

Double Disadvantage?

Socio-economic inequalities in the SEND system

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Overview

- The number of children with SEND is growing. Since 2014, the rate of growth has been faster for children not eligible for FSM in many categories of SEND, including 'Autism Spectrum Disorder', 'Speech, Language and Communication Needs' and 'Social, Emotional and Mental Health'.
- Similarly, EHCPs are on the rise. Between 2016 and 2025, the share of English pupils with EHCPs has almost doubled (from 2.7% to 5.2%).
- Children eligible for FSM are over-represented within the SEND cohort. Nationally, 25.7% of children are eligible for FSM. However, this figure is 39.3% for those categorised as receiving SEND support and 43.8% for those in receipt of an EHCP.
- Children eligible for FSM are over-represented in every category of SEND and mostly so in 'Moderate Learning Difficulties', 'Severe Learning Difficulties' and 'Social, Emotional and Mental Health'.
- Within the SEND cohort, children eligible for FSM have lower outcomes at Key Stage 4. In 2023/2024, only 7.5% of children eligible for FSM and who had an EHCP secured 4+ in English and Maths compared to 17.3% of those with an EHCP but not eligible for FSM.

- Within the SEND cohort, those from more affluent homes are more likely to secure an EHCP. 65% of working-class parents spent no money on their EHCP application compared to only 29% of middle-class parents. 11% of middle-class parents spent over £5,000 on their application, compared to 1% of working-class parents.
- More affluent parents are more likely to use the tribunal system to secure an EHCP. 22% of middle-class parents successfully used the tribunal system after an initial EHCP rejection compared to 15% of working-class parents.
- When an EHCP has been secured, parents of children with SEND are more positive about the education their child is receiving than those with SEND without an EHCP. They are more likely to agree that their child belongs at school and that they enjoy school.
- More affluent families were more likely to secure special school places for their children. 41% of middle-class parents of a child with SEND reported securing a special school place compared to 25% of working-class parents of a child with SEND.
- There may be a relationship between spending money on an EHCP application and securing a special school place. 12% of parents in special schools had spent over £5,000 on their EHCP compared to 1% of those in mainstream schools.
- 42% of parents say too little government money is spent on SEND. Only 6% say too much is spent on SEND.
- Greater levels of satisfaction were reported for children with SEND who attend a special school. Overall, 91% of families are satisfied or very satisfied with their special school (state or independent) compared to 68% of those within mainstream schools.
- There are also socio-economic disparities in satisfaction with support for their children. Middle-class parents were more likely than working-class parents to be happy with the support their children with SEND were receiving in terms of academic performance, behaviour, and other areas.
- Having a child with SEND can have financial implications for families. Within the SEND cohort, 16% of parents reported leaving employment to support their child. 16% reported changing their job and 27% changed their working hours. 14% of families reported going into debt to pay for the resources their child with SEND needed.
- All parents are broadly supportive of inclusion. Most parents feel that children with SEND should be educated in mainstream schools, wherever possible. The majority also feel that having children with SEND in mainstream schools supports both those with SEND and without.
- Independent special school places secured via EHCPs were twice as likely to result from a tribunal or appeal as state special school places.

Implications for SEND reform

- **Policy makers should acknowledge the relationship between socio-economic background and SEND.** Policies designed to eliminate child poverty may help to reduce the prevalence of certain forms of SEND.
- **Policy makers must acknowledge the double disadvantage for those who are eligible for FSM and have SEND.** Reform should look to address specific issues that contribute to this.
- **Those children who are labelled as 'SEND Support' often have less positive experiences of education than those who have an EHCP.** Reform should consider how this group of children can be well supported, including how the support for this group is funded.
- Policy makers should consider how to **reduce the diagnosis backlog and waiting times** for families so that timely and targeted support can be offered. Schools should continue to support children who are waiting for their diagnosis, providing support based on need rather than label.
- Policy makers should think about how to **increase the consistency of SEND identification** within and between schools to minimise socio-economic disparities in identification and support.
- **Simplifying the process of accessing support for SEND** should be a priority so that complexity does not act as an additional rationing system with some groups of parents better able to navigate processes than others.
- Schools should **continue to be supported to create calm, consistent learning environments** that are conducive to learning for all pupils.
- Policy makers should consider **how to increase capacity in mainstream schools** so that they can better support all pupils. This could be for example effective partnership working with other services or supporting schools to introduce SEND Hubs with ongoing support to implement them effectively.
- Policy makers should reflect on how they can best capitalise on opportunities for **early identification** through improved access to high-quality early years provision and improved training opportunities for the early years workforce.



Introduction

It is essential that all children and young people, regardless of background or individual characteristics, can access an excellent education. Across the country, teachers, senior leaders, support staff, and other professionals work tirelessly to ensure that pupils can learn in calm, supportive environments, and that those in need of additional support are able to access it. However, we also know that too often children who need additional support do not have these needs identified, and that when they do, they struggle to access suitable, high-quality support.

There is growing demand for special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) support. Over 1.7 million pupils in England have an identified SEND – an increase of 5.6% since 2024.¹ Between 2016 and 2025, the share of English pupils with Education and Health Care Plans (EHCPs) has almost doubled (from 2.7% to 5.3%),² while high needs spending by councils increased by 66% in real terms over the same period (from £7.5bn to at least £12bn), raising concerns about the financial sustainability of the system.³

These fears have been accompanied by significant concerns about outcomes for children and young people with SEND. In September 2025, the Education Select Committee's 'Solving the SEND Crisis' report detailed a range of challenges facing different parts of the system, including limited school capacity; a lack of parental trust in the system; wider capacity issues among educational psychologists, therapists and relevant health professionals; and local authority funding, among other issues.⁴ The Commission's inquiry found that significant improvements are required across all levels of SEND support, including ordinarily available provision, SEND support, and EHCPs.

