for funded transport when, due to a lack of places close to home, children were placed at schools outside the statutory walking distance. Although a shortage of places was most usually cited in respect of secondary admissions, this was not always the case, with some shortages at primary level. In a few areas, capacity has been reduced due to school closures. Other local authorities described moves to mixed age teaching and fewer classes in primary schools, due to falls in the number on roll and funding pressures. Plans to address forecast growth were reported by some local authorities, including through expansion of existing schools. One LA stated its intention to have "conversations with the secondary academies that are operating below their built capacity".

109. It was a widely stated view that schools should admit children up to at least the level of the original PAN for a cohort, unless there are compelling reasons not to do so.

There were many reports of the impact on capacity of MATs or own admission authority schools using an ‘admission limit’ for year groups other than the normal year of entry. When such a limit is below the PAN that was in operation when the year group was first admitted to the school in question, it is generally described by local authorities as ‘capping’. Although many were sympathetic to the position of schools, concerns remained as described by one local authority:

> “Particularly at secondary level, schools are reducing their in-year admission limits and reorganising the size of registration groups in response to financial pressures. One effect is to take capacity out of the local area as some of the schools’ physical capacity is not being used. This is not always fully informed by similar moves in other local schools. Reducing the number of registration groups where numbers support that approach is reasonable and inevitable: [The local authority] is sympathetic to the growing financial pressure on schools and trusts but would challenge where the impact is to close access to new arrivals or others requiring education in that local community while there is physical capacity on site.”

110. The PAN applies only to the normal year of entry and to seek to apply a PAN or any other admission limit to any other year group is contrary to the Code. The test for refusing a child a place outside the normal year of entry is whether admission will cause prejudice to the provision of efficient education or the efficient use of resources, and for a looked after child whether that prejudice will be serious. Despite lengthy explanations of this matter in previous OSA reports, misunderstandings persist. For example, one LA stated:

> “There is continued resistance from academies to offer and admit all other young people in year 11, although the academies appear to have vacancies according to the official PAN.”

111. Other local authorities recognised the accurate definition of the PAN and expressed frustration that it cannot be more widely applied:

> “Unfortunately, as the Code stipulates that the PAN only applies to the ‘normal year of admission’, LAs cannot hold schools/academies to any set “admission number” in other year groups. Without any legal restrictions stopping a school /academy from changing the number of pupils they say they can accept in a particular year group at any point in the academic year, numbers can fluctuate without notice during the year, which can be challenging and problematic for LAs tasked with finding places for all in-year applicants. These fluctuations are unhelpful for everyone and could even give rise to unfortunate and/or erroneous perceptions that admission decisions are being made on grounds other than the lawfully permitted reason (i.e. prejudice to efficient education/use of resources).
>
> It would be more equitable and efficient if all other year groups (beside the normal year of entry) were required to have an agreed “admission number”; this would bring increased clarity and certainty to the in-year admissions process overall.

> Schools/Academies could still be given a route by which such an "admission number" could be lawfully varied as necessary. For example, it could just be required that the change was agreed with the LA, with the proviso that the admission authority could apply to the OSA for an variation if agreement could not be reached (using the same system for this as already exists to enable in-year variation of a PAN after it has been determined for the normal year of entry). That would bring clarity and order to this area of admissions which is sometimes lacking at present.
>
> We appreciate that this would require an amendment to the School Admissions Code, but would urge the OSA to raise this with the DfE."

112. The role of the schools adjudicator is to uphold the Code and the law as it relates to admissions. The test for refusing a child a place other than in the normal year of entry is whether their admission will cause prejudice to the provision of efficient education or the efficient use of resources, and for a looked after child whether that prejudice would be serious. We find ourselves reiterating this to local authorities and own admission authority schools on a regular basis. However, we wondered whether the Department might give some consideration to whether an admission number should apply to other year groups as this would provide a clear benchmark for in-year admissions.

113. Local authorities reported various difficulties regarding procedures for in-year admissions at schools for which they were not the admission authority. These included slow responses to applications or delayed start dates, and failures to properly update the local authority on admissions made. Some local authorities reported an issue of schools asking, as part of the application process, for information other than that allowed by the Code. One LA told us that it has raised these concerns with the DfE. Another stated:

> "There is anecdotal evidence of some schools asking parents and previous schools for information about prospective pupils as part of their own decision-making process. This can deter and delay applications and may contribute to refusals. Whilst we recognise that this comes from a concern to do the best for the existing school community but could be at the expense of children and families seeking local school places."

114. We were concerned to read reports of the use of pre-admission meetings, a practice which is specifically prohibited by paragraph 1.9 of the Code. We are conscious that paragraph 3.10 of the Code allows admission authorities to refuse to admit children with challenging behaviour and refer such children to the FAP. Paragraph 1.9(g) of the Code prohibits admission authorities from taking account of reports from previous schools about children's past behaviour, attendance, attitude, or achievement. However, this provision does not apply where an admission authority takes account of past behaviour as evidence for concerns about challenging behaviour, solely for the purpose of making a decision on whether it would be appropriate to refuse admission on the basis described in paragraph 3.10. There appears to be confusion on the part of schools and

local authorities about when, and in what circumstances, background information on an applicant can be sought and whether it should be provided. We hope that the Department for Education will consider taking steps to resolve the confusion and inconsistency in implementation of paragraphs 1.9 and 3.10 in its forthcoming amendments to the Code.

115. The matter of coordination was, as in previous years, raised in most local authority reports. In some areas local authorities offer coordination of in-year applications, but as it is not a requirement that own admission authorities use the authority's coordinated process, they reported issues relating to schools choosing not to take part including "increased confusion for families, particularly around understanding which schools they need to apply directly to". The lack of mandatory coordination was widely regarded by local authorities as a serious safeguarding concern. One local authority which recently adopted the approach of coordinating all in-year admissions described the impact of this:

> "The Local authority started coordinating all in year admissions for all mainstream schools in [the local authority area] including own admission authority schools in September 2024.
> The LA received quadruple the number of in year applications compared to the number of notifications received from schools the previous year. Despite the unexpectedly high number of applications, the Admissions Team has worked diligently to ensure that all applications were processed within the statutory timeframe which put immense pressure on the team. This improved process enhances the safeguarding of children, as the LA now has more comprehensive information, and the admissions team can effectively monitor the movement of children around the county as well as into and out of the county. The Admissions Team has used this information to assist School Place Planning colleagues, ensuring that children have access to the appropriate school places at the right time.
> We would encourage a change in the School Admissions Code to require all local authorities to coordinate all in year applications as the safeguarding benefits, consistent approach, securing school places in a timely manner, especially for our vulnerable children, compliance with the School Admissions Code etc far outweigh the challenges we faced."

116. As in-year admissions often involve more than one local authority, such as when a child moves from one area to another, cooperation between local authorities is clearly required. A number of local authorities reported, however, that relationships were not always cooperative. One told us:

> "Our experience with neighbouring local authorities shows significant variation in the level of support provided during in-year admissions. While some authorities are cooperative and efficient, others inadvertently create barriers that delay or prevent children from securing school places. In certain cases, authorities have failed to complete key processes, such as notifying parents of application

outcomes or informing them of their right to appeal, further complicating the process for families.

To improve consistency and fairness, we recommend enforcing a rule that prohibits requesting additional information not relevant to the school's admissions policy. Background details should only be sought after a school place has been offered and confirmed."

B. Looked After Children and Previously Looked After Children In Year

117. Most local authorities reported that LAC and PLAC were well served by the in-year admissions process (see Table 9).

Table 9: How well specific groups of looked after and previously looked after children were served by in-year admissions in 2024/2025 (number of local authorities)

Group of children	Not at all	Not well	Well	Very well	Not applicable
Looked after children in home LA (153)	0	4	50	98	1
Looked after children in another LA (153)	2	24	82	41	4
Looked after children from another LA (152)	0	10	58	83	1
Previously looked after children in home LA (152)	0	8	56	85	3

118. The factors that were reported by local authorities as contributing to a greater level of challenge in respect of in-year admissions generally, which we have summarised above, also applied to securing places for LAC and PLAC. Although many local authorities reported a commitment within their own organisation, and from schools, to securing appropriate education for these children, they also told us that a shortage of available school places often resulted in schools being unable or reluctant to admit them. One local authority stated:

"Due to high demand and schools frequently being at capacity, securing a place for a Looked After or Previously Looked After Child can be challenging, especially at our most popular schools. Although the Local Authority always aims to broker a place at the preferred school, headteachers can be reluctant to admit pupils over their admission number, often due to existing complexities within a specific year group or the school as a whole.

