

# SCHOOL PLACE PLANNING REPORT 1:

## Sustainable Schools Strategy – 2025 update

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## 1. Background and introduction

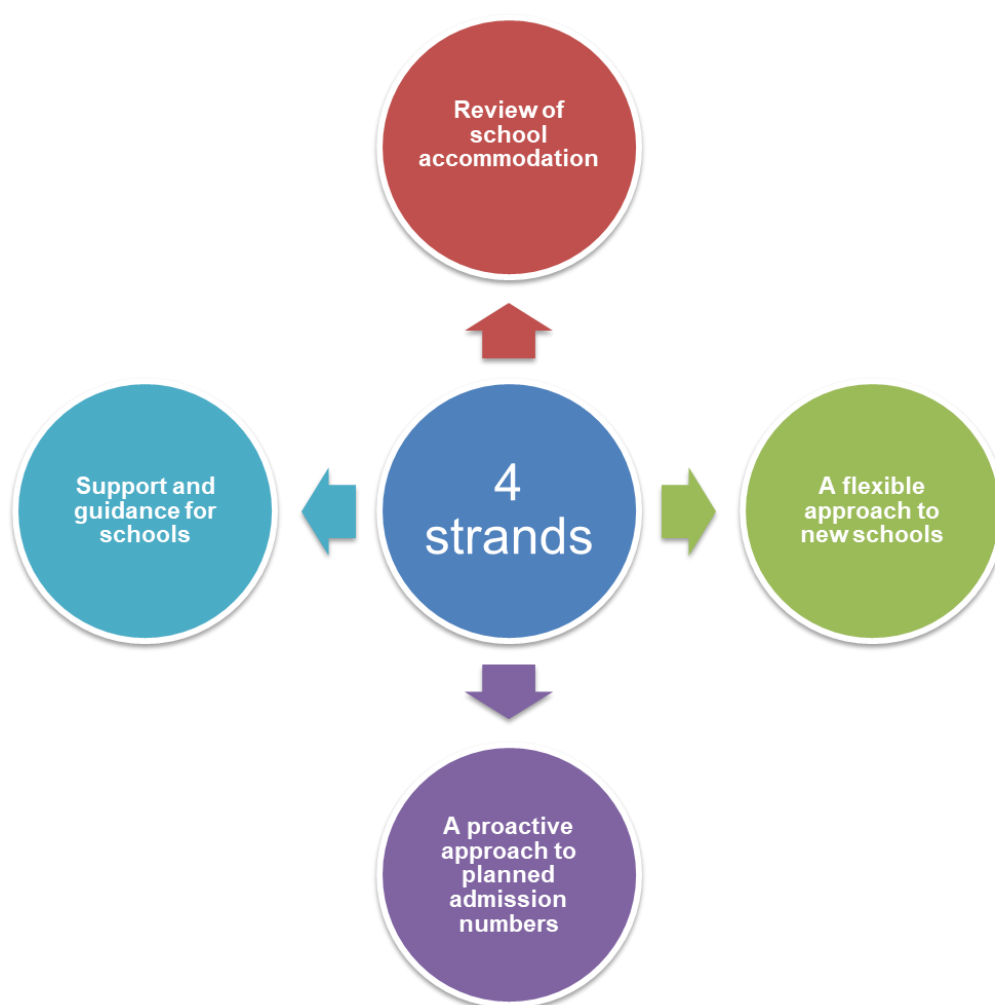
On 5 February 2020, Education Scrutiny Committee considered a report on *Management of Changing Rolls in Oxfordshire Schools: A Strategy for Sustainability*, and requested that an annual report on progress be made to the School Organisation Stakeholders Group. The strategy was focused on primary schools, but the general approaches also apply to secondary schools.

