

Managing school places and admissions in London

February 2025





Contents

Executive Summary	5
Recommendations	6
School Places Forecasts	7
School budget analysis	12
Managing school places and admissions locally	16



Executive Summary

The London boroughs are forecasting an ongoing decline in demand for school places from 2024-25 to 2028-29 across the region. London Councils' analysis of the four year school places forecasts of all 33 London local authorities reveals that they are predicting a collective drop of 3.6 per cent in demand for reception places and 2.9 per cent in year 7 places. There are some boroughs predicting growth but the large majority are forecasting cumulative drops in demand.

The cumulative impact of these decreases in demand is significant, particularly on school budgets, and we have seen many primary schools reduce their Published Admission Numbers (PANs) and some even close as a result. Local authorities have a key role in ensuring that there are sufficient high quality school places available in the local area. In the context of falling school rolls this means working closely with schools to manage the decline in demand without negatively impacting on children's outcomes.

London local authorities are concerned about the impact of falling rolls on school standards and pupil attainment. While pupil numbers are falling, demand for additional support has continued to rise. Yet schools with falling rolls face diminishing financial capacity to meet the education needs of all pupils.

While pupil numbers are falling, demand for additional support has continued to rise. This includes an increase in mental health support needs, rising school avoidance and persistent absence, and rising SEND rates. Furthermore, attainment gaps relating to race, Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and disadvantage persist.

The government will need to ensure that schools have sustainable and adequate funding to strengthen their capacity to respond to additional needs and enable all children to thrive and achieve.

London Councils published its report [Managing falling school rolls in London](#) in January 2024 with a number of key asks of government to help support local authorities and schools through this challenging period. We have welcomed the measures proposed in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill that will create a fairer, more joined up and less bureaucratic places planning and admissions system, including the proposals to:

- Introduce new duties for schools and local authorities to co-operate with each other regarding admissions and for schools to co-operate with local authorities regarding place planning
- Enable the Schools Adjudicator to set a school's published admission number (PAN) where they uphold an objection to it
- Extend local authorities' current powers to direct a maintained school to admit a child, to also enable them to direct academies in the same way
- End the current legal presumption that new schools should be academies and allow proposals for other types of school to be put forward where a new school is needed, including proposals from local authorities

Recommendations



To further enable local authorities to meet their statutory duties, we also recommend the Department for Education (DfE) takes forward the following:

- Ensure sustainable and adequate funding to strengthen the capacity of state-funded schools to respond to additional needs and enable all children to thrive and achieve.
- Give local authorities greater decision making powers, potential financial support and flexibility to retain and manage the use of closed school buildings locally, and balance the immediate needs of a local area with longer term planning for education provision
- Strengthen proposed measure in the bill to ensure that schools comply with local authority place planning arrangements and that the DfE have levers they can use to enforce this duty.
- Give local authorities the overall responsibility for managing applications for in-year admissions for all state funded schools in their area.
- Adjust core funding based on the January School Census so schools receive funding for in-year admissions and explore more immediate funding for in-year admissions for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).
- Implement changes to the Admission Code to speed up the in year admissions process, including removing the need to wait four weeks to refer to a Fair Access Panel (FAP) and stipulating that children should be admitted within two weeks of the decision.

We plan to work closely with the DfE regional office and other key education partners in London to develop a strategic approach to managing falling school rolls across the region. As our data reveals, school rolls are likely to continue to decrease for the medium term so it is vital that we recognise the need to work collaboratively to share good practice and minimise disruption to schools and children across London so that they can continue to thrive.

School Places Forecasts



Introduction

Every year local authorities respond to the DfE School Capacity Survey (SCAP) with detailed forecasts for the next four years. These returns are based on detailed work, using localised and regional intelligence to devise the most accurate forecasts of demand for mainstream places. London Councils has collated and analysed these SCAP returns to understand the regional picture of demand forecasts for the next four years. We received SCAP returns for mainstream schools from all 32 London boroughs.

