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High-SEND schools: Patterns and pressures in mainstream provision

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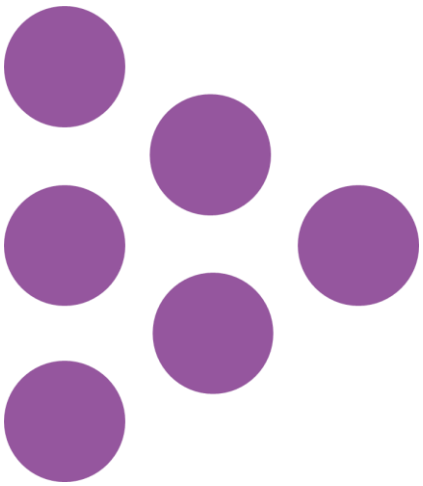

High-SEND schools: Patterns and pressures in mainstream provision

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Glossary

Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) are support plans put in place by the local authority for pupils requiring a higher level of support. EHCPs are legally binding documents outlining a pupil's needs and the support that must be provided.

High-any-SEND schools (HASS) is the term we use to describe schools where there is a higher-than-expected proportion of pupils with any identified SEND, compared to their catchment area and nationally.

High EHCP schools (HES) is the term we use to describe schools where there is a higher-than-expected proportion of pupils with EHCPs, compared to their catchment area and nationally.

Inclusion - We use this term to refer to the practice of removing barriers to participation and learning for pupils with SEND wherever possible. This includes providing high-quality teaching, appropriate support, and reasonable adjustments so that all pupils can access the curriculum, participate in school life, and make meaningful progress.

Inclusion bases - a new term introduced in the Schools White Paper, *Every Child Achieving and Thriving,* to encompass existing SEN units, resourced provision, and pupil support units. It refers to provision that will offer specialist support within mainstream schools and colleges. For some children, this support is designed to enable a gradual transition to full participation in mainstream classes. For others, ongoing support from the base will be designed to help them access mainstream learning, education and their wider community in a way that works for them.

Ordinarily Available Provision (OAP) refers to everyday support and adaptive teaching that all mainstream settings are expected to provide from their own resources for children and young people, including those with SEND, before specialist help is considered.

Resourced provision (RP) is a specialist facility within a mainstream school for pupils with a particular type of need (e.g. hearing impairment, autism, or speech and language difficulties). Pupils are on the roll of the mainstream school and typically spend most of their time in mainstream classes, supported by outreach from the RP.

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) - A pupil is considered to have SEND if they: (i) have significantly greater difficulty in learning than most others of the same age; or (ii) have a disability which prevents or hinders them from making use of educational facilities generally provided for children of the same age in mainstream schools or post-16 institutions.

SENCO: Special Educational Needs Coordinator; a qualified teacher in a school who is responsible for overseeing the provision for pupils with SEND.

SEN Support generally describes a lower level of support that can be provided by teachers or teaching assistants. This is largely funded through the school's existing budget, without the need for an EHCP, although some LAs may provide additional funding for pupils on SEN Support.

SEN unit (SU) is a self-contained provision within a mainstream school for pupils with more complex needs who require more intensive or specialist support and spend most or all of their time outside mainstream classes.

Executive Summary

Pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are not evenly distributed across England's mainstream schools. Instead, they are increasingly concentrated in a subset of schools. This matters because, as we report below, while a concentration of SEND pupils can build expertise and inclusive culture, it can also create pressure that many schools describe as difficult to sustain. It also matters for the Schools White Paper[1], *Every Child Achieving and Thriving*, which expects every local mainstream school to meet more need: that ambition will be hard to realise if responsibility for SEND continues to cluster in a minority of settings.

Drawing on national pupil data, a nationally representative survey of 800 special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs) and senior school leaders, and in-depth interviews with high-SEND case study schools, comparison schools, parents and local authorities (LAs), this report builds on our earlier scene-setting report, *High-SEND schools: Understanding the uneven distribution of pupils with SEND across England's mainstream schools*. It explores *why* pupils with SEND cluster in certain schools and *what this means* for schools, pupils and families.

What we found

- **SEND prevalence has risen steadily over the last decade:** By 2024/25, more than 1.7 million pupils (around one in five) were identified with SEND in England's school system. This reflects an increase over the last decade (from 14.4 per cent in 2015/16 to 19.5 per cent in 2024/25) and includes both pupils receiving SEN Support (the majority) and those with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) (around 0.4 million), who have seen the steepest increase, almost doubling in number over the period. Rising prevalence matters because it increases the likelihood that every school will need to meet a wider range of need, making the distribution of SEND across schools more consequential for capacity, sustainability and equity.
- **Pupils with SEND are unevenly distributed across mainstream schools and that unevenness is growing.** In 2024/25, primary schools in the highest EHCP-rate quartile had around six times as many pupils with EHCPs as those in the lowest quartile (with a fivefold difference in secondary schools). Differences are also evident when we look at 'any SEND' (EHCP or SEN Support): primary and secondary schools in the highest any-SEND quartile have more than double the proportion of pupils identified with SEND compared to those in the lowest quartile (29 per cent vs 11 per cent in primaries; 26 per cent vs 10 per cent in secondaries).
- **The concentration of pupils with SEND appears to be driven by a structural steering effect:** pupils are pulled towards certain schools with reputations for and expertise in inclusion and pushed towards them when capacity in other schools is constrained. This is reinforced by variation in school practices, with some schools less willing to develop a reputation for inclusion or actively discouraging admission of pupils with SEND—whether due to capacity pressures or concerns about performance measures.
- **Pull factors are rooted in school-level ethos and reputation.** Inclusive schools become known locally as places that "will make it work", shaping parental choice, professional advice and LA placement decisions. Our case study evidence suggests that the schools that sustain

[1] Subsequently referred to as the white paper.

this most successfully are those where inclusion is a whole-school approach—owned by senior leaders and embedded in everyday teaching, curriculum planning, behaviour policy, and staff routines—rather than reliant on a specialist team operating alongside mainstream provision. Leaders also described some schools actively managing their reputations to limit demand from pupils with SEND to enrol, while others with established inclusive reputations and/or specialist provision were repeatedly approached through EHCP consultations and treated as default or 'last resort' placements when specialist capacity was scarce and statutory processes were delayed—even where those schools said they could not safely or sustainably meet need.

- **Push factors reflect system-level pressures:** shortages of specialist provision, delays in statutory processes, and placement urgency mean inclusive mainstream schools are often treated as the default option. These pressures are reinforced by mobility patterns: pupils with SEND are more likely than pupils without SEND to move schools overall, but those in high-SEND schools are less likely to move on, meaning pupils with SEND are more likely to remain in high-SEND settings once placed there, further entrenching concentration over time.
- **Case study schools reported that parental expectations around SEND provision had increased markedly over time.** SENCOs described how schools known locally for inclusive practice, or those hosting specialist or resourced provision, often attracted expectations of highly individualised support that exceeded what could realistically be delivered within mainstream settings and existing resources. High-SEND schools noted that expectations were frequently shaped by advice from other schools, professionals or parent networks. This could set unrealistic expectations about what they could offer, as compared to a special school.
- **Without matching capacity and funding, concentration can become self-reinforcing.** As higher-need intakes accumulate, pressure on SENCO and leadership time, staffing, budgets and safety can increase, making inclusive practice harder to sustain and more dependent on goodwill. Over time, this can shape system behaviour: other schools may become more reluctant to admit pupils with SEND or may seek to avoid developing a SEND-inclusive reputation, which in turn pushes more demand back onto the same high-SEND schools.
- **Recorded patterns of SEND concentration are shaped not only by underlying levels of need, but by how need is identified, recorded and supported.** Variation in SEND identification and recording practices, particularly for SEN Support, alongside differences in the strength of quality-first teaching and ordinarily available provision, limit the extent to which administrative data can reliably distinguish between underlying need and formal identification. Some schools may identify pupils with a given level of need as having SEND in order to access specialist support, while others meet similar needs through universal or targeted provision without formal identification. As a result, recorded SEND prevalence may reflect differences in practice as much as differences in need, potentially obscuring the true distribution of pupils with SEND across schools.

Why it matters

- **Concentration leads to both strength and strain.** Our case study and survey evidence suggests high-SEND schools develop stronger inclusive practice and shared expertise, for example, more consistent staff confidence in reasonable adjustments, shared routines for identification and review, and cultures where SEND is normalised and pupils report stronger

belonging. The uneven distribution may therefore limit opportunities for pupils and staff in lower-SEND schools to develop inclusive practice and benefit from more diverse, inclusive learning environments. However, the same concentration also intensifies operational strain on high-SEND schools: leaders and SENCOs in these schools describe heavier and less predictable workloads (including EHCP administration and multi-agency coordination), greater resource pressure, higher classroom complexity (with implications for pace and curriculum coverage), and more frequent behavioural and safeguarding risks, particularly where unmet need and in-year arrivals cluster. This strain is also financial: leaders reported SEND budgets running at deficit, with costs driven by the £6,000 EHCP contribution and high-cost, unplanned provision. While, in principle, funding arrangements are intended to reflect need, the requirement for schools to meet the first £6,000 of additional provision for each pupil with an EHCP means that schools with higher concentrations of pupils with SEND face a disproportionate call on their core budgets. This is compounded where top-up funding does not fully cover the costs of provision or does not keep pace with changing need, contributing to the financial strain reported by high-SEND schools.

- **School staff and parents raised concerns that, in some cases, mainstream settings did not have the capacity to meet pupils' needs safely and effectively.** In interviews, school staff and parents described how pupils' distress and dysregulation could escalate, sometimes frequently, and cause high-risk incidents that schools said they could not manage safely within ordinary classroom environments and staffing ratios. Staff recounted how one pupil's behaviour could quickly trigger dysregulation in others, particularly in classrooms with high numbers of pupils with a predisposition to becoming dysregulated. They felt that meeting the needs of these pupils, especially when several were in the same class, required specialist expertise, facilities and a level of consistency that are difficult to provide within mainstream provision.
- **Uneven distribution raises equity concerns:** High-SEND schools are more likely to serve disadvantaged communities, meaning that the pressures associated with higher concentrations of need are not evenly shared across the system. Where SEND concentration overlaps with deprivation, schools can face a dual challenge: higher overall levels of need (including both SEND and disadvantage-related needs), alongside SEND funding that does not fully reflect this combined need and cannot easily adjust to rapid changes. This can leave schools with tighter effective resources and make it harder to provide consistent, high-quality support. At the same time, families' ability to secure suitable provision is not equal: those with greater confidence, knowledge, or capacity to navigate statutory processes (such as securing or amending EHCPs) may be better able to access support or challenge decisions. Taken together, this means that both school-level pressures and differences in families' ability to navigate the system can contribute to unequal experiences and outcomes.
- **Unevenness also raises a fairness question about shared responsibility:** if some schools consistently take a much larger share of pupils with SEND (including in-year arrivals), then not all schools are playing an equal role in meeting need. This matters not only in terms of funding, but also as a matter of principle: even where resources are adjusted, a highly uneven distribution concentrates both the demands and expertise of inclusion in a subset of schools. In turn, this unevenness may limit the system's overall capacity to meet the government's

ambition for greater mainstream inclusion, as not all schools are equally engaged in, or prepared for, supporting pupils with higher levels of SEND.

What needs to change

Drawing on the direction of travel set out in the white paper, the report concludes by setting out the actions that are needed at both system and school level to reduce SEND concentration and make inclusion sustainable across mainstream schools.

Recommendations for policymakers and system leaders

- **Monitor the distribution of pupils with SEND and prioritise a more even spread across schools to support the white paper's ambition for 'local' suitable places.** The white paper's focus on access to a suitable place in a local school will not be met while pupils with SEND continue to cluster in a subset of settings. Trusts and LAs should therefore routinely monitor the distribution of pupils with EHCPs and SEN Support across schools within local areas (including in-year movement) and use this information to identify where intakes appear persistently unrepresentative of local need.
- **Align accountability and inspection with sustainable inclusion so that incentives match the white paper's inclusion agenda.** Although the white paper and Ofsted's new inclusion focus signal a shift towards prioritising inclusive practice, our evidence suggests there are misaligned incentives which contribute to the 'structural steering effect'. For example, leaders reported a perceived attainment–inclusion tension that can discourage schools from admitting and supporting higher-need pupils. If schools are expected to admit and support pupils with a wider range of needs, inspection and performance measures should more clearly value inclusive practice, appropriate pathways and meaningful progress for pupils with SEND, alongside outcomes for other pupils.
- **The Department for Education (DfE) should commission ongoing evaluation of inclusion bases to inform guidance, support improvement, and avoid the replication of weak or unsustainable models at scale.** Our findings on schools' experiences of SEN units and resourced provision suggest this is urgent because integration is currently uneven. Some schools report weak joint working between base and mainstream staff and, in a minority, limited pupil interaction/friendships across the base–mainstream boundary. Over two thirds of schools also reported staffing and resource pressure from operating a unit/RP.
- **Publish clear, evidence-based guidance for implementation and oversight of inclusion bases tailored to different stakeholders.** Drawing on the newly created evidence on inclusion bases (see above), the DfE should publish practical guidance that sets clear expectations for how these bases should operate within mainstream schools to avoid poorly integrated parallel provision. Guidance should be tailored for: schools and trusts (covering things like design, staffing, integration routines, pathways and decision-making), local authorities (place planning, funding, commissioning and information-sharing), and Ofsted (inspection expectations and indicators). It should include explicit expectations for joint working and shared capability-building (so expertise is not siloed), and for monitoring pupils' academic, social and wellbeing outcomes, as well as their participation in mainstream learning and wider school life where appropriate.

- **Be explicit that mainstream schools, including inclusion bases, cannot meet every pupil's needs, and plan sufficient specialist places accordingly.** Case study and survey evidence suggests that, even in highly inclusive schools, there is a small group of pupils whose needs are so severe and complex that mainstream settings cannot meet them safely or effectively, even with an inclusion base. Policymakers and LAs should therefore treat specialist provision, including special schools, as an essential part of an inclusive local system to avoid inappropriate mainstream placements becoming the default when specialist capacity is scarce.
- **Where integration and inclusion remain uneven, funding needs to better match patterns of need across schools so that inclusive practice is sustainable, not goodwill-based.** Our findings show that higher levels of need often cluster in particular mainstream schools, creating cumulative staffing and resource pressures that are not reflected in current funding arrangements. Schools also reported that pupils on SEN Support frequently require substantial additional resource for which additional funding is not available. If the white paper's commitment to an adequately resourced system is to be realised, policymakers should review mainstream funding for high needs and SEN Support so it better tracks both pupil need and concentration effects and ensure reforms do not incentivise exclusion or discourage inclusive admissions.

Recommendations for schools and trusts

- **Embed inclusion as a whole-school priority, in line with the white paper's expectation that every local school will meet more need.** This research finds that the concentration of pupils with SEND is driven in part by a 'structural steering effect', where some schools become known as places that "will make it work" while others avoid developing a SEND-inclusive reputation. To counter this, senior leaders and governors/trusts should make inclusion a non-negotiable core priority, with clear ownership and routine scrutiny. All schools should build inclusion into curriculum design and review, behaviour policy (including reasonable adjustments), staffing and timetable decisions, and staff professional development and coaching.
- **Protect and distribute SEND leadership capacity to sustain 'ordinarily available provision' and avoid crisis-driven delivery.** Case study SENCOs and leaders described SEND leadership as characterised by constant problem-solving and crisis response, alongside substantial administrative burden linked to EHCP processes, with reliance on staff working beyond their contracted hours. In addition to ensuring that all teachers are teachers of pupils with SEND, senior leaders should treat protected SENCO leadership time as a core capacity decision (reviewed against cohort need), ringfence administrative support for statutory processes, and build a distributed SEND leadership model, linked to school size and need (for example, assistant SENCO or inclusion lead roles), so expertise is not siloed. They should also establish clear routines for triage, assess–plan–do–review and multi-agency coordination, and define internal thresholds and escalation routes. This is particularly important in contexts where clustering creates heightened behavioural or safeguarding risks.
- **Use data-informed routines to strengthen early identification and the graduated response by supporting pupils early, before SEND escalate.** Our findings show that SEND identification is not purely a technical exercise: schools vary in terms of thresholds for and

access to screening, and capacity constraints and external delays can mean need is recognised late or inconsistently (particularly for pupils who mask or at transition points). This aligns with the Government's consultation, which acknowledges variable practice in identifying SEND and the need for higher-quality screening tools. To reduce late or inconsistent identification and support, schools and trusts should adopt a shared, data-informed identification routine. This could include: (i) baseline screening on entry and at key transitions; (ii) clear processes for handling teacher and parent concerns; (iii) agreed monitoring categories for emerging/unclear need, with time-limited interventions; and (iv) a scheduled assess–plan–do–review cycle (with named ownership) that tests what is working, escalates support where necessary, and avoids both under- and over-identification. These steps could be incorporated into the new SEND Code of Practice and should be supported by timely access to appropriate screening tools and specialist advice, and by regular SEND review meetings so decisions do not depend on individual staff knowledge or availability.

1. Introduction

The uneven distribution of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) across mainstream schools is a critical but often overlooked system-level issue in England. Our interim report showed that pupils with SEND, whether supported through SEN Support or Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), are not spread evenly across schools. Instead, they tend to cluster in a subset of primary and secondary schools, creating marked differences between high-SEND and low-SEND settings. On average, primary schools with the highest EHCP rates have six times as many pupils with EHCPs as those with the lowest rates, with a similarly stark fivefold difference in secondary schools (Tang *et al.*, 2025).

This concentration has significant implications for equity and inclusion. When higher levels of SEND cluster in a subset of mainstream schools, it raises questions about fairness and the extent to which all schools play an equitable role in meeting need[2]. Uneven distribution can also distort parental choice: some families actively seek out inclusive schools, while others may struggle to secure appropriate placements when schools feel unable or unwilling to admit pupils with additional needs.

Understanding why pupils cluster in particular schools, and how this affects school capacity, pupil experiences, and system-level fairness, is essential for designing a sustainable and inclusive SEND system. This report explores these drivers and consequences, providing a clearer picture of the factors shaping variation in SEND provision.

It is guided by three research questions:

1. How are pupils with SEND currently distributed across mainstream schools and how has this changed over time? (Section 2)
2. What are the factors driving the distribution of pupils with SEND across the school system? (Section 3)
3. What are the implications of the current distribution of pupils with SEND on schools and pupils? (Section 4)

The first question was partially addressed in our 2025 interim report. That report drew on analysis of administrative school data from the DfE's National Pupil Database (NPD) to provide an initial, system-level picture of how pupils with SEND are distributed across mainstream schools in England. It also incorporated insights from local authority (LA) stakeholders on the factors they perceive to be shaping this unevenness and its consequences, capturing one perspective within a complex and multi-layered system.

In this final report, we build on that initial analysis by bringing together additional strands of evidence, including findings from a national survey of primary and secondary school leaders and Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs), as well as in-depth interviews with school staff and parents. This enables a more comprehensive examination of the drivers of variation in SEND distribution and its consequences, addressing all three research questions in full.

[2] When this report refers to pupils' 'needs', we mean their special educational needs and disabilities.

1.1 Policy context

System pressures and the Schools White Paper

Both the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis have intensified pressures on an already strained SEND system (Gould, 2023). These challenges compound longstanding issues, including the rising prevalence of complex needs, shortages of specialist staff, and reliance on costly independent provision, leaving many LAs unable to meet demand and contributing to a system widely described as being in crisis (Education Committee, 2025). The Schools White Paper[3], Every Child Achieving and Thriving, situates these pressures within a broader agenda to reform the school system, with a renewed emphasis on inclusion, early intervention, and sustainability in SEND provision, with detailed proposals set out through the accompanying consultation, *SEND Reform: Putting Children and Young People First*.

The statutory SEND framework

To understand how these pressures play out in practice, it is important to consider how pupils with SEND are currently identified and supported within the education system in England. The 2014 Children and Families Act (UK Parliament, 2014) introduced two levels of support for pupils with SEND:

- **SEN Support**: lower-level support provided by school staff, funded mainly from the school budget.
- **Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs)**: legally binding plans issued by LAs for pupils requiring higher-level support. Schools cover the first £6,000 of EHCP costs and LAs fund the remainder. Sharply rising EHCP numbers have placed huge pressure on LA budgets and made the system increasingly unsustainable (Sibieta and Snape, 2024).

Timeliness, dispute resolution and parental confidence

Since 2018, timely access to EHCPs has declined, with all regions except London seeing drops in the percentage issued within the statutory 20-week period, with a national fall from 60 per cent in 2021 to 46 per cent in 2024 (DfE, 2025). Tribunal cases contesting EHCP decisions have also risen, with almost all outcomes including elements in the parent's favour (Ministry of Justice, 2025). The white paper highlights these trends as evidence of systemic inefficiencies and a lack of parental confidence, reinforcing the case for reform to improve consistency, transparency, and timeliness in decision-making.

Reform principles and accountability

The Government has set out five principles which will underpin SEND reform: (i) pupils able to access support early; (ii) pupils have access to a suitable place in a local school; (iii) schools are adequately resourced to meet SEND and specialist provision is accessible to those who need it; (iv) reforms are evidence based and; (v) all stakeholders work effectively in partnership (Bridget Phillipson, 2025). In addition, a new 'inclusion' inspection area has been included in Ofsted's new framework (Ofsted, 2025). This intends to ensure 'schools are providing high-quality support for children and young people with vulnerabilities such as SEND'. However, this criterion is not

[3] Subsequently referred to as the white paper

currently set to consider school admissions, leaving a potential gap in addressing inequities in access.

Early delivery steps

Recent policy announcements can be understood as early delivery steps towards the white paper's ambitions. In December 2025, the Government announced at least £3 billion of investment to create tens of thousands of new specialist places for pupils with SEND, primarily within mainstream schools (DfE, 2025). This includes around 50,000 specialist places with tailored facilities (e.g. calm or breakout spaces for pupils with autism or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)), alongside delivery of 10,000 planned special free school places. Within the white paper framework, this investment is positioned as a means of embedding specialist support within mainstream settings, reducing reliance on distant specialist placements, and promoting more inclusive local provision.

This was followed in January 2026 by a £200 million programme to expand SEND training for the education workforce in England (DfE, 2026a). The white paper emphasises workforce capability as a critical enabler of inclusive education, and this programme operationalises that ambition by providing training for teachers, teaching assistants, and support staff. A new expectation in the SEND Code of Practice will require SEND and inclusion training for all staff, supported by flexible delivery models and new professional development programmes. This responds to longstanding inconsistencies in SEND training and supports the white paper's focus on improving the quality of teaching for pupils with SEND in mainstream settings.

Finally, in February 2026, the DfE set out an ambition for every secondary school in England to have an 'inclusion base', a dedicated space within the school where pupils with SEND can access targeted support that bridges mainstream and specialist provision (DfE, 2026b). This expectation is part of the government's broader Education Estates Strategy and aims to standardise and simplify existing in-school provision (such as SEN units and pupil support units) under one term, supported by forthcoming guidance on best practice and inclusivity. Where new capacity is needed, the expansion of inclusion bases can be funded through the government's £3.7 billion high needs capital investment between 2025-26 and 2029-30, which can be used to create new or adapted physical space but not to fund ongoing staffing. Guidance on adaptations to improve accessibility, such as breakout rooms and sensory spaces, will also be issued. While positioned as a key mechanism for delivering greater inclusion, detailed implementation arrangements remain under development.

1.2 Methodology

Our report draws on analysis from four different sources which are summarised in Table 1 below. By drawing on a mixed-methods approach, we can triangulate findings across administrative data, survey findings and qualitative accounts, strengthening confidence where findings align and helping to explain divergent patterns where they do not.

