

Falling Pupil Numbers in England

Strategies from School and Trust Leaders



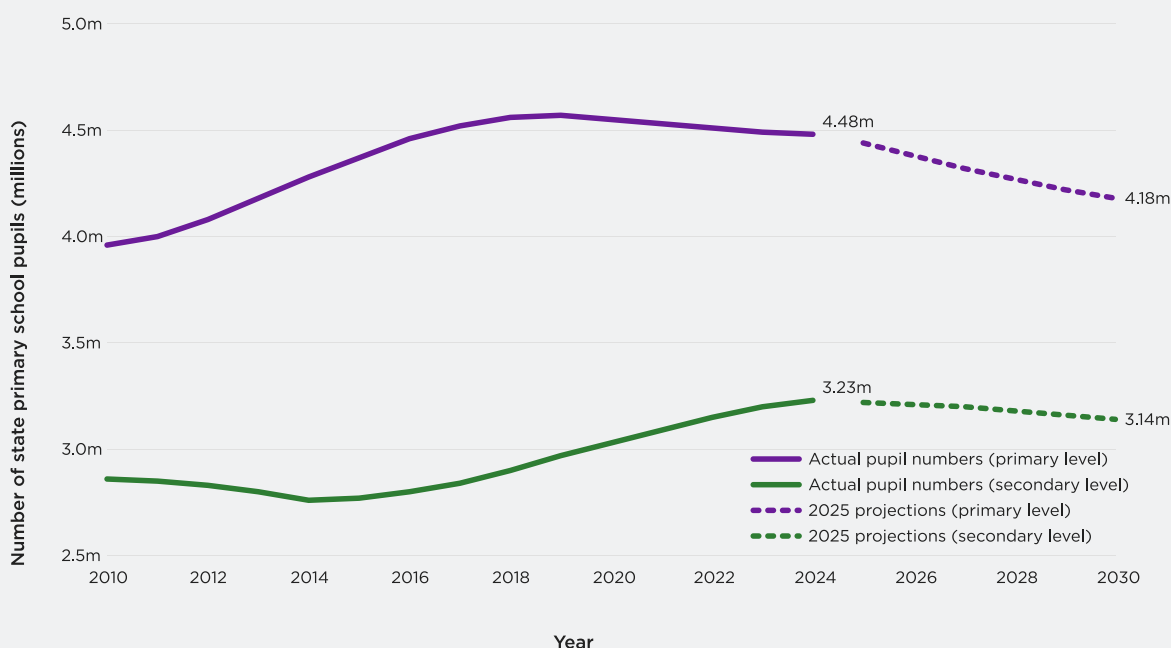
Budgets remain a challenge for schools in England. With costs relatively fixed in the short term yet funding tied to pupil numbers, a decline in pupil numbers is likely to be a contributor to schools' current financial pressures.

This Research Bite shares key insights from our latest research, and some of the strategies school and trust leaders are deploying, which may help to inform discussions at your school.

In June 2025, the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) surveyed over 350 senior leaders, identifying those who were at least 'slightly concerned' about the impact of falling pupil numbers, providing new insights into how school funding and demographic challenges are impacting schools.

More than four in five primary school leaders who took part in our Teacher Voice survey reported being at least slightly concerned about the impact of declining pupil numbers on their settings. Despite a decline in overall secondary pupil numbers not expected for another couple of years, **more than three in five secondary leaders** said they were at least slightly concerned about the potential impact on their schools.

State pupil number projections for England by school phase



Source: National pupil projections by the DfE for the reporting year 2025



82%

of senior primary school leaders are concerned about the impact of falling pupil numbers



65%

of senior secondary school leaders are concerned about the impact of falling pupil numbers

Data from NFER's 'Senior leaders under pressure as school pupil numbers fall' blog, September 2025

