Department for Education

School preference (child level) data collections 2027

Information for local authorities on the submission of 2027 secondary and 2027 primary level school preference and offer data

November 2026

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Summary

This guide provides local authorities with information about the statutory secondary and primary school preferences and offers child-level data collections. It is intended to assist local authorities with returning the required data to the Department for Education (DfE, or 'the department') and provides information on the scope of the two collections, the data that should be included in the respective secondary and primary returns, and the mechanism for submission.

In 2027 the go live dates will be Monday March 1 for the secondary preference collection and Friday April 16 for the primary preference collection.

This guide should be read in conjunction with the relevant instructions on how to use the department's COLLECT (Collections On-Line for Learning, Education, Children, and Teachers) web-based system. Local authorities may also wish to refer to the business and technical specification (sections 3 and 4) for further information.

Data protection and data sharing

Data from which it is possible to identify children, parents and staff (in any medium, including within a MIS) is personal data.

The UK General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA 2018) put in place certain safeguards regarding the use of personal data by organisations, including the department, local authorities and schools. Both give rights to those (known as data subjects) about whom data is processed, such as children, their parents / carers and staff. This includes (amongst other information that we are obliged to provide):

- the right to know the types of data being held
- why it is being held
- to whom it may be communicated

For the purposes of data protection legislation, the terms ‘process’, ‘processed’ or ‘processing’ apply to any activity involving the personal data, such as:

- collecting
- storing
- sharing
- destroying
- other – please note: this list is not exhaustive

The legal duties information below provides additional information on two aspects of data protection legislation - namely privacy notices and data security. However, as data processors and controllers in their own right, it is important that schools and local authorities process all data (not just that collected for the purposes of the school census) in accordance with the full requirements of the UK GDPR. Further information on the UK GDPR can be found in the Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO) overview of the UK General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

Legal duties under the UK General Data Protection Regulation and the Data Protection Act 2018: data security

Providers and local authorities have a (legal) duty under the UK General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018 to ensure that any personal data they process is handled and stored securely. Further information on data security is available from the Information Commissioner’s Office.

Where personal data is not properly safeguarded, it could compromise the safety of individuals and damage your reputation. Your responsibility as a data controller extends to those who have access to your data beyond your organization where they are working on your behalf; for example, where external IT suppliers can remotely access your information. The 'School procurement: selecting a school MIS' pages provide further guidance and advice.

It is vital that all staff with access to personal data understand the importance of:

- protecting personal data
- being familiar with your security policy
- putting security procedures into practice

As such, you should provide appropriate initial and refresher training for your staff.

Content of the collection

Each year parents apply to their local authority for a place for their child and are invited to list a number of preferences as to which school they would prefer.

The local authority will have gathered information on the child as well as the schools requested and offered and will therefore need to include in the collection:

Personal details (unique pupil number (UPN), surname, first name, middle names, date of birth and sex);
Home postcode and address details (either BS7666 or line address format);
The 'LA code' and 'Estab' of each preference expressed, in preference order;
The 'LA code' and 'Estab' of the school offered;
Whether the application was made online ('True/False/blank');
Whether the record is for a child who did not make an application but to whom the local authority has decided to make an offer ('True/False');
Whether none of the child's preferences could be met ('True/False/blank').

For further details of these requirements, see section D.

Further information on applications to be included in the return

Common application process

All applications made to the local authority by parents using the common application form (CAF) should be included in the local authority's return as long as the following additional conditions are met. Information on children that have not had an offer made on their behalf because they are already registered for another form of schooling (for example a private school or home-schooling) is not required.

On time applications

Only those applications which the local authority treated as if they were on time should be included. Applications which arrived after the closing date should only be included if they were treated by the local authority as on time – that is, that they were considered for, and allocated a place at, either secondary or primary school at the same time as the on-time applicants.

If an application was late and some of the schools named within it are prepared to consider the application as on-time (meaning they will consider that child under their admissions criteria at the same time as the on-time applicants) then the whole application should be considered as on-time, and therefore should be included.