Demand for reception places

As shown in Graph 1, the majority of London boroughs are anticipating a decline in reception pupil numbers from 2024-25 to 2028-29. Over this four-year period, there is an average forecast drop in demand of

3.6% at reception level across London – this masks some significantly larger decreases, but includes a number of areas of growth. If the eight areas of growth are excluded, the remaining boroughs are forecasting a 6.1% drop in demand for reception places over the same period. Last year's analysis showed that only 4 boroughs were predicting growth, but when they were excluded from the analysis the overall drop in demand from the other boroughs was broadly the same at 5.9%.

In comparison to the regional data from the 2023 SCAP returns, the overall four-year forecast for reception places appears to have marginally improved from a forecast drop of 4.4%. However, it is too early to identify any change in trends due to the many local variations within these figures, including growth forecasts.

Graph 1: Reception SCAP % change between 2024-25 to 2028-29

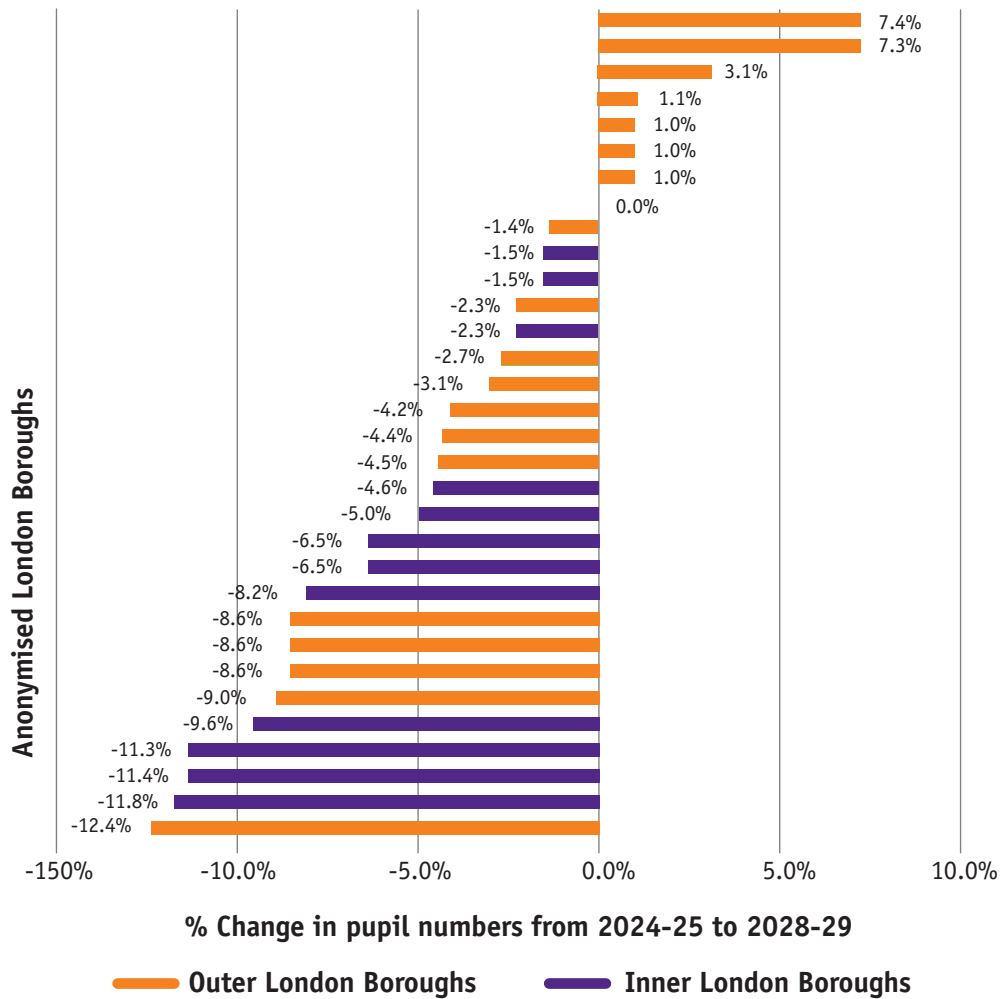


Table 1 provides a sub-regional breakdown of the decline in demand for reception places¹. It highlights that boroughs in South East London are expected to experience the greatest decline, with a forecast 8.2% drop. This differs from the 2023 SCAP returns, which saw Inner London boroughs being

the most affected over the next four years. Similarly, within a sub-regional breakdown, the previous year's returns expected North West London boroughs to experience the greatest decline in reception student numbers, and South West and North Central London boroughs to be the least affected.