The original report is available at:

[https://mycouncil.oxfordshire.gov.uk/documents/s49729/ESC\\_FEB0520R03%20-%20Changing%20Rolls.pdf](https://mycouncil.oxfordshire.gov.uk/documents/s49729/ESC_FEB0520R03%20-%20Changing%20Rolls.pdf)

Section 10 of the report sets out four strands of Oxfordshire's Sustainable Schools Strategy:

*Figure 1: Sustainable Schools Strategy*



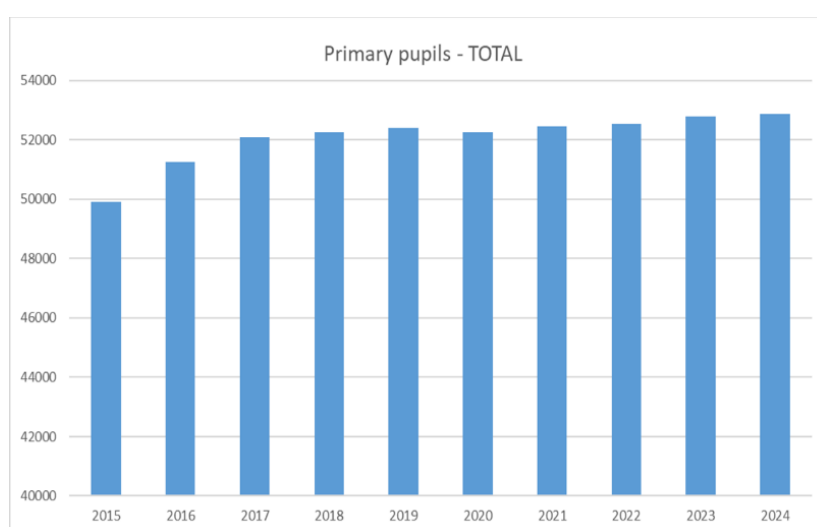
This report reviews the first five years of operation under the Sustainable Schools Strategy, and sets out plans to further strengthen this area of work. The current statutory framework for making changes to schools and academies is summarised in Section 5 for reference.

## 2. Changing pupil numbers

### Primary schools

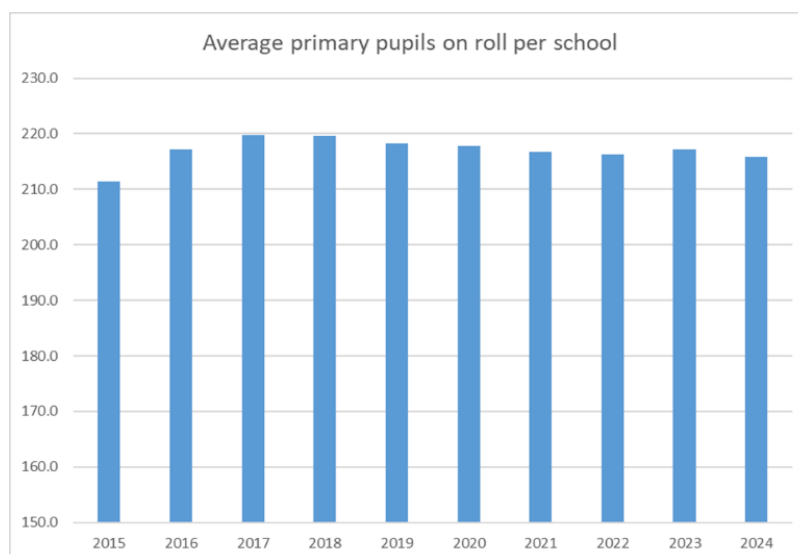
Patterns of pupil numbers, change and spare capacity across Oxfordshire are complex and can be volatile, and cannot be simply summarised. There are rural areas with falling numbers, but also urban areas. There are village schools with surplus capacity but also many which are full. Large housing developments are generating rapid rises in pupil numbers in some areas, but in other areas have been slow to have an impact. Schools and areas which have surplus places one year can be suddenly full the next year, and vice versa.