Table 1: Overview of methodological strands

Analysis strand	Timing	Overview of analysis undertaken
Quantitative analysis of the National Pupil Database (NPD), an administrative dataset covering pupils in all state-funded mainstream schools in England.	Pupil data up to 2023/2024	Descriptive analysis of the distribution of pupils with SEND between schools and an exploration of the characteristics of high-SEND schools. Regression analysis of the movements of pupils with SEND from mainstream high-SEND schools and other schools in the school system.
National survey of 800 SENCOs and senior school leaders.	November 2025	Data weighted to be nationally representative in terms of SEND and analysed by key subgroups. Differences highlighted as significant where there is a 95 per cent likelihood that differences observed between groups have not been observed by chance.
Case studies in 15 high-SEND schools with senior leaders, SENCOs, middle leaders, LAs and parents.	Fieldwork between September 2025 and March 2026	Case study, comparison schools and LA interviews analysed using data analysis package MAXQDA.
Comparison interviews with senior leaders and/or SENCOs in 18 comparison schools.		
Interviews with 10 senior LA officers with responsibility for SEND.	Fieldwork between June and July 2025	

Case study schools were selected from those identified as ‘high-EHCP’ schools (HES) in our quantitative analysis, meaning they demonstrated elevated levels of EHCPs both relative to their respective catchment areas and on a national scale. The case study sample also comprises schools with substantial representation of SEN support. Accordingly, we designate these institutions as high-SEND schools throughout this report. It should be noted that the number of interviews conducted varied among the high-SEND schools included. An overview is provided in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Case study and comparison school interviews

		High-SEND*	Comparison**	LAs
Schools		15	18	
SENCOs		15	10	
Senior Leaders		14	7	
Middle Leaders		10	1	
Parents	**EHCPs**	11		
	SEN Support	7		
	No SEND* **	10		
LAs		2		10

*Of the 15 high-SEND case study schools, 8 were secondary, 7 were primary.
**Of the comparison schools, 7 were secondary, 11 were primary.
***+37 written responses from parents of children with no SEND.

Interviews with comparison schools constituted any schools not identified as being in the HES group. This included schools with relatively small proportions of pupils with SEND as well as some with larger proportions, especially of pupils receiving SEN Support. Since our final sample was determined by those schools willing to participate in our fieldwork, it is important to acknowledge that comparison schools with the smallest proportions of SEND pupils were underrepresented. In addition, most comparison schools in the sample were located within the same local areas as HES schools and therefore shared similar catchment populations. This means that, although not classified as HES, many operated within the same local SEND context and pupil population as high-SEND schools, often serving overlapping communities and drawing from similar pools of need. While this offers advantages for drawing comparisons with case study schools, it means that their experiences may not be typical at a national level.

Our national survey oversampled HES and 'high any SEND' schools (HASS) to ensure a good representation of high-SEND schools. The definitions of HES and HASS used for the survey analysis are marginally different to those presented elsewhere in our analysis to ensure adequate numbers of responses for meaningful analysis[4].

Further detail on the methodology can be found in the methodological appendix.

[4] For both HES and HASS, the survey groups included schools from the top 40 per cent of schools ranked on how closely they represented their catchment area in terms of SEND profile (compared to the top 20 per cent for the characteristics analysis as presented in Sections 2.1.4 and Section 2.2).

1.3 Limitations of the methodological design

Quantitative analysis

The use of National Pupil Database (NPD) data provides comprehensive coverage of pupils in state-funded schools and allows robust description of trends over time, as well as analysis of how SEND pupils are distributed between schools. However, quantitative analyses are observational and cannot, on their own, establish causal relationships between school characteristics, system pressures and SEND concentration.

Administrative measures of SEND (particularly SEN Support) are influenced by local thresholds and school identification practices, so differences between schools may partly reflect variation in recording behaviour rather than underlying need.

National survey

The national survey of senior school leaders and SENCOs provides a system-wide perspective and supports subgroup comparisons through weighting, helping to situate the case study findings within the wider school population. Survey evidence is self-reported and may be affected by non-response and social desirability bias, and it captures perceptions at a single point in time.

Case-studies and comparison school interviews

The in-depth case studies add explanatory power by capturing mechanisms, local context and lived experiences (from school staff, parents and LA officers) that cannot be inferred from quantitative data alone. Interviews with comparison schools further support interpretation by highlighting where experiences appear distinctive to high-SEND contexts.

The qualitative fieldwork provides depth but is not statistically generalisable: case study schools were purposefully selected from the high-EHCP group and participation was voluntary, meaning the sample may over-represent schools more willing to engage with research. To mitigate this, we sought to include a diverse range of schools within the high-EHCP group (for example, by phase and geography), and we compared emerging findings against wider quantitative patterns to assess their broader plausibility.

Comparison schools were also ultimately self-selecting; as a result, we were unable to speak to schools with the very lowest SEN intakes. In addition, in the comparison schools we did not speak to a wider range of stakeholder groups (for example, parents or LA officers), which limits the comparisons we can make between them and the high-SEND case study schools.

Finally, the study reflects a specific policy and system context (2025–2026); ongoing reforms and local changes to SEND provision may alter patterns over time, so findings should be interpreted as time-bounded evidence rather than a fixed picture. To enhance relevance, we have situated the findings within the current policy landscape, including the direction of reform set out in the white paper, and focused on identifying underlying mechanisms and system dynamics that are likely to persist even as policy evolves.

2. How are pupils with SEND currently distributed across mainstream schools and how has this changed over time?

This section explores how levels and needs of pupils with SEND have changed over the last decade, drawing largely on analysis previously published in the interim report. It considers how pupils with SEND are distributed across mainstream schools and sets out a definition for 'high SEND' schools which underpins the study design. The analysis of the complexity of pupil need is new to this report and explores how, alongside rising numbers of pupils with SEND, schools are increasingly supporting pupils with more complex, overlapping and intensive needs, which require higher levels of expertise and support within mainstream settings.

Key findings

- The proportion of pupils identified with SEND has steadily increased over the last decade. In 2024/25, more than 1.7 million pupils in England were identified as having SEND — equivalent to around one in five pupils in the school system.
- Mainstream schools report facing greater complexity of pupil need, with pupils increasingly facing co-occurring challenges and more pupils functioning below developmental expectations for their age.
- Pupils with SEND are unevenly distributed across mainstream schools. The spread of pupils with EHCPs and 'any-SEND' (i.e. an EHCP or SEN Support) across schools has increased over time.
- High-EHCP schools (HES) and high-any-SEND schools (HASS) differ from the wider school population—but are not homogeneous groups.

2.1 Pupils with SEND in the school system

The proportion of pupils identified with SEND has steadily increased over the last decade

Over the past ten years, the proportion of pupils identified with SEND has risen year on year, from 14.4 per cent of pupils in 2015/16 to 19.5 per cent of pupils in 2024/25. By January 2025, there were over 1.7 million school pupils in England with identified SEND. This represents around one in every five pupils.

Most of these pupils (1.3 million) are in receipt of SEN Support – which is support that is additional to, or different from, the support generally made available for other children in a school. Schools identify which pupils should be in receipt of SEN Support. A smaller number of pupils (0.4 million) are in receipt of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP). These are intended to be for pupils who need more support than is available through SEN Support. EHCPs are assessed by the LA.

While the number of pupils with EHCPs has grown across all school types since 2015/16, the sharpest increase has occurred in mainstream primary schools. In 2024/25, over half (56 per cent) of pupils with EHCPs were in mainstream schools. This represents an increase from 49 per cent in 2015/16.

Pupils in receipt of SEN Support and EHCPs have a range of SEND needs. Autistic spectrum condition (ASC), speech, language and communications needs (SLCN), and social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) make up the primary need recorded in four fifths of all EHCPs. Increases in numbers of pupils across these three groups have also driven a large proportion of the increase in the rate of pupils with EHCPs over the last ten years.

Complexity of pupil need

Across nearly all 15 case study schools, interviewees emphasised the *increasing complexity* of pupil needs in their settings. This suggests that alongside the increasing number of pupils requiring support, levels of need are also increasing. LA interviewees also shared the view that levels of need in mainstream school settings had increased. Communication and interaction needs, particularly ASC, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), SEMH and SLCN, featured prominently. Senior leaders and SENCOs agreed that the Covid-19 pandemic had contributed significantly to the rise in SEMH needs, particularly relating to emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA), though they emphasised that these needs were already increasing prior to the pandemic.

SENCOs highlighted that pupils often present with co-morbidities, such as ASC and anxiety, which contribute to the increased complexity of needs they are seeking to support. Cognition and learning difficulties, SEMH needs, and physical needs were frequently reported as secondary co-occurring challenges.

Schools reported that they are increasingly supporting pupils whose needs are so severe and complex that they might be better placed in a specialist setting rather than a mainstream school or resource base. Several school staff described pupils entering their school functioning at a much earlier developmental stage than typically expected for their age with reduced school readiness and fewer basic functional skills. For example, in some schools, SENCOs described pupils who were pre-verbal and unable to express their needs as well as needing help to meet basic needs such as still being in nappies. One primary senior leader commented:

> *With our youngest children, their speech and language skills coming into school are poorer than they were…the way they communicate with adults and with each other—pose challenges.*

These challenges also impacted secondaries. One secondary middle leader explained *'we've never taught phonics at secondary school, but we've now got someone teaching phonics…what you would learn in…year one at primary school'*.

Many school staff also felt that the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated trends that were already emerging prior to 2020, particularly in relation to anxiety, SEMH difficulties and school avoidance. Interviewees described these changes as contributing to increasingly complex caseloads. Staff in schools serving more disadvantaged communities, and those already supporting higher proportions of pupils with SEND, felt these pressures particularly acutely, intensifying existing demands on pastoral and SEND systems.

Senior leaders and SENCOs also distinguished between increases in the *complexity* of need and increases in *identification*. They suggested that while complexity had risen sharply for some pupils,

overall SEND numbers may partly reflect greater parental awareness of typical child development, leading to earlier identification and more proactive support-seeking.

Pupils with SEND are unevenly distributed across mainstream schools

Whilst the numbers and complexity of SEND among pupils appear to have increased in recent years, there are large differences in SEND rates between mainstream schools.

In 2024/25, primary schools in the top quartile for EHCP rates had, on average, six times as many pupils with EHCPs as those in the lowest quartile (seven per cent compared to one percent). In absolute terms, this equates to an average of three pupils per school in the lowest quartile compared to 17 pupils per school in the highest quartile[5].

This pattern is similar among secondary schools, albeit that the spread of pupils is slightly less skewed. Secondary schools in the top quartile have an EHCP rate five times higher than those in the lowest quartile (six percent compared to one percent). This equates to an average of 14 pupils per school in the lowest quartile compared to 54 pupils per school in the highest quartile.

These patterns are broadly reflected in differences in 'any SEND' rates (including both EHCP and SEN Support pupils) across schools. Primary and secondary schools in the top quartile for any SEND rates have, on average, more than double the proportion of pupils with any identified SEND compared to schools in the lowest quartile (29 per cent compared to 11 per cent in primaries, and 26 per cent compared to 10 per cent in secondaries). In primary schools, this equates to 30 pupils in the lowest quartile compared to 65 pupils in the highest quartile[6]. In secondary schools, this equates to 120 pupils in the lowest quartile compared to 220 pupils in the highest quartile.

Unevenness in the proportions of pupils with EHCPs and any SEND across schools has increased over time. From 2018/19[7] to 2024/25, the difference in EHCP rates between schools at the 25th percentile (those with relatively few pupils with EHCPs) and the 75th percentile (those with relatively many) grew by one percentage point in primaries and 0.8 percentage points in secondaries. Similarly, for any SEND, the range between the 25th and 75th percentile increased by 0.8 and 0.4 percentage points respectively.

In 2024/25, the correlation between EHCP and SEN Support rates at the school level was low (0.2 in primary, 0.3 in secondary). SEN Support and EHCPs are meant to form a continuum or graduated system of support, where SEN Support is the first level of intervention and EHCPs are used when a child's needs cannot be sufficiently met through the support available at school[8]. The low correlation indicates that schools with higher proportions of pupils with EHCPs do not always have similarly high rates of SEN Support. One possible interpretation is that some schools may be

[5] In 2024/25, the average (mean) primary and secondary schools have 272 and 1048 pupils on roll respectively.
[6] Note that difference between rates and pupil numbers reflect variation in EHCP and any SEND rates by school size (see section 2.2).
[7] 2018/19 is used as a comparator as this is the first year where SEN statements were fully phased out.
[8] The SEND Code of Practice emphasises that schools, colleges and early years providers must use a graduated approach to identify, assess, and support pupils with SEN. If a child's needs are more complex and cannot be met satisfactorily through SEN Support, a request for an EHCP needs assessment may be made (DfE and DoH, 2015).

more inclined to pursue formal statutory assessments, while others may make greater use of SEN Support provision without escalating to an EHCP. These differences may reflect variation in local practices, thresholds, or levels of resource, but further evidence is needed to understand the underlying causes.

Defining high-SEND schools: high EHCP schools (HES) and high any SEND schools (HASS)

Our study identifies two groups of schools with higher proportions of pupils with SEND to explore their characteristics in more depth. Since no single measure provides a complete picture of need, using two definitions enables us to capture different but complementary aspects of the data and to acknowledge the inherent complexity of accurately identifying SEND.

The first group comprises schools with considerably higher proportions of pupils with EHCPs compared with both their local catchment area and the national average (HES). The second group is defined using the same approach but considers any type of identified SEND, rather than focussing solely on EHCPs ('high any SEND schools' or HASS).

Our working definition for a HES is a school which:

- was in the top 20 per cent of schools in terms of the difference between its EHCP rate and the EHCP rate among all pupils resident in the school's catchment area for the three consecutive years 2022, 2023 and 2024[9]; and
- had an EHCP rate that was in the top quartile for their phase in 2023/24.

By focusing on schools which have high rates of EHCPs compared to their local areas, we can account for the fact that pupils in some local areas may be more likely to be issued with an EHCP than others for a comparable set of needs (e.g., where an LA may use more stringent criteria for allocating EHCPs).

More broadly, while EHCPs are legally defined and granted through a formal statutory process, making them a more standardised measure than school-based assessments, they may not consistently capture all children with equivalent levels of need. A range of factors, including local differences in support, assessment and decision-making, can influence who receives one.

Pupils with EHCPs typically have complex or severe needs requiring coordinated, multi-agency provision. Schools with above-average proportions of EHCPs are therefore likely to face greater challenges.

The second group – HASS – comprises schools which have higher proportions of pupils with any identified SEND need compared with both their local catchment area and the national average. Our working definition for a HASS is a school which:

- was in the top 20 per cent of schools in terms of the difference between its overall SEND rate (i.e., pupils with an EHCP or receiving SEN Support) and the SEND rate among all pupils resident in the school's catchment area for the three consecutive years 2022, 2023 and 2024)[10]; and

[9] See A.3 Technical Appendix for more information on how the catchment areas were determined.
[10] See A.3 Technical Appendix for more information on how the catchment areas were determined.

- had an overall SEND rate that was in the top quartile for their phase in 2023/24.

SEN Support relies on school-level judgements that can vary widely in how needs are identified and recorded. This can make comparisons between schools less robust (as compared to using EHCPs). For example, a high SEN Support rate could reflect higher levels of underlying SEND or could be the result of a tendency of the school to identify pupils with certain lower-level needs as having SEND when other schools would not. Nevertheless, schools with a high number of pupils identified as needing SEN Support may also be operating under considerable pressure, especially as they are not usually able to access top-up funding for pupils without EHCPs. Hence, we decided to analyse them as a second type of 'high-SEND' school.

As might be expected, given that there is a weak relationship between EHCP and SEN Support rates and the fact that SEN Support numbers are significantly higher, there is only partial overlap between the schools included in the two groups.

2.2 Characteristics of high-SEND schools

This sub-section is focused on exploring the characteristics of schools with high proportions of pupils with SEND. Understanding these characteristics is key to building a clearer picture of how pupils with SEND are distributed across schools.

Analysis presented in our interim report showed that HES differ from the wider school population—but are not a homogeneous group. Compared to other schools, HES are more likely to:

- Have a SEN Unit (SU) or resourced provision (RP).
- Be a community or voluntary controlled school.
- Be in regions with higher rates of EHCPs, such as London.
- Serve more deprived communities, particularly at primary level[11].
- Be smaller in size in the secondary phase.
- Have lower levels of attainment than, but similar Ofsted judgements to, all schools.

Further differences can be observed by comparing HASS and HES schools. Compared to HES, HASS are:

- Less likely to have an SU and/or RP.
- More likely to have lower levels of attainment and relatively poor Ofsted judgements, particularly at secondary.
- More likely to serve deprived communities.

While HES and HASS generally compare similarly to all schools, there are some clear differences between them in terms of outcomes and populations served. Again, these distinctions may reflect variation in how schools identify and record SEND, as well as differences in local context or pupil intake.

[11] Deprivation is measured by the percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals in the school.

3. What are the factors driving the distribution of pupils with SEND across the school system?

This section draws on evidence from case study interviews with school staff, parents and LA officers, alongside findings from our national survey of SENCOs and senior school leaders, to explore the factors that drive where pupils with SEND are educated across the mainstream school system.

Key findings

Our case study interviews highlight a structural steering effect driving pupils to be concentrated in certain schools. The uneven distribution of pupils with SEND reflects the interaction of pull, push and contextual factors, which reinforce one another over time.

Pull factors (school-level)
Schools with a strong inclusive ethos develop reputations for meeting need. These reputations shape parental choice, professional advice and LA placement decisions, drawing higher numbers of pupils with SEND to these schools. Specialist units or resourced provision further strengthens this pull. The importance of pull factors is amplified by the weight of parental preference in shaping placement decisions.

Push factors (system-level)
Shortages of specialist provision, delays in EHCP processes and the urgency to secure placements constrain LA and parental decision-making. At the same time, some mainstream schools may seek to avoid enrolling pupils with SEND where they feel unable to meet need or are concerned about the impact on capacity or attainment measures. Inclusive mainstream schools therefore often become default options, particularly where they are perceived as flexible or have available space. Patterns of pupil mobility and placement practices mean that once pupils are placed in high-SEND schools, they are less likely to move, reinforcing concentration over time.

Contextual factors
Differences in SEND identification and recording practices affect how patterns of concentration appear in the data, while local demography helps explain variation in underlying levels of need between schools. Rising complexity of need since COVID-19 has not driven distribution patterns, but has intensified pressure where SEND is already concentrated, alongside LA processes that push additional pupils into a small number of inclusive schools.

Overall, schools' SEND profiles are rarely driven by a single factor. Instead, they reflect cumulative and mutually reinforcing system dynamics that steer pupils with SEND towards particular mainstream schools. Over time, these dynamics can become self-reinforcing, influencing school behaviour and further concentrating pupils with SEND.

2.3 The structural steering effect

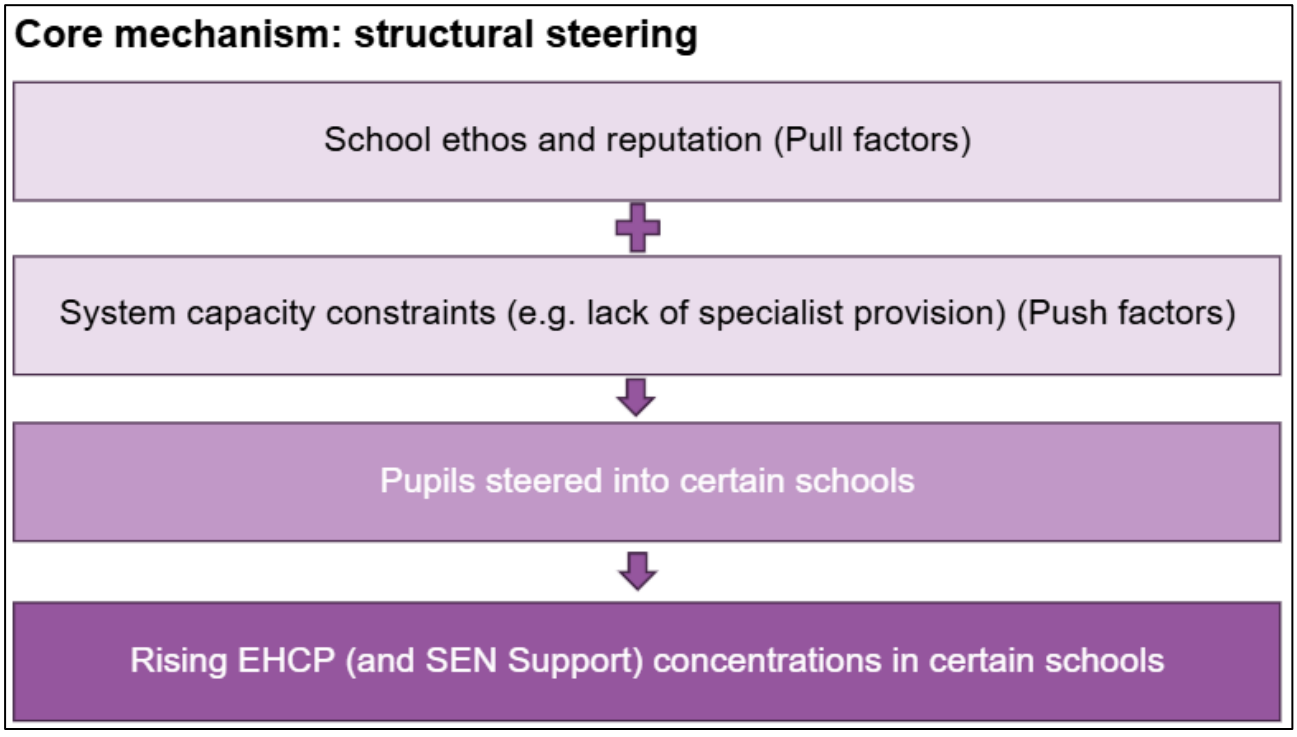
We begin by outlining the overarching explanation for why pupils are unevenly distributed across schools emerging from our research findings.

The uneven distribution of pupils with SEND does not appear to be random, nor is it primarily driven by differences in underlying pupil need. Instead, evidence from school staff, parents and LA officers points to what we interpret as a structural steering effect within the system.

This effect reflects the interaction of two concurrent dynamics, as shown in Figure 1 below. First, some schools develop a strong reputation for inclusion and specialist expertise, which can make them more likely to be selected or recommended for pupils with SEND. Second, system-level capacity constraints, alongside some schools' reluctance to enrol pupils with SEND, limit the availability of suitable placements elsewhere.

Taken together, these dynamics create predictable patterns in where pupils with SEND are educated. This provides a plausible explanation for why uneven distribution persists, reflecting both system-level constraints and variation between schools in how inclusion is prioritised and enacted.

Figure 1: Why pupils with SEND become concentrated in some schools



The remainder of this section explores these drivers in order of their relative influence.

2.4 Primary drivers (pull factors): inclusive ethos and reputation

Across high-SEND case study interviews, the strongest and most consistent reported driver of higher proportions of pupils with SEND was school ethos. Staff consistently framed inclusion as a core feature of the school's identity rather than as a policy requirement or specialist function. Many described an implicit principle that pupils are not turned away because of need.

Over time, schools perceived that this ethos became visible externally and shaped the school's reputation. Schools known for being warm, nurturing and responsive to individual need were widely perceived by parents, LAs and other professionals as places that could successfully support pupils with SEND, including those with more complex needs. This reputation created a clear pull towards certain schools, drawing in families seeking supportive and reliable placements. Notably, this reputation often extended beyond SEND-specific provision to encompass a broader inclusive culture, which parents of pupils both with and without SEND reported valuing (see Appendix A.2 for more detail on factors influencing school choice among parents whose children do not have SEND).