¹ The five sub regions are: North Central (Camden, Haringey, Islington, Barnet, Enfield), North East (Barking & Dagenham, Havering, Redbridge, Newham, Tower Hamlets, Waltham Forest, Hackney, City of London), North West (Hillingdon, Harrow, Hounslow, Ealing, Brent, Hammersmith & Fulham, Kensington & Chelsea, Westminster), South East (Bromley, Bexley, Greenwich, Lewisham, Lambeth, Southwark) and South West (Kingston, Merton, Richmond, Sutton, Croydon, Wandsworth).

Table 1

	Reception student number change from 2023-24 to 2028-29
London total	-3.6%
Inner	-7.0%
Outer	-2.3%
North East	-0.9%
North Central	-4.2%
South East	-8.2%
North West	-0.8%
South West	-6.1%

pupil numbers from 2024-25 to 2028-29. On average, across London there is a forecast drop in demand for Year 7 of 2.9%. This masks some significantly larger decreases, but again includes a number of areas of growth. When we exclude the five areas of growth, the remaining boroughs forecast a 3.5% drop in demand for Year 7 places over the same period.

When comparing this year’s data to the 2023 SCAP returns, the four-year forecast demand for Year 7 places has also slightly improved, rising by 1.3% from a four-year forecast drop of 4.3%.

Demand for Y7 places

Graph 2 demonstrates that most London boroughs are anticipating a decline in Year 7