Overall, the number of primary pupils in Oxfordshire schools is still rising, despite the fall in underlying birth rates, as a result of large scale housing growth in some areas, but growth is much slower than was seen a decade ago.



*Figure 2: Oxfordshire total primary pupil numbers – last 10 years*

Because there have been new schools opened to meet the needs of the large housing developments, the average number of pupils per school has fallen slightly over the last seven years



*Figure 3: Oxfordshire average primary pupil numbers per school – last 10 years*

However, at the local level there are significant differences. Over the last five years, some areas have seen a 10% fall in pupil numbers, while others have seen more than a 10% increase in numbers. Demographic changes are, therefore, being felt very differently in different areas.

Excluding new schools which are still growing, this county has 39 schools with fewer than 90 pupils on roll (October 2024 pupil census), of which there are 7 schools with fewer than 60 pupils on roll. The question is often asked, “how small is too small?” This is not easily quantifiable – a school is too small if it can no longer deliver high quality educational experience in a financially sustainable manner, and some small schools are very successful at doing this. The smallest primary school in 2024/25 is Finstock Primary School, with 25 pupils (October 2024 pupil census) which in January 2024 received an “Outstanding” Ofsted rating.

## Secondary schools

Secondary pupil numbers in Oxfordshire have been growing strongly, both in total and also the average number of pupils per school.

