Year 9 at UTC South Durham

October 2026

Consultation

The Trustees of UTC South Durham are consulting relevant stakeholders and partners on a proposed change to its admissions arrangements. The proposal is to admit Year 9 students to the UTC from September 2028.

The consultation period runs from 1 October 2026 to 13 November 2026.

This consultation consists of one change but which covers two parallel processes:

1. A consultation under the School Admissions Code about changes to the UTC's admissions arrangements
2. A Tier 3 Significant Change consultation for the Department for Education.

Proposed Change

UTC South Durham is a specialist technical school and 6th Form based on the Aycliffe Business Park in the south of Durham County. It is part of a network of 44 University Technical Colleges across the country. It opened in September 2016 and focuses on engineering, technology science and maths education for those who want to move on to careers in those sectors, either via university or directly into apprenticeships or employment.

Currently the UTC recruits up to 150 students into Year 10 (aged 14), as well as recruiting to the 6th Form, from across a wide region including 8 local authorities. The proposal is to recruit up to 135 students at age 13 (the start of Year 9) and to reduce the PAN (published admission number) for Year 10 and 11 to 135, and slightly in the 6th Form.

Rationale for students

There are significant educational advantages for students starting earlier and this has been demonstrated in several other UTCs around the country:

- An additional settling-in year, with more time to adapt to the UTC's careers-based education and culture before the pressure of GCSEs begins
- A stronger academic foundation, giving an extra year to build the core knowledge needed for strong GCSE results
- Earlier access to employer engagement, projects and technical experiences currently squeezed by the pace of a five-term GCSE programme
- More opportunities for personalised learning: we would be able to identify students' individual needs at an earlier stage, providing them with the tailored support they need to succeed
- An opportunity for renewed momentum in their education, focused on their interests and treating them as young professionals
- Our students will be more employable and confident in accessing their career opportunities, providing the talent pipeline that employers need.

We know there is demand

UTC South Durham has direct evidence of local demand: an earlier proposal in 2020 attracted over 100 expressions of interest without active marketing, and we continue to receive regular enquiries from parents of Year 8 students wanting to join early.

10 years of UTC South Durham

UTC South Durham is 10 years old and has demonstrated an excellent track record of technical education and preparing young people for their careers.

UTC South Durham was again graded 'Good' in its last Ofsted inspection in 2024, recognising the overall high quality of education.

- 96% of parents say they would recommend the UTC to other parents
- We were identified as 'the happiest secondary school in County Durham' in 2025
- We have a superb record on behaviour, attendance and inclusion
- We have a strong reputation for supporting young people with SEND and helping them to their careers

The Baker Dearing Trust, which set up and coordinates all UTCs, recognised in July 2026 that:
"UTC South Durham continues to exemplify the UTC mission through the delivery of a distinctive technical education that successfully combines academic excellence, employer engagement and outstanding preparation for future careers".

Results and destinations

Post-16 results:

- 98% pass rate for Level 3 leavers
- 41% of post-16 grades were A/A* or Distinction/Distinction* (compared to 23% across the region)
- T-level. 100% pass rate and half achieved Distinctions (the equivalent of AAA at A-Level, compared to just 10% nationally)

For GCSE results, students make broadly expected progress from their starting points when they arrive with us, but outcomes are limited by the very short time they have to prepare for their GCSEs; more time for preparation will make a meaningful difference.

Destinations remain superb. In the context of one million young people classified as NEET (not in education, employment or training) – including 13.5% of 16-24 year olds in the North East:

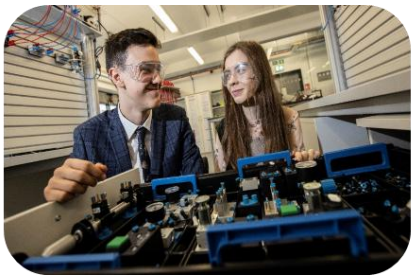
Over the last 9 years:

- 97% of students have a meaningful destination when they leave the UTC
- We are again the top provider in the North East for those going on from Level 3 qualifications to apprenticeships, increasingly at degree/higher level
- All who have wanted to have gone to university

Alignment with Government policy

This move clearly aligns well with the Government's education, skills and economic priorities:

- Recent announcements about the importance of technical education and preparation for careers
- The focus on reducing those classified as NEET (not in education employment or training).
- The government's SEND and Inclusion focus
- The UK's Industrial Strategy and North East Local Skills Improvement plan, both needing talented young people feeding the high-quality skills pipeline



The evidence from other UTCs

Starting in Year 9 is now a well-established and accelerating national trend in the UTC world. Of the 44 UTCs nationally, 19 already have Year 9. A further 6 UTCs begin Year 9 recruitment this year or next, meaning the original Year 10-only model will soon be the minority.

