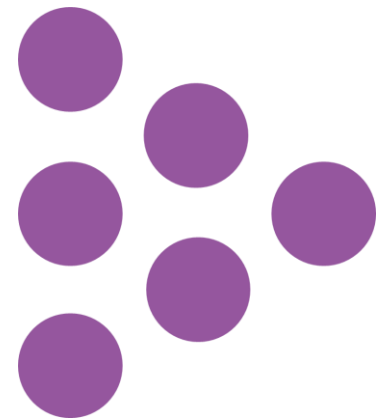


Interim report

High-SEND schools: Understanding the uneven distribution of pupils with SEND across England's mainstream schools

National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER)



High-SEND schools: Understanding the uneven distribution of pupils with SEND across England's mainstream schools

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Published in November 2025

By the National Foundation for Educational Research,

The Mere, Upton Park, Slough, Berkshire SL1 2DQ

www.nfer.ac.uk

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Registered Charity No. 313392

ISBN: 978-1-916567-41-2

How to cite this publication:

Tang, S., Julius, J., Walker, M. and Classick, R. (2025). *High-SEND Schools: Understanding the uneven distribution of pupils with SEND across England's mainstream schools*. Slough: NFER

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Acknowledgements

We would particularly like to thank the local authority staff who gave their time and shared their experiences.

We also wish to thank Sarah Maughan and Alice Reeves at the Nuffield Foundation for their support in managing the project and facilitating its delivery. Their guidance and coordination are greatly appreciated.

The Nuffield Foundation is an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. It funds and undertakes rigorous research, encourages innovation and supports the use of sound evidence to inform social and economic policy, and improve people's lives. The Nuffield Foundation is the founder and co-funder of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, the Ada Lovelace Institute and the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory. This project has been funded by the Nuffield Foundation, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation. Find out more at: nuffieldfoundation.org.

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We are very grateful to all of the individuals and organisations that formed our stakeholder advisory group and contributed insights to inform the research set out in this report. We would particularly like to thank Brahm Norwich and Alison Black (University of Exeter), Frances Akinde, Geoff Lindsay (University of Warwick), Annamarie Hassall (NASEN), Sharon Smith (Special Needs Jungle and SEN Policy Research Forum), Jo Hutchinson (Education Policy Institute), Wendy van Rijswijk and Richard Allison (Department for Education), Margaret Mulholland (Association of School and College Leaders) and Simon Tanner (Authentic Education).

The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of these individuals or their organisations.

This work was undertaken in the Office for National Statistics Secure Research Service using data from ONS and other owners and does not imply the endorsement of the ONS or other data owners.

Glossary

Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) are support plans put in place by the local authority (LA) 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 are a higher than expected proportion of pupils with any identified SEN as compared to their catchment area and nationally.

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

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 spend most of their time in mainstream classes, supported by outreach from the RP.

SEND stands for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities. 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.

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, albeit some LAs do 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

While it is widely recognised that the system for supporting pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) is ‘in crisis’ (Education Committee, 2025), one critical, but often overlooked, dimension of this crisis is the uneven distribution of pupils with SEND across mainstream schools. This pattern of unevenness raises pressing questions about equity, inclusion, and the capacity of schools to meet diverse needs.

This report draws on analysis of administrative school data from the Department for Education’s (DfE) National Pupil Database to present early findings into how pupils with SEND are distributed across mainstream schools in England. It also explores local authority (LA) perspectives—one lens within a complex and multi-layered system—to examine the factors they believe are shaping this unevenness and its consequences. These insights are necessarily partial, shaped by LAs’ statutory responsibilities and system-level vantage points.

The findings presented here are intended to outline and frame the key issues emerging from early analysis, providing a system-level picture of how pupils with SEND are distributed across mainstream schools. They highlight patterns that warrant closer examination rather than offering definitive explanations of why these patterns exist or what their implications may be. We will gather further evidence through a large-scale survey of primary and secondary school leaders, together with in-depth interviews with school staff and parents, to explore in more detail the drivers and consequences of this uneven distribution. The

final report, which will bring these strands of evidence together, will be published in summer 2026.

Our quantitative analysis relies on the numbers of pupils identified as having an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) or SEN Support in the available DfE data. We recognise that SEN Support identification practices vary across schools, and that local differences in how pupils are supported, assessed and issued with EHCPs can influence who receives one. These factors affect the data and determine which children are recorded as having an EHCP or SEN Support. This is an issue we will explore in greater depth over the remainder of the study.

Problem statement: Uneven and rising demand for statutory SEND support in mainstream schools

Our initial analysis reveals a system under increasing pressure, with both the scale and distribution of pupils with SEND changing markedly over the past decade. Further details are provided below.

- **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 are identified as having SEND — equivalent to around one in five pupils in the school system. This compares to 1.2 million pupils with identified SEND in 2015/16. Between 2015/16 and 2024/25, the increase has been most pronounced among pupils with an EHCP (those requiring a higher level of support) with the proportion nearly doubling from 2.8 per cent to 5.3 per cent of pupils in state provision. In comparison, the proportion of pupils receiving SEN

Support has risen more gradually, from 11.6 per cent to 14.2 per cent across all 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. 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. As expected, there are very few SEN Support pupils (i.e. pupils without EHCPs) in special schools.

- **Pupils with SEND are unevenly distributed across mainstream schools**

In 2024/25, primary schools in the top quartile based on their EHCP rates had, on average, more than six times the rate of pupils with EHCPs compared to those in the lowest quartile. This equates to an average of 17 pupils per school in the highest quartile compared to three pupils per school in the lowest quartile. This pattern is similar among secondary schools, albeit the spread of pupils is slightly less skewed. Secondary schools in the top quartile have five times as many pupils with EHCPs as those in the lowest quartile (equating to an average of 54 pupils compared to 14 pupils per school in the lowest quartile)¹.

¹ In 2024/25, the average (mean) primary and secondary schools have 272 and 1048 pupils on roll respectively.

² At primary, this equates to 30 pupils in the lowest quartile compared to 65 pupils in the highest quartile. At secondary schools, this equates to 120 pupils compared to 220 pupils.

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 (11 per cent compared to 29 per cent in primaries, and 10 per cent compared to 26 per cent in secondaries)².

- **The spread of pupils with EHCPs and any SEND across schools has increased over time**

From 2018/19 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 respectively.

- **Schools with higher EHCP rates do not necessarily have correspondingly high rates of SEN Support**

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 school³. In 2024/25, the correlation between EHCP and SEN Support rates at

³ 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 EHC needs assessment may be made (Department for Education, 2015).

the school-level was low (0.2 in primary, 0.3 in secondary). The low correlation indicates that schools with higher proportions of pupils with EHCPs do not always have similarly high rates of pupils receiving SEN Support. One possible interpretation is that some schools may be more inclined to pursue formal statutory assessments, while others may make greater use of SEN Support provision without escalating to an EHCP application. These differences may reflect variation in school or local identification practices, thresholds, or levels of resource, but further evidence is needed to understand the underlying causes.

Characteristics of high-SEND schools

We identify 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 those with higher proportions of pupils with EHCPs as compared to both their catchment area and nationally, referred to as ‘high EHCP’ schools (HES). 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

⁴ Deprivation is measured by the percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals in the school.

EHCPs typically have more complex or severe needs requiring coordinated, multi-agency provision. Schools with above-average proportions of EHCPs are therefore likely to face greater resource, staffing, and curriculum challenges, and to be more representative of schools operating at the ‘high-need’ end of the spectrum.

The second group identified has higher-than-expected numbers of pupils with SEN Support and/or EHCPs. We refer to this group as ‘high-any-SEND schools’ (HASS). 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. For example, a high SEN Support rate could reflect high levels of underlying SEND or could be the result of over-identification of SEND. Nevertheless, schools with a high number of pupils identified as needing SEN Support may be operating under considerable pressure, especially as they are not usually able to access top-up funding for pupils without EHCPs.

High EHCP schools (HES) differ from the wider school population—but are not a homogeneous group

Compared to other schools, HES are more likely to:

- Have an 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 level⁴
- Be smaller in size in the secondary phase

- Have lower levels of attainment than, but similar Ofsted judgements to, all schools.