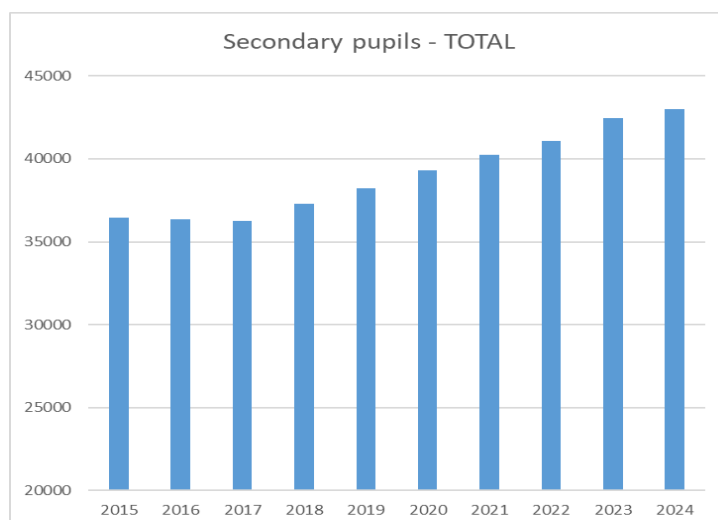


Figure 4: Oxfordshire secondary pupil numbers – last 10 years

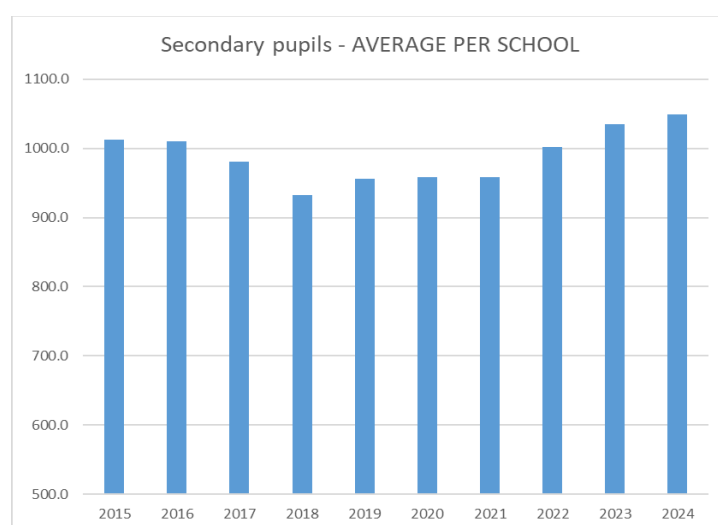


Figure 5: Oxfordshire average secondary pupil numbers per school – last 10 years

In the context of opening new schools, the DfE would define “too small” as less than 4 forms of entry, i.e. 600 pupils (with no sixth form). However, some specialist schools – University Technical Colleges and Studio Schools, providing a more vocational focus – have been designed to be 600-places or smaller, only taking pupils from Year 10 upwards. Of Oxfordshire’s 11-16 or 11-18 secondary schools, only two have significantly fewer than 600 pupils: Aureus School in Didcot, which opened in 2017 to serve housing development in Didcot and will grow as the housing populates, and Maiden Erlegh Chiltern Edge in Sonning Common.

### Forecast pupil numbers

Pupil forecasts are submitted to the DfE each summer for the purposes of informing Basic Need funding allocations. Forecasts are updated annually, and are based on School Census data, population forecasts (which include planned housing development) and recent patterns of parental choice.

The latest set of pupil forecasts approved by the DfE were calculated in the summer of 2024.

*Figure 6: Primary pupil forecasts 2024/25 – 2028/29*

Forecast Year	R	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
2024/25	7424	7752	7801	7861	7950	7904	7796	54,488
2025/26	7293	7707	7975	7992	8020	8112	8056	55,155
2026/27	7487	7566	7917	8135	8124	8163	8242	55,634
2027/28	7244	7731	7759	8061	8242	8244	8276	55,557
2028/29	7141	7474	7891	7892	8144	8329	8335	55,206

*Figure 7: Secondary pupil forecasts 2024/25 – 2028/29*

Forecast Year	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	Total
2024/25	7806	7791	7916	7575	7256	3463	2989	44,796
2025/26	7741	7916	7861	7940	7548	3361	3182	45,549
2026/27	7954	7841	7969	7884	7896	3458	3090	46,092
2027/28	8125	8042	7883	7990	7838	3621	3169	46,668
2028/29	8123	8198	8061	7890	7929	3609	3319	47,129

### **3. Delivery of Oxfordshire's Sustainable School Strategy 2020-2024**

#### **Strand 1: A flexible approach to new schools**

*Where a new school is required, consideration will be given to the potential to relocate an existing school before committing to a new school.*

It is important to note that capital investment for new schools is mainly secured from housing developers through "Section 106" funding, the uses of which are legally restricted. For Education, the effect of this is that developers can only be required to pay for additional school capacity where the existing school capacity will not be sufficient for the expected number of pupils generated by the new housing, and the funding can only be used for additional capacity directly related to the housing development.

In some circumstances, local authorities are able to work within these constraints and also achieve added value through investment in existing schools rather than establishing separate new schools, for example, where an existing school is on a site which would not support expansion, but an additional school in the area would be destabilising.

- Shrivenham Primary School relocated to a new site in 2024, enabling it to grow.
- St Nicholas Infant School in Wallingford will also move to a new site and building in 2026, enabling it and Fir Tree Junior School to convert to primary schools. This follows similar action in Faringdon, where the infant school moved to a new site and building, and both it and the junior school extended their age ranges to become primary schools in 2022.
- Another option actively explored is the expansion of a school onto a split site, as happened in Bicester with St Edburg's CE Primary School expanding onto a second site in 2024.

#### **Strand 2: A proactive approach to planned admission numbers**

*Where a school appears to be operating with a lower Published Admission Number (PAN) than their accommodation supports, and it is in an area where additional school places are required, officers will discuss with the school a timetable for increasing PAN if places are forecast to be needed. To ensure a proactive approach to forward planning of admission numbers, schools which may benefit from a reduced PAN, with reference to the latest pupil forecasts and forward plan of new school openings, are contacted annually in time to consult on PAN changes.*

Each year, OCC has worked with schools and academy trusts to revise published admission numbers (PANs) in response to changing patterns of pupil numbers. This includes both permanent and temporary increases and decreases in PANs with the aim of better matching school provision to local population.

