

School admissions

A guide for constituents

July 2026



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School admissions

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July 2026

This guide provides some background information on the school admissions process for maintained schools in Wales and answers some frequently asked questions.

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1. Applying for a school place

Admission authorities (those deciding who is admitted to maintained schools) must deal with applications for school places in line with the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 and the School Admissions Code (2013). Parents (or carers) must have the opportunity to express a preference for their child's school, which admission authorities must meet unless exceptions apply. The most common exception is where this 'prejudices' the provision of efficient education and the number of applications for a school exceeds the number of available places. In such cases, 'oversubscription criteria' are used.

Legislation and guidance

The law relating to school admissions is set out in the [School Standards and Framework Act 1998](#). The Welsh Government has also issued two codes on how statutory functions (legal duties) of admission authorities should be carried out: the [School Admissions Code](#) (2013) and the [School Admissions Appeals Code](#) (2023).

The Codes impose requirements and offer guidance in respect of the discharge by local authorities, the governing bodies of maintained schools, admission forums, and admission appeal panels of their school admissions and appeals functions. These bodies must "act in accordance with" the Codes.

Some key terms explained

Maintained school – A school that is wholly or substantially financed by a local authority, as opposed to independent / private schools. [Maintained schools](#) can be community schools (owned and run by the local authority); voluntary controlled or voluntary aided schools (run by a voluntary organisation such as a religious diocese, with varying levels of independence); or foundation schools

(owned by either the governing body or a charitable foundation with limited local authority control).

Admission authority – The entry of children to schools is controlled and administered by an ‘admission authority’. Who the admission authority is depends on the type of school. Local authorities are admission authorities for community and voluntary controlled schools (unless this function has been delegated in full to the governing body). The admission authority for foundation and voluntary aided schools is the school’s governing body.

Admission forum – Under the 1998 Act, as amended, local authorities must establish admission fora which monitor compliance with the School Admissions Code. They provide a vehicle for admission authorities and other key interested parties to discuss the effectiveness of local admission arrangements, consider how to deal with difficult admission issues and advise admission authorities on ways in which their arrangements can be improved

Admission arrangements – Admission arrangements are set by the admission authority. The arrangements set out how children will be admitted, including the ‘oversubscription criteria’ that will be applied if there are more applications than places at the school.

School capacity – The capacity of a school is the number of pupil places it contains. The Welsh Government has published guidance, [Measuring the capacity of schools in Wales](#), that sets out a method that all community, voluntary aided, voluntary controlled and foundation schools in Wales use to work out their capacity.

Admission number – A school’s admission number is the number of pupils that can be admitted to a year group. Admission authorities must have regard to the ‘indicated admission number’ for each year group. The indicated admission number is calculated in line with the capacity assessment method set out in the measuring capacity guidance. The admission number is calculated by dividing the capacity by the number of year groups to be accommodated at the school.

What are the rules about how admission authorities set their arrangements?

Admission authorities must set their admission arrangements in accordance with principles that are set out in the [School Admissions Code \(2013\)](#). Arrangements must:

- be clear;
- be objective;
- be fair and equal for all pupils;
- provide parents with access to information on arrangements; and
- comply with the law.

Once an admission authority has decided on its arrangements, it must consult on them. Admission arrangements must be consulted on for maintained schools during some period between 1 September and 1 March, and set by 15 April, of the school year (the 'determination year') beginning two years before the school year in which the arrangements will apply.

Local authority admission authorities must consult each year for their schools. The rules are slightly different for governing body admission authorities. They must also consult annually unless they have consulted on their arrangements within the previous two determination years, the arrangements are unchanged, and there has been no objection made to the Welsh Ministers about their admission arrangements in the preceding five years.

The School Admissions Code provides information on who must and who should be consulted and the detail that should be included in the consultation. These include neighbouring local authorities and other local admission authorities, governing bodies, and religious bodies. Following consultation, the admission authority must 'determine' its arrangements, with modifications if necessary.

Where can admissions information for schools be found?

Local authorities must publish an annual prospectus that sets out the admission arrangements for all maintained schools in its area. This must also include a timetable for the admissions process. The prospectuses are generally published on local authority websites and are often called 'starting school' or 'parents handbook'. These explain how to apply for a school place.

All admission authorities in any local authority area must have a common date of return for all primary applications and a common date for all secondary applications, for the normal year of entry. However, those common dates for each of primary and secondary applications may differ from each other.

When do parents have to apply for a school place for their child?