Since the Children and Families Act 2014 and the accompanying SEND Code of Practice, which forms the basis of our current SEND system, numerous inquiries, reviews, and plans have sought to improve its function and outcomes.⁵ The 2014 Act sought to give parents and children more of a say over their support needs; improve partnership working between education, health and social care services; and ensure both early identification of needs and continuation of support up to those aged 25 where needed.⁶ However, over a decade on, and the promises of the 2014 Act have not been realised. Provision continues to vary greatly between settings and local areas, needs have sky-rocketed, budgets are stretched, and insurmountable costs are driving deficits in local authority budgets. SEND policy in 2025 stands at a crossroads.

“At present, our SEND system creates a lottery in provision. Approaches to identification, practice, and available support vary greatly by setting and local area.”

For a government aiming to Break Down Barriers to Opportunity,⁷ addressing the current challenges in SEND provision is crucial. The government has already announced a further £1bn for high needs funding for the 2025/26 academic year,⁸ while Ofsted's new inspection framework has 'inclusion' as one of its new criteria for inspection.⁹

There is a clear appetite for improvements to our SEND system and the Education Secretary has acknowledged the difficulties that the current system is presenting to children with SEND and their parents.¹⁰ The Department for Education is also set to publish 'best practice guidance for operating and setting up SEN units, resourced provision, and pupil support units within mainstream schools', with interim draft guidance to be published by December 2025 and full guidance being released by mid-February 2026.¹¹ This reflects the government's intention moving towards more inclusive mainstream schooling.

SEND and socio-economic disadvantage

At present, our SEND system creates a lottery in provision. Approaches to identification, practice, and available support vary greatly by setting and local area.

In this report, we look at these differences and disparities in relation to socio-economic background and SEND, before exploring how socio-economic background influences experiences and outcomes for families with children with SEND.

The first section of this report examines the current context, how SEND and disadvantage are linked, and how this has changed over time.

In the second section, we use the results of a survey of over 4,000 parents to begin to understand why children who are from a lower socio-economic background and have SEND have some of the poorest education outcomes of all pupil groups.

Finally, we look to the future to discuss how parents view the role of schools in supporting children with SEND.

Taken together, these insights inform a series of implications for SEND reform, outlined on page 3.

Setting the scene: SEND and socio-economic disadvantage

What do we mean by Special Educational Needs and Disabilities?

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) is a broad umbrella term, covering a range of needs and disabilities.

The SEND Code of Practice¹² defines it as such:

“A child or young person has SEN if they have a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made for him or her.

A child of compulsory school age or a young person has a learning difficulty or disability if he or she:

- Has a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of others of the same age, or
- Has a disability which prevents or hinders him or her from making use of facilities of a kind generally provided for others of the same age in mainstream schools or mainstream post-16 institutions”

Who identifies SEND?

The starting point for accessing SEND support is raising the question of whether it is needed. This can be done by:

- Parents or carers
- The child or young person
- School staff
- Medical professionals
- Other professionals such as Early Help workers or counsellors

The school SENDCo will lead the co-ordination of information gathering and work with all stakeholders to make a final decision on what support is needed. This could include referrals for assessments, managing school support, placing the child on the SEND register and arranging any interventions.

Children who meet the criteria for SEND are placed on the school's SEND register by the SENDCo at one of two levels: 'SEND Support' or 'Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP)'. At the SEND Support level, the school identifies that a child requires additional or different support beyond what is provided through high-quality teaching. The SENDCo coordinates this support, which is planned, delivered, and reviewed as part of a *graduated approach* - typically referred to as Assess, Plan, Do, Review.

If a child's needs are more complex or severe and cannot reasonably be met from the school's own resources, the SENDCo or parents may request a statutory assessment from the local authority. If agreed, this process can lead to an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) - a legally binding document outlining the child's specific needs, outcomes, and the provision required to meet them. The EHCP is written and maintained by the local authority, with input from professionals such as the SENDCo, educational psychologists, health specialists, and other relevant experts.

For children at SEND Support level, provision is funded primarily from the school's delegated budget and may draw on existing staff expertise and resources. Schools can also apply for High Needs Funding (HNF) or equivalent

top-up funding from the local authority if additional financial support is required - though the process varies locally.

For pupils with an EHCP, the local authority has a statutory duty to ensure that the provision specified in the plan is delivered. This may include direct funding to the school and/or access to specialist services such as advisory teachers, NHS professionals, or social care support.

Applying for an Education, Health and Care Plan

Parents, the young person, school or wider professionals can apply to the local authority for an EHC needs assessment. The following timeline should then be followed:

Within 6 weeks: The local authority (LA) must confirm whether they will assess the child or young person.

Within 16 weeks: The LA must finish the assessment and decide whether the child or young person needs an EHCP.

Between 16-20 weeks: The LA sends a draft EHCP to the family. They have 15 days to comment and request a specific school place.

Within 20 weeks: The LA must complete the final draft of the EHCP.

Annually: The LA must complete a review and update the EHCP.

Parents have the right to appeal the decision-making of their LA. Common subjects of appeal include whether or not an EHCP is issued and which school is named on the EHCP. The appeals system is known as a tribunal.

There are four broad categories of SEND, each encompassing a number of needs and disabilities:

1. 'Communication and interaction': focuses on speech, language and communication needs as well as Autism Spectrum Disorder.
2. 'Cognition and learning': focuses on children who need support because they are working below their chronological age, alongside more specific learning disabilities such as dyslexia.

3. 'Social, emotional and mental health': focuses on mental health and behaviour issues as well as attention disorders including Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder.
4. 'Sensory and physical needs': focuses on medical issues such as hearing or visual impairment and Downs Syndrome. A more comprehensive list can be found in Appendix 1.

This section illustrates the range of needs for children with SEND is extremely broad, especially in cases of co-morbidity – where children have multiple, overlapping conditions.

“It is well established that children from lower income backgrounds tend to be over-represented in the SEND cohort.”

How does SEND interact with disadvantage?

