



## **CABINET - 3 FEBRUARY 2026**

### **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 advise the Cabinet of the outcome of the consultation on Leicestershire County Council's draft School Places Strategy 2026–2031 and to seek approval of the Strategy, which is attached as Appendix A to this report.

##### **Recommendations**

2. It is recommended that the Cabinet:
  - (a) Notes the outcome of consultation on the draft School Places Strategy 2026-2031;
  - (b) Approves the School Places Strategy 2026-2031;
  - (c) Notes that a School Places Delivery Plan will be developed to support the implementation of the Strategy.

(KEY DECISION)

##### **Reasons for Recommendation**

3. To note the feedback received from the consultation on the Strategy which has informed the final version.
4. 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.

5. The School Places Delivery Plan will set out how the ambitions detailed in the Strategy will be achieved.

### **Timetable for Decisions (including Scrutiny)**

6. A six-week consultation on the draft School Places Strategy was held from 20<sup>th</sup> November 2025 until 4<sup>th</sup> January 2026.
7. The Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee received a report as part of the consultation process at its meeting on 20<sup>th</sup> January 2025 and its comments are set out in paragraph 48 and 49 below.
8. Following approval by the Cabinet, a School Places Delivery Plan, setting out priority areas of action by the Council, will be developed.
9. The Children and Family Services Capital Programme Board will oversee progress against the School Places Delivery Plan, including monitoring of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs).

### **Policy Framework and Previous Decisions**

10. 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).
11. 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.
12. 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.
13. 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.

14. The Academies Act of 2010 moved the education provision for children towards a more autonomous and diverse system, away from the traditional structure of schools under the direct control of the local authority.
15. In November 2014, the Cabinet agreed the previous strategy for the organisation of school and other educational places, "In the Right Place".
16. At its meeting on 7<sup>th</sup> 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.
17. The Cabinet agreed the SEND and Inclusion Strategy 2025-2028 on 17<sup>th</sup> 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.
18. The draft School Places Strategy is aligned with the ambitions set out in the Children and Family Services Department Plan 2026-2029 and the County Council's Strategic Plan 2022-26.
19. The Cabinet agreed the draft School Places Strategy for consultation at its meeting on 18<sup>th</sup> November 2025.

### **Resource Implications**

20. 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.
21. 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.
22. 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 required.

23. A refresh of the County Council's 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.
24. 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.
25. The Director of Corporate Resources and Director of Law and Governance have been consulted on this report.

**Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure**

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

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## **PART B**

### **Background**

- 27. The background to the Strategy was set out in the report to the Cabinet in November 2025. This included significant changes to Leicestershire's educational landscape since the previous Strategy was agreed and the change in the Council's primary role from a direct provider of school places to a commissioner.
- 28. In addition, the pattern of birth rates in the County has meant that there is currently increased need for Secondary School places, while the position is less consistent across primary schools, with some popular schools oversubscribed and others, typically in rural areas, significantly below capacity. However, major housing development is proposed across Leicestershire by 2036 which is expected to increase total pupil numbers by 26,000.
- 29. An increasing number of children and young people with SEND have been supported by Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) in recent years. The number of specialist school places have struggled to keep up with demand, resulting in the use of more expensive independent specialist placements.

### **The School Places Strategy 2026-2031**

- 30. 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.
- 31. The School Places Strategy ensures 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.
- 32. School places are planned through a robust, data-driven process that draws on birth data, GP registrations, school census numbers, admissions data and detailed housing trajectory information to forecast future need, supplemented by annual School Capacity Survey (SCAP) returns and ongoing analysis of migration and retention trends to ensure accuracy. When new housing creates demand, the Council seeks developer funding in line with its Planning Obligations Policy, calculating pupil yield for each development and securing contributions through Section 106 or Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) agreements; in some cases developers may construct new schools directly, but all provision must meet the Council's specifications and DfE requirements.