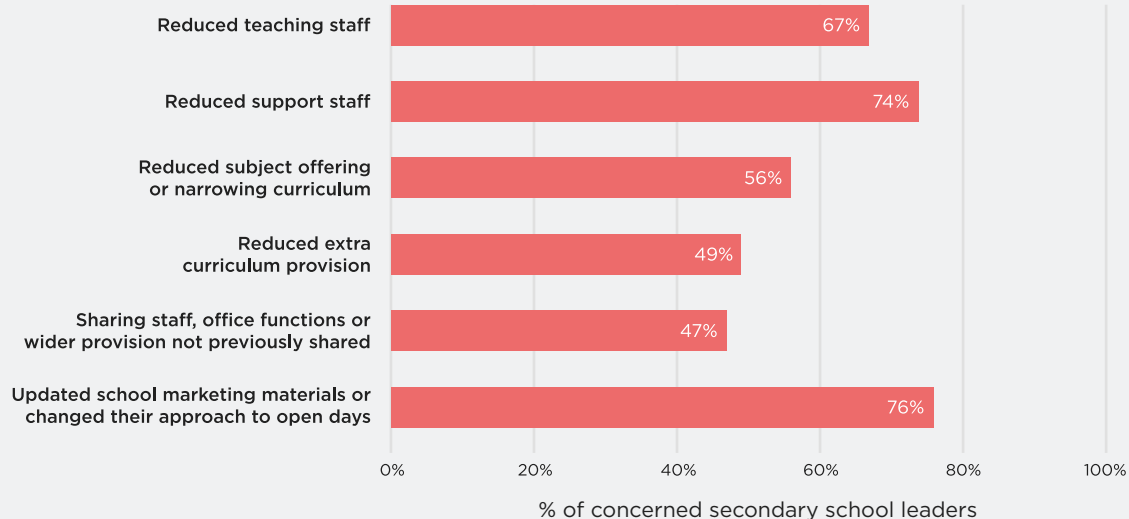
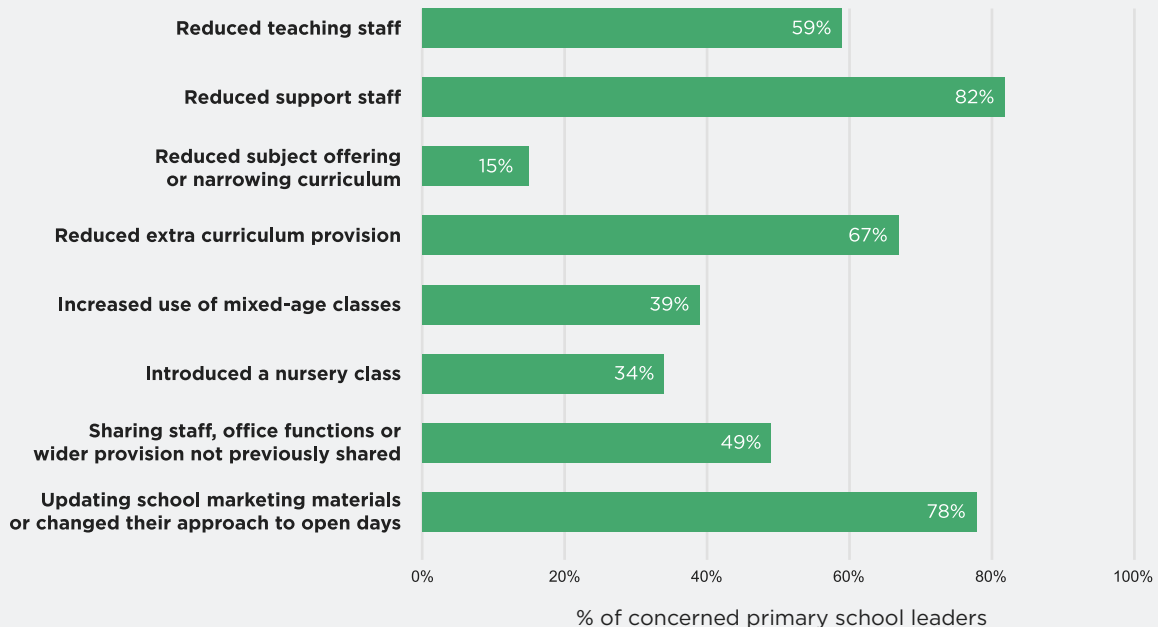
It is clear that a large proportion of school leaders have had to respond to the challenge of falling pupil numbers. To better understand how schools are adapting, we asked concerned leaders what actions they have taken in the last two years, or plan to take in the next two years, to manage the impact.



'Where falling pupil numbers is an issue, the main impact is on the school's finances. This is then impacting on staffing, class structures and in some cases parental perception.'

Trust Leader in Meridian Trust

What have school leaders done, or considered, to cope with the impact of falling pupil numbers?



Source: Data from NFER's 'Senior leaders under pressure as school pupil numbers fall' blog, September 2025

Note: Question asked to senior leaders who were at least slightly concerned about the impact of falling pupil numbers on their settings