It is well established that children from lower income backgrounds tend to be over-represented in the SEND cohort.¹³ In official statistics, this is measured by eligibility for Free School Meals (FSM). However, this overall relationship obscures some complexity. The association differs by categories of need, and there are also questions about the relationship between the underlying rates of SEND and the rates of those identified, diagnosed and receiving support.

The link between low income and SEND is complex with multiple factors coming into play. As such the impact of low income will vary depending on the type of SEND we are considering. The prevalence of genetic inheritance in certain types of SEND is a factor in some cases. Poor maternal health, including lower quality pre-natal care can also contribute to some types of SEND. In other cases, the impact of poverty can lead to children being categorised with SEND. For instance, if they are 'acting out' at school due to challenging home lives they could be recorded as having Social, emotional and mental health needs (SEMH).¹⁴

In addition, it is recognised that for a child with SEND to thrive in their education, a strong partnership is needed between school and home. This can be more challenging in some cases, often including parents from low-income backgrounds¹⁵ who may have had negative experiences of the school system themselves.

Meanwhile, children with SEND are more likely to move into poverty. This is often due to parents having to reduce work commitments to support their child, or because of the increased costs associated with raising a child with SEND.¹⁶ Parental separation is also more likely for parents of children with SEND, leading to more children with SEND living in single parent households.¹⁷

This section shows the complex and multi-faceted relationship between SEND and socio-economic disadvantage. It demonstrates the need to attend to particular challenges faced by this group, and to understand how elements of the system may contribute to such challenge.

How many children have SEND?

Over 1.7 million pupils in England have SEND. This is an increase of 5.6% since 2024. The overall percentage of children with an EHCP is now 5.3%, and of children receiving SEND Support without EHCPs is currently 14.2%, both up from last year.¹⁸

This reflects significant long-term growth of the SEND cohort, although growth rates across different types of SEND vary. Autistic Spectrum Disorder, Speech, Language and Communication needs and Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs are the areas that have grown the most in the last decade.

Growth in SEND identification is driven by several factors. These include better diagnostic tools, increased awareness, system incentives and issues with 'Construct Validity' whereby our definitions of SEND are not robust enough.¹⁹ This means our identification of SEND could be inaccurate, leading to under or over identification of SEND. Ultimately this could result in some children being placed on the SEND register when they should not be and vice versa.²⁰ Additional factors contributing to the rise in identified SEND include improved maternal care and medical care for babies born pre-maturely and the extension of SEND support to the age of 25 which may have encouraged EHCP applications due to their increased timeframes for support.²¹

The increasing numbers of children with SEND is putting significant pressure on the education system. In order to reserve special school places for those with the highest level of need, mainstream schools are being asked to support more children with SEND. Consequently, these children may also have more severe or complex SEND than in previous years. School staff are working hard to meet this additional need and higher needs funding has increased. However, demand continues to rise and there are growing concerns about outcomes for pupils with SEND.

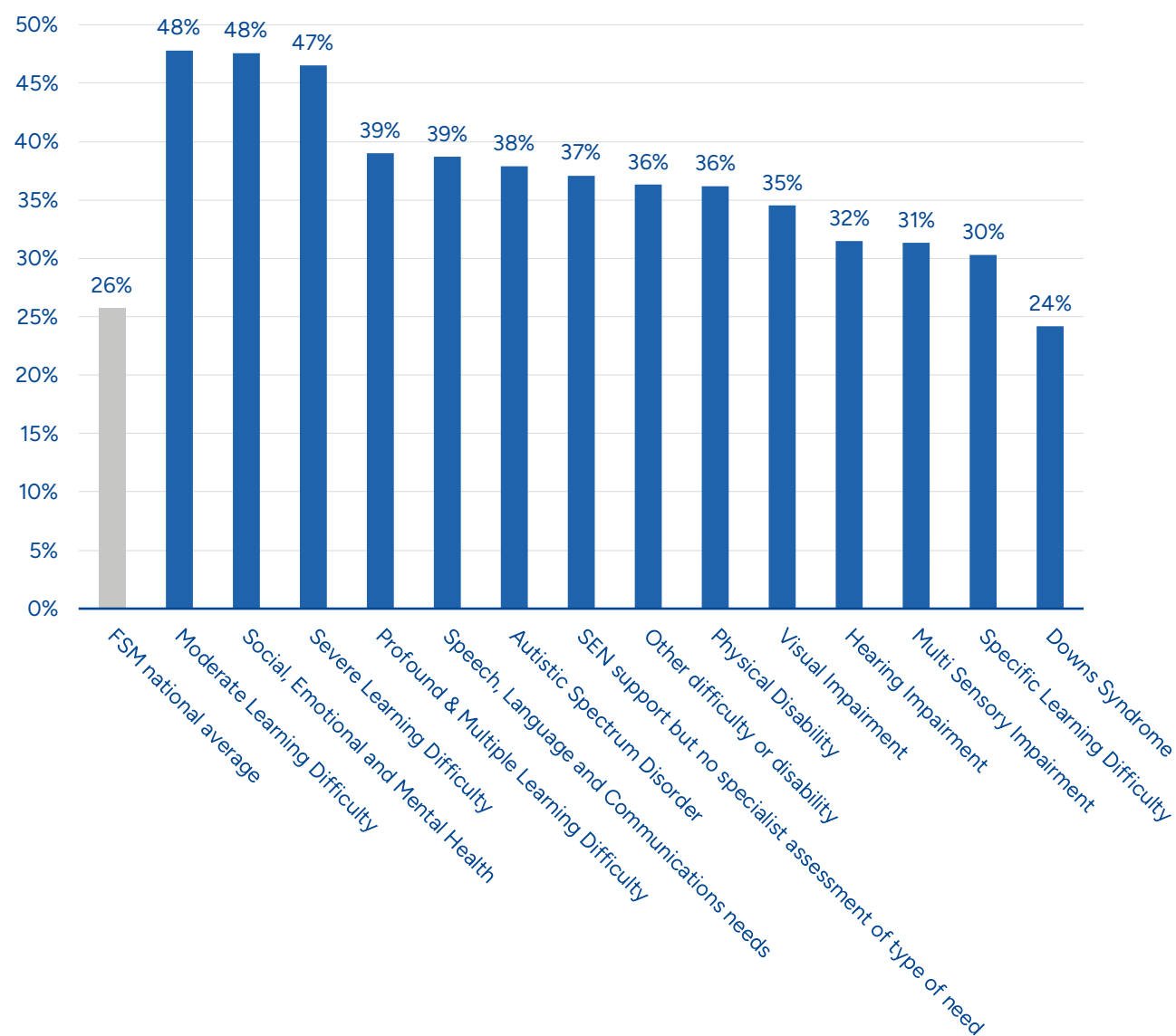
“Over 1.7 million pupils in England have SEND. This is an increase of 5.6% since 2024.”