Timetables for making an application can usually be found in local authorities' information for parents booklets and on their websites. Most admission authorities open their applications system during September and October. Admission authorities consider all applications together after the closing date.

The age at which children start school is discussed later on in this chapter.

Can parents choose a particular school for their child?

Admission authorities must allow parents of children in their area to express a preference for a particular school. This is sometimes known as 'parental preference'. Pupils going into sixth form may themselves express their preference for a specific school.

Where a parent or young person expresses a preference, local authorities and governing bodies must comply with that preference. However, there are exceptions:

- where arrangements for entry to a school's sixth form are based wholly on selection by ability or aptitude and compliance would be incompatible with selection under those arrangements;
- where a child has been permanently excluded from two or more schools and the latest exclusion took place within the last two years; or
- where compliance would **'prejudice'** the "provision of efficient education or the efficient use of resources". This means in practice having to take inefficient measures to ensure the school complies with the statutory infant class size limit, for example, having to employ an additional teacher or create another classroom. Further information on infant class sizes is outlined in a later question further on.

In a normal year of entry, a child must not be refused admission to a school on the grounds of prejudice to efficient education or the efficient use of resources except where the number of applications for admission exceeds the admission number. However, it may be reasonable for an admission authority to exercise discretion, in exceptional circumstances, to admit more pupils than the admission number indicates. This may be, for example, where there are a significant number of surplus places across the year groups in the school or if

there is a temporary shortage of a particular type of provision in an area, for example Welsh medium education, while additional provision is being established.

All maintained schools that have enough places available (up to and including the admission number) must offer a place to every child who has applied (except where they have been excluded at least twice).

Are parents guaranteed a place in their school of choice?

While parents can state a preference for a particular school, if there are more applications than there are places available a parent may be unsuccessful and may not be offered their preferred option.

What happens if there are more applications than there are places at the school?

As part of their admission arrangements, admission authorities must have criteria to decide on how places are allocated if there are more applications than there are places. These are known as **‘oversubscription criteria’**.

While admission authorities have discretion over the criteria, these must be clear, objective, procedurally fair, and comply with legislation. The admission authority must consult on and then publish its oversubscription criteria.

Are there any oversubscription criteria that cannot be used by admission authorities?

Admission authorities must ensure that arrangements will not disadvantage unfairly, either directly or indirectly, a child from a particular social or racial group, or a child with additional learning needs. The criteria must not require any ‘interpretation’ and must be clear and unambiguous.

The School Admissions Code includes a list of ‘undesirable oversubscription criteria’ that admission authorities must not consider or use, such as selection by ability or aptitude. There are some exceptions to this, such as sixth forms. Undesirable oversubscription criteria also include giving priority to some prospective pupils over others, such as whether they are children of staff, have had behaviour issues, are of particular faiths (with exceptions), or have additional learning needs.

Are there any requirements for some children to be given higher priority than others?

The School Admissions Code recognises that looked after children are among the most vulnerable and therefore requires admission authorities to give the highest priority in their oversubscription criteria to looked after children and previously looked after children.

Faith schools can give priority to children of their own faith (see the relevant question further down). However, they must still give the highest priority to looked after children and previously looked after children. This means that:

- looked after children of the school's faith must be given priority over all other children of that faith; and
- looked after children who are not of the school's faith must still be given higher priority than other children who are not of that faith.

The Code provides some guidance on setting fair oversubscription criteria. While it does not state that the criteria listed should be the preferred criteria, it offers guidance on their appropriateness. Included in the list of potential criteria are:

- siblings of pupils still at the school;
- medical need;
- distance from home; and
- the use of catchment areas.

Is a child with additional learning needs (ALN) guaranteed a place at a particular school?

The new ALN system, established under the [**Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal \(Wales\) Act 2018**](#), completed its roll out in September 2025. Every learner with ALN is given a statutory Individual Development Plan (IDP) setting out their needs and what interventions they require.

The [**Additional Learning Needs Code for Wales \(2021\)**](#) states that a local authority may name a maintained school in an IDP it prepares or maintains for a child. Where a maintained school is named, the school must admit the child

regardless of whether that means it will exceed its admission number or the statutory limit on infant class sizes.

Can admission authorities for faith schools give higher priority to children of the same faith?

Schools with a designated religious character may give preference to members of a particular faith or denomination. However, this must not conflict with other legislation, such as equality legislation or the mandatory provisions of the School Admissions Code.

Faith schools must not keep open places if they do not have enough applicants of their own faith and other parents have applied for a place. Where preference is to be given to members of a particular faith, the admission authority's published admission arrangements must make clear how religious affiliation or commitment is to be demonstrated, for example, through a family's priest, minister, or other representative of the church or religious authority.