By contrast, some comparison schools reported that they had not developed, and in some cases had deliberately avoided developing, a SEND-inclusive reputation. Schools cited a range of reasons for this, including building size, staffing capacity, and the presence of nearby schools perceived as more SEND-friendly. Some also expressed concerns about their ability to meet need within existing resources or about the potential impact of higher SEND enrolments on attainment outcomes. These decisions were associated with lower demand from families of children with SEND, reinforcing the link between school reputation, perceived capacity, and intake profile.

Overall, the findings suggest a cumulative process in which inclusive ethos shapes reputation, reputation drives demand, and demand further reinforces the school's identity as an inclusive (or less inclusive) setting.

A strong reputation for inclusion

A strong reputation for inclusion was consistently identified as a key driver of disproportionate high intakes of pupils with SEND, including pupils with EHCPs. Across the case study schools, families were reported to actively seek out schools known for effective SEND practice, with several schools described as having developed a local reputation that positioned them as informal "SEND hubs".

SENCOs emphasised that families were typically attracted by the school's whole-school ethos rather than by a narrow focus on SEND provision. In particular, behaviour policies, flexibility around uniform, and the perceived approachability and experience of staff were highlighted as important. Staff were frequently described by parents as well-trained, knowledgeable and effective in supporting pupils with SEND. Schools' inspection track records and their perceived ability to support families in navigating the SEND system, particularly the EHCP process, were also seen as influential.

Senior leaders and parents alike stressed the importance of the SENCO's reputation and their relationships with families. One SENCO reflected, "*We offer that flexibility… we've become the school that parents feel meets the needs of children with SEND best*," while another noted, "*I think*

we're genuinely very good at identifying children's special needs… we're a very nurturing school and people want to send their children here because we understand children with special needs."

LA interviewees similarly described these schools as intentionally inclusive, with leadership teams and governing bodies actively committed to accommodating pupils with a wide range of needs. Inclusive practice was framed as a deliberate leadership choice rather than a passive outcome. In one case study, for example, parents felt that the school's smaller size and relational culture meant that pupils were "known" as individuals and supported accordingly.

Parents of children with SEND also described a welcoming school community, strong pastoral support and responsiveness to individual need as central to their choice of setting for their child. Several described inclusion as embedded in everyday practice rather than treated as a specialist function. As one parent put it, "*So it's just in everyone's bones sort of thing of the way they act… it's the ethos and the culture,"* while another explained, "*Everybody is accepted; it's just it's part of your everyday*."

Parents frequently highlighted the availability and visibility of specialist expertise within schools as reinforcing their confidence. This included specialist staff and services such as resourced provision staff, speech and language therapists, interpreters, and experienced learning support assistants. Parents of pupils without SEND also reported valuing this expertise, viewing it as evidence that the school was well equipped to meet diverse needs.

Over time, this reputation solidified, with case study schools increasingly viewed as a "first choice" for families of children with SEND. Senior leaders and SENCOs noted that this reputation was often reinforced by other schools, LAs and professionals, with some parents reporting that they had been explicitly advised–including by parents and other schools–that the case study school would be best placed to meet their child's needs.

Word of mouth and parental networks played a significant role in disseminating these reputations. Parents described recommendations circulating through local communities and social media, with one parent noting that the school was *"recommended over and over again"*, and a senior leader explaining that "*when a [parent] goes on [the Facebook group] … [the school] comes up all the time."* Some parents reported being willing to travel long distances or relocate to access these schools.

Several schools also described becoming a destination for families relocating to access support, which they felt perpetuated higher-than-average SEND levels over time once a reputation for inclusion was established. LA staff noted that, where a school was already known to be inclusive and effective, families were increasingly likely to request it during EHCP processes. They emphasised that high numbers of disputes progressing to tribunal meant parental preferences were more often upheld, reinforcing and entrenching existing patterns of uneven distribution.

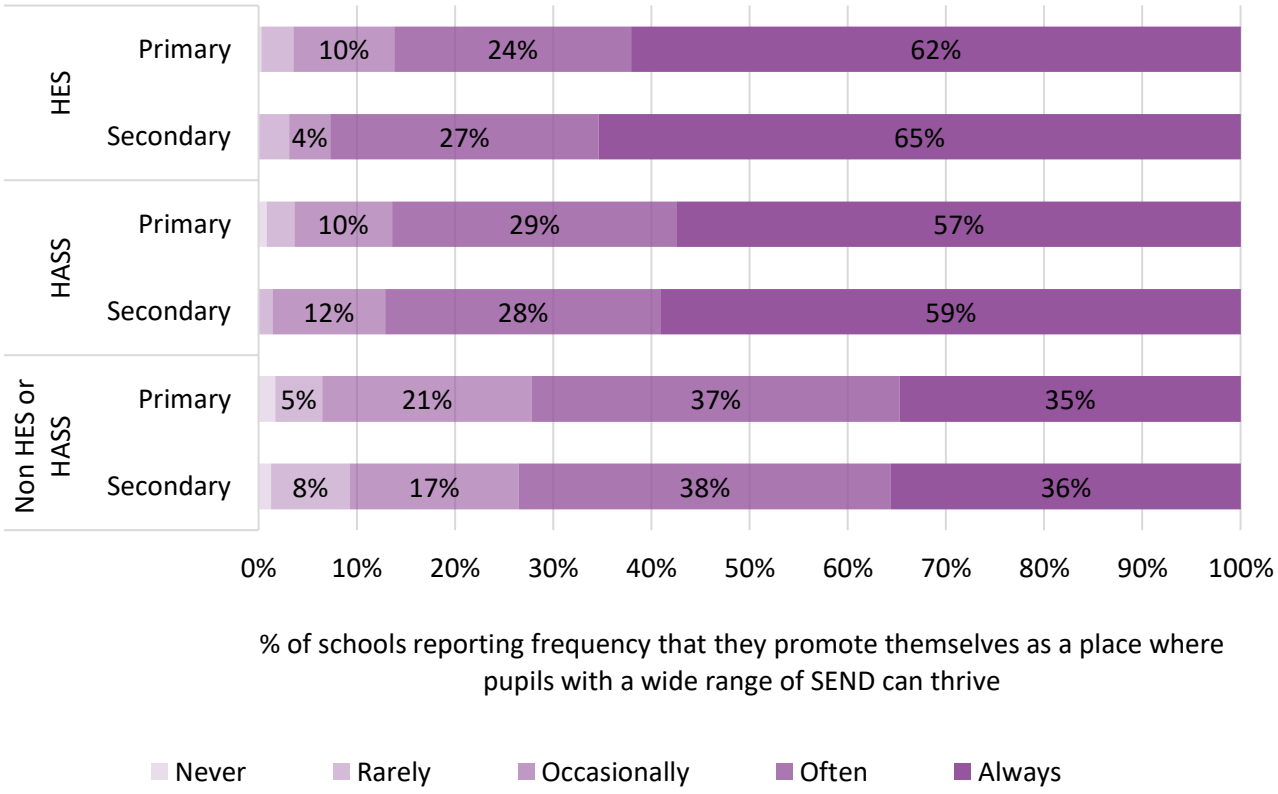
They emphasised that the legal weight of parental preference can entrench patterns of uneven distribution,

By contrast, some comparison schools reported not having developed a SEND-friendly reputation, and in some cases having deliberately avoiding doing so. These schools described factors such as building size, staffing constraints, concerns about the impact on attainment data, and the presence of neighbouring SEND-focused schools as reasons for this. One interviewee stated, "*We've always*

tried not to have a reputation for being good at SEND so parents don't tend to seek us out." These accounts suggest that, for some schools, reputational positioning operates in tension with policy ambitions for a more inclusive mainstream system, reinforcing the role of reputation in shaping patterns of SEND intake.

Findings from the national survey of senior leaders and SENCOs corroborate these qualitative insights. Figure 2 shows that high-SEND schools**,** identified according to the HES and HASS definitions outlined in section 0**,** were more likely than other schools to report actively promoting themselves as places where pupils with a wide range of SEND can thrive. For example, among primaries, 62 per cent of HES and 57 per cent of HASS reported always promoting themselves as a place where pupils with a range of SEND can thrive, compared to 35 per cent of other schools. The findings broadly align with recent research from the Sutton Trust, which found that many school leaders think some schools actively discourage applications from pupils with SEND (O'Regan, Huband-Thompson and Cullinane, 2026).

Figure 2: How often schools say they present themselves as a place where pupils with a wide range of SEND can thrive



Source: NFER survey of school leaders and SENCOs, 2025. Based on 778 responses (primary N = 576, secondary N = 202).

Specialist or resource provision as key attractors

Across high-SEND school case study interviews, the presence of specialist resourced provision (RP) or a SEN unit was repeatedly described as creating a powerful "magnet effect" within the local school system. Schools hosting such provision were widely perceived by parents, LAs and other professionals as places with the expertise, flexibility and capacity to meet higher and more complex levels of need. Over time, this resulted in these schools becoming de facto hubs for pupils with SEND, particularly those with EHCPs.

This magnet effect was not attributed to specialist provision alone. Rather, interviewees emphasised the interaction between visible specialist provision, an established inclusive ethos and accumulated experience in supporting pupils with complex needs. Together, these features shaped parental choice and professional decision making, drawing disproportionate numbers of pupils with SEND into a relatively small number of mainstream schools.

Four of the fifteen case study schools hosted RP or a SEN unit. While this represented a minority of the sample, the presence of such provision played a significant role in shaping parental choice where it existed. As one parent explained, *"It has an [RP] for 12 autistic children… that's why we chose [this school],"* while another noted that because the school had a deaf education centre connected to the school, "*From the minute I went to the school that they're at now, I knew straight away that I'd made the right decision".*

Parents widely perceived specialist units as offering greater predictability, structure and consistency than mainstream provision alone. The presence of adapted environments and staff with specialist training provided reassurance, particularly for families with prior experiences of placements that had struggled to meet their child's needs. Specialist provision was frequently interpreted as a signal of quality, safety and competence.

Parental preference operated somewhat differently in schools hosting specialist provision. In these cases, families were often actively seeking particular forms of support, such as resourced provision or SEN units, rather than a general inclusive ethos. Interviewees described reputations for specialist provision circulating through informal parental networks, social media and local SEND communities, with parents sharing detailed knowledge about the availability and quality of specific support. Over time, these reputations became entrenched, with some parents reporting that the same schools were "recommended over and over again" as places able to meet particular needs. Several schools with specialist provision described families being willing to travel long distances or relocate to access this support, further reinforcing higher-than-average levels of SEND intake.

Importantly, parents did not frame these units as separate or isolating spaces; instead, they valued what they saw as an effective balance between specialist support and mainstream inclusion. One parent explained that their child accessed separate lessons within the RP but remained fully integrated into wider school life, reporting no sense of difference or exclusion. In the case study schools included in this research—all of which were high-SEND schools with a strong inclusive ethos—RPs were often described as fully embedded within the mainstream school community, reinforcing inclusive identity. However, the qualitative sample was small and not intended to be representative of schools with units more generally. Units located in schools with lower levels of SEND or a less established inclusive ethos may operate differently, a view supported by later

survey findings which indicate greater variability in experiences of RPs and SEN units across schools.

LA placement practices also contributed to this dynamic. LA interviewees noted that schools with established RP were more likely to be consulted during EHCP placement processes, particularly where special school places were scarce. SENCOs reported that they were frequently approached to take pupils whose needs could not be met in other mainstream settings, often at short notice and regardless of existing capacity. In localities with limited specialist provision, these schools were described by school staff as default options within LA placement panels, reinforcing their role as system hubs for higher need pupils. LA representatives noted that the presence and scale of specialist provision increased the number of EHCP consultations a school received through placement panels. In many cases, case study schools were reported to be the only schools in their area with such provision, further reinforcing their pull.

School leaders reported that hosting specialist provision often had wider effects on the school's intake profile. The presence of a RP was said to increase the proportion of pupils with similar needs across the school, including pupils who did not meet the threshold for access to the RP. For example, one school with a RP for pupils with hearing loss described attracting pupils with hearing aids who did not have identified SEND, as families were drawn to adaptations such as sound loop systems. This finding is reinforced by findings presented in our interim report which showed that HES are more likely to have higher numbers of pupils with EHCPs even once pupils in SEN units or RPs are accounted for.

Interviewees also highlighted wider system level inequalities in inclusive capacity across schools. Where not all schools in a local area demonstrated the same willingness or ability to support pupils with complex SEND, those with longstanding specialist provision were perceived to be meeting a disproportionately large share of need. Several SENCOs reflected that inclusive practice was unevenly distributed across the system, meaning that schools with visible provision and expertise were relied upon more heavily over time.

The development of specialist provision followed different trajectories. In some schools, leaders made a deliberate strategic decision to build SEND expertise and position the school as a specialist provider. As one senior leader explained, "*It was my decision to actively become specialists in SEN… it comes from the top. It wouldn't just be happening anywhere."* In other schools, specialist provision emerged more organically in response to the needs of pupils already on roll, gradually becoming formalised.

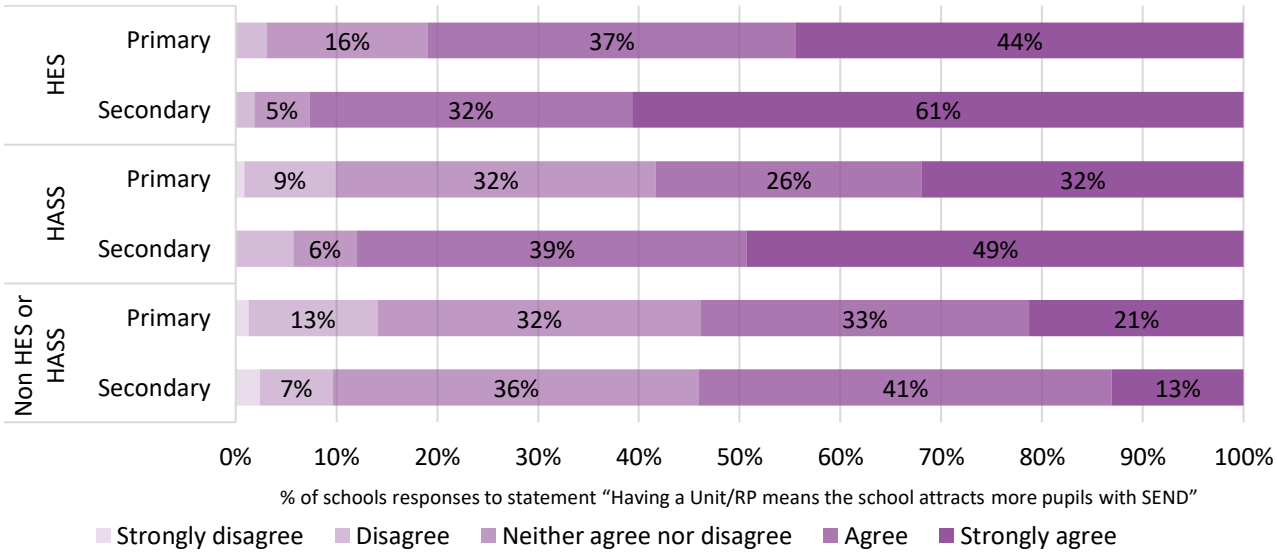
In these cases, SENCOs described a cumulative and responsive process of development over time. Provision often began in response to the needs of one or two pupils already on roll and was gradually adapted and extended as the profile of need broadened. One SENCO explained how provision initially developed to support a single pupil with autistic needs before being widened to support larger groups and, eventually, formalised through engagement with the local authority.

Comparison schools also recognised the influence of specialist provision elsewhere in the local system. Some noted that the presence of neighbouring schools with established units or RP affected their own intake, with parents perceived to "*gravitate there*".

Several interviewees reflected that the cumulative effect of these dynamics was that schools originally established to support a modest number of pupils through a resource base could evolve into high-SEND environments at whole school level, less as the result of deliberate strategy than as an emergent consequence of repeated parental choices and placement decisions within a constrained system.

These qualitative findings are reflected in patterns from the national survey, which asked schools whether having a SEN unit or RP meant the school attracted more pupils with SEND. As shown in Figure 3, agreement with this statement was higher among schools with an inclusion base[12], although the strength of agreement varied by school type. Among HES and HASS schools with a base, between around a third and three fifths agreed or strongly agreed that their provision attracted more pupils with SEND, compared with around a quarter to just over half of non-HES/HASS schools. This suggests that schools with higher SEND intakes were more likely to perceive specialist provision as reinforcing demand.

Figure 3: Proportion of schools agreeing or disagreeing that having a SEN Unit/RP means the school attracts more pupils with SEND



Source: NFER survey of school leaders and SENCOs, 2025. Based on 444 responses (primary N = 288, secondary N = 156).

School environment

The high-SEND school case studies also demonstrated the importance of the school's physical environment and characteristics in attracting pupils with SEND, particularly in secondary settings. Senior leaders and SENCOs reported that their schools were often perceived by parents as smaller, calmer or easier to navigate. In some cases, staff noted that this perception did not

[12] In the survey, 46 per cent of primary schools (N=595) and 76 per cent of secondary schools (N=205) reported having a SEN unit or RP. These weighted estimates are substantially higher than figures from government data, which suggest that just under 10 per cent of primary schools and around 20 per cent of secondary schools have a SEN unit or RP. We believe this difference reflects schools including self-funded bases in their responses, rather than only those funded by local authorities.

necessarily align with the school's objective size or layout but rather reflected how the environment was experienced or communicated to families. Parents of pupils with SEND frequently expressed concern about their child becoming overwhelmed and were therefore attracted to schools with simpler layouts, wider corridors or more spacious environments.

One SENCO described how the physical environment shaped parental perceptions: "*It's a single building, it's all carpeted. The corridors are wide; the classrooms are bigger than most schools… the building feels very low threat and nice."* Such features were seen as reducing anxiety and supporting pupils to feel safe and settled.

Some parents were particularly wary of large schools, expressing concern that pupils with SEND might not be sufficiently known or supported. As one parent explained, *"If you've got hundreds of kids per year group, SEND kids are going to get lost. They're not going to get known."*

While physical environment alone did not determine SEND intake, these perceptions reinforced the broader appeal of schools already known for having an inclusive ethos and strong pastoral support. In this sense, environmental characteristics appeared to amplify the pull created by reputation and ethos rather than operate as a standalone driver of the uneven distribution of SEND pupils across schools.

2.5 Secondary drivers (push factors): system capacity and sufficiency pressures

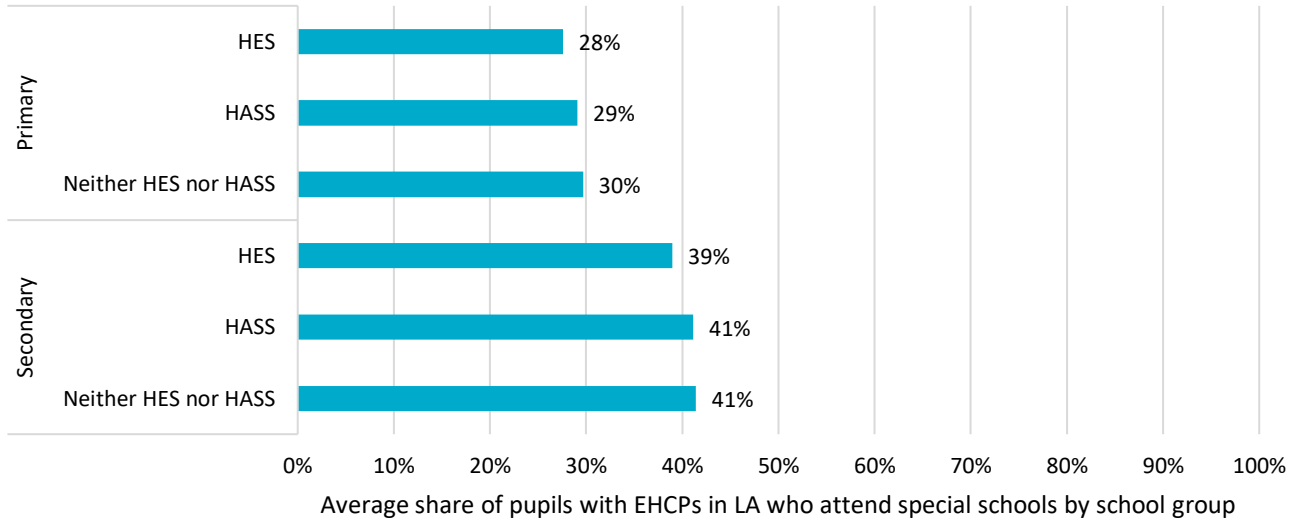
Alongside school reputation, pressures within the wider SEND system play a significant role in shaping patterns of SEND distribution. Across case study schools, leaders and SENCOs described placement decisions as being driven by tight local capacity constraints, rather than made through strategic planning.

Shortages of specialist provision and placement urgency

Senior leaders and SENCOs consistently reported severe shortages of special school and alternative provision places within their local areas. As a result, LAs were increasingly relying on inclusive mainstream schools to accommodate pupils with SEND, including those with highly complex needs whose requirements were not always compatible with a mainstream environment.

This is consistent with our analysis of the NPD: Figure 4 presents how the average share of EHCP pupils in special schools within each school's LA vary by school group (HES, HASS or neither). It shows that, on average, a slightly smaller share of pupils with EHCPs are in special schools in those LAs where HES are located, as compared to those where HASS and other mainstream schools are found. For example, primary HES are located in LAs where, on average, 28 per cent of EHCP pupils are in special schools, whereas the comparable percentages for HASS and non-HES-or-HASS schools are 29 and 30 per cent.

Figure 4: Average percentage of pupils with EHCPs attending special schools within the local authority, by school group (HES, HASS or neither)



Source: NFER analysis of 2024 NPD data.
Note: Schools can be both HES and HASS.

Amongst our case study schools, many described pupils being placed with them on a temporary basis while waiting to take up a place at a special school, only for those placements never to materialise. In practice, this meant pupils remaining in mainstream settings for extended periods, even where schools felt unable to meet need. As one senior leader explained:

> *There are not enough special provision schools. There are not enough places in the special provision that can meet the needs of the children and therefore those that should be in special provision are in RPs, those that should be in RPs are in mainstream.*

Delays in EHCP processes, commonly reported as taking up to two years, were also seen to intensify these pressures. Because access to special school placements typically depends on a completed EHCP, families who felt their child ultimately needed specialist provision described being unwilling or unable to wait for decisions while their child's learning deteriorated. As a result, some sought the most inclusive available mainstream placement as an interim solution, redirecting pupils into mainstream schools by default in order to secure immediate support and avoid prolonged absence or loss of learning.

In this context, inclusive mainstream schools were frequently described as the most viable option available to LAs. LA interviewees acknowledged that, where specialist places were scarce, schools with strong inclusive reputations were often relied upon as default placements for pupils with more complex needs.