What proportion of children eligible for FSM have SEND?

Nationally, 25.7% of children are eligible for FSM.²² However, this figure is 39.3% for those categorised as receiving SEND support and 43.8% for those in receipt of EHCPs.²³

While overall children eligible for FSM are over-represented in the SEND cohort, these patterns differ by type of SEND, as Figure 1 demonstrates.²⁴

Figure 1: FSM proportion in each type of SEND for school year 2024/2025 - primary need only



Source: [Special Education Needs in England](#)

Socio-economic disparities in identification and diagnosis

As outlined in Figure 1, the proportion of pupils eligible for FSM varies between different categories of SEND, reflecting potential differences in how needs are identified and diagnosed.

Pupils eligible for FSM are most over-represented in SEMH, MLD, and SLD²⁵ possibly due to underlying social or safeguarding factors being misinterpreted as SEND needs²⁶ - labels that can sometimes be applied without formal assessment.

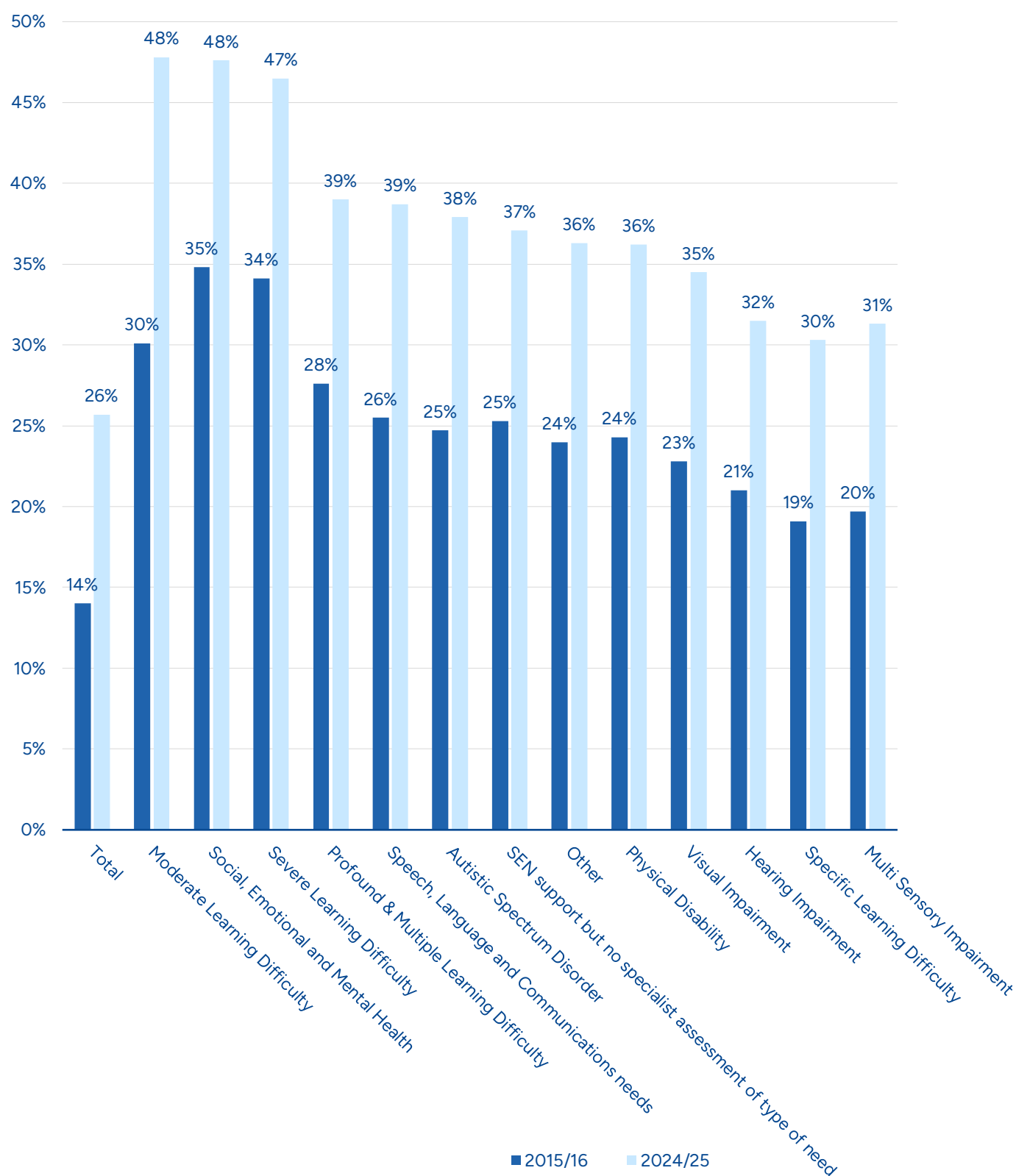
In contrast, conditions such as ASD and ADHD rely on specialist diagnoses, yet long NHS average wait times (26 months for an ASD diagnosis²⁷ and 29 months for an ADHD diagnosis²⁸) delay identification and, in some cases, access to support. ADHD also sits within the broader SEMH category, making it harder to isolate the impact of these delays on growth patterns and identification trends. In addition, costly private assessments (£1,800–£3,500²⁹), create additional barriers for low-income families.