Can admission authorities for Welsh medium schools give higher priority to children who speak Welsh?

Admission authorities must not adopt oversubscription criteria which select pupils on the basis of ability or aptitude. This includes for example, in the case of Welsh medium schools, the ability to speak Welsh.

The exception to this general prohibition on ability based criteria, which applies to all schools, is schools with partially selective arrangements, which already had such arrangements in place at the beginning of the 1997/98 school year and are permitted to continue to use selection by ability. There is also an exception on selection by ability for sixth forms (see further information in the relevant question further down).

Are there any reasons why a school can refuse a pupil admission to a school when they have enough places?

In general, schools that have enough places must comply with parental preference. However, where a child has been permanently excluded from two or more schools the requirement to comply with the preference is removed for a period of two years from the date on which the latest exclusion took place. There are exceptions to this and it does not apply to:

- children who were below compulsory school age when excluded;

- children who were reinstated following a permanent exclusion;
- children who would have been reinstated following a permanent exclusion had it been practicable to do so; and
- looked after children and previously looked after children, where the application for admission is made by or on behalf of the corporate parent.

Local authorities are still responsible for providing suitable full-time education for twice excluded children and may need to use their powers of direction to secure a school place or provide a place in a Pupil Referral Unit or other education provision.

At what age must a child start school?

Under **section 8 of the Education Act 1996**, children must attend school full-time from the **start of the first term that begins after their fifth birthday**. This is called 'compulsory school age'. The end-of-term dates are 31 March, 31 August and 31 December.

All local authorities in Wales offer education in school from the start of the academic year in which children turn 5. This is known as the 'reception year'.

Before then, there is a **minimum entitlement of 10 hours per week early years education** for all children from the first term after their third birthday, with some local authorities offering more. Parents do not need to accept this offer. Some children may also be entitled to free childcare under the Welsh Government's **childcare policies**.

What is 'deferred entry'?

As stated above, local authorities in Wales offer reception class places to children at the start of that school year, which is before their fifth birthday and when they are still below compulsory school age. Deferred entry is the term used where a parent can ask for their child who is below compulsory school age to only go to school part-time or to put off starting school until later in that school year. The effect of deferred entry is that the place is held for the child and cannot be offered to anyone else.

The parent would not be able to defer entry beyond the beginning of the term after the child's fifth birthday, nor beyond the school year in which the original application was accepted. This means for children who are not yet of

compulsory school age, that the child will have to start at the school before the end of the summer term or they will lose their place in the class and the parent will have to reapply for a school place for the following year.

Children will generally still follow their chronological year group. If a parent does not wish for their child below compulsory school age to start school at some point during the reception year, the child would not normally join the next reception class but would join the year group in which they were originally offered a place (which would then be Year 1).

If the parent does want the child to start in reception class after they have reached compulsory school age, for example some 'summer born' children whose birthday is between 31 March and 31 August, they will need to make an application for starting school 'outside the normal age group'.

Can a child join a different year group to their chronological age group?

There may be instances where parents would like their child to be admitted to school outside their normal age group, for example, 'summer born' children as discussed above, children who are more able and talented (who may wish to join an older year group) or a child who has experienced problems and missed part of a school year.

In these cases, the School Admissions Code states that admission authorities should consider these requests carefully and make decisions on the basis of the circumstances of each case, in consultation with the parents and the school, and specifically in relation to what is most beneficial to the child.

What is 'early years education'?

As stated above, there is a minimum entitlement of 10 hours a week early years education for all children in **the first term after their third birthday**, with some local authorities offering more. This is optional for parents to take up.

Local authorities must secure sufficient nursery education for children in their area. This means a **minimum of 10 hours of provision per week** for the same number of weeks as the normal school year (39 weeks) in either a:

- school (maintained setting); or

- non-maintained setting that is registered with the local authority to deliver nursery education (such as a childminder, cylch meithrin, day nursery or playgroup).

It is up to the local authority, not the parent, to decide whether the nursery provision offered is in a school or a non-maintained setting, depending on local circumstances such as whether it has sufficient maintained provision to meet demand. As nursery education is non-statutory provision, parents have no statutory right of appeal if they are not offered a place at their preferred provision.

Early years education providers must follow the [Curriculum for Wales \(CfW\)](#). Non-maintained settings can either design their own curriculum within the CfW framework or adopt the [Curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings](#) that the Welsh Government has issued. Nursery classes in schools follow the school's curriculum that it has designed within the CfW framework.