High-any-SEND schools (HASS) are more likely to be deprived compared to HES

Compared to HES, HASS are:

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

While HES and HASS generally compare similarly to all schools, there are some clear differences between them in terms of outcomes and populations served. These distinctions may reflect variation in how schools identify and record SEND, as well as differences in local context or pupil intake. Future strands of the project will examine these differences in more detail to build a clearer understanding of the factors driving variation across measures of SEND prevalence and provision.

Local authority perspectives

Key insights from exploratory video interviews with ten senior LA officers from nine different LAs include:

- **Uneven distribution and inconsistent identification:** LAs recognised systemic unevenness in the SEND distribution and noted variation in how SEND is identified across schools, affecting which pupils are in receipt of SEN Support and EHCPs.

- **The role of the LA in supporting SEN Support identification practices:** In some areas, LAs had little or no involvement, while others offered training and support services to schools. A few LAs went further, mandating standardised identification practices to promote greater consistency across settings.
- **Parental choice and school ethos:** Parental preferences and variation in the inclusiveness of different school cultures were seen as major drivers of SEND clustering. Some families were reported to be drawn to schools with strong reputations for inclusive practice, while others avoided settings seen as less supportive.
- **Impact of accountability pressures:** LAs perceived that some schools are reluctant to admit pupils with SEND due to concerns about performance metrics and inspection outcomes, suggesting that accountability frameworks may inadvertently discourage inclusive practices.
- **Operational pressures in high-SEND schools:** Compared to schools with below-average intakes of SEND pupils, high-SEND schools were reported to face significant operational challenges, particularly around funding, staffing, and equitable provision.
- **Role of resourced provision and SEN units:** Schools with dedicated SU or RP were often seen to demonstrate stronger whole-school SEND expertise. They also tended to attract additional pupils with EHCPs beyond those attending the SU or RP itself.
- **Impacts on pupils with and without SEND:** Interviewees reported that attending a high-SEND school can have both positive and negative effects for pupils. For those with SEND, these

schools may offer stronger expertise and a more inclusive environment, but high concentrations can stretch resources and limit individualised support. For pupils without SEND, mixed classrooms can promote understanding of diversity, yet when provision is stretched, some parents perceive this as causing disruption to their children’s learning.

More broadly, the uneven distribution of pupils with SEND—alongside wider systemic challenges such as funding constraints and workforce shortages—was reported to be generating tensions within LAs and across stakeholders. Officers described the ongoing struggle to balance legal duties, parental expectations, financial limitations, and school-level pressures, all within a context of rising demand and limited resources.

Conclusions

Our emerging insights suggest that the uneven distribution of pupils with SEND across mainstream schools is shaped not only by the underlying prevalence of need, but also by factors such as school quality, SEND identification practices, ethos, resources, parental preference, and accountability pressures.

Our early findings suggest that while some schools actively welcome and support pupils with SEND, others may be less equipped or less inclined to take on additional pupils with SEND. Combined with wider evidence that families with greater knowledge, resources, and/or social capital are often better able to secure additional support or preferred placements for their children, this pattern has the potential to reinforce inequalities in access to well-resourced or highly inclusive schools.

While these issues will be explored in greater depth across the remaining strands of our project, it is essential that government reforms the SEND system to promote **greater consistency and equity**. This includes ensuring that schools committed to inclusive practice are **supported rather than penalised**, and that the system does not place disproportionate pressure on those serving higher numbers of pupils with SEND.

1. Introduction

Both the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis have exacerbated pressures on a SEND system that was already under significant strain (Gould, 2023). These recent challenges come on top of longer-standing issues, including the rising prevalence of complex needs such as autism spectrum disorder and social, emotional and mental health difficulties, shortages in specialist staff such as educational psychologists, and the increasing reliance on costly independent provision. Taken together, these pressures have left many local authorities (LAs) without sufficient capacity or funding to meet demand, creating what is widely described as a system in crisis (Education Committee, 2025).

One important, but less well-understood, dimension of this crisis is the distribution of pupils with SEND across schools in England. How pupils with SEND are clustered or spread across mainstream schools has the potential to have significant implications. For pupils and families, uneven distribution may create inequities in access to inclusive environments and high-quality support, producing what some describe as a ‘postcode lottery’ (Hutchinson, 2021). For schools, disproportionate intakes of pupils with SEND may be straining staffing, budgets, and classroom practice, threatening sustainability and morale. Conversely, schools with large numbers of pupils with SEND may be more able to develop specialist expertise and capacity and be more readily able to adopt tailored approaches to the curriculum. At a system level, clustering may increase demand for Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) and specialist placements, with knock-on

effects for LA finances, as schools with high levels of need may be more likely to seek additional support and resources.

There are a range of hypothesised reasons for why pupils with SEND are unevenly distributed across schools. One possibility is differences in SEND identification: for example, some schools may be more likely than others to record delays in early development, literacy, or behaviour as SEND. Indeed, there is evidence that whether a child is identified as having SEND is more heavily related to the school they attend than to any aspect of their individual needs (Hutchinson, 2021). At the same time, parental choice plays a role: families may be drawn to schools with a reputation for strong inclusion or a particular ethos of support, creating self-reinforcing patterns of higher SEND enrolment.

Despite these issues, there is currently limited systematic evidence on the drivers of uneven distribution and, crucially, on its implications for schools, pupils, and families. This project addresses that evidence gap. The study is guided by three key research questions:

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

This first project report provides initial insights into how pupils with SEND are distributed across mainstream schools. It draws on analysis of administrative school data from the Department for Education’s (DfE) National Pupil Database and explores LAs’ perspectives on the drivers and implications of uneven distribution. This is informed by

exploratory video interviews with senior staff across nine different LAs. It is important to note that LAs represent just one perspective within a complex SEND system. Their insights are necessarily partial and shaped by their statutory responsibilities.

The findings presented here are intended to outline and frame the key issues emerging from early analysis, providing a system-level picture of how pupils with SEND are distributed across mainstream schools. They highlight patterns that warrant closer examination rather than offering definitive explanations of why these patterns exist or what their implications may be. Further evidence will be gathered through a large-scale survey of primary and secondary school leaders, complemented by in-depth interviews with school staff and parents. Together, these strands will explore the drivers and consequences of the uneven distribution of pupils with SEND, helping to build a more comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping this variation. The final report, which will bring these strands of evidence together, will be published in summer 2026.

1.1. Wider context

Reforms to the SEND system brought in by the 2014 Children and Families Act (UK Parliament, 2014) mean there are two levels of support used to target support for pupils with SEND in pre-schools, schools and colleges:

- **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, albeit some LAs do provide additional funding for pupils on SEN Support.

- **Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs)** are support plans put in place by the LA 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.

SEN coordinators (SENCOs) in schools decide on SEN Support, while EHCPs are issued by LAs following applications from schools or parents. While schools must cover the first £6,000 needed to support any pupil with SEND, the remaining cost of the provision specified in an EHCP must be met by the LA. This places considerable financial pressure on LAs, and recent increases in EHCP numbers have made the system increasingly unsustainable (Sibieta and Snape, 2024).

Access to timely EHCPs has also become more difficult. Since 2018, all regions other than London have seen drops in the percentage of EHCPs issued within the statutory 20-week period. The steepest falls have occurred since 2021 suggesting backlogs associated with Covid are still working through the system. Nationally there has been a fall of 14 percentage points between 2021 and 2024 when only 46 per cent of EHCPs were issued within 20 weeks in England, symptomatic of a system under stress (Department for Education, 2025). Similarly, increasing numbers of tribunals are taking place to contest EHCP decisions made by LAs (Ministry of Justice, 2025). Among Tribunal-

decided outcomes, almost all (99 per cent) include at least some elements decided in favour of the parent⁵.

Schools face major concerns around resourcing and capacity. The Children’s Commissioner’s school census found over half of primary and two-fifths of secondary leaders were worried about the progress of pupils with EHCPs/SEN Support (The Office of the Children’s Commissioner, 2025). Key barriers included insufficient funding and lack of specialist staff.

Government reviews (Department for Education, 2022, 2023) and inquiries have highlighted inconsistent identification and provision, noting that the system is not designed with inclusion in mind. There is a clear call for reform—emphasising the need to increase capacity, strengthen staff training and collaboration, clarify the role of EHCPs and legal entitlements, and improve cost efficiency and accountability for system outcomes.