Similarly, dyslexia - only diagnosable through private assessment (£600 – £900³⁰) - may be under-identified among disadvantaged pupils, with financial barriers, lower expectations, and limited parental awareness all contributing to inequities in diagnosis. This is an example of how some conditions may be underdiagnosed within the FSM cohort.

Are there socio-economic differences in the growth of SEND in recent years?

Figure 2 below shows that even as the numbers of children in each SEND category have increased over the last ten years, the proportion of those eligible for FSM has risen in all categories.

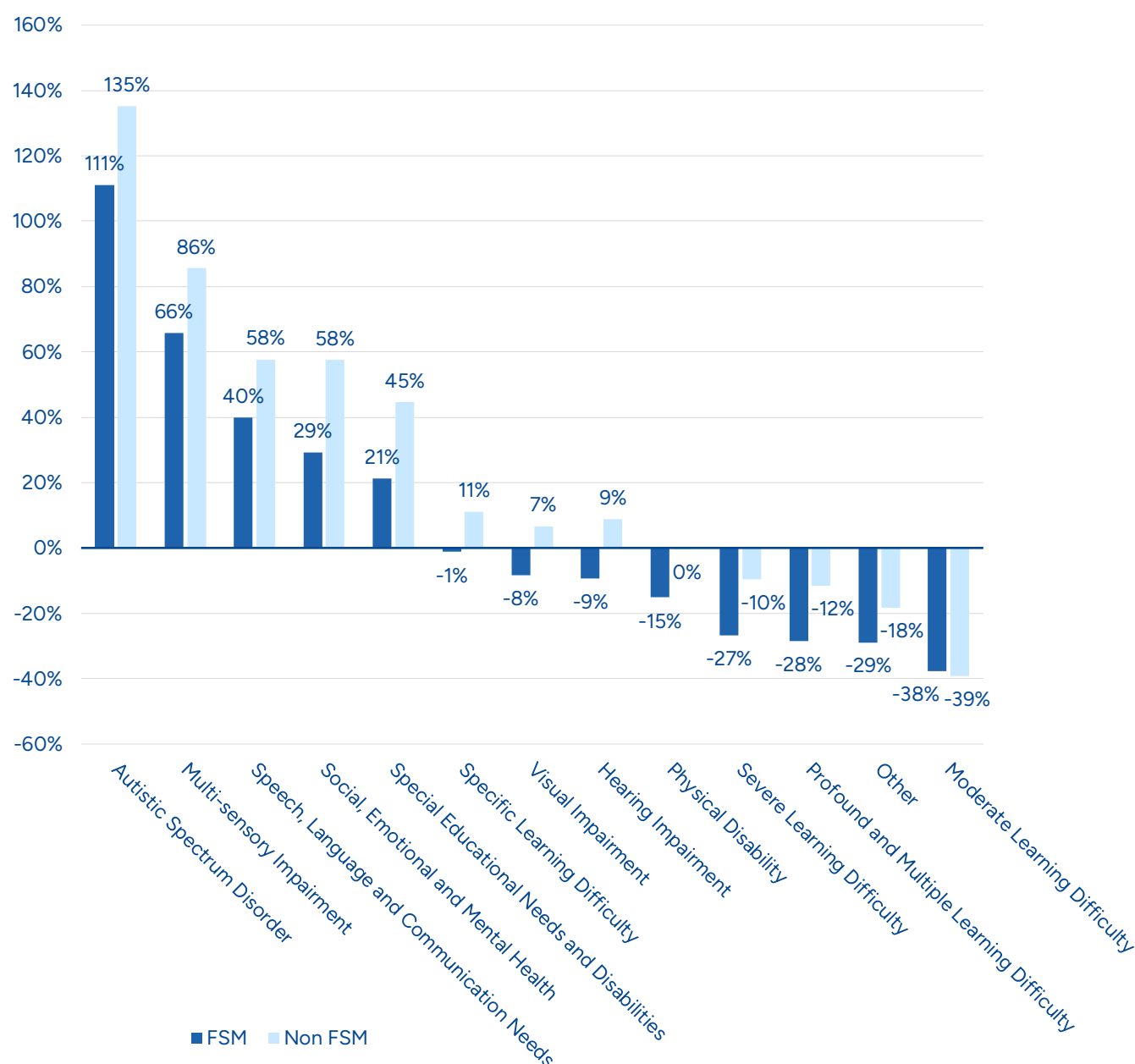
Figure 2: The proportion of children eligible for FSM in each type of SEND in 2015/2016 and 2024/2025.



Source: [Special Education Needs in England](#)

However, FSM levels have significantly increased over that period as well as having more children in the school population overall. In 2015/2016 there were 7,974,971 children in the school system with 14.3% of children eligible for FSM. By 2024/2025 there were 8,449,209 children in the school system with 25.7% of children eligible for FSM. As such, these figures obscure a more complex picture. It is therefore important to also look at how each type of SEND has changed since 2014/2015. In Figure 3 we look at how the percentage of children with each type of SEND has changed for both those eligible and not eligible for FSM.

Figure 3: The rate of growth between 2015/2016 and 2024/2025 for each type of SEND by FSM eligibility



Source: [Special Education Needs in England](#)

Figure 3 above shows that growth across SEND types is uneven, with ASD seeing the biggest growth. MSI shows a similarly high growth, but this involves a very small group of children overall. Crucially, Figure 3 demonstrates that growth is higher (or declines are lower) for the non-FSM group across all but one category. This shows us that despite the overall proportions, relatively speaking, SEND identification has been rising faster among the non-disadvantaged cohort. This is particularly pronounced in the ASD, SEMH and SLCN categories.

In most categories which have seen a decrease, such as SLD, the decrease is less profound for those not eligible for FSM.