Schools in another local authority

Each local authority must record the details of applications by and offers to all applicants living in their area (home applicants). This will include applications made by home applicants for schools in another local authority area. A local authority whose school has offered a place to an applicant who lives in another local authority should not record this application and offer, as it will be recorded by the home local authority.

Withdrawn applications

If a parent withdraws their application before an offer is made, their application should not be included in the return.

Non-applicant offers

Children for whom no application for a school place was made, but to whom the local authority has made an offer of a school place, should be included in the return with details of the offer made. These records will not be used in any calculation of the local authority's preference rates.

Middle schools

Middle schools will be part of the admissions process applicable to whether they are deemed to be primary or secondary schools, and will be processed as such within the local authority. If as a result of having middle schools a local authority has more than one admissions year at either primary or secondary level they are required to submit preference and offer data at the appropriate level in respect of the year which has the most places available. For example, if a local authority has 3,000 places available as part of the common admissions process for entry into year 7, and 1,000 places for entry into year 9, then only the figures for year 7 should be provided in the secondary level return.

All through schools

Applications for entry into all-through schools should be recorded as part of the admissions process within which they are made and processed. Thus children applying, as part of the primary admissions process, for entry into the reception year of the all-through school will be recorded in the primary return. Children applying via the CAF to enter the school at the secondary entry point for the local authority (normally year 7) will be recorded in the secondary return. Children already attending the school who are automatically provided with a place at secondary level, and did not have to complete a CAF, should not be included.

New free schools

Free schools in their first year of operation can choose whether to participate in the common application process or whether to accept and administer their own applications and admissions directly. If a new free school within the local authority administered their own admissions then they should not be included in the local authority's return.

Additional preferences

If a local authority allows parents to express six preferences but has permitted a small number of parents to express additional preferences owing to their particular circumstances, then only six preferences should be listed. If they are offered a place at one of the additional preferences, this should be listed as their sixth preference school. If this is not done they will be recorded as having not received a preferred offer.

Preference offered

The highest preference offer on national offer day should be recorded in all cases, regardless of whether that offer was subsequently accepted or whether that offer was later withdrawn.

Recording non-preference offers

All offers must be recorded in the offers module, regardless of whether they are a preference or non-preference offer. The department will match the offer codes to all the preference codes and, where the offer is not one of the listed preferences, record it as a non-preference offer. This will be checked against the NoPreferenceMet field.

Schools listed twice

If an applicant lists a school twice then the second listing should be removed and any lower ranked preferences moved up accordingly. However, if a school has two forms of entry – for example if 10 per cent of their places are available for music students, selected via an aptitude test – then a 'dummy' establishment number should be used for the selective application and the school's main establishment number used for the non-selective application.

The same method should be used to record applications for boarding places at a predominantly day school, and for the second site of 2-site schools which share a single establishment number. In all cases the appropriate main or dummy establishment number must be used to record any offer made.

Details of the dummy code used, the school it applies to and the reason for its usage, must be recorded in return level notes.

Children with special educational needs (SEN) and EHC plans

Any child who has an education, health and care (EHC) plan, which lists the school to which they will be made an offer, should not be included in the return. However, children with SEN but without an EHC plan, where parents can express preferences as to which school they would like their child to go to, and where those preferences are considered alongside other applicants, must be recorded as normal.

Appeals

An appeal against the school offered can only be instigated once the offer has been made to the parents, and they have 14 days to decide whether to appeal. This application and offer return is based on national offer day and therefore any appeals will not have been logged at that point. They should therefore be ignored.

Re-expressing preferences

Only the preferences listed on the original CAF should be counted when assessing whether an offer is to one of the preferred schools. If the parents have been allowed to re-express preferences, and one of these was offered, then the offer should be considered against the original preferences and the ‘NoPreferenceMet’ field set at ‘True’.