In response, the Government have already 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) that schools are adequately resourced to meet SEND and that specialist provision is accessible to those who need it; (iv) reforms are evidence based and; (v) that all stakeholders work effectively in partnership (Bridget Phillpson, 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’.

⁵ Includes cases recorded as a ‘decision in favour of the appellant’, as well as those where the local authority was directed to take action as a result of the judgment (Ministry of Justice, 2024).

However, this criterion is not currently set to consider school admissions.

At the time of writing, a white paper outlining the Government’s full plans for system reform is expected in January 2026.

2. Pupils with SEND in the school system

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

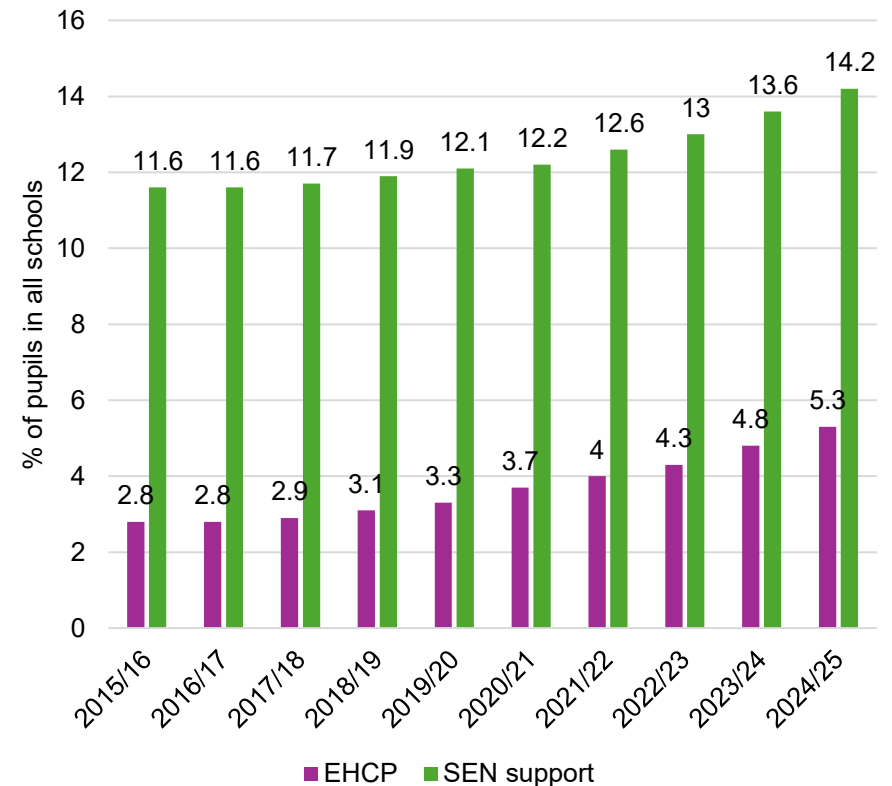
In January 2025, there were over 1.7 million school pupils in England with identified special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). This represents around one in every five pupils.

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 proportion of pupils (at 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.

The proportion of pupils with SEND has increased significantly over the last decade, as shown by Figure 1. The rise in the proportion of pupils with EHCPs has been most acute, doubling from 2.8 per cent to 5.3 per cent across all schools. In comparison, the proportion of pupils with identified SEN Support needs has increased at a slower rate, from 11.6 per cent to 14.2 per cent.

Figure 1: Proportions of pupils in receipt of SEN Support and EHCPs in all schools, 2015/16-2024/25



Source: DfE Special educational needs in England publication

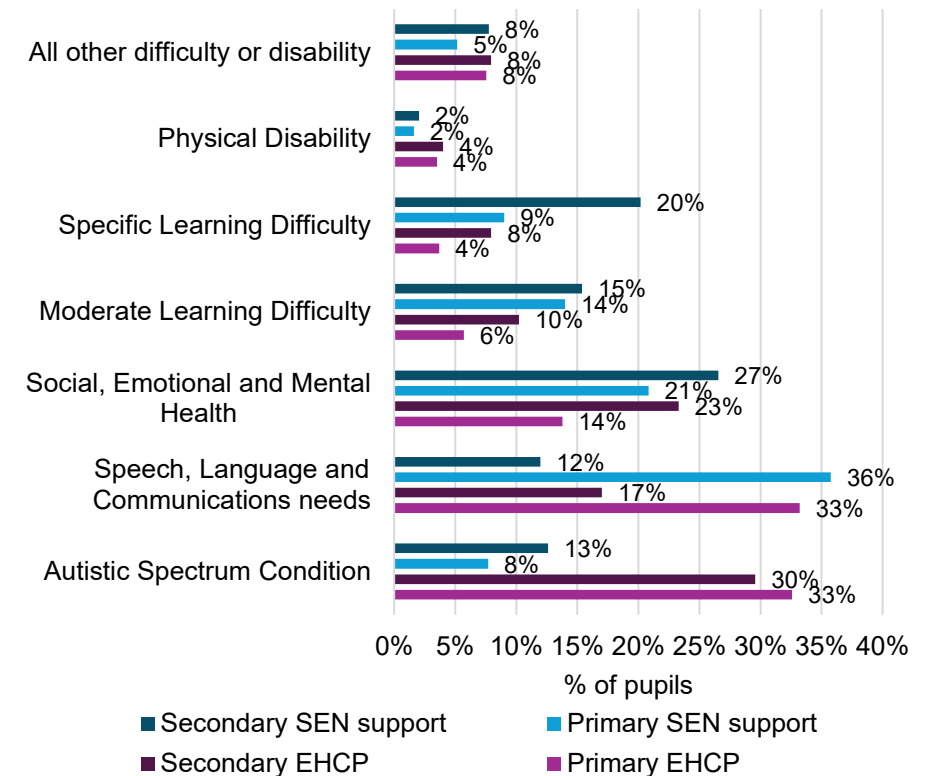
Pupils in receipt of SEN Support and EHCPs have a range of SEND. As shown in Figure 2, autistic spectrum condition (ASC), speech, language and communications needs and social, emotional and mental health are the largest groups, making up the primary need recorded in four fifths of all EHCPs. Increases 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.

A number of reasons have been hypothesised for increased needs over the last decade, which include improvements in diagnostic tools, mechanisms and understanding of these needs, e.g., growing awareness of how traits symptomatic of ASC present in girls has led to more girls being diagnosed (Russell *et al.*, 2022; Van Herwegen, 2022). This is consistent with the similar increases in SEND that have been reported in other higher-income countries (Zeidan *et al.*, 2022; Sibieta and Snape, 2024; Wang *et al.*, 2025). It has also been argued that the rise in EHCPs reflects the significant financial incentives for schools to apply for them, as this can attract additional funding not typically available for pupils receiving SEN Support (Sibieta and Snape, 2024). This trend is compounded by wider financial pressures on school budgets—particularly given that the notional £6,000 threshold for SEN Support funding has not increased since 2013, despite the substantial rise in the cost of specialist provision over this period.

Pupils in receipt of SEN Support and EHCPs tend to have different characteristics to the wider pupil population. They are much more likely to be boys (at 73 per cent of EHCPs and 64 per cent of SEN Support) and more likely to be from disadvantaged backgrounds – as measured

by eligibility for free school meals (at 44 per cent of EHCPs and 40 per cent of SEN Support, compared to 22 per cent of pupils with no identified SEND).