SpLD shows a negative growth rate of -1.25% for children eligible for FSM and a positive growth rate of +11.15% for children not eligible for FSM. This demonstrates the potential challenges when there is no option of an NHS assessment.

Looking on a year-by-year basis, in some categories, including ASD and SLCN the last year has seen a balancing out of this growth.

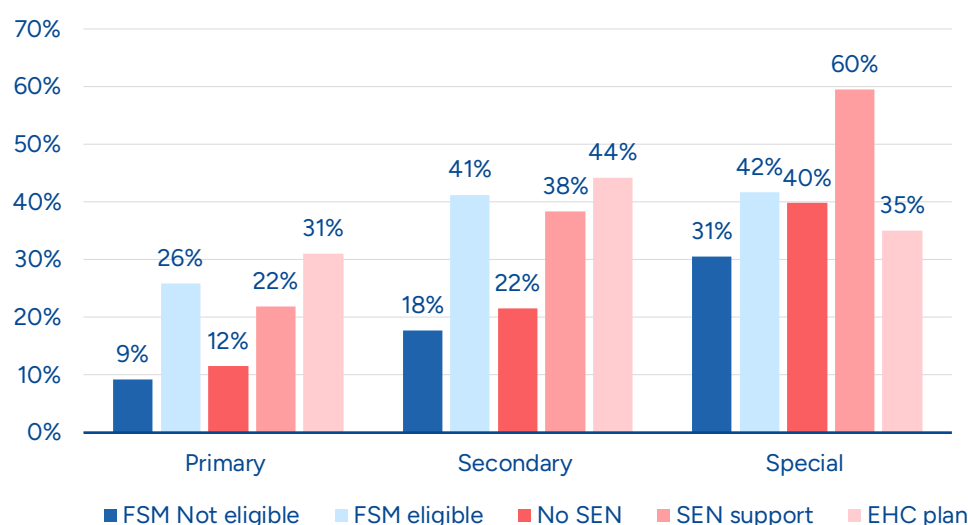
How do educational outcomes differ for those who are eligible for FSM and identified as SEND?

As this section outlines, various outcomes for pupils eligible for FSM and identified as SEND are notably worse than for their peers.

Attendance and Behaviour

Early warning signs of poorer educational outcomes for children eligible for FSM and who have SEND can be seen in attendance. In the academic year 2023/2024 the overall attendance rate was 93.1%.³¹ For pupils eligible for FSM this drops to 89.4%. For children on SEND Support it is also 89.4% and for children with EHCPs it is 86.3%. Children eligible for FSM and who have SEND are also more likely to be persistently absent, as shown in Figure 4 below.

Figure 4: 2024/2025 Persistent Absentee rates by sub-group



Source: [Pupil Attendance in Schools](#)

Similar patterns are seen in suspensions. Children eligible for FSM are more likely to be suspended than children not eligible for FSM. Suspension rates are a key metric reported by the Department for Education and represents the number of suspensions per 100 pupils. The suspension rate for children eligible for FSM (27.55) was more than four times that of pupils who were not eligible (5.99). Children with an EHCP had a suspension rate of 25.62, compared to 29.43 for those accessing 'SEND Support'. Both were more than three times higher than for children with no SEND at 7.55.³²

Whilst we are able to show how each group individually experiences worse attendance and numbers of suspensions, we are not able to show how they interact as this data is not available.

Key Stage 4 Outcomes

Unlike attendance and behaviour data, it is possible to find attainment data for the intersectional group of children that have SEND and are eligible for FSM.

Table 1: Key Stage Four Outcomes 2023/2024

KS4	FSM Status	Attainment 8	Progress 8	% of children securing a grade 4 or more in both English and Maths
No SEND	Yes	39.8	-0.4	52.7
	No	52.5	+0.24	77.6
	Yes	25.0	-0.89	21.9
SEND Support	No	37.4	-0.21	46.0
	Yes	10.2	-1.35	7.5
EHCP	No	17.3	-0.96	17.3

Source: [Key Stage Four performance](#)

For every attainment measure within each category of SEND status children with FSM underperform compared to more affluent children. Children with the most severe level of need (i.e. those on EHCPs) who are also eligible for FSM have the lowest outcomes shown here.

Post 16 Education

Post KS4 destinations show similar patterns of weaker outcomes for those eligible for FSM and having SEND as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Post 16 Destinations 2023/2024

Progression rates by age 19	% in Higher Education	% in High Tariff Higher Education
All	45.8	12.8
Children eligible for FSM	28.9	4.9
Children with SEN Support	25.4	4.6
Children with EHCP	9.4	1.5

Source: [Widening Participation in Higher Education](#)

Evidence of compounded disadvantage when it comes to Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET) status has also been identified in a report published by Impetus.³³ They found that children from a disadvantaged background, with SEND, who have low qualifications are 180% more likely to be a NEET than average. Without the layer of qualifications this is still 140%. The combination of disadvantage, SEND and not securing KS4 outcomes brings the highest risk of a young person becoming NEET.

How do experiences of the SEND system differ for families of different incomes?

Official statistics paint a concerning picture when it comes to the outcomes of pupils who are eligible for FSM and identified as SEND. This chapter draws on a large survey of parents to understand how socio-economic disadvantage impacts experiences of the SEND system.

The Sutton Trust commissioned Public First to survey parents to help us understand how attitudes and experiences differ. Overall, 4,008 parents of school aged children were polled online between 15th-26th August 2025. Results are weighted to be representative by gender, region and parental education. Of

these parents, 1,273 parents reported having at least one child of school age with SEND (identified or suspected).

Several methodological points are worth noting here:

1. We asked parents with multiple children with SEND to only talk about their experience with one child (randomised between oldest and youngest).
2. Socio-economic status here is defined by 'social grade', derived from the occupation of the main earner in the household, and divided into two groups: ABC1 (middle-class) and C2DE (working-class and long-term unemployed).
3. When we discuss a child having SEND but not an EHCP this group includes those who have 'identified' and 'suspected' SEND to accommodate the range of different pathways and circumstances families may be navigating.
4. Our survey covers parents of school-age pupils, including primary, secondary and post-16 settings. In future research, a larger sample would allow for greater disaggregation by educational phase.

