



# Managing the Drop in Demand for School Places in London

London Councils works closely with all 33 London local authorities to support their work on school places planning. This briefing sets out the current challenges facing the school system in London due to falling demand for primary places across the capital.

## Introduction

Local authorities have a statutory duty to ensure that every school age child who requires a state school place has access to one.

Between 2009 and 2017 London experienced a sharp increase in demand for school places across most London local authorities, which has been feeding through to secondary schools in the last few years in many areas of the capital. Since 2017 London's local authorities have begun to see demand for primary places start to plateau in some areas, and then more recently begin to drop across most areas of London.

## Analysis

### Demand for primary reception places for entry September 2021

The total number of applications for reception places through the Pan-London Admission System this year is almost 6 per cent less than last year's total. This is due, in part, to the turbulence brought about by Covid-19. The boroughs are expecting more late applications this year as many parents were not accessing childcare where they would usually have had reminders about the application deadline, or have just been too busy dealing with the disruption caused by the pandemic. A high volume of late applications will make it very difficult for local authorities to plan the right number of places for September 2021.

However, despite a predicted increase in late applications, the majority of boroughs are still forecasting an overall decrease in demand for reception places this year, in with current trends. This reflects a wider set of factors at play that have been impacting on a reduction in demand for primary reception places over the past few years.

### Drivers in the decrease in demand for primary places

The number of live births in London has been falling, year on year, since a peak of 134,186 in 2012 to 120,673 in 2018. This is not just a London trend: in 2019 there was a decrease of

2.5 per cent in live births in England and Wales in 2019 and a 12.2 per cent decrease since the most recent peak in 2012.

The birth-rate is not the only factor affecting demand for primary places. Other factors, such as the announcement of Brexit and subsequent drop in EU migration, have been cited by some boroughs as having an impact on demand for primary school places. Covid-19 is also already having an impact on London's demographics as boroughs report that more families in London are choosing to move to less urban areas due to changes in circumstances and working patterns. These factors vary from borough to borough and are very hard to quantify in terms of numbers, therefore making it increasingly difficult for local authorities to be able to plan school places in the medium-long term.

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### **The impact of the decrease in demand on schools**

In February 2021 officers at Ealing council collated responses from all London boroughs on primary surplus figures. Their analysis shows that there has been a surplus of reception places of more than 10 per cent for the last three years in London. In 2020/21 the 11.8 per cent surplus equated to 12,980 surplus reception places or 433 surplus reception classes. All London local authorities had surplus reception places in 2020/21, ranging from 3.6 per cent to 22.7 per cent.

These surplus places will put enormous pressure on schools as the funding formula is allocated on a per pupil basis. This will mean that some schools will not be able to fund the same activities or number of staff, which risks narrowing the curriculum or face going into deficit going forward.

### **How local authorities and schools are addressing the decrease in demand**

The boroughs are working hard with Head teachers and governing boards to mitigate the impact of this drop in demand to avoid destabilising school budgets, staff and pupils. The main option schools have is to reduce the Planned Admission Number (PAN) in a school with falling rolls. A PAN is the number of pupils in each year group that the admission authority has agreed will be admitted without causing problems for the school. A school's PAN can be decreased by reducing classes in a form of entry or individual class sizes. The London borough of Ealing analysed PANs from across London in February 2021, which revealed an estimated reduction in reception PANs collectively across London from 2018/19 to 2021/22 of 2,715 places or 91 classes.

Some boroughs have merged schools to manage demand pressures. In some cases schools have opted to close completely, following consultation with the local community, where changing local demographics have reduced demand significantly. Local authorities play a key role in managing the impact of any closures, working closely with the local community and other schools to ensure that places can be found elsewhere for all the affected children.

Across 30 London local authorities we have seen 21 primary schools close since 2018/19. 14 of these were mergers with other schools, including 4 infants school mergers with junior schools with no loss of capacity. Moreover, 10 primary schools across 30 London local authorities are currently being considered for closure this year, subject to consultation.

Boroughs are exploring pragmatic solutions to reuse vacant education space, for example by redesignating schools so that they become special schools and help to meet the rising demand for special places at the same time. Both temporary and permanent reductions in space are being explored to address the practicalities of places planning in this current uncertain climate.

## **Commentary**

The significant reduction in demand since 2017 for reception places has created a number of

challenges for the London boroughs and schools. In particular the uncertainty in the system makes it very difficult to be able to plan sufficient school places effectively at present, and particularly in the longer term. London local government has been working closely with the Department for Education to ensure that Government recognises the challenges facing schools and local authorities, but there will need to be greater collaboration across the school system to mitigate the impact of the reduction in demand for school places.

As primary demand continues to drop, it will become increasingly important to take stock of its feed through into secondary schools. Current demand for year 7 places is stable across London, but there is variation across the boroughs, reflecting demographic shifts from different communities. 12 London boroughs are forecasting a decrease in demand over the three years, according to our recent snapshot survey of 30 London local authorities. Some boroughs have fluctuating demand in specific areas due to unpopular schools or changes in housing yields. Other areas are predicting an increase in demand at secondary, which may also impact at primary, due to significant housing developments.

The uncertainty caused by Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic on demographics in London means that borough forecasts are subject to change more than ever. School places planners keep a very close eye on local demographic shifts, such as housing developments, and correlate their data with external sources, including the GLA pupil projections. However, they recognise that they are currently in unprecedented times and it is very difficult to forecast accurately in the mid-long term the demand for school places in their local areas.

It is vital that local authorities start planning now for the likely drop in demand at secondary to avoid having to take any of the measures that they are implementing at primary now, such as school mergers or closures. It is important that boroughs work closely with their neighbouring boroughs at secondary, as many children travel across borough boundaries to go to school and planning decisions in one borough will impact on demand in other areas. Similarly, boroughs need to work closely with the Regional School Commissioners on any new schools in the pipeline, to make sure they have taken into account pupil forecasts across the local and wider area. Opening new provision when there is no need could destabilise other schools and lead to closures.

London Councils intends to continue supporting the boroughs in their school places planning role to ensure that schools are able to continue to deliver an excellent education, despite changes to demand for places.

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