Figure 2: Most common primary SEND need, 2024/25



Source: DfE Special educational needs in England publication

Note: Excludes independent schools. Categories as defined by DfE

2.2. Over half of pupils with EHCPs are in mainstream schools

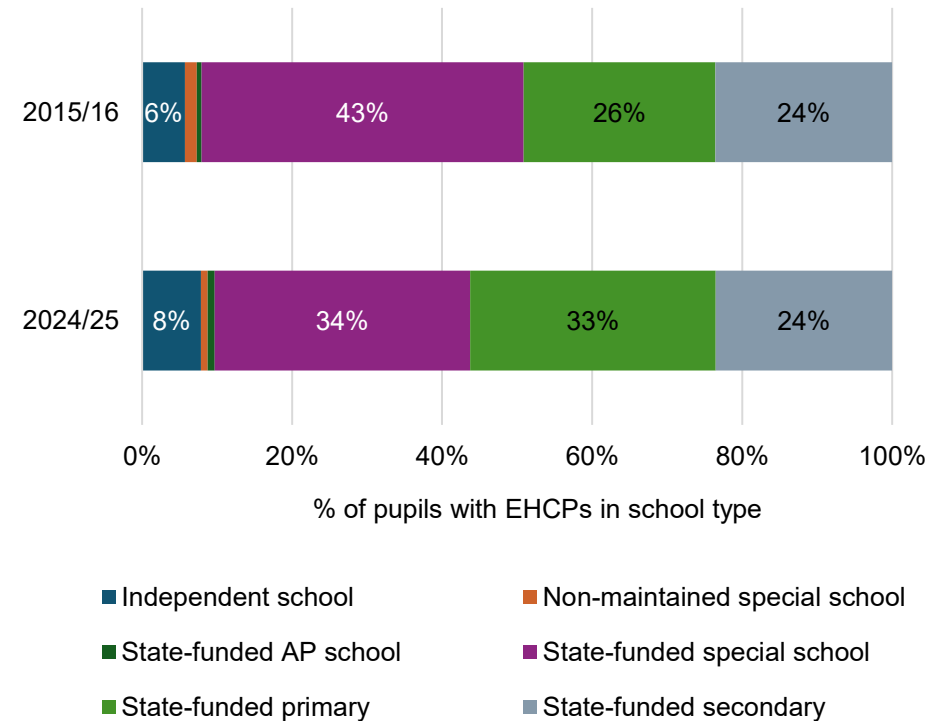
The number of pupils with EHCPs in primary and secondary schools has more than doubled since 2015/16⁶. At primary, it has increased from over 60,000 in 2015/16 to over 150,000 in 2024/25, whilst secondary numbers have increased from over 55,000 to over 110,000. Over this period, the number of pupils with EHCPs in special schools has also increased from just over 100,000 to over 160,000.

While the number of pupils with EHCPs has increased across all settings, the rate of increase has been greatest in primary schools. Figure 3 shows a seven-percentage-point rise in the proportion of pupils with EHCPs in primary mainstream settings since 2015/16 (from 26 per cent to 33 per cent). By 2024/25, 56 per cent of pupils with EHCPs were educated in mainstream schools. In contrast, the share of pupils with EHCPs in special schools has fallen over the same period, from just over two-fifths (43 per cent) in 2015/16 to just over a third (34 per cent) in 2024/25.

This change in the composition of pupils with SEND across schools is likely to be down to a combination of factors. This includes the extent to which different types of SEND are identified across settings and the incentives to secure an EHCP as discussed in section 2.1, alongside the large numbers of special schools now operating over capacity (National Audit Office, 2024).

⁶ In comparison, over the same period, total primary pupil numbers have fallen by one per cent, and secondary pupil numbers have increased by 15 per cent.

Figure 3: Proportion of pupils in receipt of an EHCP by school type, 2015/16 and 2024/25



Source: DfE Special educational needs in England publication

2.3. There is a wide variation in the identification of SEND across the country

There is considerable variation across regions and LAs in terms of the proportions of pupils identified as having SEND. London has the highest rate of pupils with EHCPs in primary schools, with 4.3 per cent having EHCPs. This is followed by the North West (3.8 per cent), the South West (3.6 per cent) and South East (3.5). This compares to primary schools in the West Midlands and North East at 2.8 per cent and 2.9 per cent respectively.

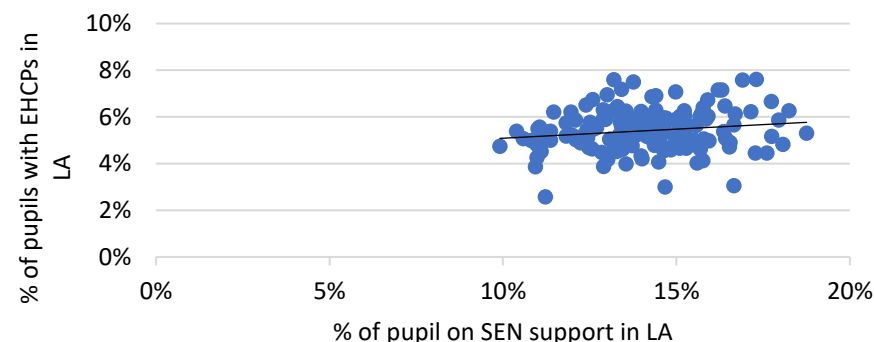
These patterns are broadly reflected at secondary. Among secondary schools, EHCP rates are highest in the South West (3.6 per cent), North West (3.4 per cent), London (3.3 per cent) and the East of England (3.3 per cent). They are lowest in the North East (2.7 per cent), East Midlands (2.6 per cent) and West Midlands (2.3 per cent).

The variability which can be observed between regions is also replicated within regions: there is a wide range of variability in SEND needs across LAs as shown by Figure 4.

These marked differences are due to a range of reasons. For example, different geographical areas have different numbers of pupils with characteristics which are related to a higher incidence of SEND (e.g., pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds)⁷. Another explanation is that identification and assessment of needs for EHCPs and SEN Support

may vary between different LAs and schools. This may reflect differences in the propensity of families and schools to identify needs, the availability of professionals to assess pupils' needs and LA staff to process EHCP applications, or criteria placed by LAs in identifying needs. Whilst there are statutory requirements on needs assessments, delays in assessments may manifest in what appears to be lower levels of need in an LA when it is in fact due to lack of resource to progress applications.

Figure 4: Proportion of pupils in receipt of EHCP and SEN Support by LA, 2024/25



Source: NFER analysis

⁷ While pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds have a higher incidence of SEND, they also face greater barriers to accessing EHCPs (Sutton Trust, 2025).

2.4. Pupils with SEND are unevenly distributed across mainstream schools

The large geographic differences in SEND rates are reflected at the school level. 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 quartile⁸.

This pattern is similar among secondary schools, albeit 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 (11 per cent compared to 29 per cent in primaries, and 10 per cent compared

to 26 per cent in secondaries). In primary schools, this equates to 30 pupils in the lowest quartile compared to 65 pupils in the highest quartile. In secondary schools, this equates to 120 pupils in the lowest quartile compared to 220 pupils in the highest quartile.

The spread of pupils with EHCPs and any SEND across schools has increased over time. From 2018/19⁹ 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 respectively.

In 2024/25, the correlation between EHCP and SEN Support rate 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 school¹⁰. 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 more inclined to pursue formal statutory assessments, while others may make greater use of

⁸ In 2024/25, the average (mean) primary and secondary schools have 272 and 1048 pupils on roll respectively.

⁹ 2018/19 is used as a comparator as this is first year where SEN statements were fully phased out.

¹⁰ 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 EHC needs assessment may be made (Department for Education, 2015).

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.

In this section, we have shown that much of the growth of identified SEND has been in mainstream schools, particularly in primary schools. The focus of the next section is to explore the characteristics of schools with high proportions of pupils with SEND.

3. The characteristics of schools with high proportions of pupils with SEND

This 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, the factors that may drive this pattern, and its implications for LAs, schools, and families. This understanding is also central to assessing the potential impact of forthcoming reforms to the SEND system, particularly for schools already supporting disproportionately high numbers of pupils with SEND.

We identify 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 ('high any SEND schools' or HASS), rather than focussing solely on EHCPs.

3.1. A working definition for 'high EHCP schools'

In this report, we use the term 'high EHCP schools' (HES) to describe schools where there are considerably higher than expected proportions of pupils with EHCPs. More specifically, our working definition for a HES is a school which:

- has been 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 three consecutive years (2022, 2023, 2024); 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 more complex or severe needs requiring coordinated, multi-agency provision. Schools with above-average proportions of EHCPs are therefore likely to face greater

resource, staffing, and curriculum challenges, and to be more representative of schools operating at the ‘high-need’ end of the spectrum.