Graph 2: Y7 SCAP % change between 2024-25 to 2028-29

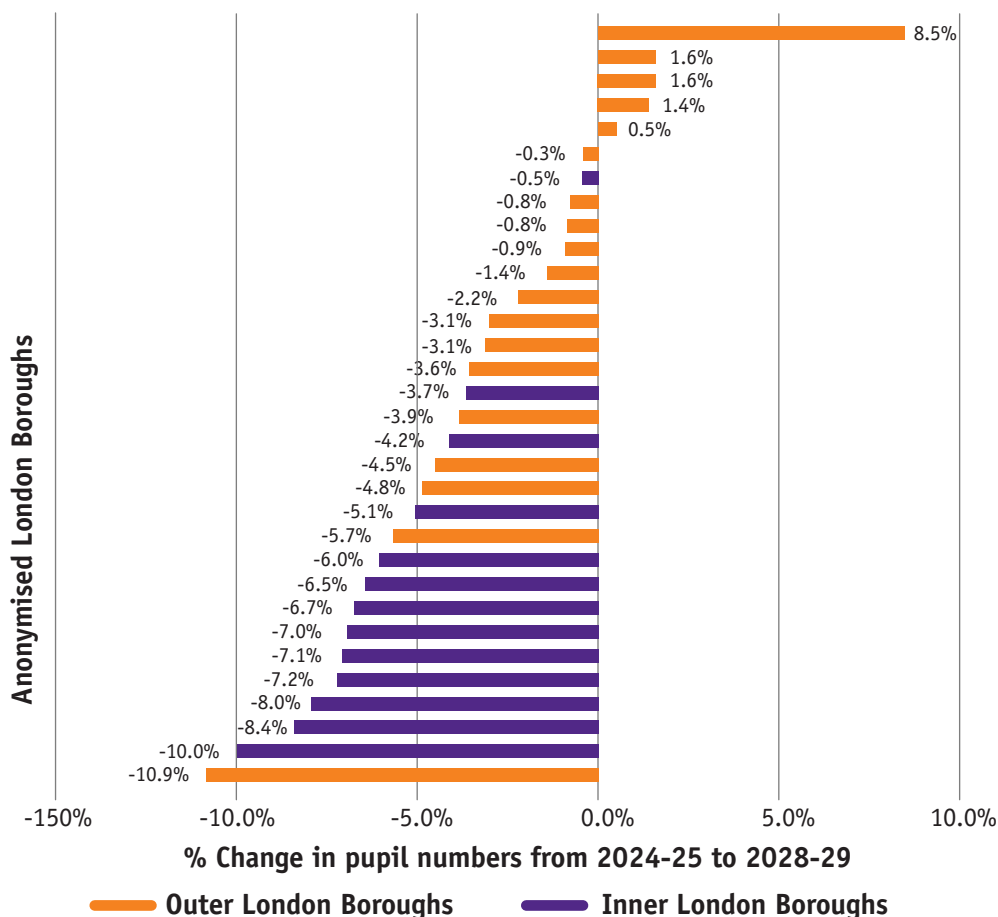


Table 2	
	Y7 student number change from 2023-24 to 2028-29
London total	-2.9%
Inner	-6.7%
Outer	-1.5%
North East	-0.9%
North Central	-3.2%
South East	-5.8%
North West	-3.0%
South West	-2.5%

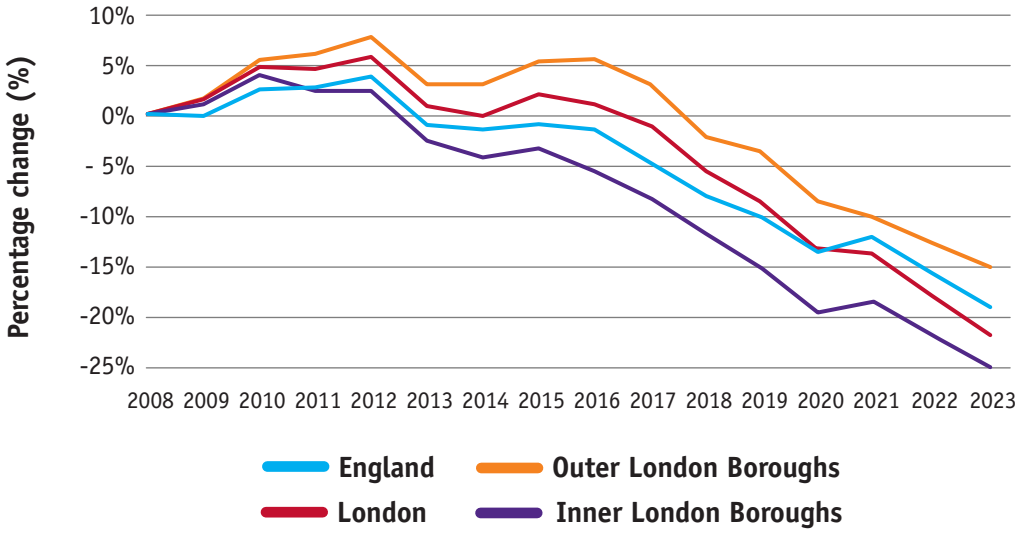
Table 2 provides the sub-regional breakdown of the decline in demand for Year 7 places. Unlike Table 1, it highlights that the challenge of falling rolls is due to be felt more acutely in Inner London, with a forecast drop of 6.7%, than in Outer London, which has a forecast drop of 1.5%. As with reception places, the South East is the sub-region with the highest forecast decrease in demand, forecasting a drop of 5.8%.

Boroughs in North East London are expected to experience the lowest drop, forecasting at 0.9%.

Drivers behind decrease in demand for school places

As noted last year, several localised factors have contributed to families relocating away from London. These include the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, rising living costs, the UK's departure from the European Union, and the shortage of affordable housing within the city. These issues remain significant in influencing where families decide to settle, especially in central London. With fewer people opting to raise a family in the capital, the birth rate in London has continued to decline. In 2020, for the first time since 2008, London recorded a smaller percentage change in the total number of live births compared to the rest of the country, as shown in Graph 3².