We also find that applications for LAC/PLAC pupils, particularly at the secondary level, tend to concentrate on a small number of schools known for their inclusive

practices. Consequently, these schools may feel they are being disproportionately affected by requests to admit children who often have complex needs and require an additional level of support, over their published admission number."

119. Some local authorities reported that more children were in care than in previous years which, coupled with capacity issues, led to "drift and delay" in children starting school. One local authority noted that "These delays can have a serious and lasting impact on the affected children." This echoes what we see in directions cases, with places being sought in oversubscribed schools because these schools are Ofsted rated Good or Outstanding. The schools cite the fact of being 'full' as a reason to refuse admission. Whilst we can see that some schools receive high numbers of applications for LAC and PLAC, we are seriously concerned about the impact of these refusals on the well-being of such a vulnerable group of children. As was the case with in-year admissions generally, securing school places for LAC and PLAC in Year 11 was reported to be especially problematic, as was the admission of LAC and PLAC with additional needs. One local authority told us:

> "Admission remains particularly difficult for Key Stage 4 pupils in care, especially those in Year 11, as well as for children with SEND needs or an EHCP. Children with complex needs who lack an EHCP - often due to repeated school and care placement breakdowns, also face significant barriers. In some cases, differences in local authority policies can lead to delays, especially when mainstream schools refuse admission on the grounds that they cannot meet the child's needs."

> 118. Local authorities reported that concerns by schools that they had insufficient resources to support the more complex needs of some LAC and PLAC resulted in those schools asking for information above that permitted by the Code. One told us:

> "Schools/academies have increasingly been requesting further information ahead of a place being offered/agreed and in a small number of cases, schools/academies are reporting that "they cannot meet need" for looked after children even though their applications are not part of the consultation process for children with EHCPs. This requires challenge and can be a protracted process."

> There were also LAs that described their processes to counteract these issues:

> "[The LA] Virtual School has strong relationships with headteachers and designated teachers and pre-admission consultations are routinely held for looked after children to ensure schools can meet the needs of the child and to determine the level of support for the school."

120. Other issues reported by LAs included incomplete information to establish PLAC status, including for children adopted from overseas, and age disputes for unaccompanied asylum seeker children (UASC). Providing for UASC, especially those in the older year groups, continued to be a challenge. One local authority described its approach as follows:

> "[The local authority] continues to commission a bespoke alternative education package in partnership with local post-16 providers. This initiative supports Year 11 pupils arriving from overseas, including unaccompanied asylum seekers, who join late in the academic year. By offering access to education within a local college setting, these young people are supported in their integration and progression to post-16 opportunities."

121. There were local authorities which reported reluctance from schools to admit LAC and PLAC on the grounds of their behaviour, and even that such reluctance had increased:

> "This year, we have noticed increased resistance from schools to admitting looked after children with challenging behaviour, especially those schools located close to residential care facilities. Since such children are not admitted under Fair Access Protocols, nearby schools may end up taking a disproportionate number of children with challenging behaviour."

122. Refusals on the grounds of behaviour can only be made under paragraph 3.10 of the Code. As we have set out above, the Code states unequivocally, in paragraph 3.12, that the provision in paragraph 3.10 cannot be used to refuse admission to looked after children. Consequently, in our view, a refusal by any admission authority to admit a LAC because of their behaviour has no basis in law.

123. Joint working of different bodies, within local authorities and between them, can be crucial to efficient in-year admissions for LAC and PLAC. Reports included descriptions of effective working practices:

> "There is a well-established school moves protocol in place to ensure that any in year admission for looked after children is carefully considered and always in the best interests of the child. These decisions are not made in isolation, they are discussed and agreed upon through a multi-agency forum, which includes education, social care, and health professionals. Crucially, no school move goes ahead without the agreement of the Virtual School Head, ensuring that educational stability and the child's wider needs are fully taken into account…"

124. There were also local authorities which reported that dealing with Multi Academy Trusts and own admission authority schools contributed to the level of challenge they experienced in securing places for LAC and PLAC. Reports included that these bodies are not always clear about their responsibilities and there can be a lack of response to applications:

> "Problems arise when some own admission authority schools do not respond in a timely way to applications. By neither refusing or accepting the request, the Local Authority has no way of knowing that the application has been made and are unable to support. We now have several examples of where this has led to carers and adopters simply giving up on the application and making an application to

> another setting. This can arise for any applicant, not only for looked after and previously looked after children but the rejection and issues this activity causes our children can be life-changing with some children losing their homes as a result. . . refusals of in-year admissions for looked after and previously looked after children are increasing and are impacting on placement stability. Carers expect the process of securing a school place to be easier than it is, and the additional challenge can add to what is already a highly challenging set of circumstances."

125. In our view, the fact of children losing their home as a result of failure to secure a school place is a matter of serious concern for this vulnerable group of children. Some local authorities reported difficulties in securing places for LAC and PLAC pupils when this involved cooperation between different local authorities. One stated:

> "Difficulties do arise when navigating admissions in other local authorities due to the differing approaches e.g. you need to apply directly to schools, or central admissions, or in some cases via the virtual school."

126. There were particular concerns expressed by some local authorities in respect of LAC and PLAC applicants with SEND who are resident in one local authority area and seeking a school place in another. This included where a child did not have an EHCP but should perhaps have one:

> "There have been several examples of children looked after by other Local Authorities, where that child has moved into [our] area, and has significant SEND needs, but is not on an EHC pathway. This has created significant challenge for the local mainstream schools who have understandably felt they are not able to meet need, whilst frustrating the virtual school from the home Local Authority. This can lead to delays in securing provision. Furthermore, on occasion, appropriate provision is quickly provided, and the EHC needs assessment process is started, only for that child to be moved out of area again, which is very difficult for that child."

127. The matter of some schools being repeatedly, and disproportionately, approached to admit LAC and PLAC pupils was raised by several local authorities. Sometimes this was due to geographical factors such as a concentration of carers, or a residential home, in a particular area. Other local authorities reported that Virtual Schools in other local authority areas will consistently apply to the same school, or small number of schools, known for their inclusive practices. One local authority told us that social workers may struggle to "navigate varying systems across local authorities, particularly when unfamiliar with the area or the processes". Another described its response to these issues:

> "We have developed a robust system of close working between the Virtual School, Social Care and School Admissions to ensure that the needs of individual children are matched to the right education setting, prior to making applications to move school. . . The process has been simplified and made more transparent and

equitable by establishing and publishing the method of placing children looked after in 'the nearest good or outstanding school which can meet needs' (applied both in county and out of county). As a result, schools see the fairness and objectivity of this approach and more readily admit pupils."

128. This approach, whilst having some practical advantages, does not appear to take into account cases where the parent or carer has a preference for a particular school.

129. In order to address the challenges faced, some local authorities dealt with the placement of both LAC and PLAC via the FAP. As our report last year made clear, the Code allows for PLAC children to be included in FAPs but does not extend the same provision to LAC children. The inclusion of LAC in the FAP groups set out in the Code would be welcomed by some local authorities. There were also local authorities which chose to coordinate in-year admissions, with one reporting that "this benefits the placement of CLA as we are able to place children quicker". Others expressed concern that a lack of coordination affects LAC and PLAC particularly badly. One stated:

> "There are fundamental concerns regarding the in-year processes, and the decentralisation of the process. . . more than half the schools in our LA are OAAs [own admission authorities]. OAAs having control over their in-year admissions means that they are less likely to communicate properly with the LA, they are less likely to provide vacancy information (even though it is statutory), and parents have to apply for a myriad of schools rather than apply to a central place.
>
> Both LAC and PLAC applicants are unfairly bearing the brunt of this issue. Even with the LA advocating for the child, it still means that a person may have to make multiple applications, with all the time and stress that involves, for a single child's placement. Due to the shortages of places within the borough (due to capping), we have had multiple cases of parents and carers having to apply to more than 10 schools. If we have to 'direct' a school to take a pupil, that means an even longer period of time that those vulnerable children are out of school. The parent or carer, of course, has to wait for the responses of multiple schools, before they can confirm a place. Due to our strong relationships with most schools, we can avoid directing or applying to the SoS for a direction as well as most appeals, but this takes lengthy negotiation on our part, and on the part of the parents, carers and social workers. We manage to place the children currently, but our ability to negotiate with schools is dwindling due to place pressure.
>
> OAAs handling their own in-year admissions doesn't work. It takes too long, and leaves vulnerable children without school places. The risk to children is exacerbated by the fact it is impossible to track their movements effectively, meaning the risks of exploitation of the system and our children is too high. It is confusing, difficult for parents, and not fit for purpose. While not directly discriminating against LAC/PLAC applicants, there is indirect discrimination - they are the most affected, due to the frequency of movement, and the complexities of

finding and maintaining placements. This remains a serious concern for our borough."