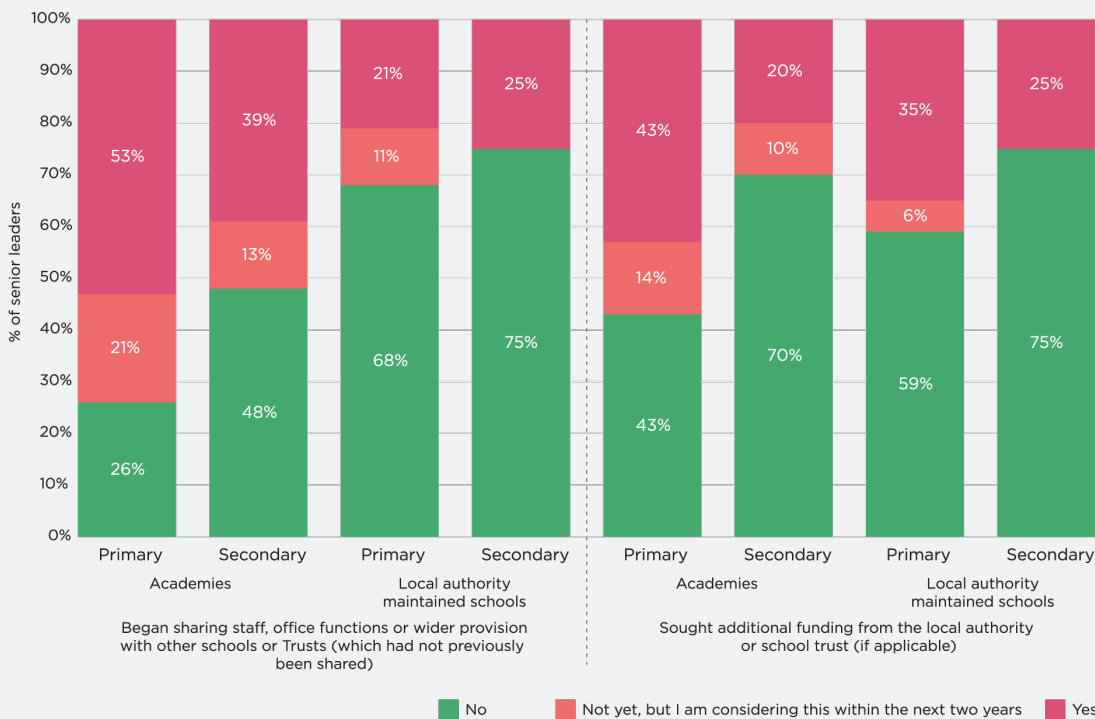
Approximately three quarters of senior leaders reported updating school marketing materials or are considering it.

This included leafletting new houses, advertising in newspapers, ramping up schools’ social media presence, organising playgroups for the community and offering more taster sessions.

All schools are fighting over the same few children so what can we do to stand out and look attractive? Try to make sure your open visits are welcoming and personable, your social media celebrates the strengths of your school, and you build a good reputation in the local area.
Headteacher, Primary School in Berkshire

Among schools that were at least slightly concerned about the impact of declining pupil numbers, nearly half of primary and secondary senior leaders reported they were sharing or were considering sharing staff, office functions or wider provision with other schools or trusts in future.

Steps senior leaders have taken or are considering taking in the future to help manage the impact of falling pupil numbers on their school settings, by school type and phase



Source: Data from NFER's 'Senior leaders under pressure as school pupil numbers fall' blog, September 2025
Note: Question asked to senior leaders who were at least slightly concerned about the impact of falling pupil numbers on their settings

As you can see in the graph, senior leaders in academies were more likely than those in local authority-maintained schools to be pooling resources.

They were also more likely to have sought, or consider seeking, additional funding from their trust or local authorities compared to local authority-maintained schools.

At the primary level, 57 per cent of academy senior leaders reported having sought or considered seeking additional funding, compared to 41 per cent in local authority-maintained schools.

We have thought carefully about class structures – considering where we can mix year groups without compromising our strong curriculum offer. Schools which are geographically close to each other could share resources, expertise and leadership; sharing staffing costs between two schools. We are carefully financial planning for the next three years, based on projected numbers, exploring further cost-saving measures if needed. Depending on numbers, we could be planning to reduce by one class in the subsequent academic year.
Trust Leader in Meridian Trust

Several senior leaders are taking these additional steps:

- 1 Seeking new income sources through charitable funding
- 2 Renting school spaces
- 3 Setting up specialist SEND provision
- 4 Changing admissions processes
- 5 Using contractual arrangements to give more flexibility to reduce costs (e.g. fixed term contracts)
- 6 Considering merging with another school

School leaders may wish to reflect on how falling pupil numbers could affect their own school(s).

Considering this proactively can help to identify potential risks and opportunities, creating an action plan that supports both financial sustainability and the best outcomes for pupils.

Reflective Action Plan Questions from a Primary Headteacher for School Leaders

- How do you market yourselves to get as many families as possible through the front door?
- What do you offer that stands out compared to other local schools?
- What are you going to do if you see a pattern of falling roll; are you reducing your Published Admissions Number (PAN), and if so, to what?
- What cost cutting measures can you take without losing the provision that makes your school successful for the children in your care?
- What does that mean for your organisational structure and curriculum?

Reference: Headteacher, Primary School in Berkshire

“While senior leaders are taking proactive steps to mitigate the impact of falling pupil numbers on their settings, if the forecast declines in pupil numbers are borne out, it is likely that more drastic steps will be needed across the school system. As this unfolds, it is crucial that local and national governments take a proactive role in planning for and supporting schools through these structural changes.”

**Gustavo Henndel Lopes, NFER
Researcher, & Jenna Julius, NFER
Research Director, September 2025**



**7% of primary and
6% of secondary**

school leaders said that they had discussed, or were considering discussing, the possibility of closing their schools

* merging and closing schools may be more commonly explored than our school-level data suggests.

This summary uses data from research by NFER. To find out more about our research into falling pupil numbers, you can read the blog in full on our website: [Senior leaders under pressure as pupil numbers fall](#), by Gustavo Henndel Lopes, Researcher, and Jenna Julius, Research Director, September 2025.

Thank you to our [Teacher Voice panel](#) for taking part in this research, and to the senior leaders who kindly shared their schools' experiences with falling pupil numbers.



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