Graph 3: Percentage Change in Total Numbers of Live Births 2008 - 2023

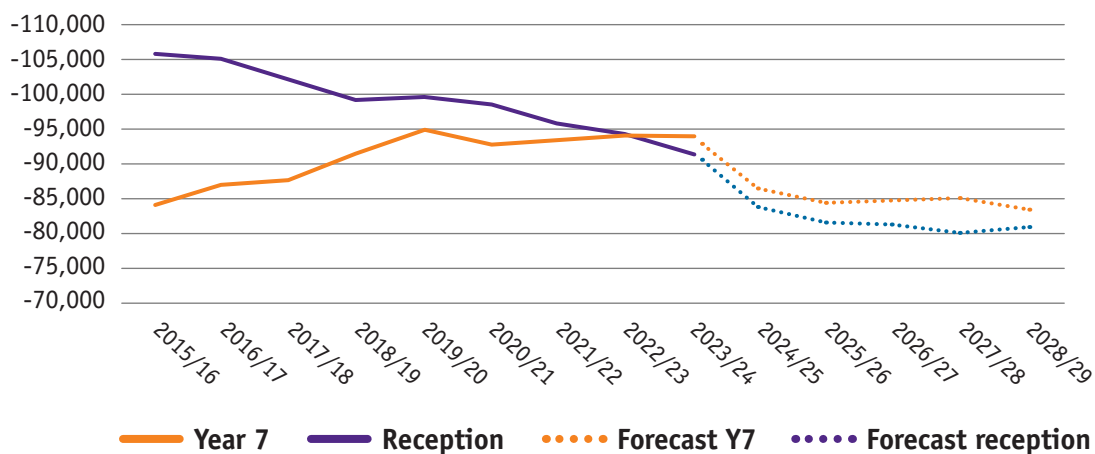


2 Births in England and Wales: summary tables - Office for National Statistics

The decline in demand for reception places over the past eight years has led to a situation where, by 2023-24, the number of children in reception had decreased to the point where it is now less than the number of children in Year 7, as illustrated in Graph 4. This suggests that the surge in the number of children starting reception, which local

authorities and schools have been managing since 2008, has subsided. Indeed, 2023-24 marks the first time London has seen more children in Year 7 than in reception at a regional level, a trend that aligns with borough forecasts and may continue in future years.

Graph 4: London Pupil Headcount from School Census



School budget analysis



Impact of falling rolls on schools

The primary effect of declining pupil numbers on schools is the challenge to their financial stability. School funding is allocated on a per-pupil basis, so a decrease in enrolment directly reduces budgets. For many primary schools in London, particularly those with only one Form of Entry, this can create a vulnerable financial situation. As the majority of a school's budget is spent on staff, there is limited scope for cost-cutting before workforce reductions become necessary, potentially affecting educational standards. For example, if schools have to reduce teaching assistant numbers in order to balance budgets, this could have a significant impact on their ability to provide appropriate additional support to children with Special

Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and will hinder their efforts on inclusion.

Local authorities are actively collaborating with schools to mitigate the financial pressures caused by falling rolls. Strategies include reducing the Published Admissions Number or establishing Additional Resourced Provision for children with Special Educational Needs within the school to use surplus capacity and generate additional funding. Despite these efforts, the long-term viability of some schools may still be at risk, and a number of primary schools in London have already closed due to declining demand. More closures are also anticipated in the near future.