Almost all case study schools reported that LAs allocated pupils to their school despite leaders stating that they were not able to meet the pupil's needs. SENCOs and senior leaders expressed concern that this practice was stretching already limited capacity and risking the quality of provision for existing pupils. One SENCO explained: *"We are repeatedly saying that we can't meet need, but the children are still coming."*

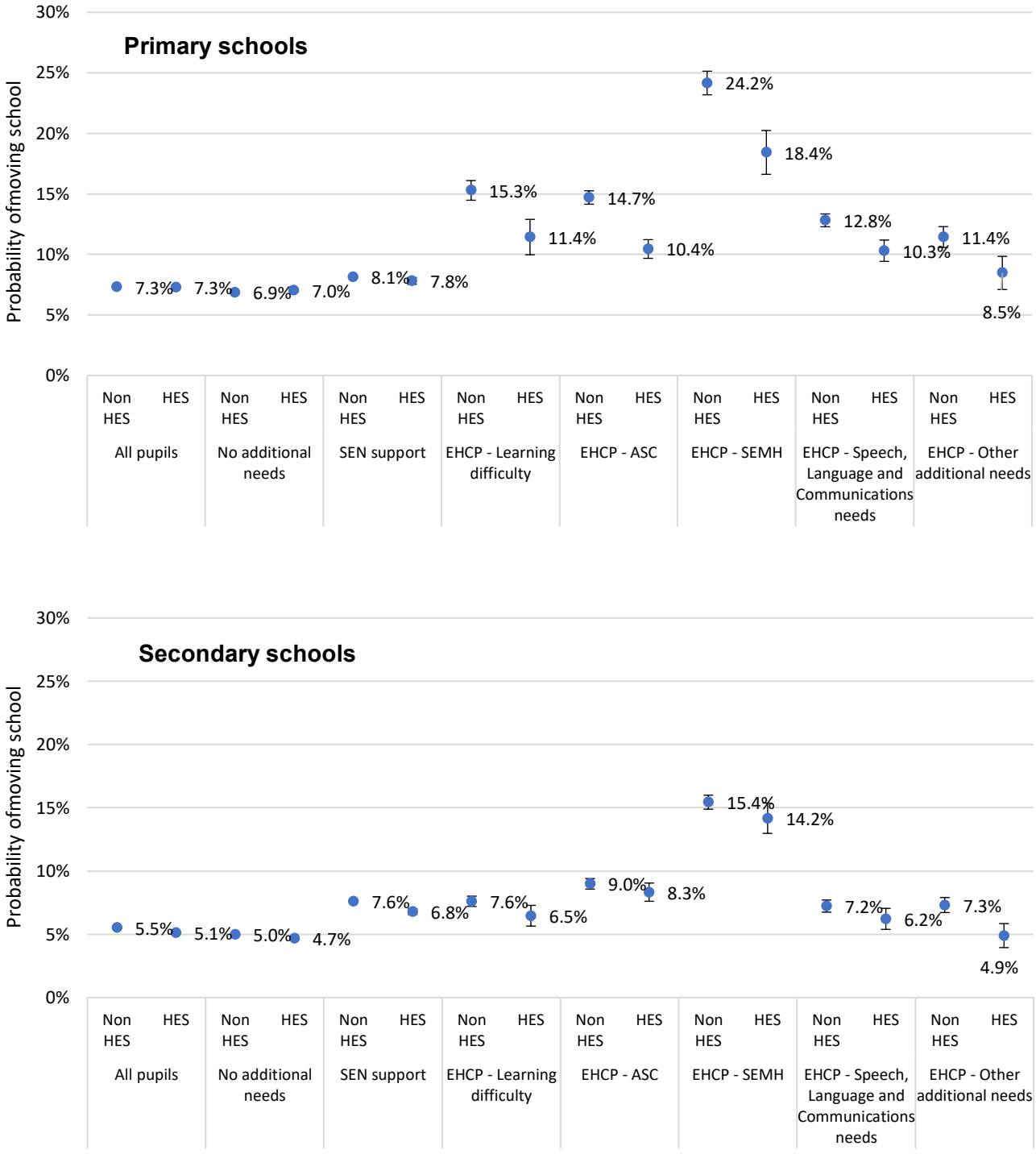
These accounts suggest that placement decisions were often driven by urgency and necessity, rather than by an assessment of optimal fit.

Movements of pupils between schools

Our quantitative analyses also highlight that movements of pupils with SEND across the school system are likely to amplify their uneven distribution. We analyse pupil school movements at non-standard transition points during primary (Years 2–5) and secondary (Years 7–10) between the 2022/23 and 2023/24 academic years. The aim is to investigate the extent to which pupils with SEND change schools, and how this varies between different schools. Data is analysed using a logistic regression approach which allows us to consider the likelihood of pupils with SEND moving from their school, once other pupil characteristics are accounted for.

Figure 5 shows that pupils with SEND are significantly more likely to move schools than those without, and that pupils with SEND in HES are significantly less likely to move schools than other pupils with similar needs in other schools. For example, a primary pupil with ASC and an EHCP in a HES has a 10 per cent likelihood of moving from their school from one year to the next, compared to 15 per cent in all other schools. This suggests that one reason for the uneven distribution of pupils with SEND is that those who attend a high-SEND school are less likely to leave than those attending other schools. This may be related to the ability of high-SEND schools to meet pupil need.

Figure 5: Probability of moving schools for pupils in HES compared with pupils in other schools



Source: NFER analysis of 2024 NPD data. Note: Confidence intervals at the five per cent level are shown by the bars.
Note: Estimated shares of pupils moving includes all movements of pupils (including to non-mainstream schools or movements outside of England). Patterns between HES and non-HES schools are comparable when we consider movements of pupils between mainstream schools only.

Perceived space and flexibility within the system

Schools with available space, or those perceived as being able to accept pupils quickly and flexibly, were perceived to be more likely to receive additional pupils with SEND. Several leaders felt that falling rolls were increasing the extent to which they were seen as able to absorb new placements. As one SENCO commented:

> *Because we weren't full in all of our classes, we were finding we were getting fuller and fuller with special needs children.*

In these cases, perceived flexibility operated as a pull factor, steering pupils towards particular schools regardless of whether those schools felt appropriately resourced to meet need.

Summary: capacity constraints as a push factor

Overall, these findings indicate that capacity and sufficiency constraints in the system act as a significant push factor driving the uneven distribution of pupils with SEND across mainstream schools. Shortages of specialist provision, delays in statutory processes and the need to secure placements quickly combine to steer pupils towards certain inclusive mainstream schools. This process was widely described as pragmatic decision-making under pressure, rather than the result of deliberate system design.

2.6 Contextual factors shaping distribution

In addition to the key pull and push factors described so far, schools and LA interviewees highlighted a set of wider influences that shape how SEND concentration is identified, recorded, and experienced. Rather than operating in the same way, these influences affect: (i) how underlying need is translated into recorded SEND prevalence, and (ii) how pressures are experienced in schools once higher levels of need are present.

Identification practices

Interviewees across both case study and comparison schools described variation in how pupils are identified for SEN Support and EHCPs. Differences in thresholds for recognising need, LA administrative processes and local data practices, approaches to ordinarily available provision (including the extent and effectiveness of quality first teaching) and the timing of assessment were all reported to influence recorded SEND prevalence.

In some schools, pupils with a given level of need were more likely to be identified as having SEND in order to access specialist support, while in others similar needs were met through strengthened universal or targeted provision without being recorded as SEND. As a result, differences in recorded SEND prevalence may reflect variation in practice and capacity as much as variation in underlying need, complicating interpretation of the apparent distribution of pupils with SEND across schools.

Some leaders also suggested that official SEND figures can lag behind or understate underlying need, particularly at transition points, meaning that apparent differences between schools may partly reflect identification practices rather than substantive differences in pupil need.

Below, we have briefly summarised what 'good' early identification and a graduated response looks like, as reported by schools. Further detail on identification processes and challenges is provided in Appendix A.1.

Figure 6: In practice: schools' perceptions of what 'good' early identification and a graduated response looks like

Across our case studies and survey data, variation in recorded SEND prevalence often reflects not only underlying need but also differences in thresholds, access to screening, and capacity. In some schools, limited time or external delays meant needs were recognised late or inconsistently, particularly for pupils who mask, and at transition points where official data can lag behind emerging need.

A more consistent approach involves a shared, data-informed routine that makes early support the default and reduces reliance on individual staff knowledge or availability. Key elements include:

- **Baseline checks at entry and key transitions** (to identify emerging need early and avoid delays while processes 'catch up').
- **Clear processes for handling concerns** from teachers and parents, with agreed criteria and triage so referrals are timely and proportionate.
- **Time-limited monitoring categories** for emerging or unclear need, paired with targeted support before escalating to formal identification.
- **Scheduled assess–plan–do–review cycles** with named ownership, using evidence of impact to adapt support and escalate where necessary.
- **Regular SEND review meetings** supported by timely access to high-quality screening tools and specialist advice, so decisions do not depend on ad hoc availability.

Demographic and socioeconomic context

Demographic and socioeconomic context was widely seen as shaping the overall profile of need within schools. Case study schools serving more deprived communities reported higher prevalence of SEMH needs, communication difficulties, family instability and wider vulnerabilities. As reported earlier, HES and HASS were disproportionately likely to be serving more deprived communities, providing an important backdrop to these accounts. Staff linked these patterns to adverse childhood experiences, housing insecurity and local population characteristics.

By contrast, leaders in comparison schools serving more affluent areas typically attributed their lower SEND proportions to intake characteristics rather than school practice. These schools reported fewer pupils presenting with complex needs, particularly in relation to SEMH and behaviour. As one leader commented:

> *We're in quite* [an] *affluent area…I think we're from an area with quite…low levels of pupil premium and things like that. And they kind of tend to go hand in hand whether that's right or wrong with SEN needs.*

Taken together, these accounts reinforce the close relationship between SEND prevalence, school context and local demography.

Summary: SEND concentration is shaped by a range of factors, not just underlying levels of need

Taken together, these findings highlight the importance of distinguishing between underlying need, identified SEND, and experienced pressure when interpreting patterns of SEND concentration. Variation in identification practices, recording thresholds and approaches to ordinarily available provision means that differences in recorded SEND prevalence do not always map neatly onto differences in pupil need, complicating interpretation of administrative data. At the same time, local demographic and socioeconomic context shapes the overall profile of need faced by schools, with higher levels of deprivation associated with greater prevalence of complex SEND. These factors help explain why SEND appears to cluster unevenly across schools and why the pressures associated with concentration are experienced more acutely in some contexts than others, even where statutory frameworks and expectations are shared.

4. What are the implications of the current distribution of pupils with SEND on schools and pupils?

This section draws on interviews with staff and parents in case-study schools, alongside evidence from the national survey of SENCOs and senior school leaders, to explore the implications of the current distribution of pupils with SEND for schools, pupils and families.

Key findings

Overall, the evidence suggests that concentration amplifies both pressure and capability: high-SEND schools often develop strong inclusive practice and expertise, but face levels of strain that many describe as unsustainable.

- **High-SEND schools experience a trade-off between strength and strain.** Concentration can enable schools to develop strong inclusive cultures, shared expertise and more consistent practice. Staff reported greater confidence in making reasonable adjustments, and pupils were described as experiencing a stronger sense of belonging. These benefits, however, sit alongside sustained operational pressure. SENCOs and teachers described unpredictable and intensive workloads, reliance on goodwill, burdensome family advocacy, and increasing classroom complexity, which can affect curriculum pace, equity of attention across pupils, and the sustainability of provision over time.
- **Behavioural, safeguarding and wellbeing risks increase where needs cluster.** High concentrations of pupils with SEMH challenges, trauma histories and frequent dysregulation were reported to increase safeguarding complexity and the physical and emotional demands placed on staff, particularly where multiple pupils with high levels of need were educated together.
- **Evidence on SEN units/RP is mixed** While many schools report that units/RP build specialist expertise and raise overall capacity for meeting the needs of pupils with SEND within the school, substantial minorities report weak integration with mainstream teaching and pupils, as well as significant staffing/resource pressures.
- **Funding and system inconsistencies underpin many challenges.** This includes the requirement for schools to fund the first £6,000 of EHCP provision, which creates disproportionate pressure in schools with higher concentrations of need. Variation in LA processes, EHCP quality and accountability frameworks, further exacerbate pressure on schools and families.

4.1 Challenges in high-SEND schools

This sub-section uses evidence from the case study schools and the national survey to explore the practical challenges of operating in high-SEND contexts. It focuses on staffing and workload, classroom pressures, behavioural and safety concerns, and funding and system-level constraints. National survey findings show that many of the challenges faced by schools in meeting the needs of pupils with SEND are common across phases and school types, including funding constraints, access to external services and staffing capacity. However, the case study evidence highlights that

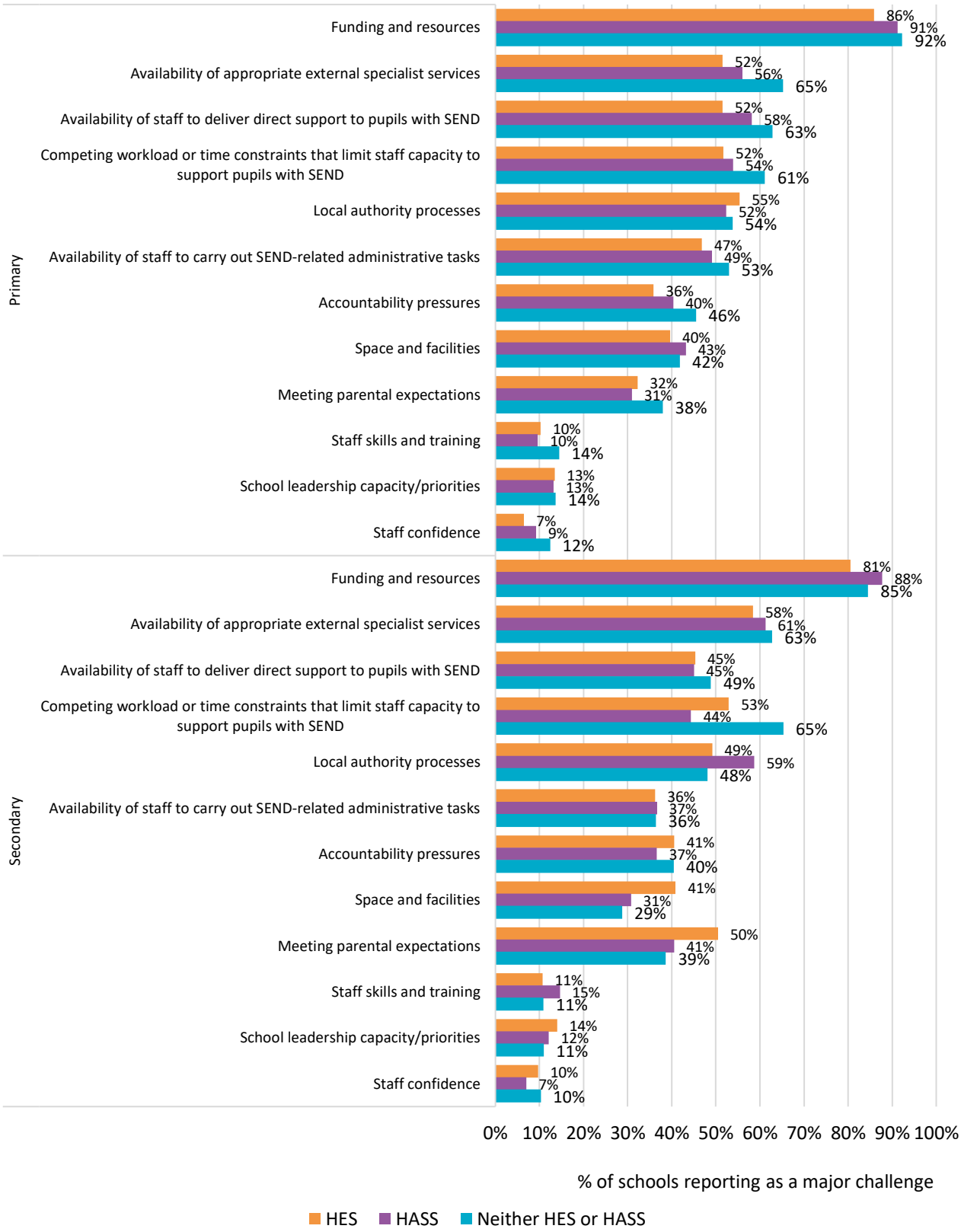
these shared challenges are experienced with greater intensity and frequency in high-SEND schools, creating sustained pressure that is harder to absorb and more likely to escalate.

Staffing, workload and the intensity of SEND leadership

Case study schools consistently emphasised that having a high proportion of pupils with SEND generated intensive and ongoing staffing demands. SENCOs and senior leaders described the work as characterised by constant problem solving, rapid decision making and frequent crisis response, alongside the need to oversee complex provision and manage expectations with parents and external agencies. A recurring theme was unpredictability, with one SENCO summarising the role as one where *"no day is the same".*

National survey evidence indicates that staffing pressures related to supporting pupils with SEND are widespread across the system. Around half of schools identify both the availability of staff to deliver direct support and competing workload or time constraints that limit staff capacity as major challenges in meeting SEND needs (Figure 7). These challenges sit alongside broader system pressures, with funding and resources, access to external specialist services, and SEND-related administrative capacity also frequently cited across all school types. While high-SEND schools are not markedly more likely than other schools to report staffing as a major challenge in survey responses, the case study evidence suggests that higher concentrations of need intensify these pressures in practice, reducing flexibility in staffing deployment and increasing reliance on individual staff and leadership capacity.

Figure 7: “Major challenges” reported by schools in meeting needs of SEND pupils



Source: NFER survey of school leaders and SENCOs, November 2025. Based on 800 responses (primary N = 595, secondary N = 205).

Interviewees in case study schools highlighted sustained pressure on staffing deployment, particularly in relation to teaching assistant support, facilitating specialist input, delivering pastoral care and safeguarding, as well as the amount of leadership time required to coordinate provision. SENCOs reported that supporting pupils with high levels of need alongside their wider peer groups required careful prioritisation, constant adaptation and substantial managerial oversight. Middle leaders noted that, for classroom teachers, planning and implementing adaptive teaching in high-need contexts was highly time-intensive, with early career teachers often finding these demands particularly challenging.

Teaching assistants and inclusion staff were frequently described as working well beyond their contracted hours, driven by care and commitment rather than capacity. One SENCO explained:

> *I've got a part-time member of staff who works very closely with a child in the mornings, and she will very often stay the afternoon because she knows he can't manage without her, but she's not been paid for that. That's just because she cares*.

Senior leaders expressed concern that reliance on goodwill was becoming normalised and was not sustainable in the longer term. Staff consistently reported that the combination of high volumes of pupils with SEND, increasing complexity of need and limited staffing capacity generated considerable stress and risked a significant detrimental impact on staff wellbeing. High concentrations of pupils with SEMH challenges, trauma histories and frequent dysregulation were reported to increase both safeguarding complexity and the physical and emotional demands placed on staff.

These pressures were felt to be particularly acute where pupils joined the school through in-year transfers. SENCOs noted that such pupils often arrived with unmet needs and limited information about their previous support, experiences or exclusions. This frequently placed schools *'on the back foot'*, increasing the likelihood that staff would be responding reactively rather than proactively and contributing to ongoing patterns of crisis management and firefighting.

Some schools reported particularly high absence rates among teaching assistants. Senior leaders spoke candidly about the toll that high levels of SEND took on staff health, with one noting that *"everyone in the inclusion team has been injured by a child"*, while another reflected that *"it is absolutely exhausting… they work so hard and they get ill from it… we're really, really proud of our school, but there's no denying it takes its toll on adults in the school as well"*.

Responding to frequent behavioural incidents, monitoring pupils' welfare and coordinating external support placed additional strain on staff and leadership teams. Strong support from senior leaders and SENCOs was seen as vital in protecting staff wellbeing, particularly for teaching assistants, early career teachers and staff new to the school.

Interviews also highlighted the significant workload burden placed on SENCOs and SEND team members. Senior leaders and SENCOs often felt that there were more pupils with SEND in their school than the school had the capacity to support effectively, resulting in workloads that far outstripped SEND team capacity. SENCOs consistently identified the administrative burden associated with EHCP processes as a major driver of workload, often limiting their availability to work directly with pupils and colleagues. They also noted that EHCP processes continued

throughout the year, including during school holidays, with statutory response times eroding opportunities for rest and recovery.

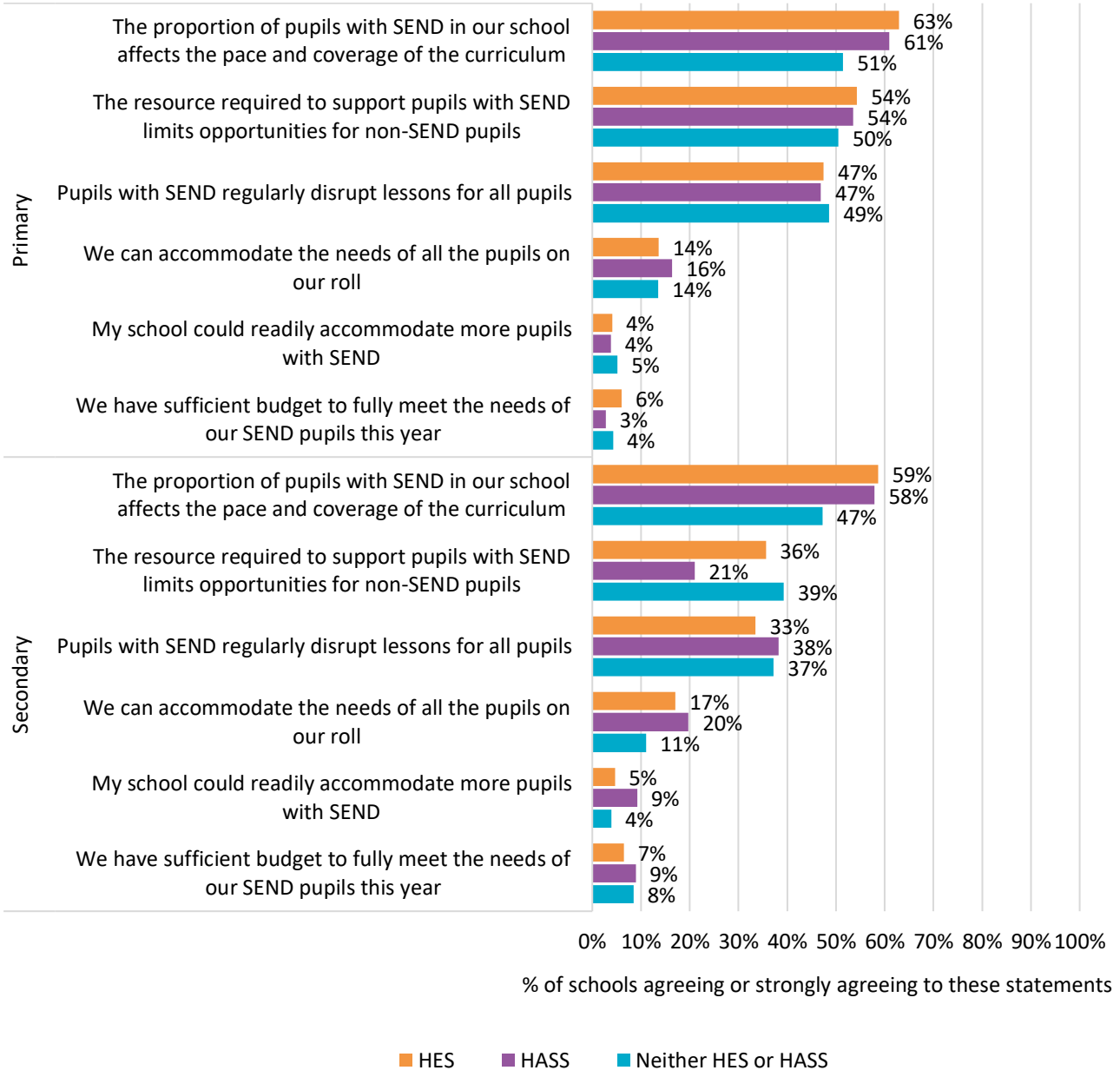
Almost all parents were aware of the workload pressures facing staff and the associated risks to their wellbeing. Some parents expressed concern that overstretched teachers and teaching assistants were less able than previously to provide consistent or timely support, while a small number reported that staff turnover had disrupted their child's learning. Parents of pupils with SEND were particularly concerned about turnover, noting that changes in staff could be highly disruptive for their children and frustrating when new staff lacked familiarity with their needs.