130. In our report last year we noted that the DfE document "Promoting the education of looked-after children and previously looked-after children" (2018) states, at paragraph 12:

> "Schools judged by Ofsted to be 'good' or 'outstanding' should be prioritised when seeking a place for looked-after children in need of a new school."

131. We would welcome guidance from the DfE regarding the placement of LAC and PLAC following changes to the system of inspection, which no longer awards schools an overall judgement. Such guidance has not yet been forthcoming. Local authorities continue to express concern regarding a lack of sufficient places in good or outstanding schools and to request clarification from the DfE, as do we. One local authority stated:

> "The recent change in the Ofsted inspection framework regarding the removal of single judgement gradings and the outdated statutory guidance for Local Authorities that states children in care should go to a good or outstanding school can provide challenges in identifying and securing the most appropriate school to meet children's needs."

132. There were local authorities which expressed support for the measures in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill which would extend powers for local authorities to direct academies to admit pupils, believing that this would be particularly beneficial to LAC and PLAC. In our casework, we have seen examples of own admission authorities believing that the extent of their obligation to admit LAC and PLAC applicants is to place the name at the top of the waiting list when the school is said to be 'full'. There appears to be a lack of awareness that schools must admit these children unless they are able to demonstrate that it would be seriously prejudicial to do so.

C. Placing Pupils who have SEND In Year

133. This year local authorities reported on placing children with special educational needs who had an EHCP and those who did not (see Table 10)

Table 10: How well children who have SEND, with and without an EHCP, were served by in-year admissions in 2024/2025 (number of local authorities reporting in brackets)

Group of children who have SEND	Not at all	Not well	Well	Very well	N/A
With an EHCP (153)	1	15	81	51	5
Without an EHCP (153)	1	12	98	36	6

134. The overall challenge faced by many local authorities, of greater demand for admissions and an increased reluctance from schools to admit children in-year, was also reported in respect of children with SEND. One local authority summarised its experience as follows:

> "While there have been many successful placements of children and young people with SEND throughout the year, it is evident that some schools feel the number of pupils with SEND in their setting is disproportionately high or that they are operating at or beyond capacity. Some schools have indicated that they are unable to offer a place for a young person with SEND, as they cannot reasonably meet the child's needs. Additional challenges arise when children arrive without a formal diagnosis but with evident additional needs, for example, those awaiting assessment or newly arrived from overseas. Parental expectations and demand for specialist placements continue to exceed the number of places available or feasible."

135. A lack of capacity was not the case for all, however. One local authority described the impact of SEND admissions on schools that do have vacant spaces:

> "Concerns remain over the impact on schools that are undersubscribed when it comes to placing pupils with additional needs. Schools with places will end up taking a higher proportion of pupils arriving with needs. Often these are pupils arriving after October census so come with no initial funding. School budgets are already stretched and requests to admit further pupils with complex needs often leads to concerns being raised by heads over the impact this will have on their cohorts, their staff and their budget. With no way to provide interim funding between censuses, the issue is very hard to resolve. An ability to recognise the issues schools face with such cases and to provide support funding would help alleviate this issue and thereby speed up the process of placing pupils into education. As rolls continue to fall and schools are already faced with deficit budgets, these issues are becoming more acute."

136. Another local authority described the use of 'capping' by schools in order to avoid admitting what they viewed as a disproportionate number of children with SEND:

> "Some schools attract more applications due to their excellent reputation for supporting children with SEN, but this becomes more difficult for them to manage when this becomes a high proportion of their cohort, putting increased pressure on their resources and finances. As a result some schools cap their admission number in an attempt to mitigate the impact, which may frustrate parental preference."

137. Local authorities reported increases in the numbers of pupils with an EHCP and described resistance, which had often increased, from schools to admit these children. In some areas this resulted in local authority officers needing to undertake multiple consultations for the same child, with workload implications and delays in the securing of

a school place. One local authority described some schools “carrying a disproportionate burden for learners with EHCPs due to the lack of inclusivity in other settings.”

138. Reasons reported for schools declining to offer a place to children with an EHCP when consulted included lack of confidence in the school’s ability to meet the needs of the child due to the number of children on roll with complex needs, and pressures on school budgets. Some local authorities expressed concern regarding the grounds used by schools not to offer a place to a child with an EHCP when consulted, and one described its strategy for challenges to refusals as follows:

> “[The] LA has a robust process for managing negative consultations from settings. These are challenged to ensure only legally permissible reasons are accepted. If a school’s response is deemed non-compliant with the Code, the school of parental preference is named and a start date arranged promptly.
>
> Where a negative consultation is accepted, the EHCP Panel determines next steps and works with families to secure appropriate placements. The Multi Agency Panel meets regularly to triage and resolve complex cases.”

139. Whilst some local authorities told us that a ‘social and medical’ need criterion gave additional priority to children with SEND (but without an EHCP) who sought in-year admission, others stressed that these pupils were, for admission purposes, given parity with all other applicants who did not have an EHCP and that schools were expected to provide for their needs. Indeed, we note here that paragraph 1.9h states that admission authorities must not discriminate against or disadvantage children with special educational needs.

140. One local authority stated:

> “Children with special educational needs and/or disabilities who do not have an EHCP are treated with equity in the in-year admission process. There is a presumption that the needs of the individual child can be met in any mainstream school by making reasonable adjustments, offering appropriate interventions, and through access to additional support mechanisms for those children if necessary.”

141. Nevertheless, several local authorities reported that refusals to admit children with SEND who do not have an EHCP were prevalent due to limited resources. Schools (they say) are claiming, and often evidencing, that they cannot appropriately meet need, and that “The number of children without an EHCP but with complex needs continues to rise”. As one local authority said:

> “Due to financial pressures within schools and academies, resources are stretched and on occasions children may be turned down if they have SEND, but no EHCP, on the grounds that by admitting the child, this would prejudice the efficient provision of education or use of resources.”

142. Some local authorities described strategies to reduce refusals from schools to admit these children, including assessments to “inform decisions on the appropriate level of support to be offered to both the school and the child.” One local authority told us that:

> “In year admissions for SEND young people have careful planning to ensure they make a successful transition. Schools are encouraged to meet with previous settings to discuss Individual Education Plans and transfer support form one setting to another. By putting in place the transition work and information sharing surrounding the in-year admissions, SEND young people have been very well supported.”

143. Securing places for children with SEND arriving into their areas, including from abroad, was reported as a challenge by local authorities. In some cases, children had complex needs which required an EHC assessment. One local authority described this as a ‘catch 22’ situation, as “the pupil cannot always get a school place without having an EHCP but they also cannot get an EHCP without having a school place.” Another local authority told us:

> “There remain concerns for some children who move into area, particularly from abroad, who clearly have significant needs or have previously attended a special school, but without an EHCP. At present, these children are expected to be admitted to a mainstream school in the first instance. The mainstream school is then required to make an initial assessment, and if necessary, contact the Inclusion Support Service, who will commission other professional partners to make an in-depth assessment and advise. The LA SEN team need time for an assessment to take place and gather information (e.g. from the previous school / social services) to evidence need and identify whether a special school place is required, which isn’t always straightforward.
>
> Mainstream schools are, however, understandably reluctant to admit such children, where it is clearly evident to them that they cannot meet need and therefore, deem it is not in the child’s best interests to start at a mainstream school. This can lead to delays in securing provision. Sometimes it might be agreed that an ‘assessment place’ is the right course of action, but they are not always available.”

144. The matter of admission authorities refusing admission on the basis of an applicant’s behaviour was raised by local authorities as an issue which contributed to refusals to admit pupils with SEND in-year, both those with an EHCP and those without, including children who had been permanently excluded. One stated:

> “Children without EHCPs but with significant needs are increasingly likely to be subject to Section 3.10 refusals - it takes significant resources to remind schools of their obligations, liaise with them, as there seems to be a growing trend of using 3.10 to refuse admission, regardless of the mitigations provided by 3.11-3.13.

Ideally, future versions of the code need to be clearer on the grounds on which a school can refuse entry, as the effects of the 3.10 refusals are born [sic] more by children with special needs not supported by EHCPs more than other applicants."