Full data tables can be found [here](#).

There are socio-economic differences with the process of securing an EHCP

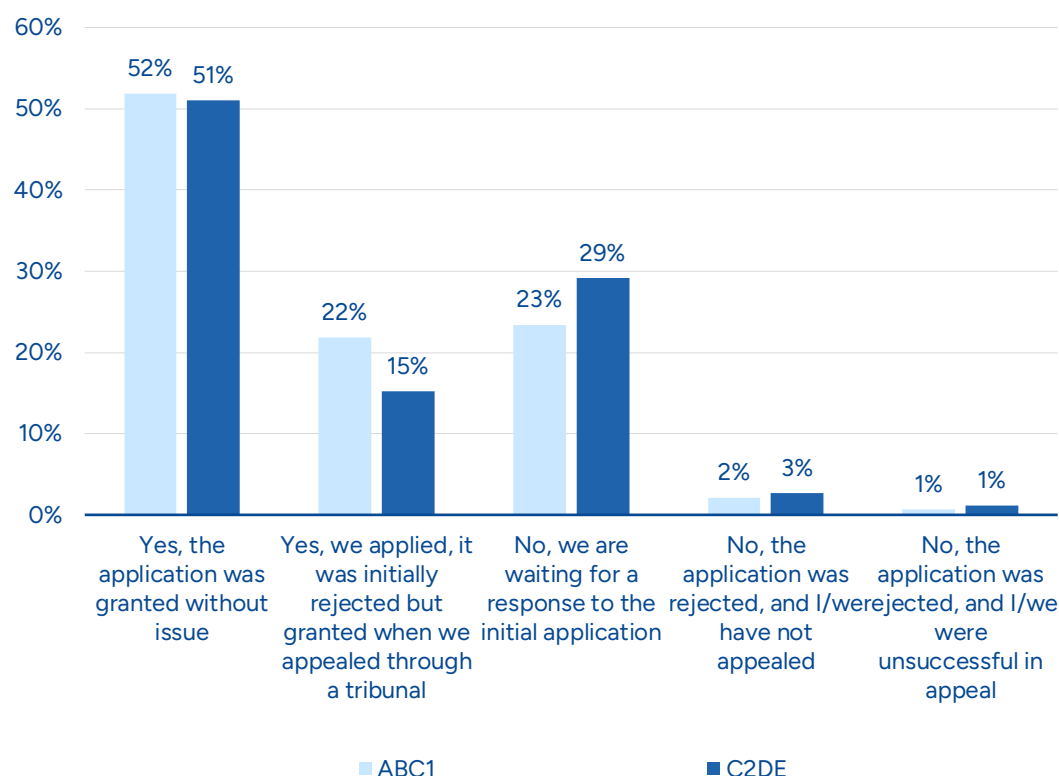
More affluent families are better equipped to secure an EHCP

The process of accessing SEND support, including an EHCP is supposed to be cost free. However, our polling reveals socio-economic disparities in the process of securing an EHCP, with more affluent parents having greater resources, capacity and support to do so successfully.

Overall, 64% of all parents who reported having a child with SEND said that they had applied for an EHCP for their child at some time. However, there was a 10 percentage point difference by socioeconomic background. 70% of middle-class parents had made an application compared to 60% of working-class parents. As Figure 5 shows below, more affluent parents were also more likely to report successful EHCP applications.

“Our polling reveals socio-economic disparities in the process of securing an EHCP, with more affluent parents having greater resources, capacity and support to do so successfully.”

Figure 5: EHCP application success by socio-economic status



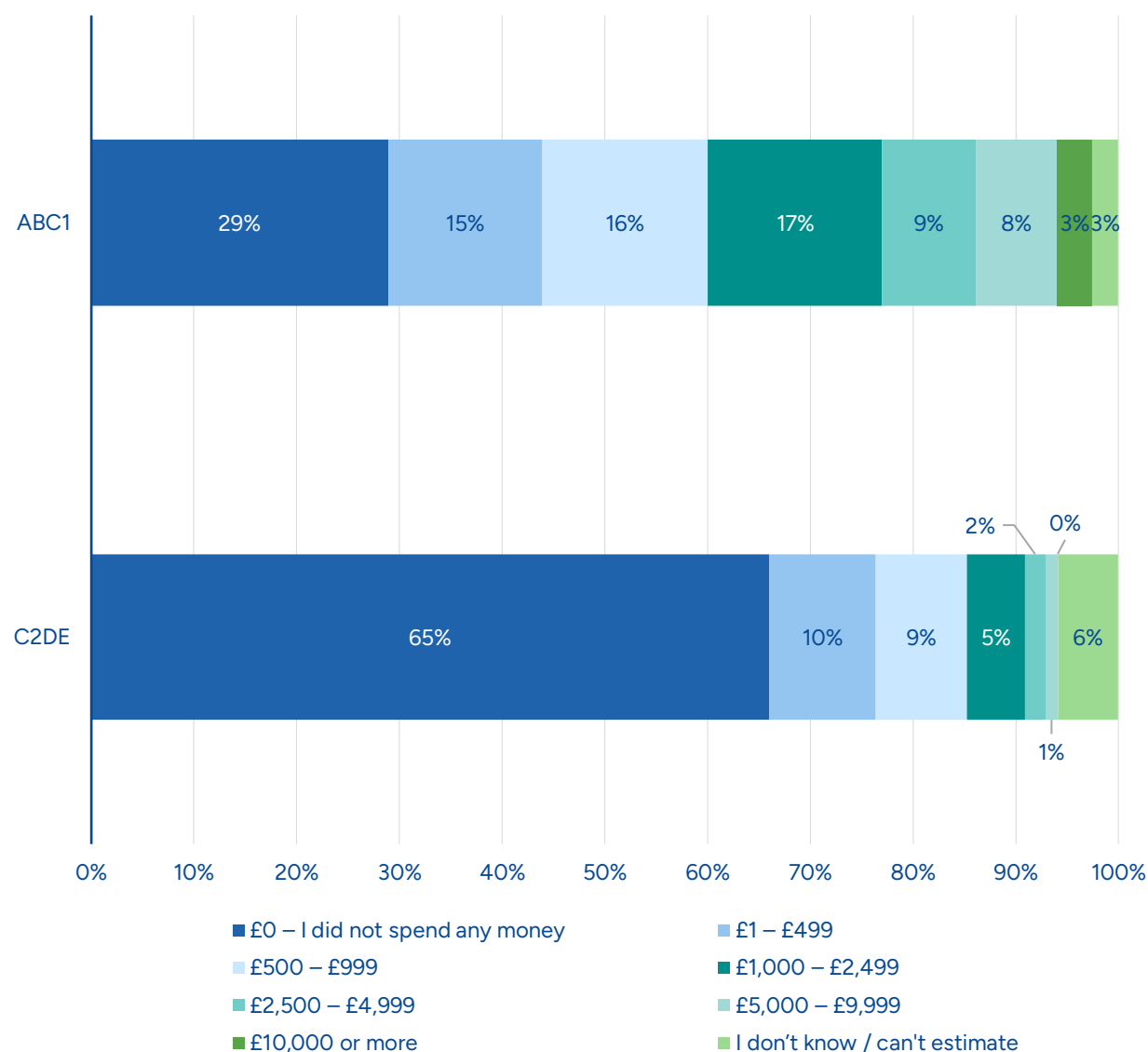
“The majority of working-class parents (65%) do not spend money on their EHCP application, whereas this was true of 29% of middle-class parents.”