Classroom pressures and challenges for pupils

Case study schools highlighted that the profile of need within classrooms had become increasingly wide-ranging and complex, encompassing pupils with EHCPs, SEN support, emerging or unmet needs, alongside pupils without SEND, and pupils who were high attaining and required appropriate challenge. Teachers described the difficulty of navigating this breadth of need simultaneously within everyday classroom practice. As one middle leader reflected, "*It is very difficult to meet the needs of every child in every lesson".*

Figure 8 presents national survey responses on the perceived impacts of the proportion of pupils with SEND on curriculum, resources and capacity. It shows that many schools report negative effects on curriculum coverage, lesson disruption and opportunities for pupils without SEND, indicating that SEND-related pressures are experienced widely across the system rather than being confined to a subset of schools. Across both primary and secondary phases, a majority of schools reported that the proportion of pupils with SEND affects the pace and coverage of the curriculum, with this perception consistently more pronounced in high-SEND schools. High-SEND schools were also more likely to report that supporting pupils with SEND limits flexibility in curriculum delivery, reflecting the cumulative impact of higher concentrations of need. By contrast, perceived impacts on lesson disruption and on opportunities for pupils without SEND were reported at broadly similar levels across school types, suggesting that these challenges are systemic in nature. Overall, the survey findings suggest that while many SEND-related pressures are shared across schools, higher-SEND contexts intensify their effects on curriculum pace and coverage, closely aligning with the experiences described in the case study schools.

Figure 8: Perceived impacts of SEND on curriculum, resources and capacity, by school type



Source: NFER survey of school leaders and SENCOs, November 2025. Based on 792 responses (primary N = 587, secondary N = 205).

Staff reported that these challenges were compounded where pupils in the same classroom required different, and sometimes conflicting, teaching strategies and forms of support. Some middle leaders described the breadth of need within a single classroom as overwhelming at times, and even highly experienced staff reported moments of uncertainty about how best to support pupils' learning given the breadth and depth of need. One middle leader commented:

> *I'm coming from a wealth of experience and there's times where I just think I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing here, not in terms of the safety of the students, but in terms of their education.*

Senior leaders echoed this concern, suggesting that in some classrooms the normal scaffolding, adaptation and differentiation strategies available to teachers were no longer sufficient.

Case study schools reported that maintaining equitable experiences for all pupils required constant monitoring and adjustment. In classrooms with high concentrations of need, teachers were required to balance highly individualised support with maintaining learning for the wider group. Staff acknowledged that some pupils, including those without SEND or with quieter or more internalised needs, may receive less attention than ideal in these contexts.

Schools and parents perceived a trade-off between meeting the needs of pupils with SEND and protecting provision for other pupils, particularly where staffing and resources were stretched. Survey findings reinforce this tension, with a substantial minority of schools reporting that having higher proportions of pupils with SEND can limit opportunities for pupils without SEND or disrupt lessons (Figure 8). Schools highlighted the challenge of ensuring that staff time was not disproportionately absorbed by supporting pupils with SEND, and of protecting budgets to maintain enrichment and extra-curricular opportunities for all pupils. Several schools linked these pressures to reductions in teaching assistant availability, often described as the result of budget constraints. As a result, parents of pupils without SEND sometimes expressed concern that their child's learning received less attention as teachers attempted to meet a wide range of needs within one classroom, increasingly without the in-class that had previously been available. As one parent explained:

> *It's a time pull on the teacher. They have to make all of the different adaptations for all of the children. And when you've not got any support in the classroom, it's almost impossible for them to give everyone the support they need.*

Both schools and parents agreed that overstretched staff and SEND provision risked the dilution of support, with all pupils receiving less attention than ideal. Schools noted that maintaining equity of experience for all pupils required ongoing vigilance and adaptation, particularly in the context of constrained funding and staffing.

Staff also highlighted the constant need to upskill and adapt at speed in response to changing and increasingly complex needs. This was felt to be particularly challenging given limited time and resources. Several staff noted that where pupils' needs went unmet, this could lead to dysregulation, with classroom situations deteriorating rapidly.

Behavioural, safety and wellbeing pressures

Where schools supported high numbers of pupils with SEMH needs, trauma histories or difficulties with regulation, behavioural and safeguarding pressures were reported to escalate. Staff emphasised that the risk of dysregulation increased where multiple pupils with high or interacting needs were educated together, or where needs went unmet due to limited capacity or support.

Across the interviews, staff gave numerous examples of situations where behaviour had escalated to the point of being unsafe for pupils, staff or others. SENCOs and senior leaders described pupils

becoming so dysregulated that behaviour had become violent or aggressive, creating risks that they felt the school did not have the specialist expertise, facilities or resources to manage safely. One senior leader explained:

> *We said at the beginning we couldn't meet need. They've come in, we're doing whatever we can and firefighting where we can, but there has to come a point where the safety of other pupils and adults becomes a priority.*

Another SENCO reflected:

> *Despite the provision that was going in place for him and the specialists that we were pulling on to tweak that provision, we were still getting really unsafe behaviours… as a school, we feel that we cannot keep this child safe at school.*

These situations were often described as the culmination of issues with capacity, complexity of need and unmet support. Staff emphasised that decisions about whether they could continue to meet a pupil's needs were shaped not by a lack of willingness but by their responsibility to safeguard the wider school community.

Teachers and senior leaders described how one pupil's behaviour could quickly trigger dysregulation in others, particularly in classrooms with high numbers of pupils with ASC or ADHD. One senior leader explained that "*most of our classes will have between five and nine pupils who have ASC or ADHD. All it takes is one very high-need pupil to come into that classroom and they can completely explode*". A parent similarly reflected, "*You put ten ADHD kids all having a bad day in a room, it's going to be a melting pot. That's why the systems as a school have to be inclusive and careful*".

Staff described managing situations where behaviour became unsafe for pupils and staff, particularly in practical subjects or during unstructured times. Middle leaders in secondary schools highlighted the heightened safety risks posed when dysregulated behaviour occurred in subjects such as science or design technology. Senior leaders and SENCOs emphasised the emotional intensity of responding to crisis-driven situations, coordinating with external agencies and monitoring vulnerable pupils' wellbeing.

These pressures were reported to be particularly challenging for early career teachers and staff new to the school. One middle leader commented, "*I can imagine certainly for the ECTs and for the younger teachers, it can be incredibly intimidating and difficult to know how to manage those situations. It definitely is scary at times*". Staff emphasised that strong support from senior leaders and SENCOs was vital in protecting both staff and pupil wellbeing.

Many parents were understanding about behaviour incidents, recognising that they can occur in any school, and their primary concern was that incidents were managed effectively and that disruption was minimised. At the same time, some parents of pupils with and without SEND also expressed concern about the impact of other pupils' disruptive and dysregulated behaviour on their child's learning. Some parents described classroom disruption affecting their child's ability to concentrate or make progress, with one parent commenting that "*one child in a class of 30 can end up disrupting the ability of the rest of the class to learn*".

Several parents spoke positively about their school's approach to behaviour management, describing calm and effective responses that limited longer-term impact on pupils. One parent described how repeated incidents were handled in a way that felt reassuring in the short term, while still expressing some uncertainty about longer-term effects on learning. Overall, parents appeared to monitor the frequency, severity and management of behaviour incidents closely. Some did feel that their school needed to do more to prevent learning from being disrupted.

Resource pressures, funding gaps and capacity limits

All case study schools consistently reported that funding failed to match pupil need. Senior leaders and SENCOs described SEND budgets as stretched and, in many cases, running at a deficit that had to be absorbed into schools' core budgets, including in schools with funded resourced provision. One SENCO commented that *"as a school we are kind of bursting at the seams financially from a SEND point of view"*. This mirrors our national survey findings, where funding and resources were identified as the most common major challenge across both primary and secondary schools (see Figure 7).

A key driver of financial pressure identified across schools was the requirement for schools to fund the first £6,000 of provision for each pupil with an EHCP from their notional SEND budget. Senior leaders highlighted that this pressure is intensified in schools with higher concentrations of pupils with EHCPs because the local funding formula used to allocate notional SEND funding does not directly account for clustering effects. As a result, schools with large numbers of pupils with EHCPs face a cumulative £6,000 contribution that represents a substantial proportion of their overall budgets, often leaving only limited additional funding available to implement the provision set out in EHCPs. One SENCO described the scale of this pressure, explaining that:

> *Because we're 30% SEND, we can't pay the first £6,000. We've effectively got what is near enough a quarter of a million pounds black hole in the budget for our school because we're paying the first £6,000 for our 40+ EHCPs*.

Schools also noted that pupils supported through SEN support did not attract additional funding, despite often requiring significant additional staff time and resources.

SENCOs and senior leaders felt that SEND funding rates had not increased in line with inflationary pressures, salary increases or recent rises in national insurance contributions, meaning that funding did not go as far as it once did. As a result, schools reported that they were increasingly unable to afford external specialist support or allocate staffing resources at the level required to meet pupils' needs. Several schools described being faced with difficult ethical decisions about provision. One SENCO working in a school with resourced provision reflected that:

> *We're trying to do a lot with less each sort of financial year… But morally it would be reprehensible to suddenly go release those children back to the mainstream for development.*

Financial pressures were further exacerbated by the need for some schools to fund external alternative provision for pupils unable to access mainstream education. This often came at extremely high cost. One senior leader described overspending £450,000 on alternative provision in a single year, explaining that *"my budget just can't sustain that… I don't get the money from the*

LA… I'm being penalised by keeping those pupils on roll… funding is a huge thing for us. It prevents us being inclusive".

Schools also highlighted significant challenges in securing additional top-up funding from local authorities, often due to financial pressures faced by LAs themselves. SENCOs described spending substantial amounts of time negotiating with LAs and appealing funding decisions, with additional funding often only made available once pupils were already in crisis. One senior leader commented that *"the problem with SEN funding is that you have to fight tooth and nail for it"*. Interviewees reported considerable variability between LAs in the level of funding schools were able to secure, even for pupils with the most complex needs.

In response to these pressures, schools reported being highly strategic and creative in their use of available resources. Many described pooling EHCP funding where possible and drawing on pupil premium (PP) funding to support pupils with SEND who were also eligible for PP. Senior leaders described carefully allocating teaching assistants to maximise coverage across cohorts and placing pupils strategically to enable shared support where needs were aligned. One senior leader explained, *"we do have an overlap of our SEND and PP, so I do use PP money… it's not a lot, but those five hours a week go specifically on interventions for those children"*, while another noted, *"we're very sensible with where we put the SEND children… so one adult can support that cohort in that classroom"*.

Schools also described developing creative solutions to maintain provision where funding was insufficient, including adapting delivery models to reduce costs. While some of these approaches were described positively, senior leaders emphasised that others reflected a state of ongoing crisis management rather than sustainable practice. One SENCO reflected on the impact of financial uncertainty on staffing, explaining that *"that's really hard and it has resulted in staff losses… the only way we manage it is by taking staff on temporary contracts… which is horrible because my staff are phenomenal, and I can't give them reassurance"*.

Across the case study schools, staff reported that a lack of resources and funding was creating a constant state of crisis management and preventing early identification, intervention and support for pupils with SEND. There was a clear sense that schools were being expected to meet increasingly complex needs without corresponding increases in specialist input or funding, compounded by a perceived shortage of specialist placements. Parents echoed these concerns, recognising that while inclusive, high-SEND schools offered substantial benefits, these were often accompanied by tensions and delays due to stretched resources. As one parent commented, *"they just don't have enough resource… they have said they are massively oversubscribed with SEND children"*, while another reflected that *"they can only do the best with the resources they are given… something needs to change much higher up"*. One SENCO summarised the overall pressure on the system, noting that *"we're doing a lot with less each year… the tipping point is going the wrong way"*.

System-level limitations

Senior leaders and SENCOs identified inconsistency in SEND practices at both local and national levels (see Appendix A) as a significant additional barrier to meeting pupils' needs consistently and equitably. They described wide variation in the guidance, thresholds and support provided by

different LAs, and in how SEND processes were interpreted and implemented across schools. This variability was perceived to create inequity for pupils and families, alongside uncertainty for schools attempting to plan provision and allocate resources.

A particular area of concern was the lack of shared understanding of what should be met through ordinarily available provision[13]. SENCOs noted that while some schools implemented extensive support through universal and targeted provision, others pursued EHCPs earlier for pupils with similar profiles of need. This inconsistency was viewed as problematic for families, especially where parents observed children with comparable needs receiving statutory plans and additional funding in other schools. Staff described this as a fundamental system-level issue, as definitions of ordinarily available provision effectively determine thresholds for EHCP assessment, access to statutory entitlements and the level of funding schools receive.

Schools also highlighted variability in the quality, content and realism of EHCPs. SENCOs reported that some plans were produced without sufficient specialist input, reflecting wider shortages of educational psychologists and other professionals. In some cases, EHCPs required substantial revision before they could be implemented effectively, delaying support for pupils. Senior leaders also described EHCPs that specified provision, which was not feasible within their setting, creating tensions with parents seeking full implementation of statutory plans. One senior leader noted that *"EHCPs are all written in wildly different ways, demanding wildly different things… stuff that is not reasonable to be able to offer in a secondary school".*

More broadly, SENCOs and senior leaders emphasised that differences in LA practices meant that securing appropriate support often depended on the school's capacity to navigate complex systems, rather than on pupil need alone. Schools reported frequently having to buy in services that they felt should have been available through the LA, adding further pressure to already stretched SEND budgets. Where schools worked with pupils from multiple LAs, these challenges were intensified, requiring SENCOs to manage several systems simultaneously. As one senior leader explained, *"we actually span pupils from three different local authorities… they all have different systems".*

Parents were also acutely aware of this inconsistency. While many valued their school's inclusive practice, variability in assessment processes, EHCP quality and coordination between education and health services generated anxiety about whether children were receiving fair and timely support. Some parents expressed concern that, in schools with strong universal provision, their child's needs were being met informally but this support was not underpinned by statutory entitlement. For these parents, an EHCP was seen as important not because the school was failing to support their child in the short term, but because it provided formal recognition of need, access to additional resources, and protection at key transition points. This created a perceived tension between effective inclusion through everyday practice and access to formal statutory support.

[13] The concept of ordinarily available provision is grounded in the SEND Code of Practice, 6.15:
'A pupil has SEN where their learning difficulty or disability calls for special educational provision, namely provision different from or additional to that normally available to pupils of the same age. Making higher quality teaching normally available to the whole class is likely to mean that fewer pupils will require such support. Such improvements in whole-class provision tend to be more cost effective and sustainable'.

Inspection and accountability pressures

School leaders highlighted a perceived incompatibility between inclusive practice and the current schools accountability framework. Leaders felt that standard outcome-based measures did not adequately reflect the complexity of high-SEND contexts, particularly where cohorts included large proportions of pupils with EHCPs or significant additional needs. In particular, they pointed to progress and attainment data as areas of concern, noting that these measures could be negatively affected by the inclusion of pupils working significantly below age-related expectations or following highly individualised pathways. As a result, published performance data was sometimes seen as obscuring the progress made by pupils with SEND, while simultaneously lowering headline attainment metrics. This created anxiety about inspection outcomes and was viewed as a potential disincentive for schools to take on higher levels of need.

Senior leaders suggested that this tension influenced strategic decision making across local areas, with some schools becoming increasingly reluctant to admit pupils with SEND due to concerns about performance data and inspection judgements. As one senior leader noted, *"Until the new Ofsted framework absolutely recognises schools like ours for doing the right thing… others will be nervous to take that leap".*

Parental expectations and system-driven pressures

Schools reported that parental expectations around SEND provision had increased markedly. SENCOs noted that where schools were known to be inclusive or had specialist or resourced provision, parents often expected high levels of individualised support that schools were not always able to provide within existing constraints. Staff felt that expectations were sometimes shaped by advice from other schools, professionals or parent networks, which could raise hopes about what mainstream settings could realistically offer.

As a result, schools described navigating frequent and highly sensitive conversations with families, particularly where mainstream placement was unlikely to meet a child's needs. SENCOs expressed concern that parents were not always supported to understand why certain schools were unable to offer places or why specialist provision might be more appropriate. One SENCO reflected that:

> *There seems to be this absolute drive for and entitlement to mainstream all the time, and then parents are really frustrated… when all of these schools are saying no, but nobody's actually told them why.*

These pressures were compounded by inconsistent guidance and communication across the system, which schools felt could create unrealistic expectations and place additional strain on relationships with families. Staff emphasised that clearer, more transparent system-level messaging about thresholds, entitlements and available provision would help reduce conflict and support more constructive engagement with parents.

4.2 Delivering support in high-SEND schools

This section explores how support is delivered in high-SEND case study schools, drawing on a document analysis and national survey evidence. It focuses on day-to-day provision, flexibility and relationships, and provides context for the challenges and benefits discussed elsewhere in this chapter.

SEND policies and inclusivity: what schools' documents tell us

To systematically examine and compare how case study (i.e., 'high-SEND') and comparison schools define, identify, assess, and provide for pupils with SEND, as well as to determine any indications of greater inclusivity within either group, we conducted an analysis of SEND policies and SEN Information Reports from a random sample of 10 case study schools and 10 comparison schools across both the primary and secondary phases. In total, 31 documents were evaluated using a structured qualitative document analysis methodology. Further details can be found in the methodological appendix.

Figure 9: Overall differences in SEND documentation between case study (high-SEND) and comparison schools

Ultimately, the core difference between the two groups lay in emphasis and framing rather than in statutory coverage or stated commitments.

Both the case study and comparison schools demonstrated broadly similar compliance with statutory requirements. All schools covered the expected elements of SEND provision, including identification of need, graduated response, review processes, and engagement with parents. There was no clear difference between the two groups in whether key SEND responsibilities were addressed in policy terms.

However, there were consistent differences in how SEND was described and positioned within schools' documentation:

- Case study high-SEND schools tended to frame SEND as a whole-school, embedded responsibility, closely linked to quality first teaching and inclusive practice. Their documents were often more narrative in style, explaining how processes worked in practice and emphasising shared responsibility between class teachers, SENCOs and senior leaders. Engagement with parents and pupils was more frequently described in relational terms, signalling ongoing dialogue and partnership.
- Comparison schools were more likely to present SEND through a procedural and role-differentiated lens, using standardised or template-based formats. Their documents prioritised clarity and compliance, setting out responsibilities, thresholds and processes in a concise and structured way, but with less contextual explanation of how provision was adapted or developed over time.

These differences were consistent across both primary and secondary schools.

Crucially, the document analysis did not provide evidence that one group of schools was substantively more inclusive in practice than the other.

It is important to note that SEND policies and SEN Information Reports are:

- Designed to describe systems and intentions.
- Often shaped by statutory guidance, templates, and accountability requirements.
- Not direct measures of lived experience, classroom practice, or pupil outcomes.

As a result:

- More inclusive language or more detailed narrative description cannot be assumed to equate to more inclusive practice.
- Conversely, more concise or procedural documentation does not imply less inclusive provision.

What support looks like in high-SEND schools: national survey evidence

To better understand how SEND provision may differ across schools, our survey presented respondents with three scenarios reflecting different profiles of pupil need (Figure 10). Schools were asked about the types of support they would typically provide in each case.

Figure 10: Pupil scenarios used in the survey of school leaders and SENCOs

EHCP (Autism Spectrum Condition)

Ethan is a 10-year-old boy in Year 6 (primary) / 11-year-old boy in Year 7 (secondary)

- He has good attendance, positive relationships with staff, and age-related attainment
- He has a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC) and an EHCP that identifies support needs related to his emotional regulation and behaviour
- He can be anxious, highly alert to his surroundings, and finds changes to routine challenging, which sometimes leads to frustration or conflict with peers
- Structured environments with clear expectations help him engage successfully
- Ethan's parents hope he will continue in mainstream education with appropriate support

EHCP (Moderate Learning Disability and Visual Impairment)

Ayaan is a 10-year-old girl in Year 6 (primary) / 11-year-old girl in Year 7 (secondary)

- She is working below age-related expectations
- She has an EHCP that identifies moderate learning difficulties and a mild visual impairment
- Ayaan benefits from tasks being broken into smaller, manageable steps and sometimes needs breaks or adjustments to help her engage with learning
- She is increasingly aware of the difference between her attainment and that of her peers, which can cause frustration and affect her confidence in class

SEN Support (Anxiety and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD))

Kwame is a 10-year-old boy in Year 6 (primary) / 11-year-old boy in Year 7 (secondary)

- He is bright, curious, and full of ideas, but in class he often finds it difficult to remain seated and can be easily distracted
- He experiences high levels of anxiety and may worry about making mistakes, which can occasionally lead to distress or refusal to participate

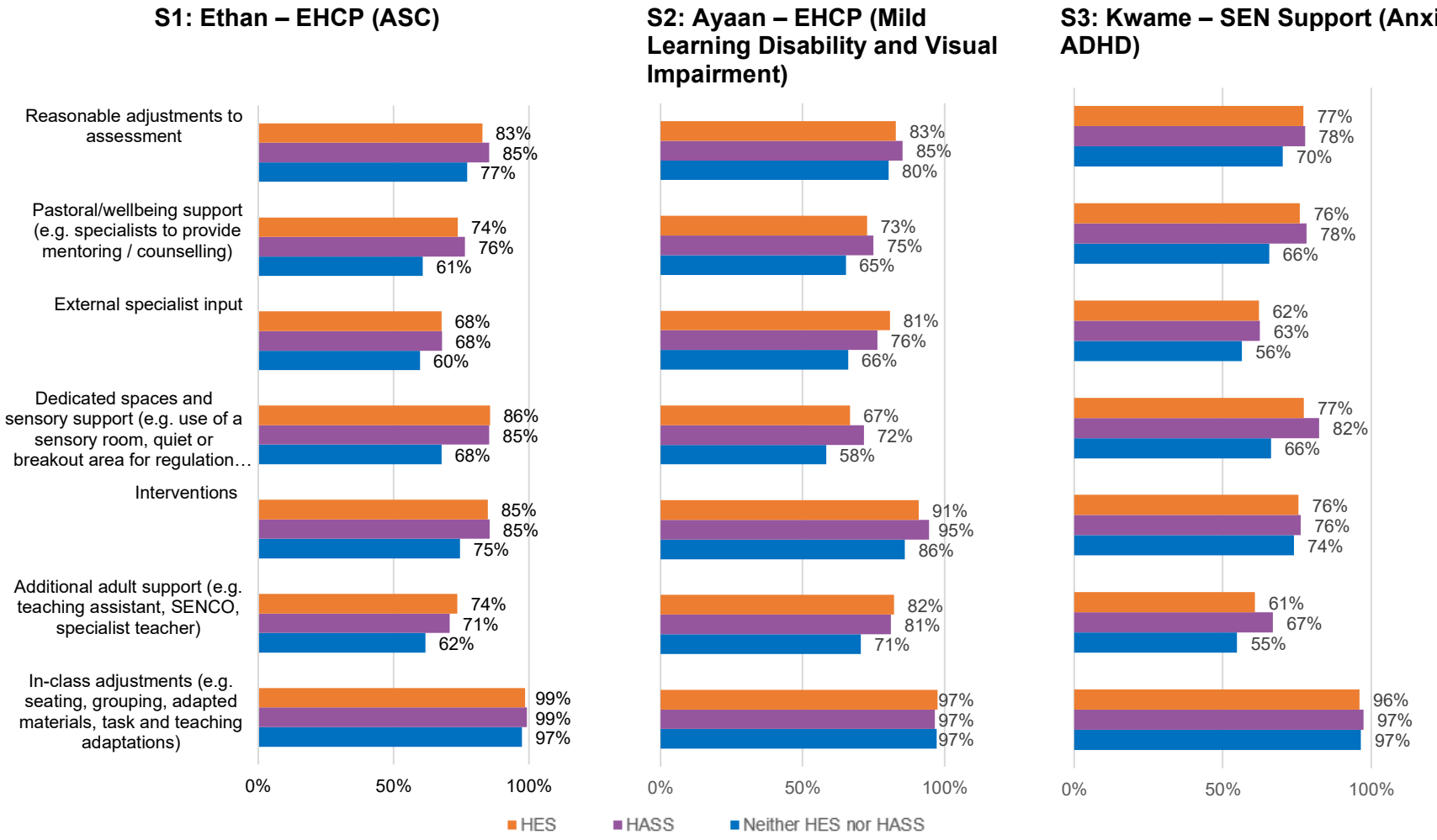
- By the end of the school day, Kwame often feels exhausted from trying to manage both his restlessness and worries
- Parental support is inconsistent, and he has additional learning needs that require consideration in school

Figure 11 and Figure 12 show that all types of schools (HES, HASS and neither) reported offering a broadly similar range of support to the pupils described, including additional adult support, curriculum adaptation and pastoral input. However, although differences were generally not statistically significant, high-SEND schools (HES and HASS) were consistently more likely than other schools to report being able to provide multiple forms of support across all scenarios. For example, in primary, between 61 and 82 per cent of HES reported being able to provide additional adult support across the three cases, compared to 55-71 per cent of non-high-SEND schools.