Further detail on the information to be included

Field	Description	Additional notes
DFE Number	3 digit number allocated to each local authority with education responsibilities.	
LA Name	Name of local authority.	
Report date	For the secondary return 1 March (or the next working day where 1 March is not a working day). For the primary return 16 April (or the next working day where 16 April is not a working day).	The report date should refer to the relevant national offer day.
National Curriculum year of admission	The National Curriculum (NC) year to which the data relates. At secondary level the NC year will be year 7 for most local authorities, but may be different for the minority of local authorities with a 3 tier school system. [Note year 10 is not an allowable field] At primary level this will be reception year (R). In either return, where there is more than one year of admission, such as to middle school and upper school, records should be provided for children entering the largest admission year only.	
Sum of admission numbers	The total number of secondary or primary school places available in the area of the local authority for the entry year for which a return is being made. To include all places available, whether allocated through national offer day or not.	The planned admission number (PAN) figure for all schools should be used, regardless of whether any of their places were not available to national offer day applicants (for example because

Field	Description	Additional notes
		they were allocated to a pupil with an EHC plan).
Child level data	Individual data should be submitted for every child where either a) an application for a school place was submitted on their behalf (regardless of whether an offer was made), or b) where no application was made but the local authority decided to make an offer of a school place. The information provided for each child (see below) will allow the department to calculate the total number of offers, preference offers and other figures at local authority level.	Children being issued with an EHC plan that names a school should not be included in this return. Do not count any applications which were not treated as on time by the local authority. However it is acceptable to include any applications which arrived after the application closing date but were considered and allocated a place for at the same time as the on-time applicants.
Personal details	For each child, provide their personal details, consisting of: Surname, first name and middle name (if any); UPN (if any); Date of birth; Sex; Home address; Admissions entry year group (see National Curriculum (NC) year of admissions details above).	It would be expected that secondary level pupils would have a UPN number, although there may be exceptions. At primary level, a number of children will not have a UPN but, where one has been allocated, it should be provided. The address must include the home postcode and then the address in either B7666 or line format. If provided in B7666 then PAON, street and at least one of locality, town or administrative area, or post town should be provided. If provided in line format then at least two address lines must be provided – all in addition to the postcode. BFPO postcodes can be entered but must still be accompanied by additional address details.

Field	Description	Additional notes
		In the very few circumstances where the applicant does not have an address (for example if they are living in a refuge) a return level note should be provided giving the reason.
Online applications	For each applicant, whether their application was submitted online ('Y/N/blank').	Whether the parent submitted the application online (Y) or via a paper form (N). If no application was made for the child, but the local authority has decided to make them an offer, this field should be left blank.
Preferences expressed	For each child for whom school preferences were expressed on their application, provide the 'LA Code' and 'DfE Estab' number of each preference in the rank order in which they were submitted. Any independent schools listed on the application form should be deleted and the remaining schools should have their preference number adjusted accordingly (see additional notes).	For each applicant, no school should be listed as a preference more than once. See section B for how to deal with potential exceptions to this rule. The number of preferences entered should be no more than the number allowed by your local authority (between three and six). Each preference is given an order – or rank – number, starting with 1 and running in order with no gaps.
Offers	For each child, state (Y/N) whether an application was made on their behalf in the 'NonApplicantOffer' field. Where an offer was made to a child, submit the 'LA Code' and 'DfE Estab' number of the offer.	Some local authorities, if they are aware of children who are of an age to enter secondary or primary school, but for whom an application has not been received, will make them an offer of an available place at one of their schools. These should be included in the return.

Field	Description	Additional notes
		It is expected that the vast majority of applicants will receive an offer of a school place.
No preference offer	For each applicant, state ('Y/N/blank') whether the offer made was of one of their preferred schools.	For this field – 'NoPreferenceMet' - a positive (Y) response is required when no preference offer could be made to the applicant. If an offer of a preferred school was made the entry should be N. Where no application was made for the child, but the local authority has decided to make them an offer, this field should be left blank.

