

CABINET – 18 NOVEMBER 2025**SCHOOL PLACES STRATEGY 2026–2031****REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES****PART A****Purpose of the Report**

1. The purpose of this report is to seek approval to consult on Leicestershire County Council's draft School Places Strategy 2026–2031.

Recommendations

2. It is recommended that the Cabinet approves a consultation to be undertaken on the Leicestershire County Council's draft School Places Strategy 2026-2031, which is attached as an appendix to this report.

(KEY DECISION)

Reasons for Recommendation

3. The School Places Strategy sets out how the Council will meet its statutory duties to ensure that there are sufficient high quality school places in Leicestershire which are in the right place, at the right time. It outlines the background, principles and challenges of delivering school places in Leicestershire and how the Council will work with stakeholders to fund and deliver places between 2026 and 2031.
4. A public consultation on the draft Strategy will seek to confirm that the final Strategy reflects local needs and will enable stakeholder feedback to be considered before adoption.

Timetable for Decisions (including Scrutiny)

5. It is proposed to hold a six-week consultation on the draft School Places Strategy. Subject to the Cabinet's approval, the consultation will commence on 20th November 2025 and run until 4th January 2026.
6. The Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee will receive a report as part of the consultation exercise at its meeting on 20th January 2025.

7. It is intended that the Cabinet will receive a further report at its meeting on 3rd February 2026 summarising consultation feedback and presenting the final Strategy for approval.

Policy Framework and Previous Decisions

8. Local authorities have a legal obligation to ensure that sufficient, high-quality school places are available for all children and young people in their area. This duty applies to both mainstream education and provision for children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).
9. Section 14 of the Education Act 1996 requires that local authorities ensure that sufficient school places are available to provide primary and secondary education for children within the area. This includes planning for future demand, commissioning new provisions, and working with maintained schools and academies to ensure capacity and quality. The School Standards and Framework Act 1998 and the Education and Inspections Act 2006 further reinforce the requirement to promote high standards, fair access, and parental choice.
10. For children and young people with SEND, the statutory framework is provided by Part 3 of the Children and Families Act 2014. This legislation requires local authorities to identify, assess, and secure appropriate provision for those aged 0–25 with SEND. The accompanying SEND Code of Practice emphasises the need for strategic planning to ensure sufficiency of specialist places and inclusive mainstream educational provision.
11. Together, these duties require local authorities to act as strategic commissioners, forecasting demand, planning capacity, and working collaboratively with schools, academy trusts, and other partners to ensure that every child and young person can access suitable, high-quality education.
12. The Academies Act of 2010 moved the education provision for children towards a more autonomous and diverse system rather than the traditional structure of schools under the direct control of the local authority.
13. In November 2014, the Cabinet agreed the previous strategy for the organisation of school and other educational places, “In the right place”.
14. At its meeting on 7 February 2025, the Cabinet considered a report on the Council’s Provisional Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS), which set out the Capital Programme for 2025-29. A number of schemes to expand existing schools and academies or establish new schools are included within the Capital Programme, along with funding for strategic capital maintenance of maintained schools.

15. The Cabinet agreed the SEND and Inclusion Strategy 2025-2028 at its meeting on 17th June 2025. Section 4 of the Strategy sets out the Leicestershire SEND and Inclusion Partnership's strategy for ensuring sufficient appropriate educational places for children and young people with SEND. These proposals have been further developed within the draft School Places Strategy.
16. The draft School Places Strategy is aligned with the ambitions set out in the Children and Family Services Department Plan 2024-26 and the County Council's Strategic Plan 2022-26.

Resource Implications

17. In order to deliver the school places set out in the Strategy, funding streams including Basic Need and High Needs capital grant funding from the Department for Education (DfE), developer contributions (through Section 106 agreements), and growth funding will be used. Schemes will be included within the Council's Capital Programme.
18. The capital requirements to support the increased need for school places through Basic Need funding are not fully met through existing grant allocations following changes to DfE methodology. Discussions are ongoing with DfE representatives to consider how this can be managed.
19. Developer contributions through Section 106 agreements are a key source of funding to meet growth needs for new school places. Historic agreements may not be sufficient for the actual cost of schemes which have experienced significant cost inflation in recent years and are reliant on the speed of building schemes to trigger funding from developers. The Strategy notes that close partnership working with Leicestershire's district councils, as the Local Planning Authorities, will be needed to ensure continued robustness of negotiations around future developments and consideration given to Deeds of Variation for existing Section 106 funding where this is needed.
20. A refresh of the Planning Obligations Policy will strengthen the need for school places to support new housing developments along with requests for full funding at the application stage to mitigate cost and delivery risks for future schemes.
21. Phased delivery of school builds will support cash flow and certainty of need, making more school places available in the right place at the right time while minimising additional pressure on available capital.
22. The Director of Corporate Resources and Director of Law and Governance have been consulted on this report.

Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure

23. This report has been circulated to all Members of the County Council.

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PART B

Background

A changing educational landscape

24. Since the publication of the previous strategy '*In the Right Place - Strategy for the Provision of School and Other Learning Places in Leicestershire*' in 2014, significant changes to the Leicestershire educational landscape have been experienced which have shaped the draft School Places Strategy for 2026-2031.
25. The increase in the number of schools within the County managed through Academy Trusts or Multi-Academy Trusts, and a subsequent reduction in the number of maintained schools managed by the Council, has changed the Council's primary role from a direct provider of school places to a commissioner. Currently, 77% of schools in Leicestershire are academies.
26. Reductions in birth rates across the County after a period of significant increased births and inward migration has led to an increased need for Secondary School places as a bulge in the number of pupils moves from Primary into Secondary schools. The effect on primary school occupancy has been inconsistent. Some schools in popular areas are oversubscribed, whereas some small primary schools, typically in rural areas, are significantly below capacity. In such schools the continuing effect of a low birth rate and consequently small numbers of children in catchment, means an increasing risk to ongoing sustainability.
27. To meet expected population growth, major housing development is proposed in all districts of Leicestershire which is anticipated to increase the pupil population by over 26,000 across all phases of education by 2036. Patterns of population change will also affect Leicestershire's local communities; in some areas inward migration is a major factor, particularly where new development is planned.
28. During recent years, an increasing number of children and young people in Leicestershire with SEND have been supported by Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), with significant numbers attending special school places or through enhanced resource bases or SEN units. Sufficiency of places has struggled to keep up with demand, and a proportion of children and young people needing a special school have been placed in Independent Specialist Placements (ISPs). These placements are generally more expensive than those in Leicestershire's maintained Area Special Schools.

The draft School Places Strategy 2026-2031

29. The Council aims to provide high quality school places for children and young people within their communities, close to where they live and to meet parental preferences as far as possible.

30. The draft School Places Strategy will ensure Leicestershire meets its statutory duties by delivering the right number of school places, in the right place, at the right time, with sufficient funding and resources in place to deliver future growth needs. The Strategy sets out the Council's approach to planning, commissioning, and funding school places across all phases, including mainstream, SEND, and alternative provision. It is informed by robust data analysis incorporating demographic trends and predicted housing growth.
31. The Strategy provides an assessment of current school place provision across all phases of education in Leicestershire and forecasts what will be needed over the period to 2031. It sets out how these forecasts have been developed and the roles of the Council, stakeholders and partners in planning and delivering sufficient school places for the future.
32. With the scale of changes that have occurred in the educational landscape within Leicestershire since the last Strategy was written, and taking into account current forecasts in pupil numbers and place requirements, the draft Strategy also sets out the Council's approach to the reorganisation of schools where this may be required to ensure ongoing sustainability.

SEND Market Position Sufficiency Statement (MPSS)

33. The Council has developed an MPSS which will build upon the School Places Strategy and consider the role of and opportunities for the external market to support the County Council to meet its SEND sufficiency needs.

Consultation

34. A public consultation on the draft Strategy will seek to confirm that the final Strategy reflects local needs and will enable stakeholder feedback to be considered before adoption. This will be carried out primarily using an online survey, which will also be available in accessible print versions on request.

Equality Implications

35. An Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) will be completed as part of the consultation process. The Strategy aims to ensure equal access to high-quality education for all children and young people. There are no adverse equality implications arising from the recommendations in this report.

Human Rights Implications

36. There are no human rights implications arising from the recommendations in this report.

Other Implications and Impact Assessments

37. Health implications: The Strategy supports access to education, which is a key determinant of health and wellbeing.
38. Environmental implications: The Strategy considers the location of new schools and travel arrangements to minimise environmental impact.
39. Partnership working: The Strategy has been developed in partnership with schools, academies, District councils, and other stakeholders.
40. Risk assessment: Risks associated with school place planning, funding, and delivery are identified and mitigated within the Strategy.

Background Papers

Report to the Cabinet on 17 June 2025 “Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) And Inclusion Strategy 2025-2028”

<https://cexmodgov01/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=135&MId=7877>

Report to the Cabinet on 7 February 2025 “Provisional Medium Term Financial Strategy 2025/26 to 2028/29”

<https://cexmodgov01/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=135&MId=7873>

Report to the County Council on 18 May 2022 “Leicestershire County Council's Strategic Plan 2022-2026”

<https://cexmodgov01/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=134&MId=6482>

Report to the Cabinet on 19 November 2014 “In the right place – A strategy for the organisation of school and other learning places in Leicestershire 2014 / 2018”

<https://cexmodgov01/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=135&MId=3995&Ver=4>

Appendices

Appendix A: Draft School Places Strategy 2026–2031

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