We also compared our definition to some alternative definitions of a HES—for example, those based on LA benchmarking, on EHCPs identified before admission to secondary school (for secondary HES only), and on comparisons with the five nearest schools. Across these approaches, most schools in our HES group would still be considered ‘high-SEND’ (see Appendix for details).

3.2. The characteristics of ‘high EHCP’ schools

HES are distributed across all regions of England

While there is a spread of HES across LAs in England, as might be expected, they are overrepresented in regions with higher levels of EHCPs, particularly London. For example, while 15 per cent of secondary schools are in London, 20 per cent of secondary HES are located there. In contrast, while 12 per cent of schools are located in the West Midlands, only six per cent of HES are located there.

In addition, HES are no more likely to be in urban areas than rural areas.

HES are much more likely to have a SEN Unit and/or Resourced Provision

Some pupils with EHCPs in mainstream schools will be learning within specialist units. There are two main types of specialist units:

- A **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 spend most of their time in mainstream classes, supported by outreach from the RP.
- A **SEN unit (SU)** is a more 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.

Whilst only nine per cent of mainstream primary schools and 20 per cent of secondary schools have a SU and/or RP¹¹, over half of the HES group have this kind of provision (at 51 per cent of primary HES and 62 per cent of secondary HES). This is not surprising given these schools will have pupils with EHCPs in those units. To investigate this further, we explored whether the HES group would change if we removed all pupils in SUs and/or RP from our data. Approximately two-fifths of primary schools and half of secondaries with a SU/RP in our original HES group were still identified as ‘high-SEND’. This indicates that many schools with SUs or RP have above-average proportions of

¹¹ This varies with the DfE data source used. We identify specialist units if they are listed in either Get Information About Schools or school census data.

pupils with EHCPs, over and above the pupils enrolled in this specialist provision.

HES are more likely to be community schools

Figure 6 shows that HES are more likely to be community or voluntary-controlled at both the primary and secondary phase. Equally academies are slightly less likely to be HES. This is in line with previous research showing that identification of SEND was lower in academies than other schools (Hutchinson, Downs and Ford, 2025).

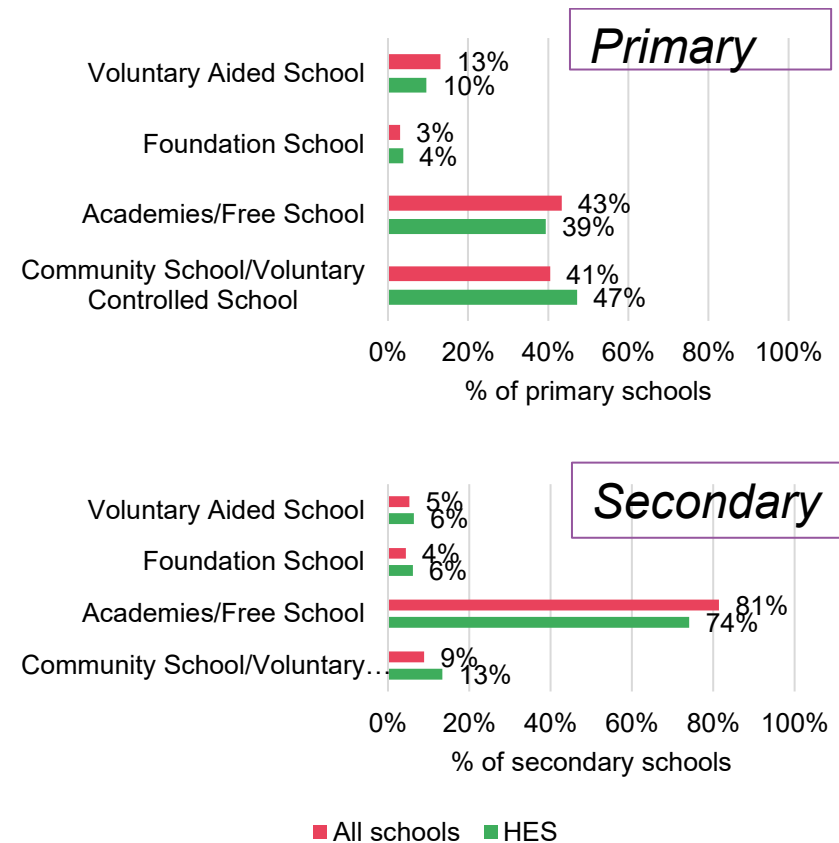
Similarly, across all mainstream schools (including academies and LA maintained schools), HES are less likely to be faith schools at primary with only 26 per cent of HES having a religious affiliation compared to 37 per cent of all primary schools. This pattern was not replicated in secondary schools where there was very little difference. This is likely to reflect a difference in the landscape of faith schools between primary and secondary. There are fewer faith schools at secondary than at primary. Church of England (CofE) schools also make up around three quarters of faith schools at primary but only a third of faith schools at secondary (with other faiths making up a much bigger share of secondary faith schools).

Secondary HES are more likely to be in grammar school areas

Secondary HES are slightly more likely to have a grammar school in their LA. On average, 31 per cent of secondary schools have a grammar school in their LA. The corresponding percentage for HES is 36 per cent. This may be explained by the fact that SEND pupils are

less likely to attend grammar schools – which is likely to reflect the selective nature of entry requirements (Danechi, 2020).

Figure 5: Proportions of HES by school type, 2023/24



Source: NFER analysis

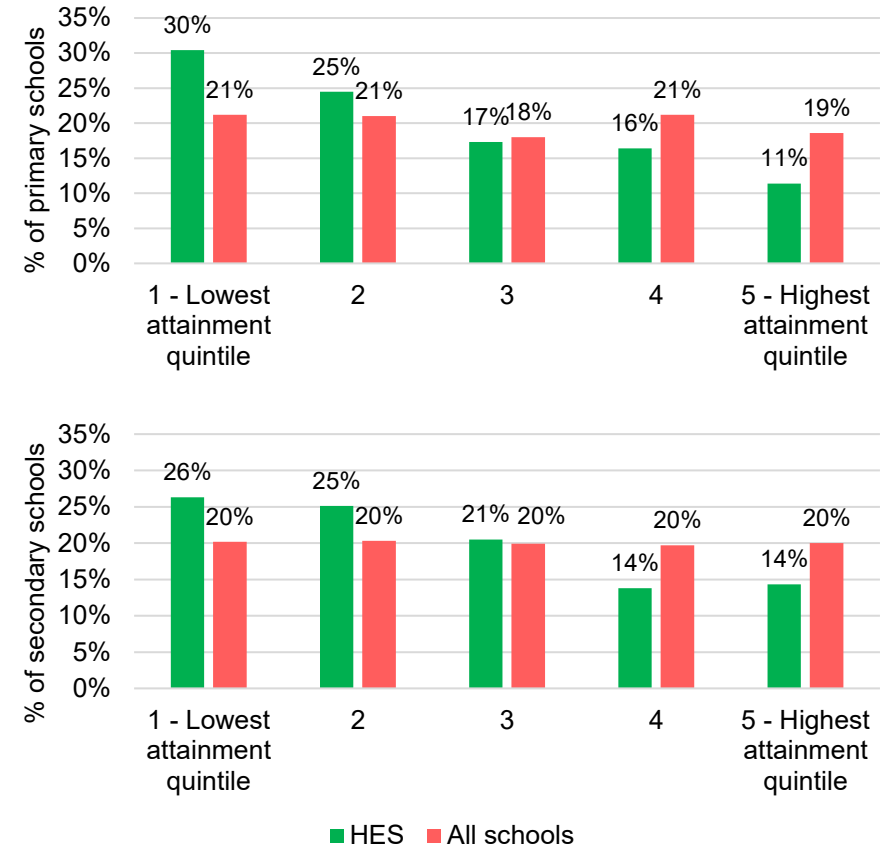
HES tend to have lower levels of attainment but similar Ofsted judgements

Compared to all schools, HES tend to have lower school-level attainment outcomes at Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4. At primary, 30 per cent of HES are in the lowest quintile in terms of attainment and only 11 per cent of HES are in the highest attainment quintile. The pattern is similar in secondary schools but is less stark with 26 per cent of HES having attainment in the lowest quintile and 14 per cent in the highest attainment quintile.