Figure 13 shows that HES and HASS were significantly more likely than other schools to report that all or almost all of their teachers had the skills and knowledge to make effective reasonable adjustments. For example, around one in five secondary HES and HASS reported that all teachers could support Kwame – a pupil with SEN Support for anxiety and ADHD – compared with around one in twenty other schools. While high-SEND schools in both phases show stronger capability than other schools, the contrast is more pronounced in secondary schools. This reinforces concerns about uneven system-wide preparedness as more pupils with additional needs are expected to be supported in mainstream secondary settings.

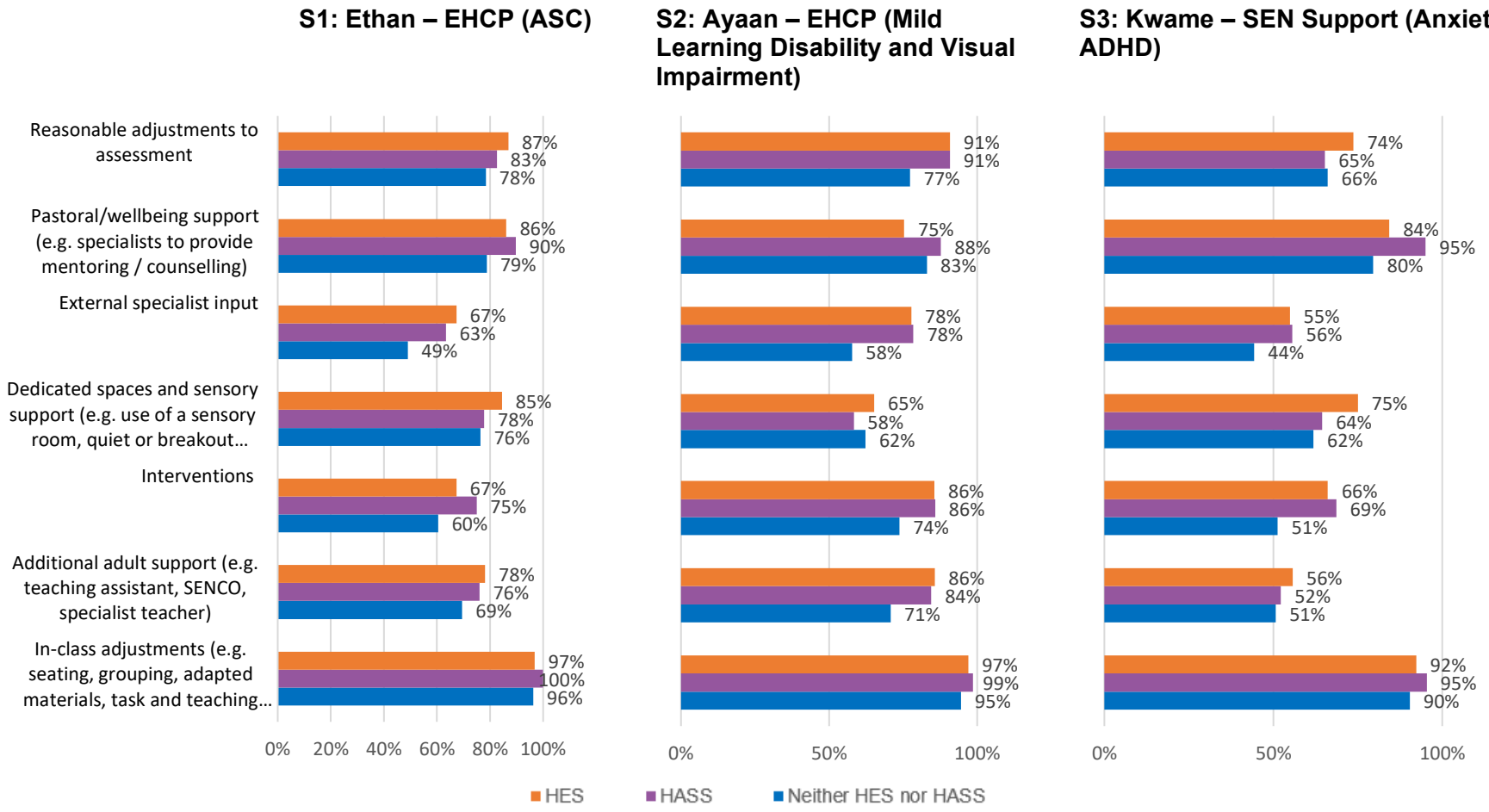
Taken together, these findings suggest that higher-SEND schools may benefit from more consistent expertise and shared practice across staff. These patterns help explain both the strengths and the pressures explored earlier in this chapter.

Figure 11: Forms of support primary schools would typically be able to offer pupils in each scenario, by school type



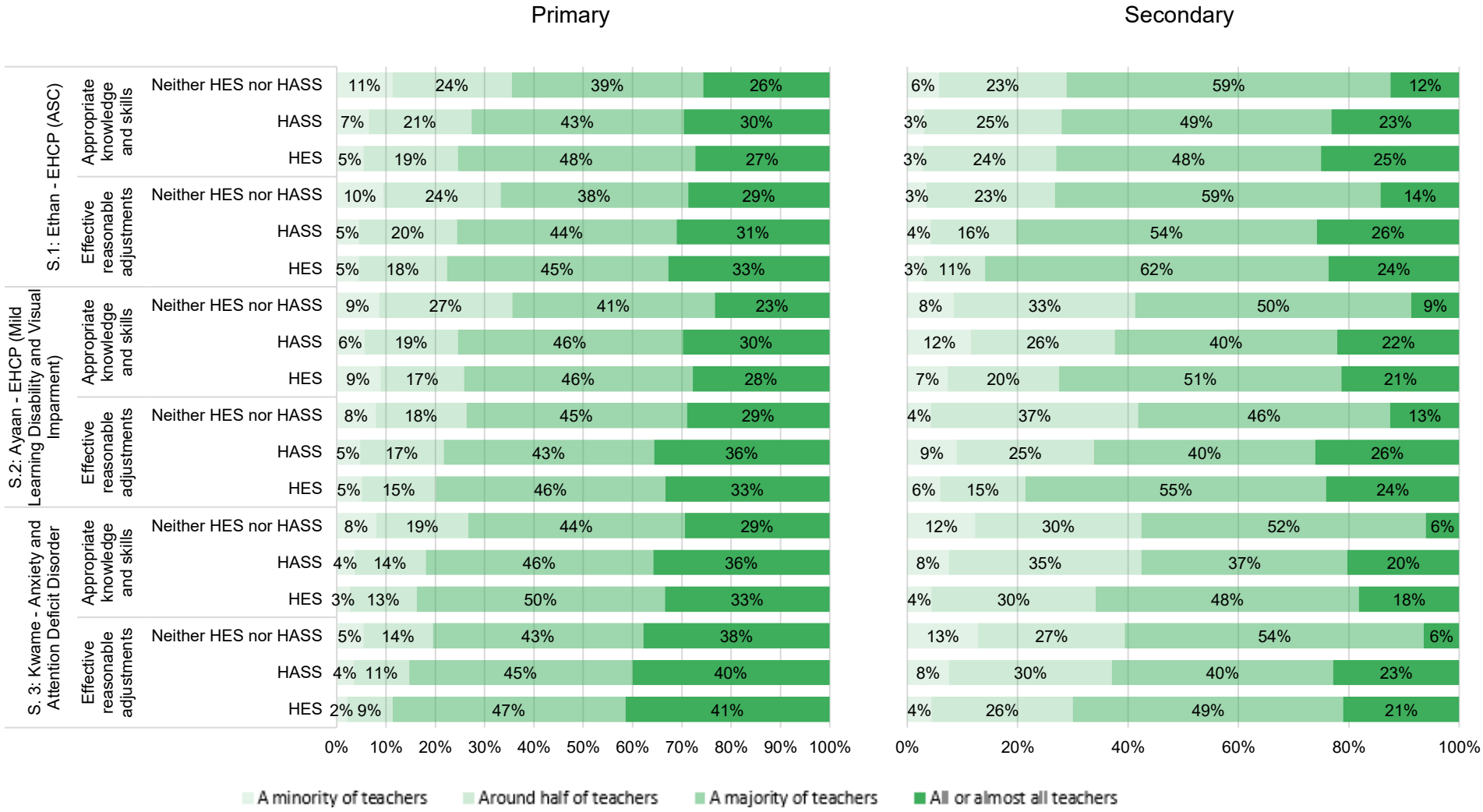
Source: NFER survey of school leaders and SENCOs, November 2025. Based on 588 responses from respondents in primary schools.

Figure 12: Forms of support secondary schools would typically be able to offer pupils in each scenario, by school type



Source: NFER survey of school leaders and SENCOs, November 2025. Based on 204 responses from respondents in secondary schools.

Figure 13: Proportion of teachers able to provide different types of support, by scenario and school phase



Source: NFER survey of school leaders and SENCOs, November 2025. Based on 800 responses (primary N = 595, secondary N = 205).

4.3 Benefits and perceived impacts of SUs and RP

Inclusion bases are a key part of the government's proposed SEND reforms, building on existing models such as SUs and RP. As outlined in Section 2, the presence of an SU or RP is correlated with being identified as a high-SEND school, and schools report that these bases can act as a draw for pupils with SEND. This section explores the benefits, challenges and system implications of SUs and RP, drawing on national survey and case study evidence.

National survey evidence

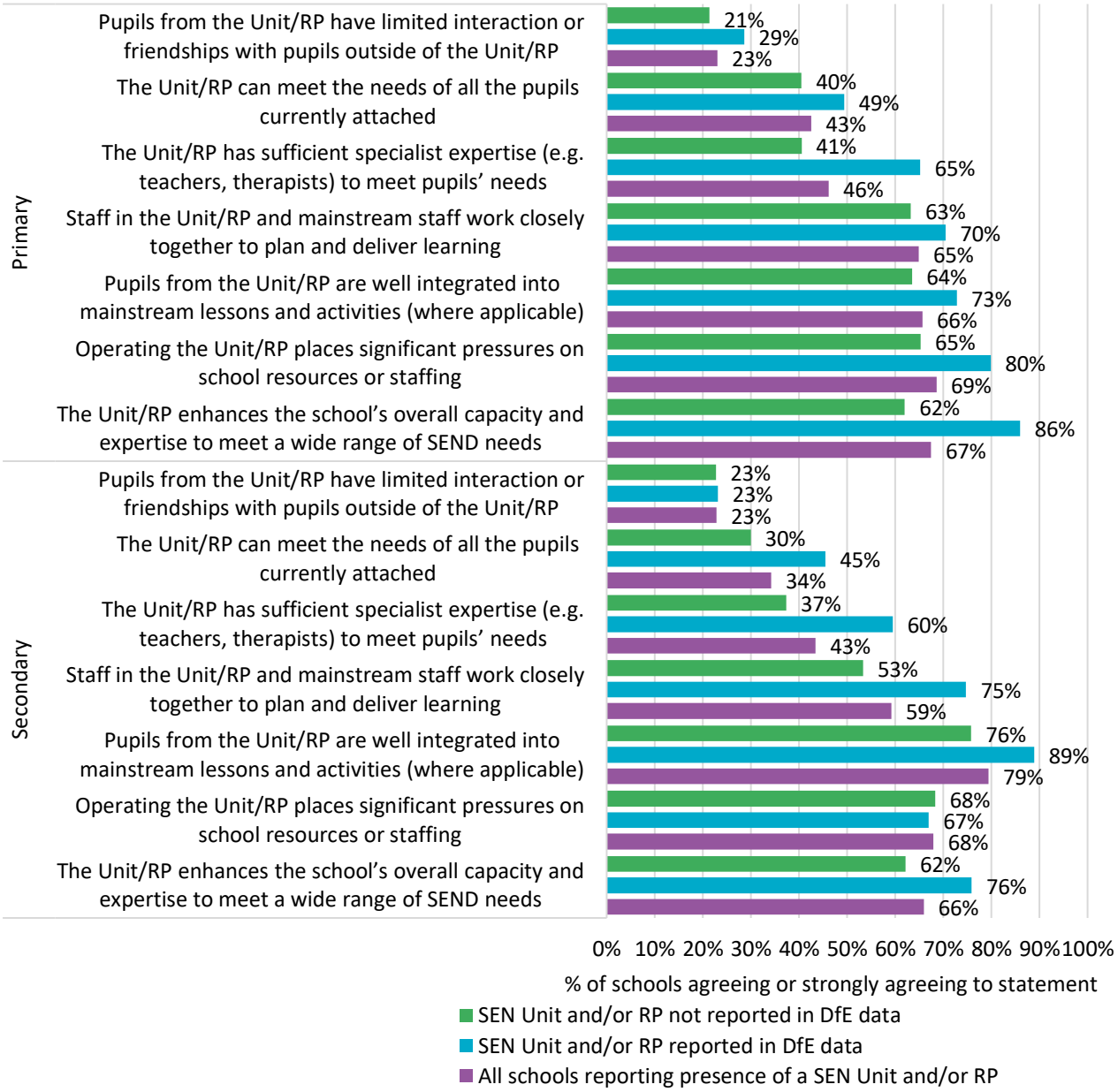
Figure 14 presents schools' perceptions of their SUs and RP, broken down by phase and whether schools have an officially recognised unit. According to DfE statistics, around 10 per cent of primary schools and around 20 per cent of secondary schools currently have an SU and/or RP. However, our survey suggests that a much larger proportion of schools consider themselves to be operating some form of inclusion base, even where this is not formally funded or recognised.

Overall, the survey paints a mixed picture of SUs and RP. Around two thirds of schools agreed that this provision enhanced their overall capacity and expertise to support a wide range of SEND. This figure was higher among schools with an officially recognised unit, at 86 per cent of primaries and 76 per cent of secondaries, compared with 62 per cent among schools without formal recognition.

At the same time, only a third of secondary schools and fewer than half of primary schools felt confident that their provision could meet the needs of all the pupils accessing it. Integration between SUs/RP and the main school also appeared uneven. Over a third of schools reported weak joint working between base staff and mainstream teachers, and around a quarter reported that pupils attending the base had limited interaction or friendships with peers outside the provision. Two thirds of primary schools felt that pupils attending the base were well integrated into mainstream lessons and activities, rising to just under 80 per cent in secondary schools.

Resource pressures were also evident. Over two thirds of schools reported that operating a SU or RP placed significant pressure on staffing and resources. Without strong integration and sufficient support, there is a risk that inclusion bases could expand capacity without fully realising the wider ambition of strengthening inclusive mainstream education.

Figure 14: Schools agreeing or strongly agreeing with statements about their SEN Unit (SU) and/or Resourced Provision (RP), by provision type and phase



Source: NFER survey of school leaders and SENCOs, November 2025. Based on 444 responses (primary N = 288, secondary N = 156).

Case study evidence

Of the 15 case study schools, four reported hosting specialist provision designed to support pupils with EHCPs. While the contexts of these schools varied, interviewees' descriptions of operating SUs or RP were highly consistent. Their accounts provide insight into how such provision shapes staffing, resourcing and the wider functioning of the school.

Staffing and workload: intensification of SEND leadership and teaching

Interviewees consistently reported that hosting a resource base significantly reshaped staffing requirements and workloads. SENCOs described the need for higher staffing ratios than in schools without specialist provision, including additional teaching assistants, higher level teaching assistants (HLTAs[14]), communication specialists and pastoral staff. In some schools, leadership structures had expanded to include assistant SENCOs or inclusion managers.

Staff also described high levels of emotional labour. Supporting pupils with complex trauma, dysregulation or significant communication needs placed sustained emotional and psychological demands on staff, contributing to fatigue and, in some cases, sickness absence. SENCOs also highlighted the need for continuous professional development in areas such as autism practice, sensory regulation, trauma-informed approaches and alternative communication systems.

Workload pressures were particularly acute for SENCOs. Interviewees described managing large numbers of EHCP annual reviews alongside multi-agency coordination, safeguarding, crisis response and behaviour support. Several emphasised that SENCO workload in schools with specialist provision was qualitatively different from that in mainstream schools without bases.

Overall, schools hosting SUs or RP were described as requiring a resilient, adaptable and well-supported workforce, at a time of significant recruitment and retention challenges.

Resource pressures and funding gaps: “We don't get fully funded for children”

Across schools hosting SUs or RP, SENCOs emphasised a persistent mismatch between the level and complexity of need associated with running specialist provision and the funding available to meet that need. This was described as a structural pressure rather than a temporary challenge. Interviewees highlighted that EHCP funding bands often did not reflect the higher staffing ratios, specialist skills and leadership time required to operate a unit or RP safely and effectively, particularly where schools supported a concentration of high-cost pupils whose needs exceeded standard funding allocations.

Schools described pooling EHCP funding across pupils attached to the unit or RP to create workable staffing models, but these arrangements were often characterised as fragile. SENCOs also referred to recurrent in-year deficits and unplanned costs specific to specialist provision, including sickness cover for skilled staff, therapeutic input not fully covered by funding, and specialist equipment or adaptations. These pressures were not framed solely in financial terms. Many SENCOs described a moral tension between maintaining the viability of the unit or RP and their duty of care to pupils, noting that schools were frequently “doing more than we are funded for”.

Some schools described having previously operated enhanced or specialist provision that they were unable to sustain. One junior school had established an internally run unit known as *“The Nest”* to support pupils with EHCPs. Although demand was high and the provision ran successfully

[14] A Higher Level Teaching Assistant is a school-based support professional who works under the direction of a qualified teacher but takes on more advanced and instructional responsibilities than a typical teaching assistant.

for two years, it was ultimately closed due to a lack of funding. This illustrates how LA funding decisions can directly constrain schools' ability to maintain specialist provision, even where demand exists and schools have the expertise to meet it.

Overall, school interviewees with SUs and RP widely experienced current funding arrangements as misaligned with levels of need, requiring schools to balance financial risk against the needs of vulnerable pupils.

Systemic challenges affecting schools with SUs/RP

Beyond day-to-day operational pressures, SENCOs identified a set of systemic challenges that disproportionately affected schools hosting SUs or RP. These included long waits for assessment and specialist input, inconsistent LA thresholds for EHCPs and placements, and a high bureaucratic burden associated with funding and statutory processes. Interviewees also highlighted the lack of specialist places, which was seen to push unsuitable placements into mainstream schools, and the uneven distribution of pupils with SEND across local systems. Several felt that inspection frameworks did not adequately recognise the complexity of operating specialist provision within mainstream settings.

Educational and social opportunities: inclusion as a whole-school strength

Despite these challenges, interviewees also described significant benefits associated with hosting SUs or RP. Staff reported that specialist provision helped to foster a deeply inclusive school culture in which difference and disability were normalised, supporting empathy and acceptance among pupils. Expertise developed within the resource base was also described as strengthening whole-school practice, with strategies such as visual timetables, structured routines and sensory regulation benefiting a wider group of pupils.

Interviewees also reported improved outcomes for pupils with complex needs, including pupils who might otherwise have experienced exclusion, out-of-area placements or disengagement from learning. Finally, hosting specialist provision was seen to strengthen multi-agency working, with staff developing confidence in working with speech and language therapists, educational psychologists, CAMHS and social care.

5. Conclusion: what 'Every Child Achieving and Thriving' gets right, and what it still needs to confront

This report shows that the stark inequalities in the distribution of SEND pupils across England's mainstream schools is not a marginal feature of the system: it is a predictable outcome of how the mainstream school system, statutory duties and local capacity constraints interact. Our analysis has revealed that primary schools in the highest EHCP-rate quartile have around six times as many pupils with EHCPs as those in the lowest quartile (with a fivefold difference among secondary schools).

The case studies and national survey help to explain why. We find evidence of a **structural steering effect**: pupils are pulled towards schools with established inclusive reputations and expertise, and pushed towards them when specialist capacity, statutory processes and placement sufficiency are under strain. At the same time, the evidence suggests that some schools actively avoid developing inclusive reputations or enrolling pupils with SEND, often because of concerns about capacity, accountability pressures or the sustainability of provision. Over time, these dynamics concentrate responsibility in a small number of schools, creating the 'strength and strain' trade-off described in Chapter 4, where high-SEND schools experience benefits in terms of stronger inclusive cultures and enhanced staff expertise alongside pressures that many schools describe as difficult to sustain.

Against this evidence base, the Schools White Paper *Every Child Achieving and Thriving* is right to place inclusion and earlier support at the centre of school reform. However, the reforms set out in the white paper do not appear to support high-SEND schools by directly reducing the pressures they face. Instead, they may help more indirectly, at a systemic level, by making it normal and expected for *more* schools to meet a wider range of need. Over time, this could reduce the extent to which high-SEND schools act as default destinations for pupils with SEND.

Policies that strengthen mainstream capability, for example through clearer expectations for ordinarily available provision, workforce development, and the expansion of in-school specialist provision through inclusion bases, could help to rebalance responsibility between local schools, provided they are implemented with sufficient funding, specialist input and effective local planning.

Whether the white paper will actually encourage more schools to become meaningfully inclusive depends on whether the system is prepared to acknowledge a hard truth surfaced repeatedly in this research: in some contexts, taking a larger share of pupils with SEND, particularly those with high and complex needs, may be associated with lower headline attainment and progress outcomes, even where schools are delivering high-quality inclusive practice. If accountability and inspection continue to privilege narrow performance metrics, the incentives that drive 'structural steering' will remain: some schools will work to avoid becoming known as inclusive, while others will continue to absorb disproportionate demand. The introduction of a stronger inclusion focus in inspection is therefore a necessary step, but our findings suggest it may be insufficient if it only assesses how well schools support the pupils they already have on roll.

Evidence on pupil movements indicates that patterns of mobility can reinforce concentration, raising a further policy question that sits squarely within the white paper's inclusion ambitions: are school intakes representative of local need? To address unevenness at source, system leaders

should consider monitoring the representativeness of SEND intakes across groups of local schools (including in-year movement), and strengthening expectations that inclusion is reflected not only in provision, but also in admissions practices and shared local responsibility for meeting need.

In summary, *Every Child Achieving and Thriving* sets a direction of travel that is broadly consistent with what this study suggests is needed: earlier support, stronger mainstream capacity, and a system that takes inclusion seriously. But without explicit action on incentives, accountability and the fairness of intakes, high-SEND schools are likely to continue carrying a disproportionate share of risk and responsibility. The recommendations that follow set out practical steps for policymakers and schools to reduce the uneven distribution of pupils with SEND, strengthen inclusive capacity, and make inclusion sustainable across the mainstream system.

5.1 Recommendations for policymakers and system leaders

Our findings suggest that reducing the unequal distribution of pupils with SEND and making inclusion sustainable will require coordinated action across funding, capacity, accountability and system oversight. We propose the following priorities for policymakers and system leaders.