School deficits

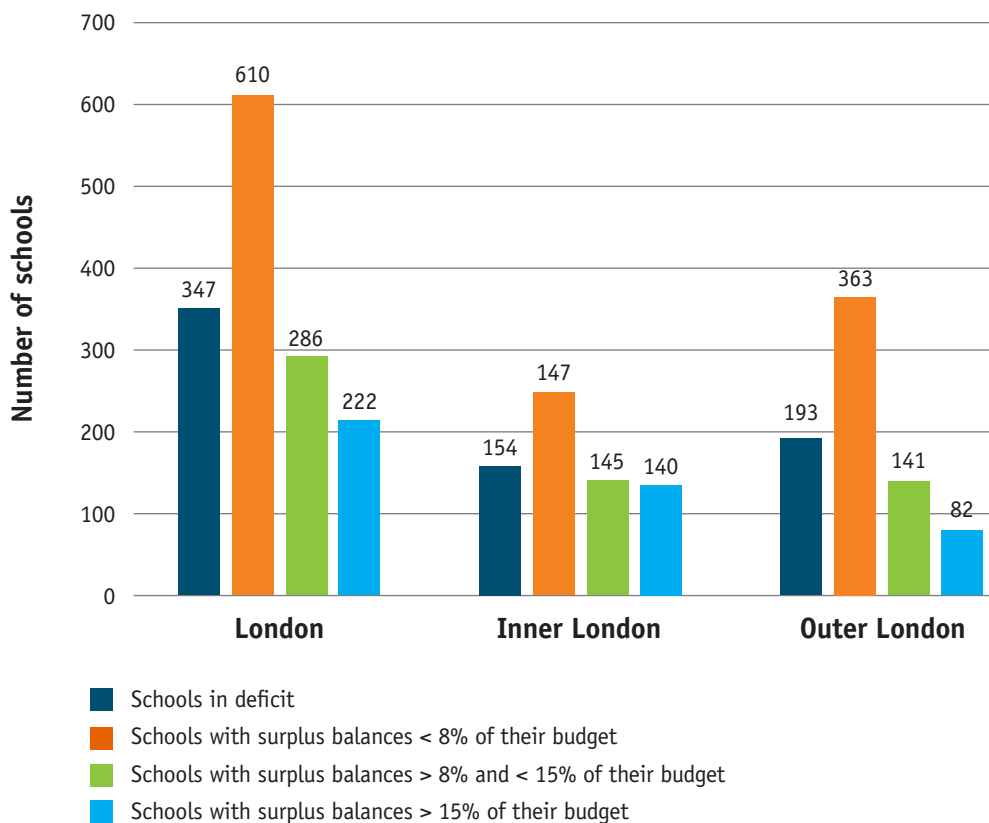
Given the significant impact falling rolls have on school finances, London Councils undertook a survey in Autumn 2024 to investigate funding pressures across London's schools and gain a deeper understanding of the contributing factors. 31 out of 32 boroughs responded³.

Graph 5 shows that almost a quarter of all local authority maintained schools in London were in deficit in 2023-24. This was

consistent across Inner and Outer London. The majority of London's maintained schools are either in deficit or have surplus balances equating to less than 8% of their budgets.

Schools in Outer London boroughs are under greater budgetary pressure than those in Inner London boroughs, with 47% of their schools being left with reserves less than 8% of their budget compared to 36% respectively. These figures remain consistent with last year's data, showing only a minimal change of 1%.

Graph 5: Number of London Maintained Schools in Deficit or with Surplus 2023-24



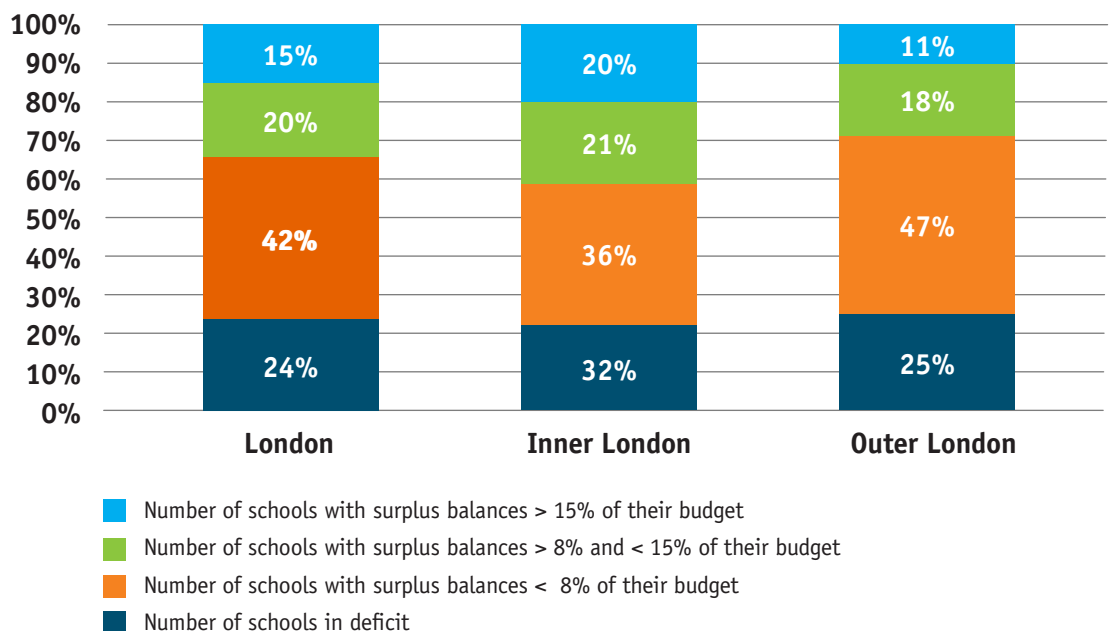
3 The City of London receives a separate grant for schools and have been excluded from the pan-London analysis.