#### **Strand 3: Review of school accommodation**

*Where reductions in PAN result in surplus accommodation, options will be explored for the use of that accommodation for other priorities, which include SEND or AP provision, or Early Years provision.*

Recent examples include:

- New Marston Primary School (Oxford) is using surplus accommodation for Alternative Provision.
- St Frideswide CE Primary School (Oxford) is using surplus accommodation to establish a SEND Resource Base.
- Orchard Meadow Primary School's reduced PAN frees up accommodation to allow the expansion of Mabel Prichard (special) School (Oxford).
- Several schools have submitted applications to convert surplus accommodation into Early Years provision.

#### **Strand 4: Support and guidance for schools**

*Advice and support will be provided to schools on how to manage their budgets on "Affordable Schools", including structural solutions such as federation (sharing headteachers and governors).*

This is provided by the School Improvement team to maintained schools at a school-level, in response to emerging financial deficits. In addition, discussions are held at an area-level where there are more general concerns.

#### **Permanent closure of a school or academy**

Where the strands of the Sustainability Strategy as set out above do not succeed in maintaining school standards and viability, it may become necessary to consider whether closure of a school would support better educational outcomes for pupils.

Closure may be considered where a school has low numbers of pupils on roll, there is no reasonable prospect of attracting additional pupils because there are surplus places in schools elsewhere in the local area, and no predicted increase in the medium to long-term need for places. It may also be considered where a school has been underperforming for some time and is under capacity, and shows no realistic prospect of meeting the required standard.

There is a presumption against the closure of rural schools and of maintained nursery schools. This does not mean that a rural school or maintained nursery school will never close, but that the case for closure should be strong and clearly in the best interests of educational provision in the area.

Where two (or more) schools are to be amalgamated, the legal process for this is to either close the schools and open a new one, or to close one (or more) of the schools and expand another to accommodate the displaced pupils. School amalgamations therefore require a statutory school closure process.

In the last five years, two primary schools in Oxfordshire have been completely closed, both in small villages where the population could no longer sustain the school. The most recent, in August 2023, was Wootton-by-Woodstock Primary School (an academy) which permanently closed by mutual agreement of the LA, DfE and academy trust (ODST) due to unviable pupil numbers, with the majority of pupils transferring to Tackley Primary School (in the same academy trust).

## **4. Sustainable Schools Strategy 2025**

Based on the experience of the first five years of the Sustainable Schools Strategy, areas for increased focus have been identified.

### **Priorities and principles**

Decisions about expansion and reduction of school capacity will be informed by these principles.

Inclusion will be at the heart of any decision. The impact of any proposal will be considered in the context of how it would support high quality provision for:

- children with SEND;
- children we care for (CWCF) and Children we previously cared for (CWPCF);
- children in receipt of pupil premium funding (PP/disadvantaged).

Quality of education:

- expansion of successful, high attaining schools supports the council's commitment to improving educational outcomes, and is in line with DfE expectations;
- this will be balanced against the potential detrimental impact to quality of education at other schools, if they experience falling rolls and hence funding as a result of another school expanding or a new school opening;
- where possible, capacity changes which move schools towards being able to teach in single age classes are preferred.

Local access to appropriate, high quality provision:

- to encourage children walking or cycling to school, changes in school provision will seek to ensure that children are able to attend a school no more than 2 miles (for infant children) or 3 miles (for older children) from home.

Efficient use of resources and assets:

- changes in school capacity will be supported where they enable the education estate to be repurposed to meet higher priority needs;
- cost-effectiveness and value for money of any changes, both with regards to capital investment and ongoing revenue funding (including school transport costs); will be important considerations.

Parental preference, choice and diversity:

- the county council seeks to ensure a high percentage of parents can secure a place at their first preference school;
- this will be balanced against the potential detrimental impact to parental preference if expansion of one school, or a new school opening, risks the viability of other schools;
- church schools and academies are considered equally with local authority maintained schools for expansion; closure proposals for a school that has been designated with a religious character should consider the effect that this will have on the balance of denominational provision in the area.