- 33. As the Council now acts primarily as a commissioner rather than a direct provider, it ensures sufficient special and other school places by working with a diverse range of Local Authority maintained schools, academies and Trusts, commissioning new provision, expanding existing schools, repurposing surplus accommodation, and using dedicated SEND forecasting and placement planning to deliver specialist places - including new special schools, expanded SEND units, and DfE-funded Free Schools - to meet growing needs across the system.
- 34. 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.
- 35. 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 Strategy also sets out the Council's approach to the reorganisation of schools where this may be required. This will focus on long-term sustainability, ensuring high quality education, and community need. Reorganisation will only be considered where evidence shows that schools are no longer viable - such as persistently low demand, significant surplus places, financial non-viability, low educational standards, or buildings that cannot be improved cost-effectively. The Council aims to maintain strong local provision by encouraging collaboration, amalgamation, or joining Multi Academy Trusts, before closure is considered. The Strategy outlines a structured statutory process for all changes, including age-range adjustments, published admission number (PAN) changes, redesignation, expansion and, where necessary, closure. This process includes robust business-case development, meaningful consultation with stakeholders, transparent decision-making, and clear implementation planning to ensure any changes support good outcomes for children and remain sensitive to the needs of local communities.

### **SEND Market Position Sufficiency Statement (MPSS)**

- 36. 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 through commissioning of specialist school places from the independent sector.

### **Consultation**

- 37. A public consultation exercise on the draft Strategy took place between 20<sup>th</sup> November 2025 and 4<sup>th</sup> January 2026. This sought to confirm that the final Strategy reflects local needs and enabled stakeholder feedback to be considered before adoption. The full consultation report setting out both the

activity undertaken and the findings is attached at Appendix B and a summary is given below.

38. The consultation sought the views of local people, communities and partners including responsible bodies such as diocesan representatives and academy trusts, and local planning authorities. An online survey was available to all visitors to the Council's website during the consultation period on the 'Have Your Say' page. A paper copy of the survey was made available upon request to ensure all local people wishing to take part in the consultation were able to. The consultation was promoted through multiple media releases, via social media including posts on the Council's Facebook page and LinkedIn, and targeted communications to key stakeholders.
39. There were 252 views of the consultation web page during the consultation period. Following closure of the consultation, 36 responses had been submitted.
40. All responses were from Leicestershire residents, with 53% being a parent or carer of a child or young person aged 17 or under. Headteachers, teachers, governors, trustees, and other school staff were 31% of respondents. Of the remaining responses, 8% were from interested members of the public, and 3% each from academy trust representatives, representatives from Leicestershire councils and 'other' respondents.
41. The majority of respondents agreed that the Strategy clearly sets out local demographic trends and key challenges impacting school place sufficiency in Leicestershire (72% strongly agreed, tended to agree or neither agreed nor disagreed).
42. A majority of respondents also agreed with the approach to forecasting and school place planning set out in the Strategy (61% strongly agreed, tended to agree, or neither agreed nor disagreed).
43. Respondents generally agreed with the proposed approach to ensuring an adequate number of school places are available at the right time and in the right place (63% strongly agreed, tended to agree, or neither agreed nor disagreed).
44. More than half of respondents also agreed with the approach to commissioning of school places (59% strongly agreed, tended to agree, or neither agreed nor disagreed).
45. Respondents were less supportive of the proposed approach to reorganisation of schools within Leicestershire where this is necessary, with only 39% of respondents agreeing with the proposed approach.

46. Overall, 45% of respondents agreed with the School Places Strategy 2026-2031.
47. A range of comments were provided by respondents; key trends from this feedback have been reviewed and are included in the detailed consultation analysis available in Appendix B. Key themes included:
  - A need to balance sufficiency pressures and school sustainability with outcomes for communities.
  - A lack of clarity around evidence and forecasts for local areas and difficulty navigating the document.
  - A need for reassurance that existing school capacity will be used and strengthened before commissioning new schools.
  - Concerns around a lack of specialist school places to meet the needs of children and young people with SEND.