145. One local authority noted that in respect of exclusions of pupils with an EHCP, many "appear to be out of step with the Equality Act, particularly where reasonable adjustments have not been fully explored or implemented." Another stated:

"Schools often consider children without an EHCP as challenging behaviour and we need to change the mindset of schools that behaviour is communication of unmet needs. Some schools work really well with the LA, others not so much and they need to amend their inclusivity."

146. One local authority asserted that, "The Admissions Code makes no provision for pupils with SEND but no EHCP. This can lead to disproportionate allocation of needs to schools." Another stated that the Code "isn't explicitly clear on the legal position for refusing admission for children from abroad with SEND but not yet with an EHCP. Some further clarity on this would be helpful." It may assist admission authorities to note that paragraph 3.17 of the Code sets out the groups of children who can be placed via the FAP and includes "children with special educational needs (but without an Education, Health and Care plan), disabilities or medical conditions". A number of local authorities reported the use of the FAP to secure in-year places for children with SEND, including for those with more complex needs. One stated:

"Children without an EHCP also fall within the scope of the in-year Fair Access Protocol (FAP), which gives these cases priority over waiting lists. Referrals to FAP are often necessary for pupils arriving from overseas without an EHCP, particularly where schools express concerns about their capacity to meet needs due to funding constraints or argue that the level of need is more appropriate for a special school. These cases are typically resolved through FAP, where SEND representation from the local authority is invited and additional support is offered from the [local authority learning partnership] to enable mainstream schools to meet needs while an EHCP assessment is progressed."

147. We were concerned to read reports from some local authorities of offers of places for children with SEND being withdrawn by admission authorities.

"We have seen increasing queries from schools where a child with special educational needs who does not have an education health care plan has been offered a place in-year, then stating that they are unable to meet need."

"There has been reluctance from some primary schools to admit some children who have SEND but do not yet have an EHCP. It is not unusual for the child's needs to become apparent only after an initial offer has been made and the school has met the child and family, which leads to schools subsequently withdrawing their offer. Often these children do need specialist provision once the assessment

is complete, and schools are concerned about the school's capacity to meet the needs of that child while also meeting the needs of their current pupil population."

148. Withdrawals of offers such as that described above are unlawful and contrary to paragraph 2.13 of the Code, which states:

> "An admission authority **must not** withdraw an offer unless it has been offered in error, a parent has not responded within a reasonable period of time, or it is established that the offer was obtained through a fraudulent or intentionally misleading application. Where the parent has not responded to the offer, the admission authority **must** give the parent a further opportunity to respond and explain that the offer may be withdrawn if they do not. Where an offer is withdrawn on the basis of misleading information, the application **must** be considered afresh, and a right of appeal offered if an offer is refused."

149. As in previous years, local authorities reported a high and often increased demand for special school places, with many stating that special schools in their areas were at full capacity. Local authorities stressed the issues caused by this shortage of places, including a lack of assessment places and that "some children and young people have had to wait until the end of an academic year or longer to join a school." One cited the increase in needs within mainstream schools as a factor in increased parental preference for specialist provision:

> "The complexity of needs within mainstream schools is also rising, and some provisions feel unable to fully meet these needs. This has contributed to a growing preference among families for specialist school placements."

150. There were local authorities which reported work to increase the number of special school places within their areas, including one which had created extra places in existing schools and another which reported "the development of two new SEND free schools." Conversely, one of the London authorities reported a commitment to mainstream inclusion supported by specialist resourced provision:

> "[Our local authority] has one of the highest national rates of children and young people with Education Health and Care Plans included in their local mainstream school; 55.1%; higher than London's 50.9% and well above the national average of 43.6%, reflecting mainstream inclusion and suggesting a strong parent preference for mainstream. Recognising the prevalence of autism, [we have] developed 8 specialist resourced provisions (SRPs), equivalent to 22% of all mainstream schools, over 150 SRP places in nursery, primary and secondary schools and academies."

151. Where local authorities sought to increase sufficiency of special school places, some barriers were reported. One local authority stated that it had a strategy in place but that "place numbers will not be fully realised for 3-4 academic years." Another reported that "Local authority planning is impeded by a lack of timescales around DfE's free school special school building programme." In some areas, specialist-type provision

within mainstream schools was being used or developed to address the needs of pupils. One local authority told us:

> "Schools work well with the Local Authority to support our children and many are developing or have developed good quality SEN provision which replicates special school models with small class sizes, personalised curriculums and higher staffing ratios. This has been successful in maintaining mainstream placements in many cases. Our special schools also support mainstream settings to maintain placements through both an in-reach and out-reach offer for identified children."

152. The matter of funding for special school places for LAC was raised by one local authority:

> "the lack of clarity in the National Guidance on the funding of specialist school places for Children Looked After who live outside the Local Authority who is responsible for their care, continues to cause a degree of confusion and delay whilst funding arrangements are discussed and agreed between the Local Authorities involved. The release of clear, updated, definitive national funding guidance will be greatly welcomed."

D. Fair Access Protocols and In-Year Admissions

153. Some local authorities reported that they had seen an increase in FAP referrals, others a decrease, with contributing factors including changes in the birth rate, movement into or out of a local authority area, and changes in the availability of school places. Local authorities reported an increased reluctance from schools to admit pupils via the usual in-year admissions process (thereby necessitating the use of the FAP). Reasons included: the needs of those pupils or of children already on roll, and increases in "children presenting with social, emotional, and mental health needs".

154. Often, a greater use of the FAP for secondary school places rather than for primary places was reported. One local authority stated that its use of the FAP had risen due to "improved identification and referral processes"; another summarised the reasons for an increase in referrals in its area as follows:

> "There has been another significant increase, of 38%, upon the previous year (which itself saw a 125% increase on the preceding period) in the number of cases presented to FAP. Key reasons are the increasing number of new-to-area families and children arriving (both from overseas and other parts of the UK) and a significant number proportion [sic] of EHE pupils seeking to return to formal education. [These] met with a high likelihood of secondary school place preference refusals within their local area, largely on grounds of (under PAN) prejudice. There remains a significant proportion of permanently excluded pupils, for which parents are unwilling to engage with Day 6 provision options, and instead seek a return to mainstream via in-year applications, largely met with refusals in first instance."

155. A lack of capacity in respect of school places was cited by many local authorities as a factor which necessitated greater use of the FAP, with one stating that, “Figures are therefore slightly misleading in so far as a number of children are hard to place simply because schools are full.” The matter of capping was also raised, with one local authority stating:

> “part of the problem stems from the Local Authority having little control over the capacity for non community schools. In order for the Authority to fulfil its responsibility of ensuring sufficient places to meet expected demand, further powers are needed. As already highlighted, an expectation for a school to work to its PAN in all year groups unless otherwise agreed with the Authority would help resolve this concern and reduce the number of allocations having to go via fair access. Whilst all secondary schools in the borough work within the terms of the fair access agreement, and admit pupils via this process, greater transparency for parents would be available if all schools were working to their published Year 7 capacity in all year groups.”

156. In some cases, local authorities reported innovative strategies to address placements for KS4 children, including ‘fast tracking’ them through the FAP process. One described its approach as follows:

> “The local authority has continued to commission alternative provision for some secondary aged learners in Year 10 and Year 11 . . . In addition, several schools have accommodated newly arrived Year 11 pupils by placing them in Year 10 where this was deemed to be in the child’s best educational interests.
>
> We have established a dedicated EAL Year 11 Resource Provision within a . . . school, providing a safe and supportive environment for this cohort. This followed a review by a working group of local authority officers and secondary headteachers, which concluded that a school-based provision would better safeguard these pupils than college placements. Many of these learners have successfully achieved ESOL Entry 1, Entry Level 1 Mathematics, and GCSEs in their heritage languages (e.g., Spanish, Arabic, Portuguese). The school has also ensured that all pupils have submitted college applications and secured appropriate post-16 placements.”

157. A number of local authorities reported that there had been increases (sometimes described as significant) in the number of permanent exclusions in their areas, necessitating greater use of the FAP. Others expressed concerns regarding EHE being used as a route to avoid permanent exclusion:

> “We are seeing an increase in parents who notify the school that they are withdrawing their child to home educate because their child is at risk of permanent exclusion. As the law allows a child to be off rolled from a school to home educate, this appears to have become a tactical approach to avoid a PEX and gain a place at another school as the parent then contacts the LA to indicate that they no longer

want to home educate and want a school place. As the LA has no vacancies in secondary schools, and there is a similar challenge in neighbouring LA, the pupil is referred for a Fair Access placement. With only six secondary schools in [the local authority], all oversubscribed, this has become a significant issue. We would like to see tighter legislation applied to requests to off roll to home educate."