This relationship is associational rather than causal, as HES may have lower attainment due to their intakes including higher proportions of pupils with SEND. Indeed, there is a well-documented attainment gap between pupils with SEND and those without (Education Endowment Foundation, 2025).

While there are significant differences in the level of attainment achieved between HES and all schools, there is very little difference between the two in terms of their overall Ofsted judgements¹². HES are slightly less likely to receive an ‘Outstanding’ judgement, but broadly patterns are comparable.

Figure 6: Proportions of HES by attainment quintile, 2023/24



Source: NFER analysis

¹² This is based on the single-word judgements, which were scrapped in 2024.

Primary HES are more likely to be deprived

Primary HES are significantly more likely to be deprived —where deprivation is measured by the percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals in the school. As shown by Figure 7, 31 per cent of primary HES are in the most deprived quintile compared to only nine per cent in the least deprived.

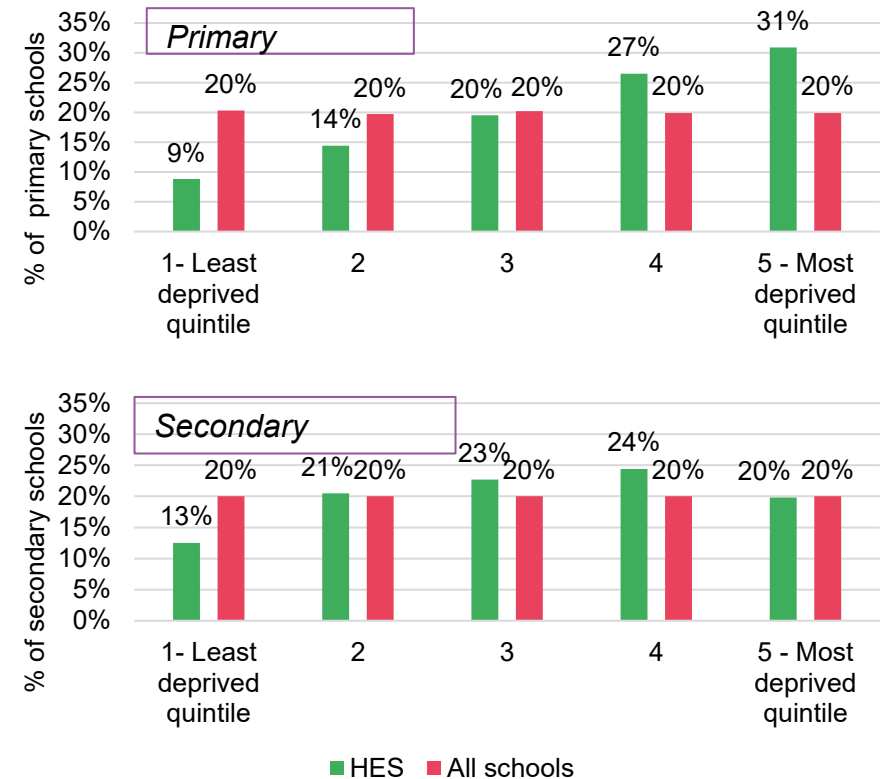
Among secondary schools, the pattern is less clear. While HES are less likely to be in the least deprived quintile of schools (13 per cent, compared to 20 per cent of non-HES schools), they are no more likely to be in the most deprived quintile. This may be partly explained by the larger catchment areas of secondary schools, as compared to primaries.

Secondary HES are more likely to be small schools

A third of secondary HES are in the smallest quintile of secondary schools in terms of pupil headcount. This group of small HES are more likely to have an RP or SU than other secondary HES.

Primary HES are, on average, no more likely to be small schools. However, there are notable size differences between primary HES with and without RP or SU. Most of the larger primary HES have an SU or RP, while most of the smaller primary HES do not. This contrasts with Secondary HES, where the opposite is true. These differences may partly reflect the fact that small secondary schools are much larger than small primary schools, so we would not necessarily expect similar patterns by school size across phases.

Figure 7: Proportions of HES by deprivation quintile, 2023/24



Source: NFER analysis

3.3. How do the characteristics of HES compare to schools with high rates of any SEND pupils (HASS)?

As outlined in section 2.4, schools with high rates of EHCPs do not necessarily have high rates of pupils receiving SEN Support. To ensure our analysis captures the full spectrum of SEND provision, we compared schools with higher-than-expected numbers of pupils with any form of SEND to those in our HES group. This comparison allows us to explore how focusing on different definitions of a ‘high-SEND school’ affects the characteristics of schools included in our analysis, with equal attention given to both groups. We call this second group High-any-SEND schools (HASS). Our working definition for a HASS is a school which:

- has been 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 three consecutive years (2022, 2023, 2024); and
- 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 high levels of underlying SEND or could be the result of over-identification of SEND. Nevertheless, schools with a high number of pupils identified as

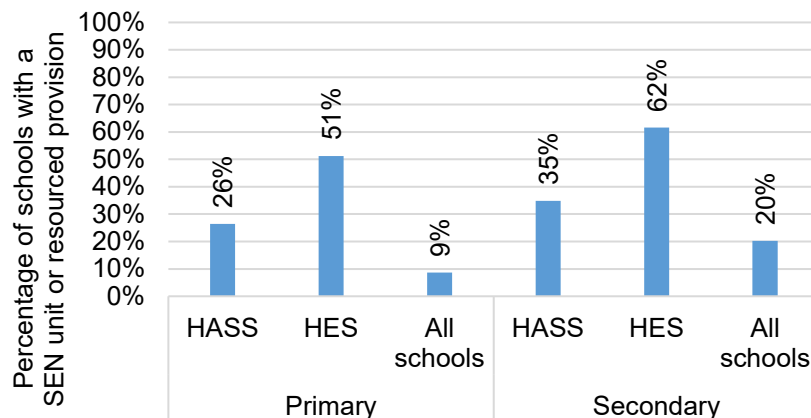
needing SEN Support may also be operating under considerable pressure, especially as they are not usually able to access top-up funding for pupils without EHCPs.

As might be expected, given the 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 each group.

High-any-SEND schools (HASS) are less likely to have specialist provision compared to HES

Figure 8 shows that HASS are less likely to have an SU and/or RP than HES, with only 27 per cent of primary and 35 per cent of secondary schools having at least one form of specialist provision. This compares to 51 per cent of HES primary schools and 62 per cent of HES secondary schools. However, HASS are still considerably more likely than the average school to have such provision: only nine per cent of mainstream primary schools and 20 per cent of secondary schools have a SU and/or RP.

Figure 8: Proportions of HASS and HES with a SU or RP, 2023/24



Source: NFER analysis

The HASS group skew towards the HES group in terms of school type but are more similar to all schools than the HSS group.

For example, 46 per cent of HASS are community schools compared to 47 per cent of HSS and 41 per cent of all schools.

Similarly to the HES group, schools located in grammar school areas are also more likely to fall into the HASS category.

HASS have lower attainment and Ofsted judgements than HES

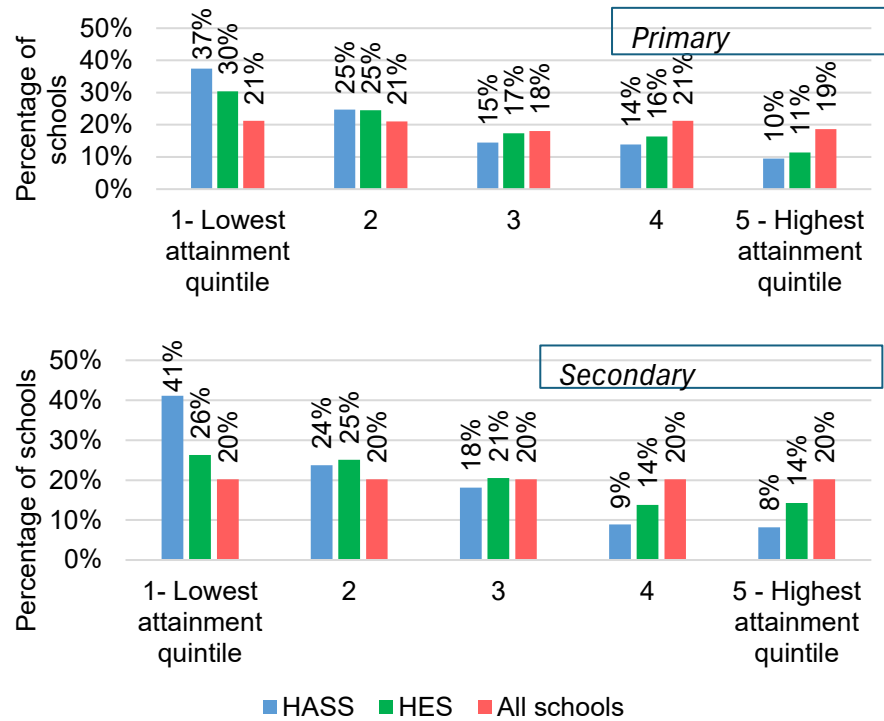
In terms of attainment, HASS and HES are more likely to have lower levels of attainment than all schools, as shown by Figure 9.