UTCs were originally set up as 14 to 19 schools, with the main entry point into Year 10. The logic for this was simple; at age 13 most students are making decisions about GCSE option subjects and after three years of secondary school it's a good time to decide to focus in a more specialist direction. However, over time it has been recognised that this gives only a very limited amount of time for young people to settle into their new environment and prepare for their GCSEs and that young people can make a good decision about their direction by the end of Year 8.

National performance data shows UTCs with Year 9 entry consistently outperforming the UTC average on the academic basics measures. While it is not possible to isolate individual causes, Principals say that the additional year at the UTC is the key difference:

- This year, students who had been at UTCs since Year 9 scored half a grade better in both English and Maths than those who had joined in Year 10.
- The difference in those achieving grades 5+ in English and Maths is better by 4.3% on average over the last three years.

The Baker Dearing Trust, the charity which co-ordinates UTCs, reports that Principals cite better GCSE preparation, financial predictability and stronger recruitment as their main reasons for making the change, and that no UTC has ever switched back to Year 10 entry once it has moved to Year 9.

Feasibility

An analysis of the feasibility of incorporating an additional year group has been undertaken. This has looked at how other UTCs have coped with adding Year 9 and considered the building, facilities, staff and location of UTC South Durham. Key factors are:

- Because the building has the capacity for over 600 students, the facilities are largely in place to accommodate this year group. Classroom capacity and circulation space are suitable. There are enough lockers and the daily structure and longer working week can be maintained with additional students.
- Introducing an additional year group is likely to stretch our Engineering Hall usage and IT facilities and this will require careful planning and investment in additional IT facilities.
- The hazards of specialist equipment have been reviewed and risk assessments are in place for all machinery and activities. The Year 9 engineering curriculum will be designed to be age appropriate.
- The UTC bus routes have capacity or can be enhanced by larger buses. The routes are flexible to be able to adapt to student needs so that safe travel arrangements can be maintained.
- Additional teachers and support staff will be needed to ensure that we provide high-quality education for all our students

Proposed curriculum

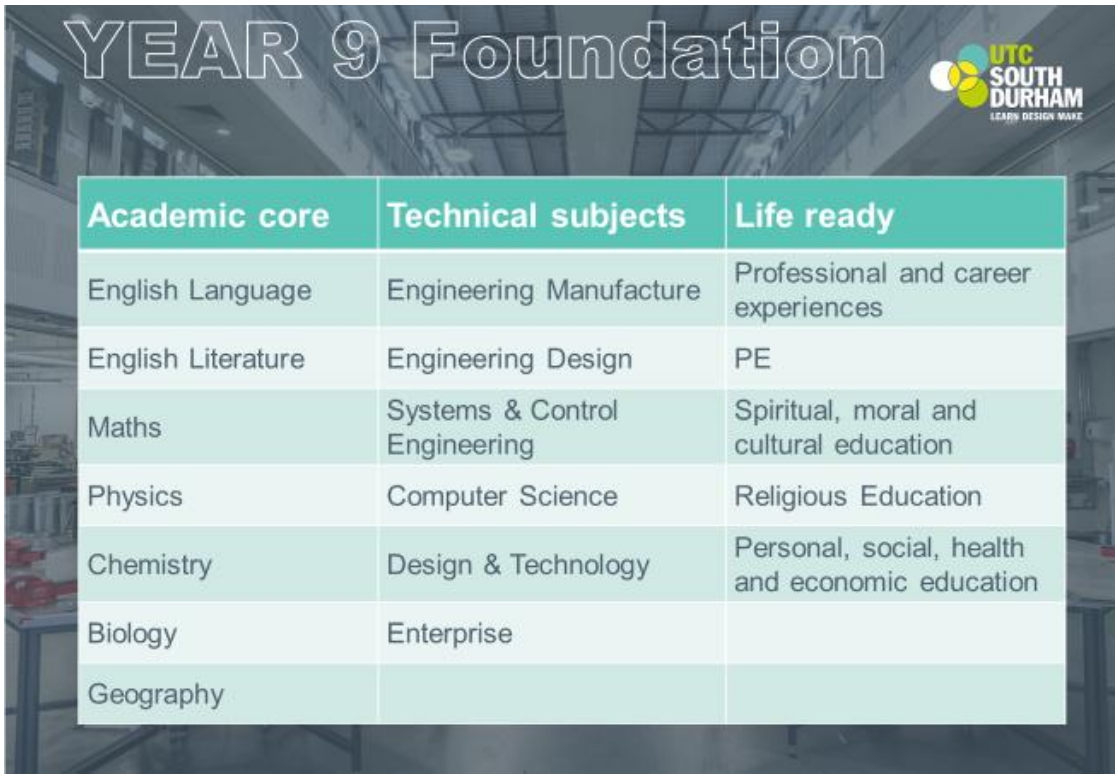
Students signing up to join the UTC in Year 9 will be undertaking a focused STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) curriculum. They and their parents will be given clear guidance about this so that they can make a good decision about whether this is right for them at this stage of their education.