Currently, there is not a clear correlation between school place demand and areas with the most deficits at a regional level. This suggests that other factors play a role in pushing schools into deficit, including inflationary price increases, a shortage of teaching and support staff leading to increased spend on expensive agency staff, and a significant pay award for staff. Despite this, discussions with boroughs highlight that falling school rolls are a key contributor to pushing schools into deficit. As such, there is widespread concern that many of the primary schools currently with surplus balances

equating to less than 8% of their budgets will shortly fall into deficit without intervention.

Unfortunately, local authorities do not have access to data on academy budgets, and so London Councils is only able to analyse local authority maintained school budgets. However, academies are funded through the same national funding formula. As such, academies will be subject to the same budgetary pressures and many of these are likely to be facing serious financial challenges⁴.

Graph 6: Maintained school deficit by percentage



⁴ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/datasets/mid-year-pop-est/editions/mid-2022-england-wales/versions/2>

The effect of so many local authority maintained schools going into deficit creates challenges for local authorities. Indeed, these deficits will contribute to the overall deficits in the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG), which cumulatively are £313.8m across London boroughs for the year 2024-25. We project that this will rise to £502.5m by 2025-26.

London's schools have been on a successful improvement journey, achieving the best Key Stage 2 and GCSE results in the country⁵ as well as having 96 per cent of all schools rated good or outstanding by Ofsted.

However, the drop in the child population is creating challenges for schools. As evidenced above, many school budgets are in deficit and schools face further budgetary reductions due to having fewer pupils. The majority of a school's budget is spent on staff. There is not much a school can cut before they have to reduce the workforce. This can affect school standards and pupil attainment, for example by reducing the amount of specialist interventions available to children with additional needs or extra-curricular activities.

Increasing financial pressures have left some schools unable to create a sufficiently supportive environment for all pupils. To manage budgets, many schools have had to cut pastoral care and investment in inclusive practice and activities aimed at reducing attainment gaps. This has left many schools struggling to provide adequate support for children with additional needs.

While pupil numbers are falling, demand for additional support has continued to rise. This includes an increase in mental health support needs, rising school avoidance and persistent absence, and rising SEND rates. Furthermore, attainment gaps relating to race, SEND and disadvantage persist.

The government will need to ensure that schools have sustainable and adequate funding to strengthen their capacity to respond to additional needs and enable all children to thrive and achieve.

5 In 2023/24, London had 69% of pupils meeting the expected standard in reading, writing and maths (combined) at KS2 compared to 61% nationally (the highest performing region). In 2023/24, 72% of pupils in London achieved grades 4 or above in English and Mathematics GCSEs, compared to 65% nationally (highest performing region).

Managing school places and admissions locally



Local authorities have duties to promote high educational standards in local schools. They have a statutory responsibility to ensure that there are sufficient school places for every child in the local area, including those with SEND. They are also responsible for supporting schools with falling rolls to ensure that they can remain financially viable with high standards, offering choice to families.

However, there are a number of challenges in the current system, some of which have been addressed in the proposals set out in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, that prevent local authorities from taking a systematic approach to planning local school places and new provision, ensuring that admissions decisions reflect local needs, and ensuring effective redesignation of spare buildings.