Further detail on early years education is set out in Welsh Government guidance: [Nursery education for 3 and 4 year olds: guidance for local authorities](#).

Are admissions to nursery education different to those for primary and secondary schools?

The local authority is responsible for deciding on admissions to nursery classes in community and voluntary controlled schools. Admission authorities must ensure that parents are aware of the formal process for applying for a place. Oversubscription criteria should be established using the same principles as those for statutory school-age provision.

Admission authorities should state clearly that there are **separate admission arrangements** for the nursery class in a school to the arrangements for school places from reception class onwards. Parents of children who are admitted for nursery education will still need to apply for a place at the school if they want their child to transfer to the reception class. Just because a child attends the nursery class in a school does not in itself make it any more likely they will secure a place in the reception class.

Are there limits on the number of children who can be admitted to infant classes?

There are statutory (legal) limits on class sizes, set by the [School Admissions \(Infant Class Size\) \(Wales\) Regulations 2013](#). When a single school teacher is present, infant classes (reception, Year 1 and Year 2) may not contain more than 30 pupils. An admission authority can refuse to admit a child to a school where to do so would cause 'class size prejudice'. That means prejudice to efficient education or efficient use of resources as a result of the relevant measures that would be needed to comply with the duty to limit the size of infant classes, for example, having to employ an additional teacher or create another classroom.

However, in relation to the reception year such prejudice cannot be said to arise unless the school's admission number would be exceeded. Admission authorities may refuse admission for places in any year other than the normal year of entry (reception), if offering a place would result in class size prejudice. This means that admission to Year 1 and Year 2 can be refused if offering a place would result in class size prejudice, even if the admission number has not been reached in relation to these year groups.

Are there exceptions to the statutory limits on infant class sizes?

The infant class size limit of 30 applies to the organisation of the classes not to the number of children to be admitted. Although classes must be organised to comply with the limit wherever possible, the 2013 Regulations set out circumstances in which pupils may be admitted as exceptions to the class size limit.

These include where pupils may have additional learning needs, are a looked after child, or where the parents wish for faith-based or Welsh medium education and it is the only school within a reasonable distance of the child's home.

Are arrangements for sixth form different?

A school with a sixth form may have different admission arrangements for those of statutory school age and for the sixth form. If this is the case, the admission authority must consult on, determine and publish those arrangements at the same time and in the same way as all other admission arrangements.

Applications for admission to a sixth form may be made by either the parent or the young person, or both, and applications must be treated in the same way as any other application for admission to a school.

Admission authorities are permitted to set arrangements for entry to sixth forms which are wholly based on selection by reference to ability, for example, so entry depends on learners having achieved a certain number of GCSEs at specific grades. Where such arrangements exist, the duty to comply with parental (or learner) preference does not apply.

Admission authorities which set wholly selective sixth form admission arrangements must apply those arrangements equally to both young people who are currently attending the same school, but seeking entry to the sixth form, and those who are applying to be admitted to the school for the first time. In all other instances where there are no wholly selective criteria, learners who are already attending the school will not need to apply for entry to the sixth form and cannot be refused entry.

Schools must not interview young people or their families for entry to a sixth form.

2. Appealing against decisions

The School Admissions Appeal Code was initially issued by the Welsh Government in 2013 and then revised in 2023. It imposes requirements and provides guidance on arrangements for appeals against admission authorities' decisions over applications for school places. The main change in 2023 was the addition of the option for admission appeals to be held remotely as well as face to face.

Can parents appeal if they are not offered their choice of school?

Any parent (except one whose child has been permanently excluded from at least two schools) whose child is refused a school place has the right to appeal to an independent appeal panel. The admission authority's letter of refusal should explain why a parent has been unsuccessful and how to make an appeal. There is **usually a time limit** in which to submit an appeal. This must be at least ten working days, although some local authorities allow up to 28 calendar days.

There is no right of appeal against the allocation of nursery places, only for primary, middle and secondary school intakes (including sixth forms / Year 12). Young people themselves can appeal against the refusal of a sixth form place.

Who hears appeals?

Local authorities are required to establish appeals panels in respect of community and voluntary controlled schools, while governing bodies are responsible for doing this in respect of foundation and voluntary aided schools. Local authorities and governing bodies may set up joint panels.

Appeals panels are made up of either three or five members, one of which must be a 'lay member', i.e. without personal experience in the management of any school or the provision of education in any school. All members must be independent of the local authority or governing body.

What if applications are turned down because of statutory infant class size limits?