The patterns are more pronounced for HASS, which shows a steeper gradient across the performance quintiles than for HES, particularly for secondaries. Further, while Ofsted judgements are broadly comparable for HES and all schools, there is a more distinct difference for HASS, which are less likely to be rated ‘Outstanding’, particularly at secondary level. These schools are also more likely to have either a ‘Requires Improvement’ or ‘Inadequate’ judgement¹³.

One possible explanation for why HASS may have lower Ofsted judgements and attainment is that schools who are struggling with quality of provision may also be more likely to overidentify SEND. However, it may also reflect that schools unable to secure EHCPs for pupils with the most complex needs face greater challenges overall, which in turn impacts their attainment and inspection outcomes.

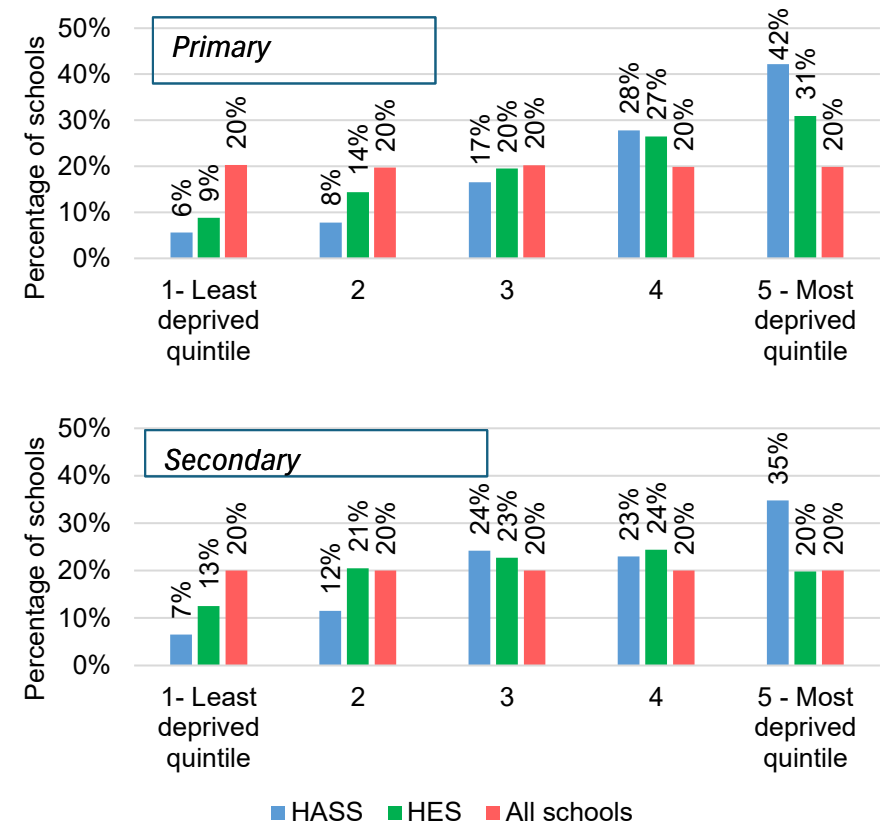
¹³ These two lower judgement groups were combined in the analysis for statistical disclosure reasons.

Figure 9: Proportions of HASS and HES by attainment quintile, 2023/24



Source: NFER analysis

Figure 10: Proportions of HASS and HES by deprivation quintile, 2023/24



Source: NFER analysis

HASS are more likely to be deprived than HES and all schools

This is shown by Figure 10 which highlights that this pattern is more conspicuous for both phases compared to the HES group. One factor which may contribute to this pattern is that EHCP rates may be more likely to be understated in more deprived schools because families are less likely to have the financial means, social capital and capacity to ensure that their children secure an EHCP (Sutton Trust, 2025)

Finally, HASS are more likely to be smaller schools than HES and all schools on average. This is particularly the case for secondary schools, where 38 per cent of HASS are in the smallest quintile compared to 32 per cent of HES and 20 percent of all schools.

Summary

This sub-section highlights that while HSS and HASS generally compare similarly to all schools, there are some clear differences between them in terms of outcomes and populations served. These distinctions may reflect variation in how schools identify and record SEND, as well as differences in local context or pupil intakes. Future strands of the project will examine these differences in more detail to build a clearer understanding of the factors driving variation across measures of SEND prevalence and provision.

The next section builds on the quantitative insights presented here by examining LA perspectives on why pupils with SEND are unevenly distributed across schools and the implications.

4. Local authority perspectives

Between June and July 2025, we conducted interviews with ten senior local authority (LA) officers from nine different LAs. All interviewees had responsibility for SEND and most had the job title of ‘Director of SEND’ or similar. The authorities were chosen to provide a regional spread and to include areas where there was a large spread in the proportions of pupils with EHCPs across schools. The key insights are summarised below, structured around the three research questions.

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

LAs recognise the uneven distribution of pupils with SEND as a problem

LA interviewees were aware of the uneven distribution of pupils with SEND across their mainstream schools and acknowledged that this encompassed SEN Support as well as EHCPs. Interviewees noted that, because of this uneven distribution, some schools were now at breaking point: *‘We’ve got a handful of schools across the county reaching a breaking point. It is not sustainable.’*

Interviewees reported that the uneven distribution of pupils with SEND was reflected in variation in the provision offered across schools, including early intervention support, pastoral care, and specialist services. While some of this variation was attributed to differences in school resourcing, particularly in schools with high numbers of pupils with SEND, other factors, such as local policy and leadership priorities, were also seen as influential.

In some LAs, a handful of mainstream secondaries were described as ‘saturated with EHCPs’, while others had far fewer. One interviewee described a secondary with 130 pupils with EHCPs, observing:

‘That’s one SENCO who has to undertake 130 annual reviews within a year... you reach a point where those responsibilities just can’t be met, no matter how determined the school is.’

Another drew a vivid analogy: *‘It’s almost becoming a small special school... with a huge secondary school attached to it.’*

Inconsistencies in identification

While noting that differences in school cohorts may explain some of the variation, LAs also highlighted inconsistencies with SEND identification across settings. In one authority, for example, the proportion of pupils receiving SEN Support ranged from over 50 per cent in some primaries to as low as five per cent in others. As one interviewee explained:

‘That is not because the cohorts are that different. It’s because if you had the same child in the school with 50 per cent, and placed them in the other school, they wouldn’t be on the SEN Support register. They would just have their needs met through quality first teaching.’

LAs varied in terms of the support and guidance offered to schools for identifying children as needing SEN Support. In some areas, LAs had little or no involvement with SEND identification, while others offered training and support services to schools. A few authorities went further, mandating standardised identification practices to promote greater consistency across settings.

Changes over time

Across LAs, interviewees described rising levels of need and an increase in EHCP requests over recent years. Several cited year-on-year rises in new plans of around 10-11 per cent nationally, alongside limited reductions in ceased plans (Department for Education, 2025).

The profile of needs was also reported to be changing. Interviewees reported growing numbers of children entering school with significant developmental delays or social and emotional challenges: *‘Many children now start school not potty trained, can’t read, can’t socialise. These were once exceptional but are now the norm.’*

ASC and social, emotional and mental health needs (particularly attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)) were highlighted as particularly fast-growing categories (in line with the national data discussed in section 2), alongside increased demand linked to deprivation and the pandemic.