Other return information

	Subject	Description
A	Time limit for submitting return	You can submit your return up to five working days after national offer day – that is by the end of Friday 5th March for the secondary return and Thursday 22th April for the primary return. However, the return must be based on the position on national offer day.
B	Which offers to include in the return	All offers made must be included in the offer module, whether they are of a preferred school or not and even if you are aware that the parents are intending to turn the offer down.
C	Establishment numbers	All establishment numbers listed in your return will be checked against a list of current schools. If any schools in your return do not yet have an establishment number – for example a school opening in September – then a dummy establishment number must be used (for example 9901). A return level note must also be added to your return with details of the school it relates to and why a dummy code was required. If the school is in a neighbouring local authority then the correct dummy establishment number should be obtained from the local authority where the school is based or from the PAN London authority. It would be appreciated if dummy establishment codes could start with 9 in order that they are easily identifiable. The codes must consist of four numbers only and must **not** start with 0 (zero). Any non-numerical characters (such as 999A) will also cause an error. Some schools have a limited number of places restricted to those who pass an aptitude test or have a certain number of boarding places. If applicants can apply for both routes into the school – for example to take a music test (for a music aptitude place) and through the general admissions criteria – a dummy establishment number will need to be used for the preference relating to the aptitude test or for a boarding place. The school's own establishment number can then be used for the general admission preference. Likewise schools with a single establishment number but which have two separate sites, which can be applied for separately, should use the school's actual establishment number for the main site and a dummy establishment number (in the same way as above) for the second site.

	Subject	Description
		In all the above cases, where an applicant has requested both routes into such a school and is made an offer of one of those routes, the appropriate establishment number must be used to record the offer. For example, if the applicant has listed both sites of a two-site school and has been offered a place at the second site, then their offer should be recorded with the dummy establishment number used to record their preference for that site. Where the need for a dummy establishment number is the same year on year – such as the aptitude and boarding examples given above - then the same dummy number should be used as in previous years. Previously used and notified codes will not trigger 064 or 066 errors.

Submitting the data

Methodology

The data will need to be submitted via COLLECT from the department's website. This is the route by which a number of data collections from local authorities and schools are sent securely to the department.

Sections C and D above and also the business and technical specification document give details of the data which is required to be provided. Once you have generated and checked the data, through your management information (MIS) system, the data should be loaded and submitted in COLLECT. Note local authority level totals do not need to be provided.

Details of how to set up COLLECT access are found in Annex A.

A COLLECT guide is available to help you use the system to complete and submit your return.

Coverage

Every child for whom an application for a school place has been submitted (regardless of whether an offer was made), and every child where no application was submitted but the local authority decided to make an offer of a school place, should be included in the return (other than children with an EHC plan, see paragraph 3.1.13).

Deadline

Local authorities are required to submit the data within five working days of national offer day. In 2027 the secondary national offer day falls on Monday 1 March and data should be submitted by the end of Friday 5 March. The primary offer date is Friday 16 April, and data should be submitted by the end of Thursday 22 April. Note the data should reflect the position as on offer day, not on the day on which it was submitted (if later).

Validation checks

On loading of your local authority's data the COLLECT system will automatically run a number of verification checks and you will receive an error notification if any of them fail and the data requires amendment.

You may also receive a query notification, to ask you to check certain figures to ensure they are correct – for example, where the values look unusual but could logically still be correct in some situations If this occurs you will need to correct the errors in the data and

then resubmit the data to the department until all the error notices are no longer present. If the corrections have been successful, COLLECT will show no further error notices and the data can be authorised.

If any queries do not require amendments, COLLECT has the functionality for local authorities to add a return level note to the data item, detailing either that it is correct or the reason why the information is not available. These return level notes will be checked by the department. Please note that from 2027, item level notes are no longer supported in COLLECT. Going forward, any explanatory comments or supporting information should be provided as return level notes only.

Further checks

Additional sense checks will be undertaken by the department and where there are concerns or queries about the figures, the department will contact the local authority concerned to ask for further information. This may result in rejecting the submission to allow for changes to be made.

If there is anything about your local authority's data, at either secondary or primary level, which you think may give the department cause to query the figures, then a return level note should be entered in COLLECT or get in touch via this service request form. An example of this would be if, at secondary level, you are returning figures for a different NC year to that submitted previously (for example because of a move away from a middle school system).