158. The matter of EHE returners was widely reported as resulting in increased FAP referrals, including where a School Attendance Order had been issued. One local authority told us that "Children returning from EHE remain a significant challenge especially in latter parts of Year 10 and into Year 11." Where EHE returners should be placed, and whether or not this should be in their previous school, is a matter of concern for some local authorities. One told us of its intention to "establish local agreements about children returning to mainstream from EHE" in order to encourage a uniform approach across secondary academies in its area; another stated:

> "Where a child has been electively home educated Fair Access Panels will generally take the view that the child should return to the previous school to try and discourage parents from electively home educating where this is not appropriate and to encourage schools to support families to keep their child in school."

159. We have already highlighted the matter of refusal by admission authorities to admit pupils on the grounds of their behaviour. It is, therefore, unsurprising that such refusals were raised by local authorities when reporting on their use of the FAP. There were some which reported that refusals on the grounds of behaviour had reduced, including due to a better understanding across schools of "the legal application of paragraph 3.10 of the school admissions code" and those who are using, or plan to introduce, processes to more effectively deal with such admissions. One local authority stated:

> "Communication and joint working between schools, alternative provision and the wider [LA] teams supporting children who are placed via fair access are positive and constructive. Schools continue to support discussion for those children with challenging behaviour and representation from the alternative provision is invaluable in providing advice and often practical support as part of a wider plan for reintegration to education."

160. Unfortunately, reports of increased refusals on the basis of behaviour were far more common; one local authority stated that it had seen "over 130 pupils being refused admission on behaviour grounds". There was also concern expressed that such refusals were not always compliant with the Code:

> "There has been an increase in the number of children referred to the fair access panel on the grounds of challenging behaviour. Some applications did not meet the threshold for challenging behaviour and therefore should have been dealt with through the normal in-year process."

161. Some local authorities expressed frustrations regarding paragraphs 3.10 and 3.11 of the Code, asserting a lack of clarity and tensions between these paragraphs and other sections of the Code. One local authority stated:

> "The School Admissions Code 3.10 states an admission authority can state they do not want to admit where they have good reason to believe a child may display challenging behaviour – this section contradicts 2.28 of the Code, raising the question which has more weight in law.
>
> Local experience suggests that FAP is being used for a significant number of cases where the applicant has applied for a new school place to avoid sanctions such as permanent exclusion. However, for 3.10 to be applied information must be shared. Families are becoming aware of this and are now applying for schools with vacancies to increase the likelihood of changing school and avoiding sanctions.
>
> Whilst many of the issues can be managed through local data sharing agreements and consent processes, there is no clear process for cross border applications."

162. As mentioned earlier, the tension between these Code provisions is something which we hope can be resolved through the forthcoming planned amendments to the Code. Another local authority told us of "some schools forming an alliance to share information between schools in relation to internal and external suspensions and exclusions before deciding whether to admit or refuse, and other schools excluded from the information sharing, placing them at a direct and deliberate disadvantage" and stated:

> "The guidance for schools being able to refuse under the grounds of challenging behaviour and refer to Fair Access, therefore assumes that schools have access to statistical information about children placed at other local schools, along with basic information about their behaviour (e.g. excluded, challenging, etc.) for the school to be able to decide if they have been asked to admit a disproportionate number, and challenge on this basis. However there is nothing outlined that LA's are permitted and should share this information with schools, or indeed from school to school, making this aspect contradictory."

163. Concerns were also raised in respect of delays in admission to school after a panel decision has allocated a place via the FAP and admission authorities not confirming to the local authority when a child is admitted, resulting in additional work for local authority officers. One local authority reported that "The DfE School Attendance data now available to local authorities helps us more easily identify vacancies and monitor start dates for children placed via Fair Access." Another stated:

> "Placing pupils via the Fair Access Protocol is proving increasingly difficult particularly as more schools convert to Academy status. We are experiencing increased reluctance from schools to admit pupils and an increase in schools referring cases to be considered via the Protocol, even where the LA does not necessarily agree that the protocol applies."

164. We have already discussed the wish of many local authorities for coordination of in-year applications to be statutory. One LA stated that the lack of coordination "makes the process of ensuring greater equity between schools challenging"; another that use of coordination in its area "allows for earlier identification of children that qualify for Fair Access and has greatly reduced the length of time a referral takes, and the number of days lost to education is reduced."

165. Reports from local authorities made a number of suggestions for changes to practice and to the Code. For example, removing the requirement for children for whom there are no places available at any school within a reasonable distance of their home to have been out of school for four or more weeks before referral to the FAP can be made, as some asserted this leads to unnecessary delays. Other suggestions were that children placed under the FAP could be exceptions to infant class size legislation, and that "cross-border co-operation over Fair Access would provide greater equity for some learners and families as children [living] close to borders are not best served by Fair Access provision being limited to residents." Many of these are reasonable suggestions which we hope the Department are considering. It is clear to us from our work on directions advice cases that unnecessary delays in securing school places for children placed via the FAP procedure are a regular occurrence.

166. There was also a wish stated for local authorities to be given powers of direction to all schools and academies. We note that there is a measure in The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill to extend local authorities' current powers to direct a maintained school to admit a child, to enable them to direct academies in the same way.

167. One LA expressed its frustration with the Code as follows:

> "The Code still does not well serve the purposes for Fair Access. The categories of pupils that are eligible is meaningless as none of the characteristics listed should be reasons to refuse admission, making the only relevant categories that of 'children for whom space cannot be found at a reasonable distance' and 'those for whom a school place has not been sought'.
>
> Challenging behaviour remains weakly defined and does not centre needs of children."

168. Table 11 shows that the number of children being admitted to schools under FAPs decreased by about 22 per cent overall in 2025 compared to 2024. This followed a significant increase in 2024 compared to 2023. For primary aged children, the reduction in 2025, compared to 2024, was more than one third (36.6 per cent). The reduction for secondary age children over the same time period was 15.4 per cent.

Table 11: The number of children admitted to schools under the Fair Access Protocol in 2025 (figures in brackets show data from 2024)

Type of school	All children	Primary aged children	Secondary aged children
Community and voluntary controlled	3836 (5426)	2459 (4032)	1377 (1394)
Foundation, voluntary aided schools and academies	17444 (21904)	3041 (4644)	14403 (17260)
Total	21280 (27330)	5500 (8676)	15780 (18654)

169. In 2025, the majority of local authorities (145) reported that children requiring a place through the FAP were well or very well served by the process. This was one less than in 2024 although there was an increase in the number rating the children as 'very well' served. This is shown in Table 12.

Table 12: Summary of responses on how well hard to place children were served by the Fair Access Protocol in 2025 (figures in brackets show data from 2024)

Not at all	Not Well	Well	Very Well	Not Applicable
0 (1)	4 (3)	59 (71)	86 (75)	4 (3)

E. Directions

170. We asked local authorities how many directions they had made to admit children to maintained schools for which they were not the admission authority (including children looked after by the local authority but resident in another area).

171. Most local authorities had not made any directions. Where directions had been made, this was usually a very small number, often one or two over the course of the year.

172. We rarely receive referrals from maintained schools which have been directed to admit children. The majority of our cases relating to directions come as advice to the Secretary of State on requests for an academy to admit a child. There were local authorities which reported that, in the majority of cases, schools agreed to admit a child at the point at which the local authority consulted with the governing body, removing the requirement for direction. One local authority stated, in respect of LAC and PLAC:

> "Importantly, we have not had to exercise our statutory power to direct a school to admit a looked after or previously looked after child, as schools have co-operated fully and admitted without delay. In most cases, placements have been achieved promptly through the standard in-year admissions process, with schools generally engaging positively. Where concerns have arisen, we have escalated matters and

involved the Virtual School and Inclusion Officers to reassure schools about the support available, ensuring the best possible chance of success for the child."

