

Where England's primary school places are empty

Two in five established state primaries in England are below 90% of capacity. But the reason splits in two — and only one of them can be fixed by being better known.

11,893

established state primaries analysed

42.5%

are below 90% of capacity — 5,058 schools

339,214

empty places between them

£1.7bn

a year in per-pupil funding those places represent

THE FINDING: TWO PROBLEMS WEARING THE SAME SYMPTOM

PROBLEM ONE · ISOLATION

57.0%

of schools with no other primary within 2km are under-filled

The highest rate of any group. Isolated usually means rural, and rural means fewer children. Of 2,412 isolated primaries, 1,376 are under-filled — holding 56,416 empty places, 17% of the national total.

Demographic. Marketing cannot conjure four-year-olds who don't exist.

PROBLEM TWO · COMPETITION

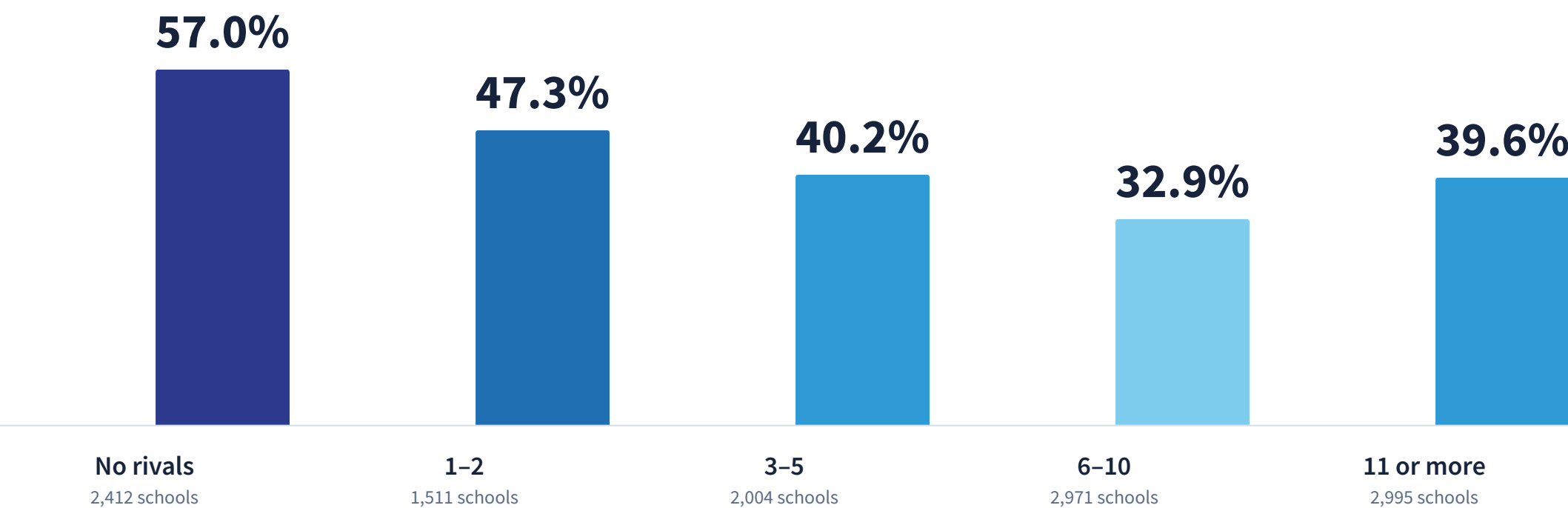
71%

of all empty places sit in schools with three or more rivals within 2km

2,968 under-filled schools — 58.7% of them — compete with at least three neighbours. Between them: 242,029 empty places, about £1.24bn a year.