- **Monitor the distribution of pupils with SEND and prioritise a more even spread across schools to support the white paper's ambition for 'local' suitable places.** The white paper's focus on access to a suitable place in a local school will not be met while pupils with SEND continue to cluster in a subset of settings. Trusts and LAs should therefore routinely monitor the distribution of pupils with EHCPs and SEN Support across schools within local areas (including in-year movement) and use this information to identify where intakes appear persistently unrepresentative of local need.
- **Align accountability and inspection with sustainable inclusion so that incentives match the white paper's inclusion agenda.** Although the white paper and Ofsted's new inclusion focus signal a shift towards prioritising inclusive practice, our evidence suggests there are misaligned incentives which contribute to the 'structural steering effect'. For example, leaders reported a perceived attainment–inclusion tension that can discourage schools from admitting and supporting higher-need pupils. If schools are expected to admit and support pupils with a wider range of needs, inspection and performance measures should more clearly value inclusive practice, appropriate pathways and meaningful progress for pupils with SEND, alongside outcomes for other pupils.
- **The Department for Education (DfE) should commission ongoing evaluation of inclusion bases to inform guidance, support improvement, and avoid the replication of weak or unsustainable models at scale.** Our findings on schools' experiences of SEN units and resourced provision suggest this is urgent because integration is currently uneven. Some schools report weak joint working between base and mainstream staff and, in a minority, limited pupil interaction/friendships across the base–mainstream boundary. Over two thirds of schools also reported staffing and resource pressure from operating a unit/RP.
- **Publish clear, evidence-based guidance for implementation and oversight of inclusion bases tailored to different stakeholders.** Drawing on the newly created evidence on inclusion bases (see above), the DfE should publish practical guidance that sets clear

expectations for how these bases should operate within mainstream schools to avoid poorly integrated parallel provision. Guidance should be tailored for: schools and trusts (covering things like design, staffing, integration routines, pathways and decision-making), local authorities (place planning, funding, commissioning and information-sharing), and Ofsted (inspection expectations and indicators). It should include explicit expectations for joint working and shared capability-building (so expertise is not siloed), and for monitoring pupils' academic, social and wellbeing outcomes, as well as their participation in mainstream learning and wider school life where appropriate.

- **Be explicit that mainstream schools, including inclusion bases, cannot meet every pupil's needs, and plan sufficient specialist places accordingly.** Case study and survey evidence suggests that, even in highly inclusive schools, there is a small group of pupils whose needs are so severe and complex that mainstream settings cannot meet them safely or effectively, even with an inclusion base. Policymakers and LAs should therefore treat specialist provision, including special schools, as an essential part of an inclusive local system to avoid inappropriate mainstream placements becoming the default when specialist capacity is scarce.
- **Where integration and inclusion remain uneven, funding needs to better match patterns of need across schools so that inclusive practice is sustainable, not goodwill-based.** Our findings show that higher levels of need often cluster in particular mainstream schools, creating cumulative staffing and resource pressures that are not reflected in current funding arrangements. Schools also reported that pupils on SEN Support frequently require substantial additional resource without corresponding funding. If the white paper's commitment to an adequately resourced system is to be realised, policymakers should review mainstream funding for high needs and SEN Support so it better tracks both pupil need and concentration effects and ensure reforms do not incentivise exclusion or discourage inclusive admissions.

5.2 Recommendations for schools and trusts

While many drivers of SEND concentration sit at system level, schools and trusts can take practical steps to strengthen inclusive practice and to reduce the extent to which inclusion depends on staff goodwill. The recommendations below focus on actions that are within schools' and trusts' influence, while recognising that many require enabling support and resources.

- **Embed inclusion as a whole-school priority, in line with the white paper's expectation that every local school will meet more need.** This research finds that the concentration of pupils with SEND is driven in part by a 'structural steering effect', where some schools become known as places that "will make it work" while others avoid developing a SEND-inclusive reputation. To counter this, senior leaders and governors/trusts should make inclusion a non-negotiable core priority, with clear ownership and routine scrutiny. All schools should build inclusion into curriculum design and review, behaviour policy (including reasonable adjustments), staffing and timetable decisions, and staff professional development and coaching.
- **Protect and distribute SEND leadership capacity to sustain 'ordinarily available provision' and avoid crisis-driven delivery.** Case study SENCOs and leaders described SEND leadership as characterised by constant problem-solving and crisis response, alongside

substantial administrative burden linked to EHCP processes, with reliance on staff working beyond their contracted hours. In addition to ensuring that all teachers are teachers of pupils with SEND, senior leaders should treat protected SENCO leadership time as a core capacity decision (reviewed against cohort need), ringfence administrative support for statutory processes, and build a distributed SEND leadership model, linked to school size and need (for example, assistant SENCO or inclusion lead roles), so expertise is not siloed. They should also establish clear routines for triage, assess–plan–do–review and multi-agency coordination, and define internal thresholds and escalation routes. This is particularly important in contexts where clustering creates heightened behavioural or safeguarding risks.

- **Use data-informed routines to strengthen early identification and the graduated response by supporting pupils early, before SEND escalate.** Our findings show that SEND identification is not purely a technical exercise: schools vary in terms of thresholds for and access to screening, and capacity constraints and external delays can mean need is recognised late or inconsistently (particularly for pupils who mask or at transition points). This aligns with the Government's consultation, which acknowledges variable practice in identifying SEND and the need for higher-quality screening tools. To reduce late or inconsistent identification and support, schools and trusts should adopt a shared, data-informed identification routine. This could include: (i) baseline screening on entry and at key transitions; (ii) clear processes for handling teacher and parent concerns; (iii) agreed monitoring categories for emerging/unclear need, with time-limited interventions; and (iv) a scheduled assess–plan–do–review cycle (with named ownership) that tests what is working, escalates support where necessary, and avoids both under- and over-identification. These steps could be incorporated into the new SEND Code of Practice and should be supported by timely access to appropriate screening tools and specialist advice, and by regular SEND review meetings so decisions do not depend on individual staff knowledge or availability.

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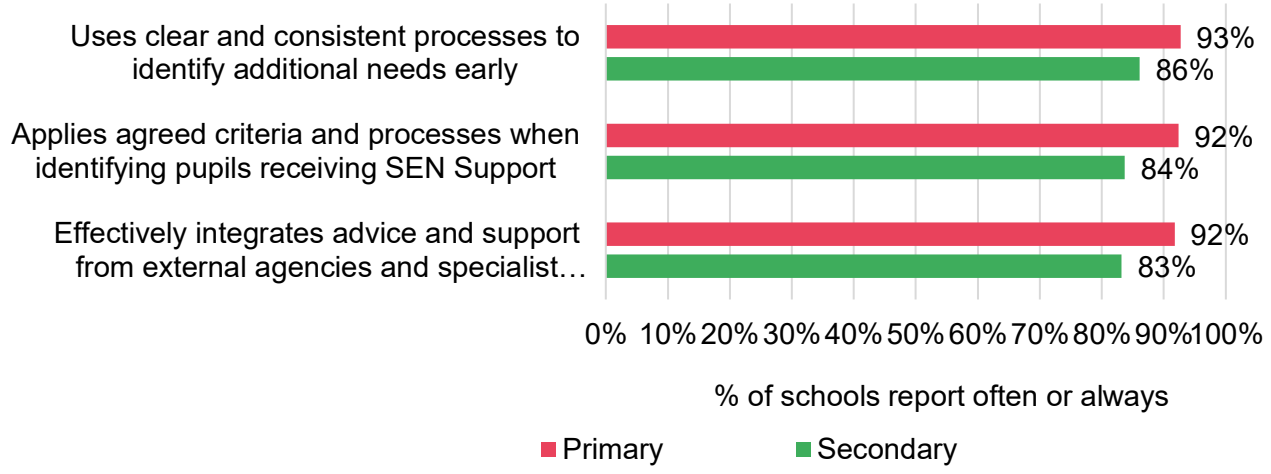
A.1 Appendix: Schools' SEND identification practices

Variation in schools' approaches to identifying pupils with SEND has been discussed in the main body of this report as potentially exaggerating the uneven distribution of pupils with SEND across schools. However, our research also generated a much wider set of insights into identification practices, processes and challenges that extend beyond the study's core research questions. These findings provide valuable contextual and operational detail on how identification operates in practice but are not central to explaining the concentration of pupils with SEND across schools. For this reason, we present this material in the appendix, where it can be accessed by readers seeking a more detailed account of identification processes, without detracting from the main explanatory narrative of the report.

A.1.1. National survey evidence

Nationally, variation in schools' and LAs' approaches to identifying pupils for SEND support is likely to be contributing to differences in reported SEND prevalence between schools. This section explores how schools approach identification, and the extent to which this differs between schools based on insights from our national survey and case studies. Figure 15 presents schools' perceptions of their processes for identifying SEND needs. It shows that most schools report often or always using clear and consistent process to identifying additional needs early (at 93 per cent of secondaries and 86 per cent of primaries), applying agreed criteria and processes when identifying pupils receiving SEN support (at 92 per cent and 84 per cent respectively), and effectively integrating specialist advice (at 92 per cent and 83 per cent respectively). Comparing across school types, HES and HASS were generally slightly more likely to report often or always using a consistent and effective approach, albeit differences were not significantly different.

Figure 15: School perceptions of processes for identifying SEND needs, by phase

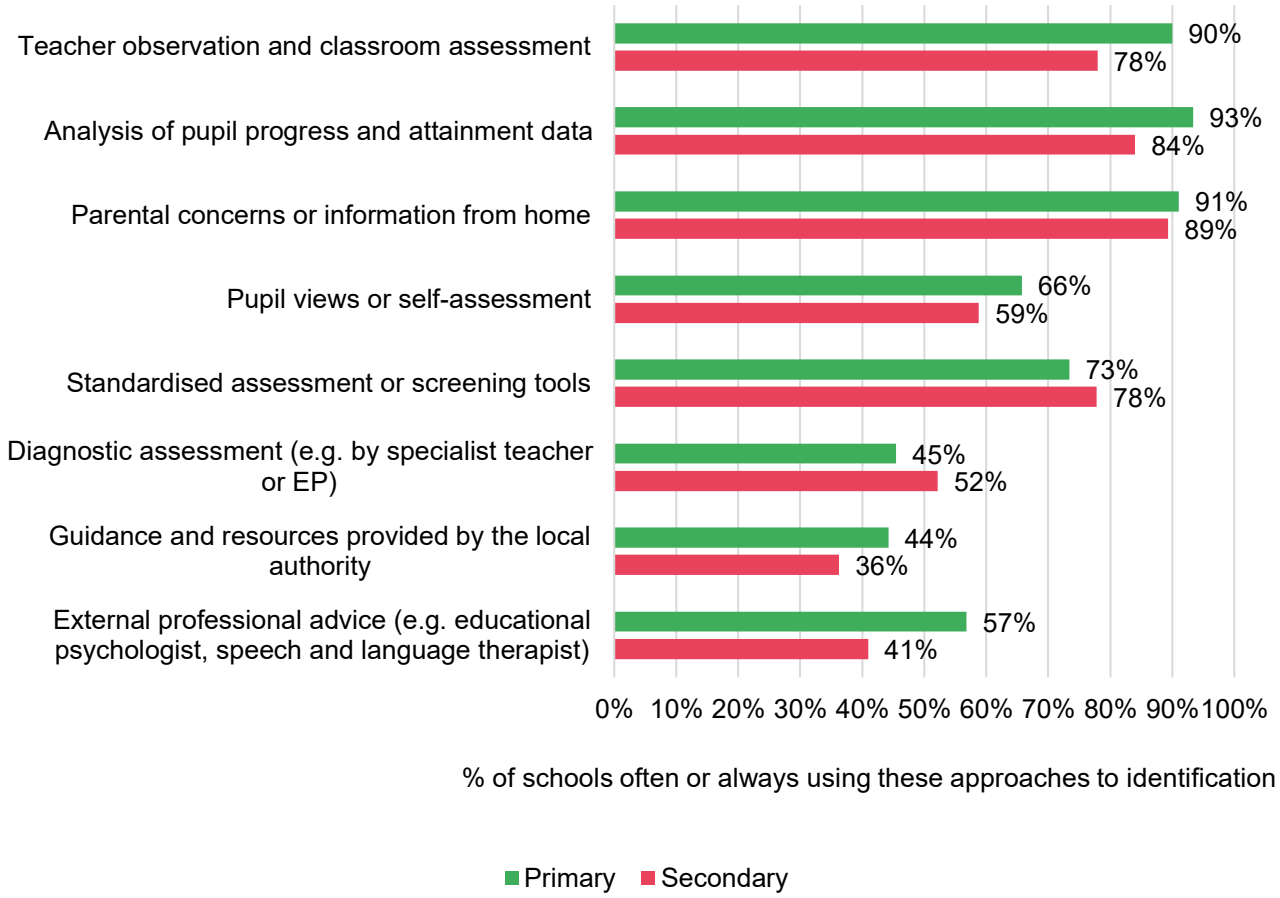


Source: NFER survey of school leaders and SENCOs, November 2025. Based on 778 responses (primary N = 576, secondary N = 202).

Schools report drawing on a wide range of data to identify SEND as presented in Figure 16. They were most likely to report often or always drawing on teacher observations (at 90 per cent of primaries and 78 per cent of secondaries), pupil attainment data (at 93 per cent of primaries and

84 per cent of secondaries) and/or parental concerns/information (at 91 per cent of primaries and 89 per cent of secondaries) to inform identification. Primary schools tended to report drawing on a wider range of data types than secondaries; notably, they were significantly more likely to draw on external professional advice (57 per cent compared to 41 per cent in secondaries). This may partly be due to primaries being less likely to have internal specialist SEND expertise.

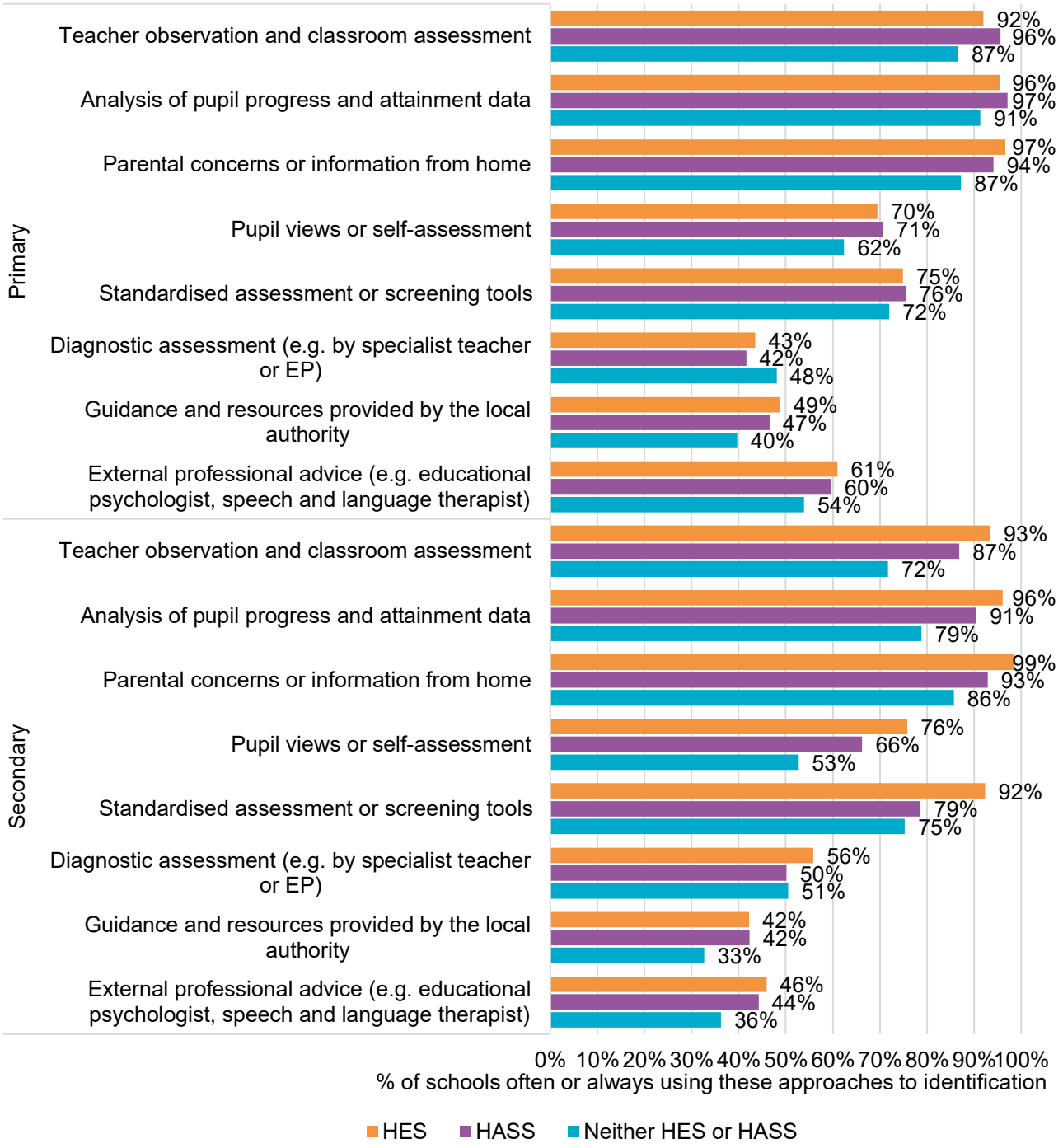
Figure 16: Different data schools use for identifying SEND needs, by phase



Source: NFER survey of school leaders and SENCOs, November 2025. Based on 800 responses (primary N = 595, secondary N = 205).

Comparing across school types, Figure 17 highlights that, while primary HES and HASS were slightly more likely to say they often or always use different data for identifying needs, differences between school types at primary are generally small and statistically insignificant. However, differences between school types are more apparent at secondary. HES secondaries are significantly more likely than non-HES and HASS secondaries to report often or always using different data to identify SEND needs. For example, HES secondaries were more likely to report using standardised assessments or screening tools (at 92 per cent compared to 75 per cent of other schools). Further differences in identification approaches between school types were identified through the case study research, outlined below.

Figure 17: Different data schools use for identifying SEND needs, by school type and phase



Source: NFER survey of school leaders and SENCOs, November 2025. Based on 800 responses (primary N = 595, secondary N = 205).

A.1.2. Case study evidence

Across our sample of high-SEND case study schools and comparison schools, interviewees described using different thresholds, criteria, and processes for recognising and recording need. These differences appeared to be shaped by local practice, resourcing, and professional judgement. As a result, pupils with similar profiles may be identified and recorded as needing SEN Support in some schools but not in others, leading to variation in SEND numbers that reflects differences in identification practice rather than underlying levels of need.

Multi-layered and data-informed identification

In high-SEND case study schools, SENCOs and senior leaders described multi-layered, data-informed systems to support early identification of SEND. Most emphasised regularly reviewing and refining these approaches, for example strengthening identification in areas of emerging need. Identification typically drew on both quantitative and qualitative evidence, including baseline assessments on entry (e.g. reading, spelling and cognitive tests) alongside structured observation. Some schools adopted more innovative approaches; in one, children were not placed into fixed classes initially but grouped flexibly to support early assessment. As one SENCO explained: *"we group them differently each day so that we can see who they work well with… that's a really good indicator for us that there might be ones to watch."*

Schools reported using multiple tools and processes to monitor pupils' progress, outcomes, behaviour and attendance to ensure they maintain an in-depth and up-to-date holistic understanding of pupils' needs. These tools include formative assessments, screenings and teacher observations. Some case study schools reported using early screening pathways, including speech and language assessments, phonological testing, or whole-cohort cognitive tools (e.g., GL Assessment's Exact or New Group Reading Test (NGRT)). For example, in one school, all nursery and foundation pupils received a one-to-one speech and language screening to ensure any early difficulties in these areas were identified and supported as quickly as possible.

Many schools used a dashboard or created profiles for each pupil to log information about pupils and build their understanding of their needs. These dashboards also fed into schools' plan-do-review cycles and were a core tool that teachers drew on to stay informed on the needs of their pupils and any recommendations on how best to support each pupil. In addition, many of the case study schools incorporated termly or half-termly meetings between senior leaders and middle leaders to ensure all key members of staff were aware of pupils' needs and to ensure the prompt identification of individuals in need of new support or changes to their existing support.

Staff training and clear referral processes were seen as central to effective identification. Teachers and middle leaders were encouraged to raise concerns, often through structured referral systems, enabling SENCOs and SEND teams to assess pupils and initiate appropriate support. Strong communication, often described as an "open door" approach, further supported this process. Many schools also had formal parent referral routes, with form tutors acting as a key point of contact. Together, these approaches enabled earlier and more nuanced identification than reliance on any single source of information.

However, leaders highlighted capacity constraints, particularly within SEND teams, and delays from external services as key barriers. There was also some evidence that case study schools had more developed identification systems than comparison schools, where inconsistencies were more commonly reported. In some cases, workload pressures had led to prioritisation of pupils with more visible academic difficulties, risking under-identification of those who mask need.

Comparison schools were more likely to report limited access to screening and standardised assessments, which they attributed to constraints on SENCO time, limited availability of external services, and gaps in staff training.

These schools also highlighted the role of parents in raising concerns. For example, one school described an 'influx' of teacher referrals following parents' evenings or extended school breaks. Parents described feeling that their child's difficulties were not always fully recognised by schools when behaviours were less visible or less disruptive in the classroom, leading to concern that a genuine SEND was being overlooked. By contrast, school staff sometimes felt that parents were interpreting behaviours seen primarily at home as indicative of SEND that did not consistently manifest in school, or that could be addressed through existing classroom practice. In some cases, these differing perspectives contributed to delays or disagreement around whether pupils required additional support or formal identification.

It is important to note, however, that some comparison schools viewed their identification processes as strong, citing clear systems and strong support for teachers.

Early identification: the importance of nurseries, feeder schools and transitions

School staff and parents agreed that early engagement and identification enable schools to anticipate needs and put support in place from the start, rather than responding once difficulties emerge. Schools emphasised that the effectiveness of feeder nurseries and early years settings has a significant impact on how well needs are understood and planned for when pupils enter school, even where identification has already taken place. In particular, timely assessment and information-sharing from early years settings were seen as helping schools to prepare appropriate support, staffing and adjustments from the outset.

Parents of pupils with EHCPs similarly described early years settings as pivotal in recognising needs, validating concerns and initiating assessment, but also in ensuring continuity of understanding as children moved into school. As one parent explained: *"As soon as we said that we thought he had autism, they were… 'right, let's assess him'"*. Parents viewed this early action as crucial, not only for identification itself, but for supporting children's later adjustment and thriving once they started school.

Interviewees also highlighted the importance of being proactive at transition points to ensure information is shared effectively. SENCOs stressed the need to gather information from previous settings and parents, while also recognising that needs may be missed, misidentified or change over time, making robust entry assessment processes essential. High-SEND secondary schools with strong feeder links described more proactive approaches, including early information sharing, transition visits and pre-emptive support planning. Primary schools also sought to gather information (e.g. through home visits) but were more constrained due to variation in early years provision and the fact that not all pupils attend nursery. SENCOs noted that some early years

settings are not well equipped to identify needs or initiate EHCP processes. As one SENCO reflected: *"I was very clear… I need you to start the EHCP process now… so the four children from outside nurseries all have EHCPs now, so that is a first"*.

Some comparison schools suggested their lower recorded SEND levels reflected delayed or inconsistent identification. One leader noted that local infant schools "don't tend to apply for EHCPs… so numbers look low until we pick them up in Year 3". This can be compounded by long waiting times and the masking of needs among some pupils (particularly girls and quieter pupils). As a result, official SEND figures were often seen as lagging behind actual need, especially at transition points while identification processes "catch up".