### **Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

48. The Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee received a report as part of the consultation process at its meeting on 20<sup>th</sup> January 2026. The Committee was keen to understand more around forecasting methodology, particularly in rural areas where concerns were expressed about pupil forecasts. Officers noted that detailed modelling for each planning area included considerations around births, inward migration, demand for school places and future expected housing growth.
49. In a discussion around the approach to reorganisation of schools set out in Section D of the Strategy, the Committee noted concerns around the potential impact of any need for school reorganisation on rural communities. Officers noted an intention to launch a review of the sustainability of Leicestershire schools in order to ensure the ambitions of the Strategy in delivering sufficient numbers of high-quality school places can be met. The Committee was keen to see a future item on the Scrutiny forward plan on the review of school sustainability as this progresses.

### **Proposed actions in response to consultation feedback**

50. While responses to the majority of questions through the consultation were generally positive, several of the key themes identified in responses require additional action to ensure the Strategy is effective in ensuring the Council meets its statutory obligations to deliver sufficient high quality school places in the right place at the right time.
51. Local planning area data was not able to be shared at the time of the consultation due to sign-off processes by the DfE, which potentially led to misunderstandings around the detailed plans and sufficiency forecasts for

specific planning areas. The detailed planning area data sheets will be published alongside the final Strategy to enable interested parties to better understand local plans for their area. These sheets help to explain local forecasts including assumptions used and will form the basis for future decision making around the need for new school places and school sustainability against future pupil forecasts. Data sheets will be regularly updated and made available via the Council's website.

- 52. A School Places Delivery Plan will be developed following publication of the Strategy, setting out how the ambitions of the Strategy will be achieved. This will include clear actions, milestones and success measures which will ensure the Strategy drives school place sufficiency and school sustainability across the County, considering the impact of decisions on local communities. The Delivery Plan is intended to cover the period of the Strategy from 2026 to 2031 and will be updated at least annually in line with the annual Capital Programme as part of the MTFS refresh. A section of the Plan will set out how specialist SEND school places will be delivered, considering current and forecast demand and addressing concerns raised within the consultation around current availability.
- 53. The Delivery Plan will ensure that existing school place capacity is used before commissioning new builds, consider options for expansion of existing schools where this is practical to reinforce sustainability in terms of pupil numbers, and safeguard against unintended impacts of new schools on existing nearby schools and staffing.
- 54. A summary version of the Strategy will also be developed to ensure the document is more accessible.

### **Implementation of the School Places Strategy**

- 55. The Children and Family Services Capital Programme Board, chaired by the Director of Education, Inclusion and Additional Needs and attended by key internal stakeholders from across Children and Family Services, Finance and Property Services will oversee progress against the School Places Delivery Plan, including monitoring of KPIs which ensure that there are sufficient high quality school places in Leicestershire which are in the right place, at the right time.

### **Equality Implications**

- 56. The Strategy aims to ensure equity of access to high-quality education for all children and young people. There are no adverse equality implications arising from the recommendations in this report.
- 57. An Equalities Impact Assessment has been completed on the Strategy and consultation approach which can be found at Appendix C. It concluded that the

Strategy should have a neutral or positive impact for all protected groups and other communities which are of special interest to the Council.

### **Human Rights Implications**

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

### **Other Implications and Impact Assessments**

59. Health implications: The Strategy supports access to education, which is a key determinant of health and wellbeing.

60. Environmental implications: The Strategy considers the location of new schools and travel arrangements to minimise environmental impact.

61. Partnership working: The Strategy has been developed in partnership with schools, academies, District councils, and other stakeholders.

62. 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 18 November 2025 "School Places Strategy 2026-2031"  
<https://democracy.leics.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=135&MId=7881&Ver=4>

Report to the Cabinet on 17 June 2025 "Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and Inclusion Strategy 2025-2028"  
<https://democracy.leics.gov.uk/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://democracy.leics.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=135&MId=7873>

Report to the County Council on 18 May 2022 "Leicestershire County Council's Strategic Plan 2022-2026"  
<https://democracy.leics.gov.uk/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://democracy.leics.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=135&MId=3995&Ver=4>

**Appendices**

- Appendix A: Draft School Places Strategy 2026–2031
- Appendix B: School Places Strategy Consultation Report
- Appendix C: Equality Impact Assessment

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