Authorisation

For each return, once the data has been checked and accepted by the department the status on COLLECT will change to 'Authorised' and your local authority's return will be complete.

Further assistance

If you have any queries about this collection or about using COLLECT please get in touch via this service request form.

September submission

Previously a local authority could choose to submit an additional collection in September. Now a September collection is neither required nor requested by the department.

Background to the school preference data collection

For a number of years the department collected from local authorities annual secondary school admissions data, at local authority level, detailing the applications and offers made for entry into secondary school, as at the 1 March national offer day. In 2014 the introduction of a separate primary level national offer day (16 April) and amendments to the relevant legislation (see section F) enabled the collection to be extended to primary school applications and offers. Two separate collections are now held, one each for applications relating to entry into the local authority's main entry point for secondary and primary schools.

Also in 2014 the collection was amended to collect the data on a child level basis, with personal information for each child and detail of each school they requested and the school, if any, they were offered. A figure for the total number of either a) secondary or b) primary school places available within the local authority is also provided.

The data helps the department to identify areas where preference rates are in need of improvement and to monitor progress in increasing choice and competition for good secondary and primary schools. It also enables more in-depth analysis to understand the reasons why parents make the school choices they do for their children.

The regulations

The Information as to Provision of Education (England) Regulations 2016 (legislation.gov.uk) require local authorities to submit (separately) data on secondary and primary school applications made and offers met in relation to children resident in their local authority. Data should be provided for all schools types who are part of the common admissions process, including community, foundation, voluntary controlled and voluntary aided schools and academies. Free schools, which are academies, should be included but are allowed to opt out of the common admissions process in their first year if required. Where information is available on applications to a new free school then it should be included if at all possible.

Regulation 4 requires a local authority to provide the Secretary of State for Education with two reports containing the information specified in Schedule 2 to the regulations, for a) secondary school applications and b) primary school applications. The secondary school report should report on applications made and offers met on 1 March each year (or, in any year in which 1 March is not a working day, on the next working day) containing information correct as that date. The primary school report should report on applications made and offers met on primary level offer day of 16 April each year, again containing information correct at that date (or next working day if appropriate).

In each case the information should relate to applications for admission to a) secondary school or b) primary school during the school year commencing in the August or September of that calendar year.

Schedule 2 specifies the information to be contained in each report.

Uses and publication of the data

Receiving the data at child level allows the department to obtain more detailed datasets about school preferences and offers, from which statistics at local authority level can be calculated. Having access to the underlying data also makes it easier for the department to ensure the accuracy of the statistics produced regarding children receiving first, second and so forth preference offers.

Although the data is collected at pupil level, the department continues to publish school application and offer data at local authority level, as before.

The preference rates for all local authorities are published in the annual statistical release 'secondary and primary school applications and offers', which includes separate tables of application totals and preference rates for secondary and primary applications.

The data is also used to inform departmental policy making on school choice and access. The child level data gives additional detail which will bring significant benefits in terms of monitoring progress in increasing choice and competition and identifying areas where improvement can be made. The additional primary level collection also allows these benefits to be realised for primary school provision.

The data allows local authorities and admission forums to compare outcomes with previous years, or to compare themselves with local authorities with similar characteristics, and will contribute to local discussion on how to improve the system and provision of places for parents.

Annex A: requesting COLLECT access

The method for local authorities to submit their data to the department is via COLLECT, our centralised data collection and management system.

Please contact your local authority approver(s) if you:

- need to request a DfE Sign In username or password to access COLLECT;
- require school admissions appeals to be added to the list of collections you can access in COLLECT.

If you do not know who your approver(s) is/are, please use DfE Sign-in help.

If you have any queries regarding COLLECT or the school preference and offer data collection in general (not related to DfE sign in) please contact the Data Operations Service Desk via DfE Sign-in help.

Version history

Version	Main changes	Author/Date
V0.1	This is the base line version of the collection guide. Updates have been made to enhance the clarity of guidance around applications and offers to special schools. All references to the addition of COLLECT notes now specify ‘return level notes’, as item level notes will not be available in 2027.	Simon Summers; COG; November 2026

Department for Education

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