173. Sadly, however, this is not the case in all areas, and we are still advising the Secretary of State in cases where academies have refused to admit LAC. In most of the cases we see, schools do not appear to be aware that they can only refuse to admit a LAC or PLAC where this would cause serious prejudice. Most simply argue that they are 'full' by which they mean that the number of pupils in the year group in question exceeds the Year 7 PAN. We wondered whether anything could be done to make schools aware that the criterion for refusal is serious prejudice and that schools are expected to admit LAC and PLAC in-year unless there are very good reasons not to. As we have already said, the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill will extend powers for local authorities to direct academies to admit pupils. Some local authorities stated that they would welcome such powers:

> "The LA has experienced more delays in processing applications from own Admission Authority schools. Own Admission Authority schools are not responding to requests for school places within a timely manner. The process for referring these cases can be lengthy and the LA feels it does not have enough power to resolve these issues with Admission Authority schools within the timeline for responding to applications. We would appreciate a much more streamlined process for directing schools."

F. Other Matters raised by local authorities

174. Many local authorities used the section of their report which invited them to raise any other matters to reiterate views that we have already set out, especially in respect of pressures on school places and the wish for coordination of in-year admissions to be mandatory. Some noted that the issues they raised were the same as those they had reported in previous years.

175. In respect of capacity, local authorities described resulting pressures on transport budgets and the impact on children, including:

> "Significant pressure on KS2-4 places means that some children have to travel long distances to the nearest school with a place. The overall impact on the child of these journeys and the effect on their learning is acknowledged, but vacant places have to be filled before additional places can be provided.
>
> As schools are full the potential for moves between schools when pupils move house or experience bullying etc, are limited. As parents do not have options to change their child's school in these situations it is resulting in some parents withdrawing their children onto elective home education in a bid, in their view, to keep them safe mentally and physically, which is then placing increasing pressure on that service."

176. One local authority stated that “Since the changes to the School Admissions Code identifying that PAN relates to year of entry only, some admission authorities (secondary) will refuse to admit pupils.” As PAN was described in the 2012 Code, and in every version since, as relating to the normal year of entry this reference to “changes” is unclear. Nevertheless, concern among local authorities of ‘capping’ is obvious from the comments made, including as follows:

> “The School Admissions Code does not go far enough to support local authorities in ensuring they can meet their statutory duty to provide sufficient school places in their areas. The assertion that the Published Admission Number only applies to normal points of entry means that schools are free to reduce their admission numbers following the normal year of entry. While this supports the school with operational efficiencies, it means that some children requiring in-year placements face delays to their admissions.”

177. One local authority asserted that schools may cap their numbers “in response to a request to admit a child with additional needs or challenging behaviour” and that it would facilitate school place planning and in-year applications “if schools were required to confirm their intended admission number for each year group before the start of the academic year.”

178. High pupil mobility was reported as a factor which caused issues for schools, with some required to manage new admissions on a weekly basis. One local authority stated:

> “Colleagues in the secondary sector have expressed increasing concern around pupil mobility in urban areas, where children are often moving from school to school to school without settling in any one establishment. This is again leading to pushback from schools experiencing high volumes of applications from families whose address has not changed, leading to difficulties in securing places for children who are genuinely unplaced”.

179. The impact of mobility on funding, including in respect of EHCPs, was reported:

> “In year movement of pupils, especially those with additional needs, presents issues for schools where allocation takes place after October census. Schools are effectively educating those children with no funding for a period of up to one year. Where those pupils go off roll before the next census, the school has effectively educated them unfunded. With the number of complex cases increasing, a system is required to recognise the issues schools are facing with in-year admissions and to provide interim funding between census points. This would ease the pressure on schools.
>
> The current system also requires a child who has left the area with an EHCP to be reassessed if they return before the EHCP can be reinstated. Placing a child who had an EHCP into mainstream without funding for the assessment to be completed is extremely disruptive to efficient education. With school budgets

already stretched, schools are reluctant to do this. We would welcome a system that enables the SEN team to provide funding on the basis of the previous EHCP to support reassessment where it is believed the EHCP is going to be reinstated. This would seem a common sense approach that is currently unavailable to SEN where an EHCP has lapsed/been ceased due to departure from the area."

180. Again, challenges in securing school places for children newly arrived into the country were stressed, including the additional challenges that arise when these children also have additional needs. One local authority told us:

> "About 27% of applications are from children arriving from overseas, requiring schools to direct existing resources towards supporting children with EAL and SEN. The requirement to accept an application from overseas before the child arrives adds a further level of complexity to the allocation of school places, as the applicants have to be frequently monitored to ensure they have arrived in the UK, and applications reassessed based on the confirmed local address. Sometimes parents will apply to several local authorities because they have not decided where they intend to settle, which results in multiple offers or already stretched resources directed to tracking applications to confirm an application may be withdrawn."

181. Several local authorities chose to reiterate their views on the matter of EHE:

> "The number of children being Home Educated is higher than before lockdown in the early 2020s, this is a national issue. The reasons for EHE are proportionally less about lifestyle choice and more about concerns of mental health and those at risk of exclusion/attendance challenges. Returning to a school environment can be difficult, especially in a large rural authority where there is limited choice and transport is a barrier."

182. We have already set out issues reported by local authorities in respect of refusals to admit applicants on the basis of their behaviour. Further comments on this matter included:

> "We are seeing a rise in the number of 3.10 refusals issued by schools despite the bar being set very high by the Code as to what constitutes such a refusal. Many schools view themselves as having significant challenges which justify a refusal which increases the workload in terms of managing in-year admissions and placing children under the protocol. Occasionally schools are solely relying on attendance as evidence of challenging behaviour, which is not provided for in the definition in the School Admissions Code."

183. One local authority reported that places can be withdrawn for children, following pressure from the school community:

> "Children who have involvement with either the Youth Justice Service or who have criminal conviction decisions pending are difficult to place. Schools are unwilling to

admit pupils with known ‘community’ history. When places are allocated, parents and students lodge complaints with the school and this can result in governing bodies withdrawing places previously offered by the Academies.”

184. In respect of admission authorities asking applicants for information that is prohibited by the Code, and conducting meetings with applicants and their parents prior to making an offer of a place, one local authority suggested, “There should be a common in-year application form to prevent admission authorities from asking for unnecessary background information.” One local authority provided the following example:

> “Secondary schools often hold pre-admission meetings, these are generally intended to allow families and students to meet with school staff, share important information, and complete admission paperwork. However, an admission offer is only made after the meeting takes place and it is sometimes the case an offer is not made following this meeting, adding complexity to the admissions timeline. This process sometimes leads to delays, as schools are not always able to schedule these meetings within the 15-school-day period required for providing an outcome. Consequently, it presents a challenge in obtaining prompt admission decisions within the statutory timeframe.”

185. We are concerned to learn that this is happening. As stated previously, schools are not permitted to hold meetings with children and parents prior to making an offer of a place and they are not permitted to withdraw an offer following such a meeting. Both practices are expressly prohibited by the Code.

186. The matter of workload for local authorities was raised in some reports, including that caused by the actions of schools:

> “Continued delay with some primary and secondary schools' responses to dealing with in year application, and lack of understanding/ adherence to the timescales for processing.
>
> A disproportionate amount of officer time is taken chasing schools for responses and providing explanations to schools and parents about the legal duties of both the local authority and own admission authority schools in respect of allocations.
>
> This places an unnecessary pressure on the council from applicants wanting updates on placements, and adds to delays in allocating places.”

187. Views on the matter of local authorities working together were provided, with one local authority stating, “As noted in our report last year, we would welcome the strengthening of safeguarding processes in relation to children educated outside the local authority where they live.” Another suggested:

> “It is not routine for one LA to inform another when a resident of that area is admitted to school. In [our local authority] we do this for all LAC and that assists with pupil tracking and keeping school numbers on roll up to date. Although it

would increase the responsibility for all LAs, it would be progress for a new duty to be set to share the outcomes of applications with relevant LAs. It would help with the LAs safeguarding duties and reduce the numbers of Children Missing Education in all areas – enabling LA resources to be targeted on children who require targeted support."

188. There was one local authority which expressed its view that coordination of in-year admissions should not be required as follows:

> "We would be concerned at any suggestion that local authorities may again be required to co-ordinate all in-year applications in the future. We consider this would be a move which works against the interests of parents and that such admissions, particularly for own admission authority schools, are best managed by the schools themselves.
>
> We remain strongly of the view that parents making in-year applications directly to schools which are their own admission authority is much better than a centrally coordinated system."

189. However, reports of issues caused by a lack of central coordination of in-year admissions, and calls for this to be statutory, were far more widespread. Comments on this matter included:

> "A return to full co-ordination for In Year would increase safeguarding within the system, giving parents one point of application and enabling the LA to offer places where vacancies exist and quickly ensure families applications are processed with a school place at the end of the process. Those parents applying to individual schools and then refused have no route forward and sometimes no information as to where they may secure a school place. Children can remain out of school for extended periods if parents must go from school to school. Delays in securing a school place lead to disengagement, poor attendance, poor behaviour and poor academic outcomes."