### Community cohesion

- schools are a focal point for family and community activity, providing extended services for a range of users, and their closure may have wider social consequences.

### Sustainability

- where possible, appropriate school provision should be available within walking or cycling distance;
- capital investment decisions will seek to improve the environmental performance of the school estate.

These principles will inform any action or decision taken relating to the Sustainable Schools Strategy.

## **Strand 1: A flexible approach to new schools**

### *Current policy:*

Where a new school is required, consideration will be given to the potential to relocate an existing school before committing to a new school.

### *Proposed change:*

Where additional school capacity (primary, secondary or special) is required, the order of priority will be:

1. Expansion of existing schools – where this is in line with the principles above.
2. Relocation of an existing school to enable its expansion – where this is in line with the principles above, and subject to the necessary academy trust and/or DfE approvals, and financial viability.
3. Expansion of an existing school onto a satellite site – where this is in line with the principles above, and subject to the necessary academy trust and/or DfE approvals, and financial viability.
4. A new school.

## **Strand 2: A proactive approach to planned admission numbers**

### *Current policy:*

Where a school appears to be operating with a lower Published Admission Number (PAN) than their accommodation supports, and it is in an area where additional school places are required, officers will discuss with the school a timetable for increasing PAN if places are forecast to be needed. To ensure a proactive approach to forward planning of admission numbers, schools which may benefit from a reduced PAN, with reference to the latest pupil forecasts and forward plan of new school openings, are contacted annually in time to consult on PAN changes.

### *Proposed change:*

The council will work with schools and academy trusts to plan ahead for where PANs need to be either increased or decreased to better meet local demand. This will include coordinating discussion across schools and trusts to identify appropriate solutions, informed by the principles above. No presumption is made of a minimum admission number, as this

will depend on the context of each school. However, the local authority will actively suggest changes where the current PANs are considered to be detrimental to school financial viability or quality of education.

### **Strand 3: Review of school accommodation**

#### *Current policy:*

Where reductions in PAN result in surplus accommodation, options will be explored for the use of that accommodation for other priorities, which include SEND or AP provision, or Early Years provision.

#### *Proposed change:*

Where reductions in PAN result in surplus accommodation, options will be explored for the use of that accommodation for other priorities, which include SEND or AP provision, or Early Years provision, informed by the principles above.

### **Strand 4: Support and guidance for schools**

#### *Current policy:*

Advice and support will be provided to schools on how to manage their budgets on “Affordable Schools”, including structural solutions such as federation (sharing headteachers and governors).

#### *Proposed change:*

Advice and support will be provided to schools on maintaining high quality education within an affordable budget, including structural solutions such as federation (sharing headteachers and governors). Where schools have a sustained record of not providing high-quality education, the council will review what intervention is required, working with academy trusts and the DfE as required.

### **Strand 5: School closure**

#### *Current policy: not stated*

#### *Proposed change:*

Where the strands of the Sustainability Strategy as set out above do not succeed in maintaining school standards and viability, the council will work with schools, academy trusts, the DfE and other stakeholders to consider whether closure of a school would support better educational outcomes for pupils, informed by the principles above, and within the relevant statutory processes relating to school closure.

## **5. Statutory framework**

### **a. Making changes to maintained (non-academy) schools**

The *School Organisation (Prescribed Alterations to Maintained Schools) (England) Regulations 2013* set out the way in which decisions are made about proposals to significant changes to local authority maintained (i.e. non-academy) schools.

In October 2024, the DfE released updated Guidance: *Making significant changes (prescribed alterations) to maintained schools*. The purpose of this guidance is stated as:

- to ensure that good quality school places can be provided quickly where they are needed;
- that local authorities and governing bodies do not take decisions that will have a negative impact on other schools in the area;
- and that changes can be implemented effectively where there is a strong case for doing so.