The importance of SENCO capacity

SENCO capacity appears to play a key role in shaping the quality and timeliness of SEND identification. Middle leaders emphasised the importance of SENCOs having sufficient time to support staff, coordinate identification, and oversee plan–do–review cycles. Schools with full-time SENCOs and well-developed inclusion structures described more systematic and consistent approaches. While this characterised most case study schools, comparison schools were more likely to have part-time SENCOs or SENCOs with substantial additional responsibilities. These arrangements were linked to delays in observation and follow-up, reduced capacity to deliver evidence-based interventions, and backlogs in screening, reviews and referrals.

As one SENCO noted: *"I get two days a week to do it… if this was my full-time job, we'd have a lot more on our register."* A senior leader in another school added: *"A lot of things come to me on the days the SENCO isn't here."*

Across both groups, limited capacity sometimes led SENCOs to triage need, prioritising certain pupils, for example, younger pupils over those nearing the end of secondary school. High-SEND schools were also more likely to have assistant SENCOs or wider SEND teams providing additional support. Overall, these staffing differences contributed to variation in the rigour and responsiveness of identification practices, even where formal policies were similar.

Monitoring groups and graduated approaches

Some case study schools reported using intermediate, informal categories, such as "Monitoring" or "K+", for pupils whose needs were emerging or whose level of need was not yet clear. These categories are not part of the statutory SEND framework and are therefore not captured in DfE administrative data. As a result, pupils supported in this way may be receiving targeted interventions without being formally recorded as having SEND, which can obscure underlying need and contribute to uncertainty about the true distribution of pupils with SEND across schools.

These approaches were described as part of a graduated response, allowing schools to provide early, targeted interventions without immediately placing pupils on SEN Support. Interventions were typically trialled and reviewed through structured assess–plan–do–review (APDR) cycles, with decisions about escalation informed by pupils' response over time. SENCOs viewed this as helping to balance early support with more cautious and evidence-based identification.

In a small number of cases, this practice reflected a more deliberate philosophical stance articulated by senior leaders, who prioritised early support and high-quality teaching over formal SEND identification where possible. In these schools, leaders emphasised meeting need without necessarily increasing recorded SEND prevalence, framing this approach as protective of pupils and focused on inclusion through strong universal and targeted provision. As one senior leader explained, "*I don't see why we should have to label them, which I know is quite different to other schools, but that's our view of it*". However, this ethos also contributed to lower official SEND proportions, particularly at the level of SEN Support, reinforcing wider concerns about inconsistency in identification practices and the limits of administrative data in capturing underlying need (see Section 4.1.5).

Parents felt they often drove the process

Most parents of pupils with SEND described early concerns about their child's communication, behaviour, sensory needs or academic progress. Some had prior experience of SEND through older children. Many reported that they were the first to recognise their child's needs and initiate support: *"I very much led the process… maybe because as a parent, I'm more educated about neurodiversity and different children's needs".*

However, the ease of having needs recognised varied considerably. Most parents described having to advocate strongly for their child at some stage. Parents shared experiences where their concerns were overlooked or dismissed, sometimes before their child moved to a more supportive school: *"His health visitor said, 'he's fine, he's just going through a phase.'"*

Such incidents were reported to cause emotional strain, delays in intervention, and, in some cases, significant distress for children before their needs were formally recognised.

While some highlighted proactive and supportive nurseries or schools, others recalled feeling ignored or dismissed. Overall, interviews pointed to substantial variation in how effectively settings identify and respond to SEND. Some parents described the process as "a constant battle" or an "awful" experience, particularly where settings were perceived as resistant to identification.

Parents were more likely to drive identification and EHCP processes where they felt unsupported by their setting or local authority. For example, one parent sought a private assessment due to long waiting lists and a lack of school support, and then used this to secure a diagnosis and access SEND provision.

LA views on the SEND identification process

LA representatives described structured processes for progressing from an initial concern to an EHCP. In one area, cases were considered at a weekly multi-agency SEND panel, which reviewed requests for education, health, and care needs assessments and determined whether plans should be issued. In another area, schools were supported through regular contact with named SEND officers and caseworkers at the LA, with termly meetings used to review emerging needs, transitions, and in-year admissions. These arrangements suggested that formal identification at EHCP level was subject to oversight and multi-agency scrutiny.

However, LA interviewees emphasised that the pathway to an EHCP often began at school level, and that schools varied in how they interpreted and implemented "ordinarily available provision".

LA staff reported that some schools were more confident and proactive in meeting pupils' needs without escalating to statutory assessment, while others were quicker to identify pupils as requiring SEN support or to request EHCP assessment. Differences in behaviour policies, thresholds for concern, and interpretations of inclusion were said to contribute to this variation. For example, schools adopting trauma-informed approaches were described as responding differently to SEMH needs compared to those operating more rigid behaviour systems.

There was also recognition that categorisation of primary need could be fluid. One interviewee referred to ongoing work reviewing whether pupils identified with SEMH needs might in fact have underlying needs such as autism or speech and language difficulties. This suggested that identification was not always straightforward and could reflect presenting behaviours rather than underlying causes.

Parental advocacy was again identified as an important influence. Parent-instigated assessment requests were observed to be more common in affluent communities, suggesting socio-economic differences in access to information and confidence in navigating the system. Interviewees also noted rising demand for EHCPs nationally and reflected on the possibility that not all pupils with plans necessarily required one indefinitely, indicating concern about upward pressure on identification rates.

LAs described efforts to strengthen school capacity through training, SEND advisory support, and shared guidance on ordinarily available provision. These initiatives aimed to support earlier identification within mainstream practice and reduce unnecessary escalation to EHCP. The emergence of operational and strategic SENCO roles in some schools was also noted, and perceived as reflecting the increasing complexity and administrative demands associated with SEND identification.

Challenges in identification

Delays and difficulties accessing external agencies/specialists

School staff and parents at both high-SEND and comparison schools reported frequent delays in accessing external support and assessments, alongside wider diagnostic bottlenecks in the health system. Services such as educational psychology, speech and language therapy, and CAMHS were particularly difficult to access. In some cases, waiting times far exceeded the statutory 20-week timeframe for issuing an EHCP.

Schools highlighted limited LA capacity to manage the EHCP process, citing staff shortages and high turnover in SEND teams, which contributed to long delays in securing support and funding. One SENCO noted:

> *We're running at a two-year waiting list for the production of an EHCP in our local authority. So it's gone from a four-month waiting list to 24 months, and that's nothing to do with what we've put in place. That's just sitting at the local authority level.*

Parents also perceived LAs as under-resourced and inefficient, which they felt added significantly to the emotional and mental stress of securing support for their children.

Conflicting views between parents, schools and other relevant professionals

Some school leaders reported experiencing increased pressure from parents to pursue diagnoses and EHCPs. While they acknowledged that greater parental awareness of SEND can support early identification, they noted that understanding and expectations of the EHCP process can vary. Schools observed that some parent requests are influenced by social media, local culture, or perceptions of potential benefits for their child. A senior leader commented: *"Parents often want a label…Parents think it's a magic sort of bullet to get them more things. And you're like, 'it won't change anything, that provision is already being given to your child.'"*

Some parents themselves recognised confusion around the purpose of EHCPs, with one noting:

"From a parent's perspective, I think there is very little clarity about what the education, health and care plan can provide that normal provision cannot."

Schools reported that this confusion can create additional workload, especially when parents seek private diagnoses or start the EHCP process independently, generating referrals and consultations that staff are required to respond to within set timeframes. SENCOs highlighted that this can reduce their capacity for other responsibilities.

Conversely, schools also noted that some parents are hesitant about a child being formally identified with SEND or receiving an EHCP, fearing the implications of a diagnosis. These conversations are often sensitive and require significant time and expertise to navigate.

Under- and over-identification, and disentangling SEND from other types of need

Schools highlighted the complexity and subtlety involved in identifying need in some children.

Senior leaders and SENCOs raised concerns about potential under-identification of SEND among pupils who mask their difficulties, such as girls with ASC, and pupils who are persistently absent, including those experiencing emotionally based school avoidance. One comparison school leader commented: *"Girls seem to mask really well… they aren't diagnosed until much later."*

Interviewees also expressed concerns that SEMH needs could be misinterpreted as behavioural issues, though they noted this had improved in recent years as awareness of SEND among staff and parents has generally increased.

Some schools highlighted the challenge of distinguishing SEND from other types of need, such as EAL. SENCOs and senior leaders reported that additional time and effort are required to accurately determine the source of unmet needs for pupils with EAL. They emphasised that, if appropriate assessment tools and observations are not used, needs associated with EAL can be misidentified as SEND, or SEND may be incorrectly attributed to EAL.

This dual trend – over-identification in some cases and under-identification in others – illustrates the complex social and diagnostic landscape schools must navigate. These challenges were seen as complicating timely and accurate identification and, in some cases, delaying access to appropriate support.

A.2 Appendix: Why parents of pupils without SEND choose high-SEND schools: school ethos, perceived inclusivity and practical considerations

Parents of children without a formally identified SEND gave similar reasons for choosing a high-SEND school to those cited by parents of children with identified needs. Their decisions were influenced by the school's ethos, reputation for inclusivity, smaller size, local standing, and practical considerations such as catchment area, siblings already attending, and overall convenience. We include this analysis in the appendix as it provides useful contextual detail but is not central to the report's core research questions or main explanatory narrative. The findings are based on ten interviews with parents of children without SEND in high-SEND schools, alongside written responses from 37 parents also with children attending the case study schools.

Reputation for SEND inclusion and inclusive culture

Parents described the school's reputation for inclusion as a strong positive factor, even when their own children did not have SEND. They emphasised that their personal values around education aligned with the school's ethos and provision. For example, one parent said: *"We just identified that the ethos of the school, which has a Christian outlook, would hopefully be more friendly and inclusive."* Another noted: *"More important for me was that I consider it to have quite a broad approach to developing pupils. There's a strong wider offering of sport and music and drama."*

Many parents felt that a strong track record in supporting pupils with SEND indicated the school could meet the needs of all pupils. One parent explained: *"If they're able to cope with and manage resources well and educate children with extra special needs, then of course you would have thought they can manage those who don't as well."*

These accounts suggest that a strong SEND reputation can function as a proxy for broader values around care, understanding, and inclusion.

Some parents were also drawn to the school because their child had a health condition (such as diabetes or a hearing aid) or life experience (e.g., being a young carer or having a family member with a disability) that they felt would be well supported in a school with strong SEND provision. They emphasised the importance of their child not feeling singled out or isolated. For example:

"We knew it was a school with such a strong SEN department; they would understand [my child], even though he wasn't the one with special needs."

These examples highlight that SEND expertise, culture, and support can benefit all children and be a significant draw for families without SEND.

School size and environment

A smaller, less overwhelming school environment was particularly attractive, even to parents whose children did not have SEND. One parent explained: *"I think it's been quite desirable for parents because this is such a small school and the year groups are much smaller than other secondary schools in the area."*

Another described how the physical environment reassured their child: *"She felt it was modern, clean… the fact that it was all in one building, she didn't have to worry about getting lost."*

Practical factors, such as proximity to home or being in the school's catchment, often reinforced the school as a good fit.

Existing connections to the school

Some parents highlighted existing connections to the school, such as older siblings, extended family members, or friends with positive experiences, which influenced their decision. Parents whose older children had attended the school often trusted the school based on that previous success and wanted the same experience for younger children.

Some parents also mentioned that they had a younger child with SEND they hoped would attend in the future and wanted all their children to go to the same school. These accounts indicate that both social familiarity and physical manageability were important considerations in parental choice.

A.3 Methodological Appendix

This Methodological Appendix provides additional detail on the study methods and analytical approaches used across all strands of the research. It is intended to support transparency and enable readers to understand, interpret and (where relevant) replicate the analytical steps that underpin the findings reported in the main report.

Where terminology or methodological decisions differ across strands (for example, survey definitions and weighting), this appendix clarifies those choices and signposts how they relate to the results presented in the main report.

A.3.1. Quantitative data analysis

Defining HES and HASS: Constructing catchment areas

School catchment areas were determined using the same approach used in NFER's Selective Comprehensives research (Iocco and Julius, 2026). This involves consideration of which Lower Layer Super Output Areas (LSOA) pupils in the three most recent intake years (2021/22, 2022/23, 2023/24) lived in. An LSOA was included in a school's catchment area if at least four pupils from that area over the last three intakes attended that school. These catchment areas, as defined here, do not cover all of the geographical areas where pupils reside. This is because some pupils in a school's intake will come from LSOAs where fewer than four pupils from that area attended the school across the last three intake years.

Logistic regression analysis

Logistic regression was used to establish the extent to which mobility differs by school types and pupil need. This will be done by modelling the likelihood of a pupil moving school as a function of pupil, school and local area characteristics. Pupil characteristics included accounting for a pupil's primary SEND type. School characteristics included whether the school had been identified as HES or HASS. HES and HASS schools were modelled separately to support the interpretation of coefficients.

The Spring School Census and the Alternative Provision Census in the NPD were used for all available years from 2015. For each year up to the penultimate year a variable was created to flag whether each pupil was in the same school in the following year's Spring School Census (excluding those in the final year of the school).

While this analysis is associational rather than causal, it provides crucial insights into the extent to which different factors may be driving the higher relative mobility of pupils with SEND in the school system. The school-level controls (HES, HASS, Neither) show the extent to which pupils with SEND may be disproportionately likely to move from certain types of schools. Pupil-level controls give insights into which pupils with which types of SEND are most likely to move schools.

A.3.2. Survey data collection and analysis

Sampling for the survey

We conducted a national survey of senior leaders and SENCOs in primary and secondary schools in England. We sent out the survey electronically using Tivian in November 2025 as part of NFER's Teacher Voice Omnibus Survey[15].

In order to ensure that sufficient numbers of survey responses were received from high-SEND schools, we also sent the survey directly to schools identified as HES and/or HASS, thus oversampling these groups. It is important to note that we used a slightly broader definition for HES and HASS for the survey compared to the quantitative analysis in order to achieve the necessary number of survey responses for meaningful analysis.

For the survey sample, a school was considered to be a HES if it was in the top **40 per cent** of schools in terms of the difference between its EHCP rate and the EHCP rate among all pupils resident in the school's catchment area for the three consecutive years 2022, 2023 and 2024. This means our HES group in the survey analysis is larger than the HES group in the analysis of characteristics of HES schools, where the top **20 per cent** of schools were defined as HES. The second criteria (that the school had an EHCP rate that was in the top quartile for their phase in 2023/24) was the same for both analyses.

Similarly, a school was considered to be a HASS in the survey if it was in the top **40 per cent** of school in terms of the difference between its overall SEND rate (i.e., pupils with an EHCP or receiving SEN Support) and the SEND rate among all pupils resident in the school's catchment area for the three consecutive years 2022, 2023 and 2024); and had an overall SEND rate that was in the top quartile for their phase in 2023/24.

The survey was closed once 800 completed responses were received. A 'thank you' payment of £5 was given to respondents that completed the survey either in the form of an Amazon voucher or a donation to charity.

Analysis of survey responses

In order for the survey sample to be representative of schools nationally, weights were used. Survey responses were weighted using stratified weights based on EHCP and SEN Support categories and constructed for primary and secondary schools respectively. Survey data was linked to NFER's Longitudinal Schools Database and data from Get Information About Schools (GIAS) to provide further insight into the characteristics of the schools.

Survey analysis was undertaken using R, Stata and SPSS to creating cross-tabulations of responses by school group (HES, HASS, Neither HES nor HASS). It is important to note that where schools belonged to both HES and HASS they were included in both groups in the survey analysis. Significance tests were undertaken where appropriate.

[15] For more information see: Teacher Voice Omnibus Survey - NFER.

Table 3: Table showing the survey response counts

		Primary		Secondary	
		Unweighted Count	Weighted Count	Unweighted Count	Weighted Count
Region	East Midlands	48	54	15	19
	East of England	78	80	23	21
	London	70	63	36	35
	North East	23	21	9	9
	North West	74	69	28	27
	South East	109	110	30	28
	South West	81	79	22	22
	West Midlands	61	66	18	20
	Yorkshire and the Humber	51	52	24	24
	Total	595	595	205	205
Role	Headteacher/Principal/CEO/ Executive Headteacher	168	192	38	40
	Deputy Headteacher, Assistant Headteacher, Vice Principal or equivalent	107	127	98	98
	SENCO	262	211	45	40
	Other senior leader role with SEND focus (e.g. Inclusion Lead)	58	65	24	27
	Total	595	595	205	205
FSM quintiles	Lowest 20%	91	123	21	26
	2nd Lowest 20%	95	106	30	30
	Middle 20%	122	115	50	51
	2nd Highest 20%	131	120	70	68
	Highest 20%	144	116	33	29
	Not available	12	15	1	1

		Primary		Secondary	
		Unweighted Count	**Weighted Count**	**Unweighted Count**	**Weighted Count**
	Total	595	595	205	205
School type	Academies	245	242	140	142
	Free Schools	4	6	13	11
	Local authority maintained schools	346	347	52	52
	Total	595	595	205	205
Survey group	Neither HES nor HASS	216	315	112	127
	both HES&HASS	103	59	28	22
	HASS only	144	123	29	30
	HES only	132	98	36	26
	Total	595	595	205	205

A.3.3. Qualitative data collection and analysis

Sampling and recruitment for local authority interviews

To offer an early system-level perspective on the unequal distribution of pupils with SEND across mainstream schools, interviews were conducted with ten local authority (LA) officers representing nine LAs as a distinct qualitative component of the research. These interviews took place online between June and July 2025. Each participant held responsibility for SEND, with most serving as 'Director of SEND' or an equivalent role. Authorities were selected to ensure regional diversity and to include areas exhibiting significant variation in the proportions of pupils with EHCPs among schools. Recruitment was carried out by contacting Directors of Children's Services directly.

The interviews explored LA officers' perspectives on the drivers of the uneven distribution of pupils with SEND across mainstream schools, including the interaction between parental choice, school accountability pressures and local system arrangements. These interviews also sought to capture LAs' views on how schools within their areas identified pupils with SEND and the implications of SEND clustering for schools and services.

The LA interviews were undertaken to complement school-level qualitative evidence and analysis of national administrative data, supporting a multi-level understanding of how SEND distributions arise and are sustained across local systems.

Sampling and recruitment of case study schools

Case study schools were selected using findings from the quantitative analysis of national administrative data. Schools were identified as “high SEND” where they demonstrated elevated levels of pupils with EHCPs, both relative to other schools in their local area and nationally. The case study sample also included schools with substantial proportions of pupils receiving SEN support. Throughout the report, these schools are referred to as high-SEND schools.

The final case study sample comprised 15 mainstream schools, including eight secondary schools and seven primary schools.

Schools were approached directly by the research team using a written invitation that explained the purpose of the study, its national policy relevance, and why the school had been identified for inclusion. The invitation set out what participation would involve, including the types of staff and parents that would be invited to take part in interviews, the expected time commitment, and the use of online interviews. Schools were also informed that participation was voluntary, that findings would be anonymised, and that no schools or individuals would be identifiable in any research outputs.

The invitation confirmed that interviews would be conducted online and outlined the proposed structure of the case study fieldwork. Schools were asked to nominate a main point of contact to support coordination of interviews and liaison with the research team. As a thank you for participation, the invitation explained that schools would receive a contribution towards supply cover and that individual interviewees would receive a voucher.

Recruitment occurred alongside ongoing quantitative analysis refinement. Case study fieldwork took place from September 2025 to January 2026. To increase participation from parents of pupils without SEND, all 15 case study schools were asked in February 2026 to share a Microsoft Form with relevant parents. The form included selected questions about school choice, inclusivity, and the impact of pupils with SEND on the school experiences of those children without SEND, as well as an invitation to participate in an interview. We received 37 written responses; 10 parents expressed interest in interviews and were contacted.

Within each case study school, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a range of stakeholders in order to capture multiple perspectives on SEND identification and provision, as well as the wider impacts of having a relatively large proportion of pupils with SEND in the school. As set out in the invitation, interviewees typically included the SENCO, up to two senior leaders, middle leaders, parents of pupils with SEND and, in some cases, parents of pupils without SEND. The number and mix of interviews varied slightly across schools depending on availability, school context and phase.

Sampling and recruitment of comparison schools

A sample of comparison schools was selected to provide a contrasting perspective to the high SEND case study schools. These schools had lower proportions of pupils with SEND and EHCPs and were included to explore differences in school context, practice and perceived drivers of SEND distribution.

In total, 18 comparison schools were recruited. Of these, 11 were primary schools and seven were secondary schools.

In comparison schools, interviews were conducted with senior leaders or SENCOs. These interviews focused on schools' approaches to SEND identification and provision, and on factors perceived to shape the proportion of pupils with SEND and EHCPs. By including comparison schools, the study was able to explore how the distribution of pupils with SEND and SEND practice differed across contrasting school contexts.

Table 4 summarises the number and type of interviews conducted with case study and comparison schools. In total, 64 interviews were completed across the 15 case study schools, involving a range of school-based staff and parents. Interviews were also conducted in 18 comparison schools, primarily with senior leaders and SENCOs.

Table 4: Number and type of interviews conducted in case study and comparison schools

Interviewee role	Case study schools	Comparison schools
SENCO	15	10
Senior leaders	14	7
Middle leaders	10	1
Parents of pupils with EHCPs	11	–
Parents of pupils with SEN support (no EHCP)	7	–
Parents of pupils without SEND	10	–
Local authority officers	2	–
Total interviews	64	18

Analysis of qualitative findings

All interviews were conducted using semi-structured topic guides and recorded with participants' consent. Interview recordings were transcribed and formed the core qualitative dataset for analysis.

Initial qualitative analysis of the school staff and parent data was supported using Copilot to assist with mapping early themes, patterns and potential lines of investigation across the interview material. This initial stage was used to support familiarisation with the data and to help structure subsequent, researcher-led analysis.

Interviews were then summarised and written up into a pre-coded analysis template aligned to the research questions and topic guide structure. These write-ups were imported into the qualitative analysis software MAXQDA, where further systematic coding and analysis were undertaken. This

enabled themes to be refined, compared across participant groups and school types, and explored in more depth across the dataset.

Qualitative analysis focused on identifying patterns and themes across interviews within and across case study and comparison schools. Analysis explored schools' approaches to SEND identification and support, perceptions of why pupils with SEND are unevenly distributed across schools, and the implications of these patterns for staff, pupils and parents. Data from different participant groups, including SENCOs, senior leaders, middle leaders and parents, were analysed together to build a rounded understanding of school practice and context.

A.3.4. Comparison of SEND policies and SEN Information Reports

Overview

This analysis compared SEND policies and SEN Information Reports for 20 mainstream schools, comprising 10 case study schools and 10 comparison schools, across both primary and secondary phases. Schools were randomly selected from our case study and comparison school samples to ensure an equal number of primary and secondary schools were in each group. A total of 31 documents were analysed using a structured qualitative document analysis approach. This included SEND policies, SEN Information Reports, or both, depending on availability for each school.

A SEND policy is a school-level policy document that sets out the school's principles, objectives and governance arrangements for supporting pupils with SEND. An SEN Information Report is a statutorily required public document that explains how the school's SEND policy is implemented in practice. Unlike SEND policies, SEN Information Reports are explicitly required by legislation.

Methodological approach to document analysis

Each school's website was searched and the relevant documents downloaded for analysis. Each document was read in full and coded, using Copilot, against a common analytic framework covering statutory alignment, organisation of SEND support, framing of roles and responsibilities, and approaches to parental engagement. Comparisons were then made within and across the two groups to identify shared features and differences in emphasis, tone and level of contextual detail. Findings reflect what is explicitly stated in the documents and do not make assumptions about SEND practice beyond written policies and reports.

Profile of schools and documents reviewed

Table 5: The number of schools, phases and documents included in the document analysis.

Group	Number of schools	Primary schools	Secondary schools	SEND policies reviewed	SEN Information Reports reviewed	Total documents
Case study schools	10	5	5	8	6	14
Comparison schools	10	5	5	10	7	17
Total	20	10	10	18	13	31

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