190. As we have already discussed, the OSA has seen a significant rise in the number of objection cases related to the admission of children out of their normal year of entry. One local authority raised this same matter as follows:

> "A new challenge is the significant growth in families applying for admission out of year group, especially as the Code does not provide clear guidance on this."

191. There were other calls for changes to legislation, including:

> "We believe that clearer legislation is needed around in-year admissions to ensure that parents—especially those whose children are currently out of school—can secure a school place without unnecessary delay. The existing process, including the Fair Access Protocol, lacks sufficient clarity on when schools are expected to offer places and does not provide local authorities with adequate grounds to

challenge decisions that may be unlawful. While parents technically have the right to appeal, in practice, most do not pursue this route and schools often use this to their advantage”

and:

“Establishing a clear timeframe for schools to either admit a child or refer the case to the Fair Access Protocol following an in-year school place allocation would be beneficial. Currently, the lack of clear guidance can sometimes result in children being out of education for longer than necessary.”

192. We agree that requirements to admit or refer a case to the FAP within a specified time period would be helpful in all cases (they do already exist for LAC in some cases). We see far too much delay between the initial approach to the school and the application for a direction. Our view is that there should also be a requirement for local authorities to consult the school on a direction within a required timescale following a refusal to admit and to apply or make a direction within a required period if the school refuses to admit or fails to respond to the consultation letter. We see children being out of school for months for no apparent reason due to delays in the process. These are vulnerable children who are already struggling, and this delay means they are missing education and will find reintegration into mainstream more difficult.

Appendix 1 - The role of the OSA

193. Adjudicators exist by virtue of section 25 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998. They have a remit across the whole of England. In relation to all academies and mainstream schools, other than 16–19 schools Adjudicators consider objections to and referrals about determined school admission arrangements. In relation to maintained schools, adjudicators: decide on requests to vary determined admission arrangements; determine referrals from admission authorities against the intention of the local authority to direct the admission of a particular child; decide some school organisation proposals; and resolve disputes on the transfer and disposal of non-playing field land and assets. In relation to academies, adjudicators give advice to the Secretary of State on requests from local authorities for the Secretary of State to direct an academy to admit a named child.

194. Adjudicators are appointed for their knowledge of the school system and their ability to act impartially, independently and objectively. They look afresh at cases referred to them and consider each case on its merits in accordance with relevant legislation, guidance and the Code. They investigate, evaluate the evidence provided and determine cases taking account of the reasons for disagreement at local level and the views of interested parties. Adjudicators may hold meetings in the course of their investigations if they consider it would be helpful and could expedite the resolution of a case.

195. Adjudicators are independent of the DfE and from each other unless two or more adjudicators are considering a case together. Adjudicators are part-time, work from home and take cases on a ‘call-off’ basis, being paid only for time spent on OSA business. They may undertake other work when they are not working for the OSA provided such work is compatible with the role of an adjudicator. They do not take cases in local authority areas where they have been employed by that local authority or worked there in a substantial capacity in the recent past. Nor do they take cases where they live or have previously worked closely with individuals involved in a case, or for any other reason if they consider their objectivity might be, or be perceived to be, compromised.

196. The two joint interim Chief Adjudicators have continued to fulfil the role pending recruitment of a permanent appointment, whilst also undertaking case work. Both are stepping down from their adjudicator role in March 2026. We are pleased to say a substantive Chief Adjudicator, Nigel Genders, has been appointed and took up his new role in February 2026. At the same time an additional adjudicator has been appointed bringing the total number of adjudicators going forward to twelve plus the Chief Adjudicator.

197. Adjudicators are supported by a small team of administrative staff who are seconded from the DfE for this purpose. We have four staff who have provided excellent support throughout the year, despite many challenges. We extend our thanks to them all.

198. As in past years we sought and received legal advice and litigation support as necessary from lawyers of the Government Legal Department (GLD) and from barristers

who specialise in education law. Adjudicator determinations are checked before publication by the Chief Adjudicator and, where appropriate, by barristers. Determinations do not set precedents, and each case is decided in the light of its specific features and context alongside the relevant legal provisions. Determinations are legally binding and, once published, they can be challenged only by judicial review in the Courts. We have one ongoing challenge to a determination, with a hearing date in the Court of Appeal expected later in 2026.

199. The OSA's costs in the financial year April 2024 to March 2025 were £597,000 compared to £491,000 the previous year. This increase is due in the main to an increase in the number of cases, training of the new adjudicators and the cost of judicial review litigation. At the completion of each case, the OSA seeks feedback from all involved on how the matter was handled. This year 252 forms were sent out and 26 (which is 10% per cent) returned. Overall, comments suggest confidence in OSA processes.

200. We received 16 requests for information that cited the Freedom of Information Act 2000 in the period 1 January 2025 – 31 December 2025. All were dealt with within the statutory timescales.

Appendix 2 - OSA expenditure[2]

OSA Expenditure financial years 2024-2025 and 2023-2024

Category of Expenditure	2024-2025 £000	2023-2024 £000
Adjudicators' fees	452	340
Adjudicators' expenses	10	10
Office staff salaries	121	116
Legal fees (including costs of subscription to legal database)	87	25
Total	-	491

[2] Information relates to financial years 2024-2025 and 2023-2024. The report covers the calendar year 2025 so far as it relates to the work of the OSA.

Appendix 3 - Table Index

Table 1: Admissions cases by year and outcome

Table 2: Variations to admission arrangements

Table 3: Directions to maintained schools to admit a child and advice to the Secretary of State on requests for a direction to an academy to admit a child

Table 4: Children subject to Direction/Direction advice cases in 2025

Table 5: The views of local authorities comparing the 2024/25 admission round with 2023/24 for each normal point of entry to schools (number of authorities reporting and percentage of those reporting in the different categories)

Table 6: How well, looked after and previously looked after children, were served by the admissions system at normal point of admission in 2024/2025 compared to 2023/2024. Response of authorities (percentage reporting for each category)

Table 7: The number and percentage of authorities saying how well children who had an EHCP were served in 2024/2025 at normal points of entry

Table 8: The views of local authorities comparing the challenge of in-year admissions during 2024/2025 for primary and secondary admissions (number of local authorities and the percentage of those reporting in brackets). Please note that out of a total of 153 local authorities, 152 answered the questionnaire

Table 9: How well specific groups of looked after and previously looked after children were served by in-year admissions in 2024/2025 (number of local authorities and the percentage of those reporting in brackets)

Table 10: How well children who have SEND, with and without an EHCP, were served by in-year admissions in 2024/2025 (number of local authorities reporting in brackets)

Table 11: The number of children admitted to schools under the Fair Access Protocol in 2025 (figures in brackets show data from 2024)

Table 12: Summary of responses on how well hard to place children were served by the Fair Access Protocol in 2025 (figures in brackets show data from 2024)

Appendix 4 Local Authority Questionnaire Template

Office of
the Schools
Adjudicator

Template for

Local Authority Report

to

The Schools Adjudicator

from

Local Authority

to be provided by

31 October 2025

Report Cleared by: Name

Job Title

Telephone number

Email:

Date submitted:

By: Name

Job Title

Telephone number

Email:

Website: Office of the Schools Adjudicator

Please email your completed report to: Office of the Schools Adjudicator by 31 October 2025 and earlier if possible

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Introduction

1. Section 88P of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 (the Act) requires every local authority to make an annual report to the adjudicator. The Chief Adjudicator then includes a summary of these reports in the annual report to the Secretary of State for Education. The School Admissions Code (the Code) sets out the requirements for reports by local authorities in paragraph 6. Paragraph 3.30 specifies what must be included as a minimum in the report to the adjudicator and makes provision for the local authority to include any other matters. Paragraphs 6 and 3.30 of the Code require that each local authority publish its report locally.

2. **This year's report must cover the 2024/2025 academic year and be submitted to the Office of the Schools Adjudicator (OSA) by 31 October 2025.**

3. Please note that, in response to feedback on the previous template and in the light of consultation with a group of local authorities, changes have been made to various sections of this year's template.

Guidance on completing the template

4. We have included all the guidance on completing specific parts of the template in this section. There is no requirement for local authorities to include the introduction and the guidance in their published reports, but they are free to do so if they wish.

5. We should be grateful if in completing questions which ask for information about primary and secondary schools and/or pupils, local authorities would follow the approach to classification of schools used in statutory provisions and in the Department for Education Statistical First Release[3] and the Education Middle School (England) Regulations 2002[4].

