

# Falling pupil numbers in primary schools: A summary for school leaders

Primary school pupil numbers are falling and as school leaders, you'll be all too aware of the impact that falling pupil numbers can have on your schools.

With a school's funding largely determined by the number of pupils on its roll, updated pupil number projections may have many of you preparing for potential decreases in funding.

In this Research Bite, we summarise:

- How pupil numbers are projected to change, and how these projections differ across the country
- What falling pupil numbers could mean for schools
- How schools can mitigate the impact of falling pupil numbers

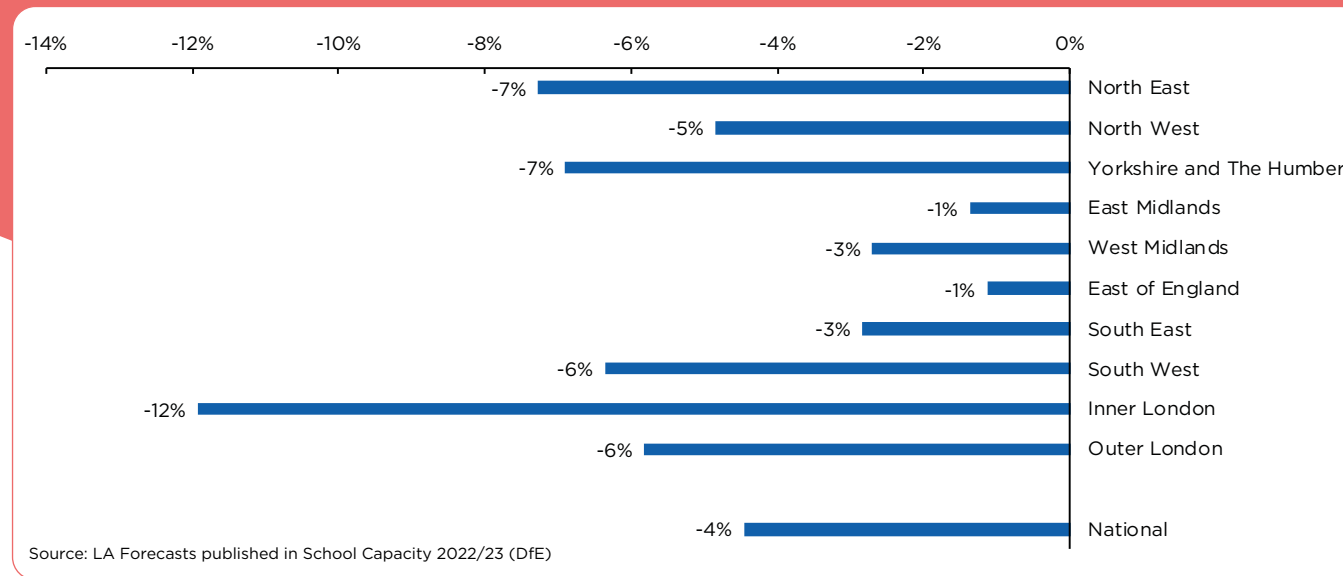


# Pupil numbers: what might the future look like?

The national picture shows that **pupil numbers have been falling in primary schools since around 2019**, and these trends look set to continue.

Local Authority projections show a continued predicted decrease in pupil numbers over the next five years, but these decreases vary significantly between regions (see Chart 1).

**Chart 1: Projected change in state-funded primary school pupil numbers between 2022/23 and 2027/28 (LAs' forecasts combined into regions and national)**



**For example:** while primary schools in inner London are forecast to see a fall in their numbers of over 10%, primary schools in the Midlands and East of England are forecast to see much smaller falls of 1-3%.

While Chart 1 shows that primary school pupil numbers are set to decline across the country, DfE's forecasts of national pupil numbers in primary schools have changed markedly in recent times, and could change again.

## Things to consider

**Focus on the local picture.** Review local trends when considering how pupil numbers might change for your school. Local Authorities produce forecasts on how pupil numbers are changing within their area, and even produce more granular forecasts for each 'planning area'. Local Authority forecasts of pupil numbers are published **here**. *Note: these projections were produced in May 2023 and are the latest to be published. For a more recent forecast, reach out to your Local Authority.*

## Remember, nothing is certain.

Consider planning for different scenarios, as the future of numbers three to five years out cannot be certain. *What would you do if you had 10% more pupils, or 10% less, in each intake, compared to what you're expecting?*



# What do falling pupil numbers mean for primary schools?

## Financial pressures

Our analysis found a link between falling pupil numbers and primary schools going into deficit.