Where an application for a school place has been turned down because the statutory limit of 30 on infant class sizes would otherwise be exceeded ('class size prejudice'), there is limited scope for the panel to uphold the appeal. The panel will **only** be able to uphold the appeal if one or more of the following grounds apply:

- the child would have been offered a place if the school admission arrangements had complied with legal requirements;
- the child would have been offered a place if compliant admission arrangements had been properly implemented; or
- the decision was not one which a reasonable admission authority would have made in the circumstances of the case.

What process do appeals follow?

A **two-stage process** must be applied in all other 'prejudice' cases, i.e. where applications are unsuccessful because they would otherwise prejudice the provision of efficient education or the efficient use of resources. This is usually where admitting pupils would exceed the school's admission number.

There is firstly a **'factual' stage** to:

- consider whether the published admission arrangements comply with the School Admissions Code and the 1998 Act;
- consider whether compliant admission arrangements were correctly and impartially applied in the case(s) in question; and
- decide as a matter of fact whether prejudice would arise if the child or young person was to be admitted.

The appeal panel must uphold the appeal at the first stage if it is not satisfied at this stage that there would be prejudice if the child or young person were admitted to the school. If there are other appeals relating to the same school, these must all be heard before a decision is taken. The first stage of such appeals will therefore usually be held at the same time.

If the admission authority has been able to satisfy the appeal panel that there would be prejudice in admitting the learner(s), the appeal goes on to a second stage. Appeals are held individually at this stage.

The second stage is a **'balancing stage'** for the panel to exercise its discretion, balancing the degree of prejudice and the weight of the appellant's case before reaching a decision. **Chapter 5 of the School Admissions Appeal Code** (in particular paragraph 5.19) gives guidance on how the panel should consider this.

Can appellants be accompanied by someone to the hearing?

Yes. A parent (or young person in the case of sixth form appeals) may be accompanied or represented by a friend, adviser, interpreter or signer who may speak on their behalf. Parents can have legal representation if they wish.

If appeals are unsuccessful, can matters be taken further?

Generally, the matter can only be taken further if there have been **issues with the process rather than disagreement with the outcome**.

Parents generally do not have a right to a second appeal in respect of the same school and the same school year, but may have a fresh appeal if:

- the admission authority agrees to arrange a second appeal because there were faults in the first appeal and there is a significant possibility that the outcome might have been affected by the faults (this may be on the recommendation of the Public Services Ombudsman (see below) or because the admission authority decides to do so on its own initiative); or
- the admission authority accepted a fresh application because there has been a significant and material change in the circumstances of the parent or young person or school, but considered that the fresh application should also be turned down.

Appeal panel decisions are final and can only be overturned by the courts where either the parent or the admission authority are successful in applying for **judicial review** of that decision (see below).

Admission authorities must admit a child whose parents have won an appeal.

The Welsh Government has no jurisdiction over the decisions of appeal panels and cannot review or overturn their decisions. However, the **Welsh**

Government does have some powers of intervention (under the **School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013**) if either:

- the panel was not correctly constituted by the admission authority, or
- the admission authority has not acted reasonably in exercising functions in respect of the appeal process or has failed to discharge any legal duty in relation to that process.

The **Public Services Ombudsman for Wales** has legal powers to look into complaints about public services. They are independent of all government bodies and provide a free and independent service.

The Ombudsman can investigate written complaints about **maladministration** on the part of an admission appeal panel. Maladministration covers issues such as a failure to act independently and fairly, rather than complaints where a person simply feels that the decision taken is wrong. In relation to school admissions, the Ombudsman can:

- look at complaints about school admissions procedures in Wales and the admissions appeals process;
- look at complaints from parents who consider a local authority has implemented its school admissions procedure unfairly; and
- look at complaints from parents who consider an appeal panel has acted improperly.

The Ombudsman cannot compel a local authority to offer a child a place at a school. Neither can they overturn the panel's decision. However, if they believe the panel hearing was improper or unfair, they may recommend that the appeal should be heard by a new panel.

The Ombudsman can be contacted on 0300 790 0203 or by email at **ask@ombudsman.wales**. Their office will be able to advise whether they can help further.

Judicial review is a type of court proceeding in which a judge reviews the lawfulness of a decision or action made by a public body. Judicial reviews are a challenge to the way in which a decision has been made, rather than the rights and wrongs of the conclusion reached. The court will not substitute what it thinks is the 'correct' decision. Judicial review could be used to review decisions of school admission appeal panels. It is a remedy of last resort and should be used only after all other efforts to resolve an issue have failed.