Mitigating the impact of falling rolls on schools and children

In some cases, local authorities' duty to ensure the sustainability and high standards of local schools collectively may lead to decisions to close schools. Some primary schools in London have already closed due to falling demand and more are scheduled to close in the near future. Local authorities make decisions about where to close schools based on a range of factors, including the popularity of schools (parental choice), Ofsted ratings, travel routes, demand forecasts and budget deficits.

Local authorities want to ensure that local areas have choice in the system and don't disadvantage particular groups of children as a result of school closures. Currently, local

authorities are not able to deliver a collective strategic approach to places planning across all schools in the local area.

In many cases academies work well with local authorities, recognising their statutory role in local school systems. However, some academies are unwilling to engage, and act in isolation without considering local needs. This is why we have been lobbying for government to change legislation to give local authorities duties over all local schools in relation to places planning. We have welcomed the proposed measure in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill around cooperation between schools and local authorities, to ensure that local authorities can manage the admissions and places planning systems more fairly across the local area with all state funded schools. Extending this to all schools will enable local authorities to better meet their statutory duties.

However, we have concerns that the wording of the proposed measure in the Bill is not strong enough to enable the DfE to enforce compliance with local authority plans for the local area. We urge the DfE to tighten the language and ensure that there are levers in place e.g. financial penalties for non-compliance with this measure.

Future proofing the education system

Educational premises that are not currently required due to falling rolls provide an opportunity for alternative temporary uses of spaces to support families and their local communities. They can be used to deliver services such as nurseries, family hubs, and special schools in line with the needs of the local community.

Some local authorities have been able to successfully redesignate primary schools that are due to be closed due to falling rolls to become special schools. The government's new School-Based Nursery Capital Grant will also allow some primary schools to repurpose spare space within the school building to create or expand nursery provision.

London Councils is concerned about the potential loss of educational assets for future generations. London's birth rate has ebbed and flowed, and London is likely to become a more popular place to raise a family in the future, particularly if it is able to meet the Government's new housing targets, leading to renewed demand for school places. Local authorities need more decision making powers, potential financial support and flexibility to retain and manage the use of closed school buildings locally, and balance the immediate needs of a local area with longer term planning for education provision.

In year admissions

London's local authorities are also grappling with a considerable increase in in-year admissions. For school admissions outside standard entry points, parents and carers must follow different processes for different schools and local authorities. This can involve lengthy delays resulting in many children having to wait for a school place which can harm their future life chances

While many head teachers work with the local authority to admit children where they can, the lack of levers for local authorities to direct in year admissions means less inclusive practice can occur unchecked. Boroughs have shared examples of schools deciding not to

fill vacancies to avoid taking on children with additional needs. Boroughs also reported instances of schools discouraging families from applying, signposting them to other local schools, and delaying decisions in the hope an alternative school offers a place, all leading to children missing out on education⁶.

We welcome the proposed measure in the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill that will give local authorities the power to direct the admission of a child to a maintained school or an academy. This will support fair allocation of in-year admissions for vulnerable children and help to ensure that admissions decisions reflect local needs.

However, this does not resolve the issue of children missing education while they go through the lengthy admissions process.

However, this does not resolve the issue of children missing education while they go through the lengthy admissions process. To minimise delays and lost learning, as well as reduce bureaucracy for parents, London Councils has been calling for local authorities to have the overall responsibility for managing all applications for in-year admissions for all state funded schools in their area. In order to fulfil this role fully local authorities also need better access to data on school rolls, and changes to the Admission Code to speed up the process including removing the need to wait four weeks to refer to the Fair Access Panel (FAP) and stipulating that children should be admitted within two weeks of the decision.

In addition, London Councils is calling on the DfE to adjust core funding based on the January School Census so schools receive funding for in-year admissions, and explore more immediate funding for in-year admissions for children with SEND. This would reduce the financial burden on schools when taking children through in-year admissions on to the school roll.

6 London Councils (2023) Seeking School Places