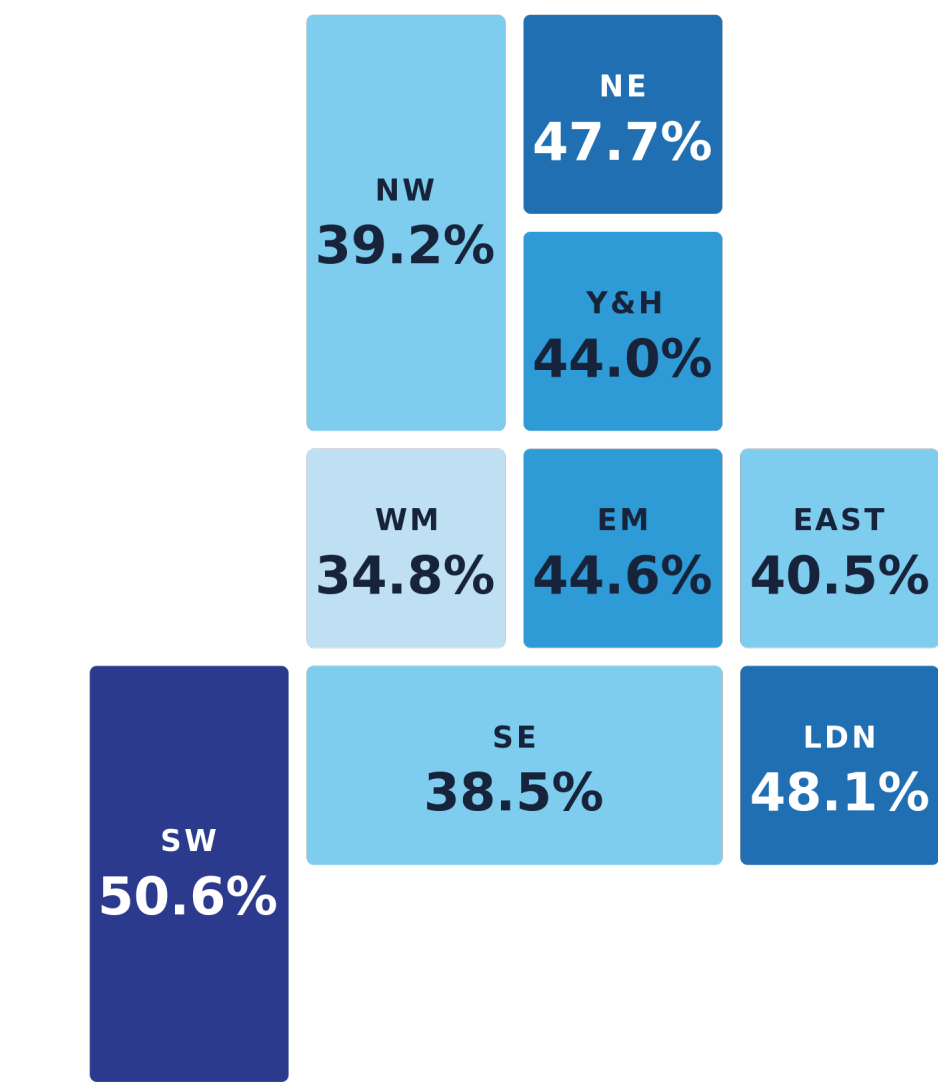
Competitive. Families have choices here, and are making them.

RATE OF UNDER-OCCUPANCY BY NUMBER OF RIVAL PRIMARIES WITHIN 2KM



Risk falls as neighbours increase — then turns back up at eleven or more, the point at which local choice becomes fierce. Rates and volumes point in opposite directions: the isolated are likeliest to be empty, but the crowded hold most of the empty places.

SHARE OF ESTABLISHED PRIMARIES BELOW 90% CAPACITY, BY REGION



Stylised — tiles are positioned by rough geography, not drawn to scale or boundary.



LONDON IS THE PURE CASE

99.1% of London's under-filled primaries have three or more rivals within 2km. The median London primary has 17 other primaries that close.

Not one of the capital's empty-place problems can be explained by an absence of nearby alternatives. 702 of its 1,459 established primaries are below 90%.

HIGHEST RATE

South West · 50.6%

LOWEST RATE

West Midlands · 34.8%

THE TWO PROBLEMS, SIDE BY SIDE — MOST UNDER-FILLED LOCAL AUTHORITIES

INNER LONDON — MANY CHOICES

Lambeth	72.7
Westminster	72.4
Merton	69.2
Hammersmith and Fulham	64.5
Southwark	63.0

LARGE RURAL — FEW CHOICES

Northumberland	68.7
Cumberland	66.9
Wiltshire	65.1
Westmorland and Furness	64.7
North Yorkshire	62.7

Percentage of established primaries below 90% capacity. Minimum 20 schools per authority. These ten are the national top ten — five dense London boroughs and five large rural counties, the same symptom from opposite causes.

WHAT AN EMPTY PLACE COSTS A SCHOOL

51

empty places at the median under-filled primary

£261k

a year, at the 2026–27 minimum rate of £5,115 per primary pupil

£35,800

carried per empty Reception place across a child's seven primary years, because cohorts rarely refill later

METHOD

All open, state-funded mainstream primaries in England, from the DfE Get Information About Schools full extract of 30 July 2026. Excluded: 3,291 schools opened since September 2018, which fill one year group at a time and look empty while behaving as designed; and 1,845 sponsor-led academies, where under-recruitment follows performance rather than visibility. Rivals counted within 2km using Ordnance Survey grid references. Occupancy is administrative capacity, not a judgement of quality — a school can be excellent and under-filled.

SOURCE

School Marketing Works (2026), *Where England's primary school places are empty*. Analysis of DfE Get Information About Schools data, 30 July 2026.

schoolmarketingworks.com/research/primary-school-places-2026