4.2. What are the factors driving this distribution of pupils across the school system?

Interviewees highlighted parental choice and school ethos and reputation as the two most significant drivers shaping how pupils with SEND are distributed across the system.

Parental choice was consistently described as influential, particularly at key transition points. Interviewees noted that informal networks, such as parent WhatsApp groups and peer advice, played a role in shaping perceptions and guiding families toward particular schools. However, some felt that the policy goal of inclusion was not always

aligned with the principle of respecting parental preference.

Interviewees described how parents’ choices—sometimes reflecting a desire for more specialist provision, sometimes for particular mainstream schools—can complicate efforts to distribute pupils with EHCPs more evenly across settings. As one interviewee put it: *‘The expectation... was that most children will... thrive in mainstream. However, parental preference really makes that very, very difficult.’*

School ethos and reputation were equally important. Schools with strong inclusive leadership were seen to attract more pupils with SEND. At the same time, some schools were content to let others take the lead when it came to supporting pupils with SEND, including those with EHCPs: *‘Some schools are happy for others to build reputations for taking on [pupils with] EHCPs’*. In some cases, this led to clustering effects, with schools characterised as *‘victims of their own success’* because their reputations for supporting pupils with SEND drew in even more applications from pupils with SEND, exacerbating resource pressures.

Other factors, including school-level practices, accountability pressures, and wider financial or structural dynamics, were also reported to play a role.

- **School accountability pressures:** Building on the point above, that some schools were content to let others take the lead in supporting pupils with SEND, LA interviewees perceived that accountability pressures could discourage some schools from admitting pupils with SEND. Concerns about performance data (as, on average, pupils with SEND make less progress than their peers)

and inspection outcomes were commonly cited: *'They're thinking about the impact that a child might have on their data, their next inspection.'*

- **Falling rolls and financial pressures:** Financial pressures caused primarily by falling rolls were reported to have resulted in schools cutting back on early intervention and staff training. LAs perceived this to have led to needs escalating and more children needing EHCPs. Some schools were also reported to pursue EHCPs partly for funding: *'You might as well have one because you'll get a bit of dosh to go into the pot.'*
- **EHCPs often increase during the transition from primary to secondary school:** Some interviewees observed that requests for EHCPs often rise during the move from primary to secondary school. This may be because some parents seek extra support to help secure a school place they feel is better suited to their child's needs, especially given the increased challenges secondary settings can pose for some children with SEND. However, some LAs suggested that, in certain cases, parents may be motivated by a desire to influence placement decisions in their favour.
- **A lack of confidence or capability in schools with lower educational standards** was seen as a factor driving some EHCP applications: *'If you've got a school with relatively low education standards... they generally don't know what to do. So they think, we'll apply for an EHCP, get some more funding and then we'll sort it out.'*
- **Academies' ability to reject EHCP placements:** Relationships with different types of school were also seen as a factor. Some

interviewees reported that academies could be more difficult for LAs to influence, particularly when they declined EHCP placements: *'It's harder if they say we can't meet need than if they're a maintained school.'*

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

Schools with above-average intakes of pupils with SEND were reported to face acute operational pressures. Interviewees described challenges around funding, staffing, and ensuring that support was distributed equitably across pupils. In some cases, high concentrations of pupils with additional needs were said to affect classroom dynamics, with staff attention and resources being disproportionately focused on particular pupils: *'There could be an isolation aspect to some children... all the adult time is kind of directed towards one pupil and not the whole class.'*

Another noted the strain on leadership and teaching capacity: *'Schools with high numbers... probably can't [operate] with a part-time SENCO.'*

Despite these challenges, some schools with very high proportions of pupils with SEND were praised for their inclusivity. As one interviewee explained:

'We've got a small secondary school... 48 per cent of their children are identified as SEN [Support]... actually they're meeting the needs of those children. They're not tipping them out into AP.'

In addition, schools with RP or SUs were reported to sometimes demonstrate stronger whole-school expertise in SEND: *'Their overall school knowledge around autism... is probably better.'* These schools were also said to attract additional pupils with EHCPs, even when the RP or SU itself was full. While this reflects their inclusive ethos and specialist reputation, it was also reported to lead to clustering within these schools, which could place pressure on their own mainstream capacity: *'The more you open [bases], the more they come.'*

Interviewees also reported observing different types of impacts on pupils with and without SEND. For pupils with SEND, being in a 'high-SEND school' was seen to have mixed effects. On one hand, these settings may offer stronger expertise, contributing to a more inclusive environment. On the other, high concentrations can stretch resources and limit individualised support, potentially impacting progress and wellbeing.

For pupils without SEND, outcomes were also reported to go both ways. Done well, mixed classrooms promote inclusion: *'Pupils without SEND benefit... they learn about diversity in their community.'*

But where provision was stretched, LAs perceived that parents may feel their children are disrupted: *'Families might say my child is perpetually disrupted... that's about meeting the needs of both children, which isn't easy.'*

Finally, the uneven distribution of pupils with SEND—alongside wider systemic challenges such as funding constraints and workforce shortages—was reported to be generating tensions within LAs and across stakeholders. Officers described the ongoing struggle to balance legal duties, parental expectations, financial limitations, and

school-level pressures, all within a context of rising demand and limited resources.

'The laws [are] against you in every step you take... your finance director is jumping up and down on your head... it is combative from different angles.'

5. Conclusions

Whilst the total number of pupils with any type of SEND has increased across all types of schools over the last decade, the rise in the proportion of pupils with an EHCP has been particularly marked in mainstream primary schools. Moreover, this increase has not been evenly distributed: recent growth has widened pre-existing differences between schools in the extent to which they support higher or lower numbers of pupils with SEND.

Our emerging insights suggest that the uneven distribution of pupils with SEND across mainstream schools is shaped not only by the underlying prevalence of need, but also by school-level factors such as quality, identification practices, ethos, and resources, as well as parental preferences, social capital, and accountability pressures. Financial fragility and conflicting incentives further compound these dynamics, with implications for equity across the system. While some schools actively welcome and support pupils with SEND, others are less equipped or less inclined to take on additional pupils, and families with greater knowledge or resources are often better able to secure preferred placements, potentially reinforcing inequalities in access to well-resourced or highly inclusive schools.

The final project report, set to be published in summer 2026, will build on this evidence and explore the drivers and consequences of the uneven distribution of pupils with SEND across schools in greater depth. It will draw on further quantitative analyses, a large-scale survey of primary and secondary school leaders, and in-depth interviews with school staff and parents.

Our early findings nonetheless indicate that government plans to reform the SEND system should prioritise greater consistency and equity. In particular, it is essential that schools with strong inclusive cultures are supported rather than penalised, and that accountability measures and resources are aligned to avoid placing disproportionate pressure on schools serving higher numbers of pupils with SEND.

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7. Appendix

7.1. Constructing catchment areas

School catchment areas were determined using the same approach used in NFER’s Selective Comprehensive’s research. 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 less than five pupils from that area attended the school across the last three intake years.

7.2. Comparing definitions of HES

Table 1 presents the level of overlap between our HES and a selected number of other potential alternative definitions of ‘high-SEND schools’. For example, the leftmost cell indicates that 88 per cent of the primary HES group are in the top quintile of schools in terms of rate of pupils in receipt of an EHCP for more than two years. It shows that there is generally a high level of overlap with other EHCP-based measures.

In comparison, comparing HES and schools in the top quartile of any SEND, there is less overlap which is not altogether surprising given the findings outlined in section 3. Nonetheless, pupils with high levels of

any SEND are still overrepresented in the HES group compared to all schools.

Table 1 Comparison of definition for identifying HES

Definition based on	% of primary HES group	% of all primary schools	% of secondary HES group	% of all secondary schools
EHCP based measures				
Schools in the top quintile of schools in terms of rate of pupils in receipt of an EHCP for more than two years	88%	20%	95%	5%
Schools in the top quintile of schools in terms of EHCP rate where EHCP was identified before secondary school	-	-	91%	20%
Schools in the top quintile of EHCP rates within their LA	96%	25%	90%	23%
Any SEN based measures				

Schools in the top quintile of any SEND rates within their LA	58%	25%	54%	23%
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NFER ref. NSEN

ISBN: 978-1-916567-41-2