In common with other year groups, students will undertake 29 hours of education each week. This 'working week' is designed to help prepare them for the working world and is needed to cover the depth of academic study, technical education and workplace experiences which are key to a UTC education.

The curriculum will be set up with a UTC focus but will maintain the breadth of education which is important at Key Stage 3. It is important to note that it will not be designed as a three-year Key Stage 4 (i.e. starting GCSEs in Year 9) but that Year 9 will be seen as an important induction year to a technical education. It will therefore have the following features:

- A common range of subjects for all meaning that students will experience all the technical specialisms open to them in their option studies before making decisions about which subjects they want to choose at GCSE level (currently students entering Year 10 need to select subjects before they start and this includes subjects they have no experience of).
- Students will be allocated to sets for individual core subjects to ensure that the work is well pitched for their ability. There will be flexibility to move between groups in Year 9 so that students are very well set up for the appropriate GCSE education.
- Our key focus on Careers education, to ensure that students are skilled and confident as they build their experience through the UTC. It will cover all of the Gatsby Benchmarks and incorporate the key skills development, knowledge and experiences which make UTC students highly employable.
- A strong citizenship education will be delivered to students in Year 9 to ensure that they understand their responsibilities in society and can maintain a healthy, safe lifestyle.
- A strong introduction to the UTCs Project Based Learning approach to education.
- A clear inclusion focus, ensuring that the curriculum can be matched to learner's needs.

Subjects included in the Year 9 curriculum will be:



Academic core	Technical subjects	Life ready
English Language	Engineering Manufacture	Professional and career experiences
English Literature	Engineering Design	PE
Maths	Systems & Control Engineering	Spiritual, moral and cultural education
Physics	Computer Science	Religious Education
Chemistry	Design & Technology	Personal, social, health and economic education
Biology	Enterprise	
Geography		

Proposal for Published Admission Numbers (PAN)

The Published Admission Number is the stated maximum number of student places each year for each age group. The proposal is to set the PAN for Year 9 at 135 students. This proposal maintains a good spread of students from across the region to have access to the UTC. It is an efficient number to allow for suitable average class sizes of 27 in the core subjects. The PAN for Year 9 follows through to Year 10 and Year 11.

Post 16 capacity will be reduced slightly to maintain an overall total in the building which is in line with the DfE assessed capacity. It is recognised that some Year 12 students are undertaking 1-year courses and this is acknowledged in the spread of PAN with a lower number in Year 13.

The original building was designed for 600 students when it opened in 2016. We have since added an additional small building with three working spaces, which allows us to increase our overall PAN slightly beyond 600.
The 1-year courses are part-time and Post-16 students have a flexible timetable around their lesson commitments.

Year group	Current PAN	Proposed PAN with Year 9
Year 9		135
Year 10	150	135
Year 11	150	135
Year 12	150	120
Year 13	150	90
Total	**600**	**615**

Transition to the new arrangements

The transition to the steady state above needs to happen over three years. In 2028 admissions will be both to Year 9 and Year 10. Initially the UTC proposes that it will recruit a smaller number to Year 9; this is to allow a more gradual build-up of overall student numbers and staff in the building.

We will admit the following numbers of students for 2028/29 and then for subsequent years:

	2028	2029	2030 onwards
Year 9	54	135	135
Year 10	135	top up to 135	top up to 135
Year 12	120	120	120

Managing the impact on other schools

We recognise local schools' interest in the effect on student numbers, particularly against a backdrop of a lower secondary-age population across the North East. We typically recruit from 45 schools each year (99 schools in total over the last 10 years).

We are proposing to reduce our Published Admission Number from 150 to 135 across Years 9–11, so the practical effect on any single school is small — a 10% reduction in the number of students each year spread across a wide network of schools.

Process and timescales

The consultation will close on the 13th November. We will submit our Tier 3 application following the consultation and, subject to approval, determine new admission arrangements by February 2027 ahead of Year 9 students joining us in September 2028.

Tom Dower – 1 October 2026