In some areas in London, schools have seen falls in pupil numbers of more than 10% - and have been going into deficit at a faster rate than the national average. **This suggests falling pupil numbers are putting extra pressure on these schools.**

We know other problems can cause financial pressures too, such as resourcing SEND provision and the increased cost of living. **When a school has less money because of falling rolls, it can make finding solutions to these problems even harder.**

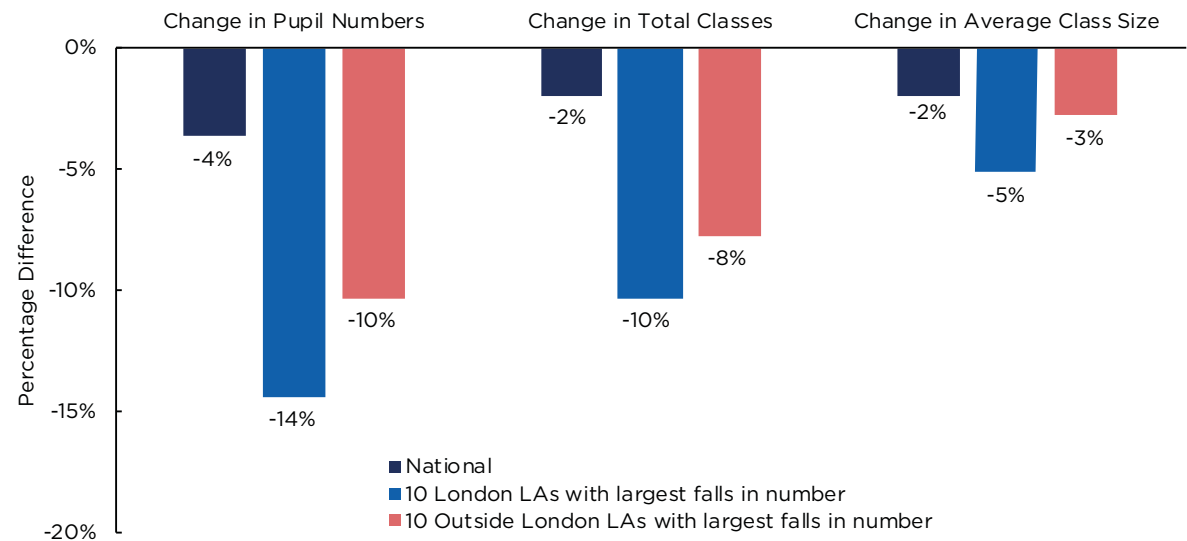
## Less classes

Primary schools are responding to falling pupil numbers by reducing the total number of classes they have, or the average class size.

Across England, as well as in areas where pupils numbers have fallen the most, evidence suggests schools have prioritised cutting the number of classes (see Chart 2 below). Class sizes have fallen, but not by as much as the number of classes.



**Chart 2: Percentage Difference in Pupil Numbers, Average Class Size and Total Class Number between 2017/18 and 2023/24**



This is likely to be linked to the financial challenge schools face when classes are not full.



# What might schools do about falling numbers?

The current picture suggests that continuing falling pupil numbers may cause more primary schools to face significant financial strife in future unless they find ways to cut costs substantially or funding is significantly increased. We know some schools may even be worrying about closing.

We are not recommending specific actions, but we know some schools will be considering these options:

**Schools may look to reduce their costs.** Staffing makes up by far the biggest share of a school's overhead costs, but it may be difficult to cut staff unless pupil numbers fall dramatically. Schools may consider fewer classes, or even creating mixed-age classes to save costs.

**Schools may pool resources with other schools.** This could be by sharing staff and office functions, or by setting up an informal partnership with neighbouring schools and the local authority to cap new admissions in certain year groups.

**Schools could use their excess space for new provision,** such as nursery places. A recent Teacher Tapp survey found three in ten schools have at least one spare classroom. In theory, finding new uses for excess space may help schools maintain their income levels.

## Find out more

**For more information, including further analysis and insights from NFER:**

Read NFER's blogs on falling pupil numbers:

- **"Just a little drop?" - Pupil numbers are falling slower than previous expectations**
- **What happens when pupil numbers fall?**
- **Fewer pupils, more unfilled places, increasing deficits: What can be done?**

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But the onus is not just on schools. **In a recent blog on our website**, we highlighted several ways in which schools, local authorities and government may respond to falling pupil numbers.