For significant changes – including expansion, relocation or change of age range – the legislation requires full consultation to take place, particularly with parents, staff and governors. A statutory consultation and decision-making process must be followed, with the decision taken by the local authority.

Changes of Published Admission Numbers (PANs) that do not require a physical enlargement to the premises of the school do not require this statutory process, but reduction in PANs do need to be consulted on in line with the requirements of the School Admissions Code.

Changes that are not counted as a “prescribed alteration” can be made by the local authority or school governing body without following a statutory process; they are nevertheless required to adhere to the usual principles of public law. They must: act rationally; take into account all relevant and no irrelevant considerations; and follow a fair procedure. Local authorities and governing bodies are expected to work together on such changes, taking into account the wider place planning context, and ensure open.

### **b. Making changes to academies**

The local authority only has direct influence over the maintained schools, and of course a large number of Oxfordshire schools are now academies. However, the latest DfE guidance on “*Making significant changes to an academy*”, published October 2024, sets out clear expectations, and clarifies the responsibilities of local authorities and academy trusts in working collaboratively and constructively in delivering the local authority’s statutory responsibility to ensure there are enough school places available in their area for every child of compulsory school age (the ‘sufficiency duty’ as set out under section 14 of the 1996 Education Act).

Academy trusts are expected to:

- work collaboratively and constructively with local authorities, other academy trusts, schools, dioceses/religious bodies (as relevant) and the department on place planning matters;

- inform the local authority and DfE promptly of any changes affecting capacity (e.g. events that take school buildings out of use);
- act reasonably when responding to requests to raise or lower PAN and expand/contract where necessary;
- be transparent with local authorities and the DfE about issues affecting their ability to deliver places and about any significant changes they are planning;
- undertake a fair and open local consultation on any significant changes they are proposing.

### **c. Permanent closure of a non-academy school**

The School Organisation (Establishment and Discontinuance of Schools) Regulations 2013 set out the way in which decisions are made about proposals to close local authority maintained schools. In October 2024, the DfE released updated guidance on *Opening and Closing Maintained Schools*.

Under section 15 of EIA 2006, a local authority can propose the closure of a community, foundation, voluntary, community special, foundation special or maintained nursery school and the governing body of a voluntary, foundation or foundation special school may publish proposals to close its own school, in each case following the statutory process. Alternatively, the governing body of a foundation or voluntary school can close the school by giving at least 2 years' notice of its intention to close the school to the Secretary of State and the local authority.

The statutory process is set out in the Establishment and Discontinuance Regulations. An initial informal consultation would precede the publication of a statutory proposal to close the school, after which there would be a formal consultation period, with the final decision being taken by the local authority.

### **d. Permanent closure of an academy**

The process for permanent closure of an academy is set out in the government guidance *Closure of an academy by mutual agreement*. This sets out that an academy trust may ask the Secretary of State to consider the closure of an academy "by mutual agreement", on the basis that there is no reasonable prospect of attracting additional pupils, and no predicted increase in the medium and long-term need for places, and/or that the academy has been underperforming for some time and is under capacity and shows no realistic prospect of meeting the required standard. If the academy is in an area with a need for additional school places, as an alternative to proceeding to closure, the Secretary of State may agree to allow trustees to transfer the funding agreement to an alternative sponsor or multi academy trust with the skills and capacity to improve standards.

The process to permanently close an academy starts with confidential discussions between the academy trust, DfE and local authority to assess the appropriateness and potential impact of closure. If the DfE agrees in principle to closure, further work is undertaken to develop a detailed closure proposal, and the trust seeks a substantive decision from the Secretary of State to close. Following a substantive decision from the Secretary of State to proceed to closure, the academy trust should share news of the closure with pupils, parents, staff, unions, relevant local authorities and schools elsewhere in the local area at the earliest opportunity and conduct a listening period, which will inform the closure plan.