6. The Code sets out some minimum requirements on the contents of each local authority report stating that each must cover as a minimum "information about how admission arrangements in the area of the local authority serve the interests of looked after children and previously looked after children, children with disabilities and children with special educational needs, including any details of where problems have arisen."

7. The Department for Education's aim through the annual reports from local authorities is to understand how well the admissions system is working nationally, rather than to hold individual local authorities to account. By understanding the effectiveness of the system, including outcomes, the Department hopes to identify areas where the admissions system is working well and areas where it could be improved. With that in mind, when the template asks, "how well does the admission system serve the needs of children," the Department appreciates that it is asking local authorities to make a subjective judgement, in the understanding that everyone's experience with the admission system will be different. The Department encourages local authorities in responding to the open questions and spaces for open comments to set out challenges that are proving difficult to overcome.

8. Guidance on specific questions and/or meaning of specific terms in this report:

    a. "in-year admissions": This means admissions (that is children admitted to a school and not applications for places):

        i. to a year group which is not a normal point of entry for the school concerned (for example to Year 2 for a five to eleven primary school); and

[3] Department for Education Statistical First Release

[4] The Education Middle School (England) Regulations 2002

ii. after the end of the statutory waiting list period (31 December) to a year group which is a normal year of admission for the schools concerned (such as Year R and Year 7).

b. Not applicable means that there were no children falling within the relevant definition.

9. We welcome all comments that local authorities make in the comment boxes and we aim to reflect those comments in the Annual Report, but we ask for the comments to be entered under the right headings. Section 3 invites comment on any other matters not specifically addressed in this template if local authorities wish to do so. The views expressed in previous years also remain a matter of public record.

10. We ask that where possible, you return the template in Word instead of PDF formatting. A number of you have commented on the formatting of the template and we have tried to make it as accessible as possible, but we are aware that some local authorities use different versions of Word.

11. Where questions request a comparison with the previous year, any new local authorities formed as a result of reorganisation should note this on the form.

Information requested

Section 1 - Normal points of admission

A. Co-ordination

Which of the following best describes the level of challenge for your **main admissions round in 24/25 compared to 23/24**?

Year Group	Much less challenging	Less challenging	No change	More challenging	Much more challenging
Reception					
Year 7					
Other relevant years of entry					

Please give examples to illustrate your answer if you wish:

B. Looked after and previously looked after children

i. How well does the admissions system in your local authority area serve the interests of looked after children at **normal points of admission**?

☐ Not at all ☐ Not well ☐ Well ☐ Very well ☐ Not applicable

ii. How well do the admissions systems in other local authority areas serve the interests of children looked after by your local authority at **normal points of admission**?

☐ Not at all ☐ Not well ☐ Well ☐ Very well ☐ Not applicable

iii. How well does your admissions system serve the interests of children who are looked after by other local authorities but educated in your area **at normal points of admission**?

☐ Not at all ☐ Not well ☐ Well ☐ Very well ☐ Not applicable

iv. How well does the admissions system in your local authority area serve the interests of previously looked after children at **normal points of admission**?

☐ Not at all ☐ Not well ☐ Well ☐ Very well ☐ Not applicable

v. If you wish, please give examples of any good or poor practice or difficulties which exemplify your answers about the admission to schools of looked after and previously looked after children at **normal points of admission**:

C. Special educational needs and/or disabilities

i. How well served are children with special educational needs and/or disabilities who **have** an education, health and care plan that names a school at **normal points of admission**?

☐ Not at all ☐ Not well ☐ Well ☐ Very well ☐ Not applicable

Please provide any comments you wish to make on the admission of children with special educational needs and/or disabilities at normal points of admission:

Section 2 - In-year admissions

A. Which of the following best describes the overall level of challenge for your in-year admissions in 24/25 compared to 23/24?

Phase	Much less challenging	Less challenging	No change	More challenging	Much more challenging
Primary					
Secondary					

If you wish, please explain the factors that have changed the level of challenge for your in-year admissions:

B. Looked after children and previously looked after children

i. How well does the **in-year admission** system serve children who are looked after by your local authority and who are being educated in your area?

☐ Not at all ☐ Not well ☐ Well ☐ Very well ☐ Not applicable

ii. How well does the **in-year admission** systems in other local authority areas serve the interests of your looked after children?

☐ Not at all ☐ Not well ☐ Well ☐ Very well ☐ Not applicable

iii. How well does the **in-year admission** system serve the interests of children who are looked after by other local authorities but educated in your area?

☐ Not at all ☐ Not well ☐ Well ☐ Very well ☐ Not applicable

iv. How well does your **in-year admission** system serve the interests of previously looked after children?

☐ Not at all ☐ Not well ☐ Well ☐ Very well ☐ Not applicable

v. If you wish, please give examples of any good or poor practice or difficulties which support or exemplify your answers about **in-year admissions** for looked after and previously looked after children:

C. Children with special educational needs and/or disabilities

i. How well served are children with special educational needs and/or disabilities who **have** an education, health and care plan that names a school when they need to be **admitted in-year**?

☐ Not at all well ☐ Not well ☐ Well ☐ Very well ☐ Not applicable

ii. How well served are children with special educational needs and/or disabilities who **do not have** an education, health and care plan when they need to be **admitted in-year**?

☐ Not at all well ☐ Not well ☐ Well ☐ Very well ☐ Do not know

iii. Please give examples of any good or poor practice or difficulties which support or exemplify your answers about **in-year admissions** for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities:

D. Fair access protocol

What proportion of the state-funded mainstream schools in your area have said that they agree to the local authority fair access protocol?

Primary

Between 0% and 49% ☐
Between 50% and 74% ☐
Between 75% and 89% ☐
Between 90% and 99% ☐
100% ☐

Secondary
Between 0% and 49% ☐
Between 50% and 74% ☐
Between 75% and 89% ☐
Between 90% and 99% ☐
100% ☐

If you have below 75% for either phase, please explain why:

i. How many children were admitted to schools in your area under the fair access protocol between 1 August 2024 and 31 July 2025?

Type of school	Number of Primary aged children admitted	Number of Secondary aged children admitted
Community and voluntary controlled		
Foundation, voluntary aided and academies		
Total		

ii. If you have seen a change in the number of children referred to your Fair Access Protocol between 1 August 2024 and 31 July 2025 compared to the previous academic year please indicate what you consider the key reasons for this change to be?

iii. How well do you consider children referred to the Fair Access Protocol are served in in your area?

☐ Not at all well ☐ Not well ☐ Well ☐ Very well ☐ Not applicable

iv. Please provide any comments you wish on the protocol not covered above:

E. Directions to maintained schools to admit children[5]

How many directions did the local authority make between 1 August 2024 and 31 July 2025 to maintained schools for which the local authority is not the admission authority to admit children (including children looked after by the local authority but resident in another area)?

Total number of children	Of which, looked after	Of which, not looked after

F. Other points on in-year admissions

i. For the schools for which the local authority co-ordinates in-year applications, in the year between 1 Aug 2024 and 31 July 2025 did you receive

☐ Significantly fewer applications than last year
☐ slightly fewer applications than last year
☐ about the same
☐ slightly more than last year
☐ significantly more than last year

ii. For what proportion of **primary** schools in your area did the local authority co-ordinate in-year admissions during the 2024/2025 academic year

[5] It is important that only Directions to maintained schools are included here. Numbers of Directions to academies are already held by the Department.

Between 0% and 24% ☐
Between 25% and 49% ☐
Between 50% and 74% ☐
Between 75% and 100% ☐

iii. For what proportion of **secondary** schools in your area did the local authority co-ordinate in-year admissions during the 2024/2025 academic year

Between 0% and 24% ☐
Between 25% and 49% ☐
Between 50% and 74% ☐
Between 75% and 100% ☐

iv. If you wish, please provide any comments about how **well in-year admissions** works for children who are **not** looked after or previously looked after and/or do **not** have SEND:

v. If you wish, please provide any other comments on the admission of children **in-year** not previously raised (you may wish to include here any comments about cases where it has not proved possible to find places for children):

Section 3 - Other matters

Are there any other matters that the local authority would like to raise that have not been covered by the questions above?

Section 4 - Feedback

We would be grateful if you could provide any feedback on completing this report to inform our practice for 2026.

Thank you for completing this template.

Please return to Office of the Schools Adjudicator by 31 October 2025

Office of
the Schools
Adjudicator

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