This was mostly driven by middle-class parents being more likely to use the tribunal process. There is a notably high success rate for tribunals with 98.3% of these in 2022/2023 being found in favour of parents and carers.³⁴ It is therefore not surprising to see parents turning to this route to secure support.

This ultimately meant that middle-class parents of a child with SEND were 8 percentage points more likely to obtain an EHCP than working-class parents of a child with SEND.

These differences in EHCP outcomes may also be due in part to more affluent parents allocating more financial resources to their applications. As Figure 6 shows below, the majority of working-class parents (65%) do not spend money on their EHCP application, whereas this was true of 29% of middle-class parents.

Figure 6: Money spent on the EHCP process by socio-economic status



Moreover, 11% of middle-class parents had spent over £5,000 on their applications. This is significant given that the EHCP success rate was 69% for those who spent less than £5000, compared to 90% for those who spent £5,000 or more. However, it should be noted that while this is a statistically significant difference, the group who spent more than £5,000 comprises only 49 parents.

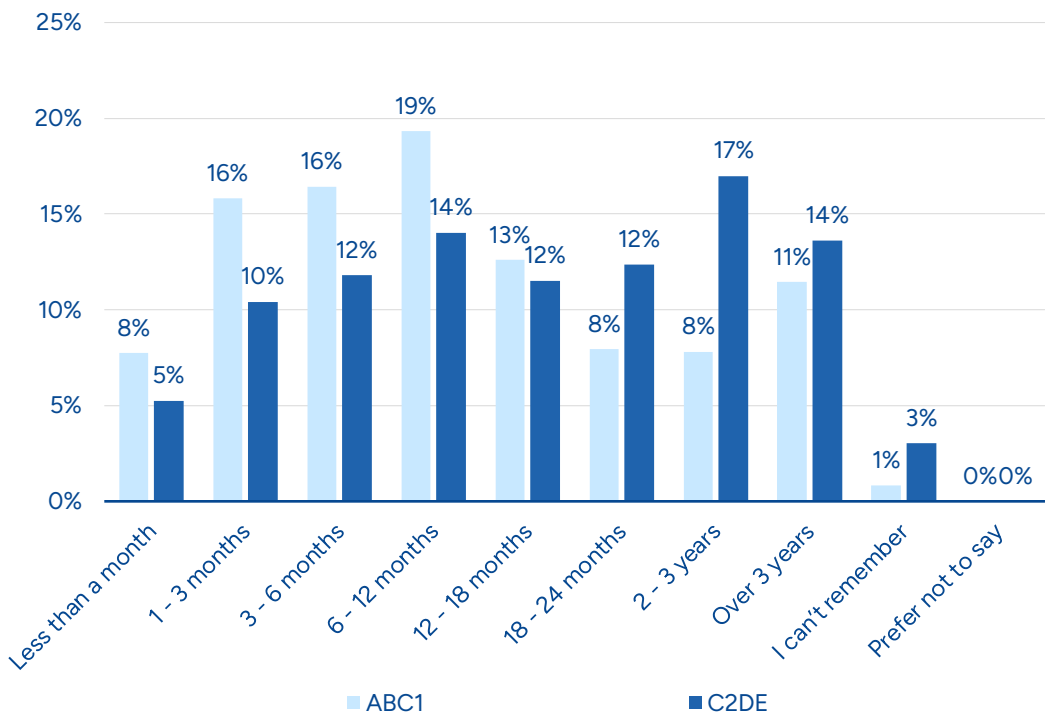
Figure 6 demonstrates that many parents are spending money on the EHCP process despite the intention of it being cost free. One frequent area of spending is on private assessments (for example autism or ADHD assessments). 21% of middle-class parents with a SEND child had used a private assessment and 23% had paid for a SEND consultant, compared to just 9% and 7% respectively of working-class parents. Similarly, 32% of middle-class

SEND parents with a formal SEND diagnosis had obtained it privately compared to just 12% of working-class parents.

There are also notable differences in waiting times by socio-economic background

Middle-class parents also generally had shorter waiting times for formal SEND diagnoses than working-class parents, as shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Reported waiting times for a formal SEND diagnosis



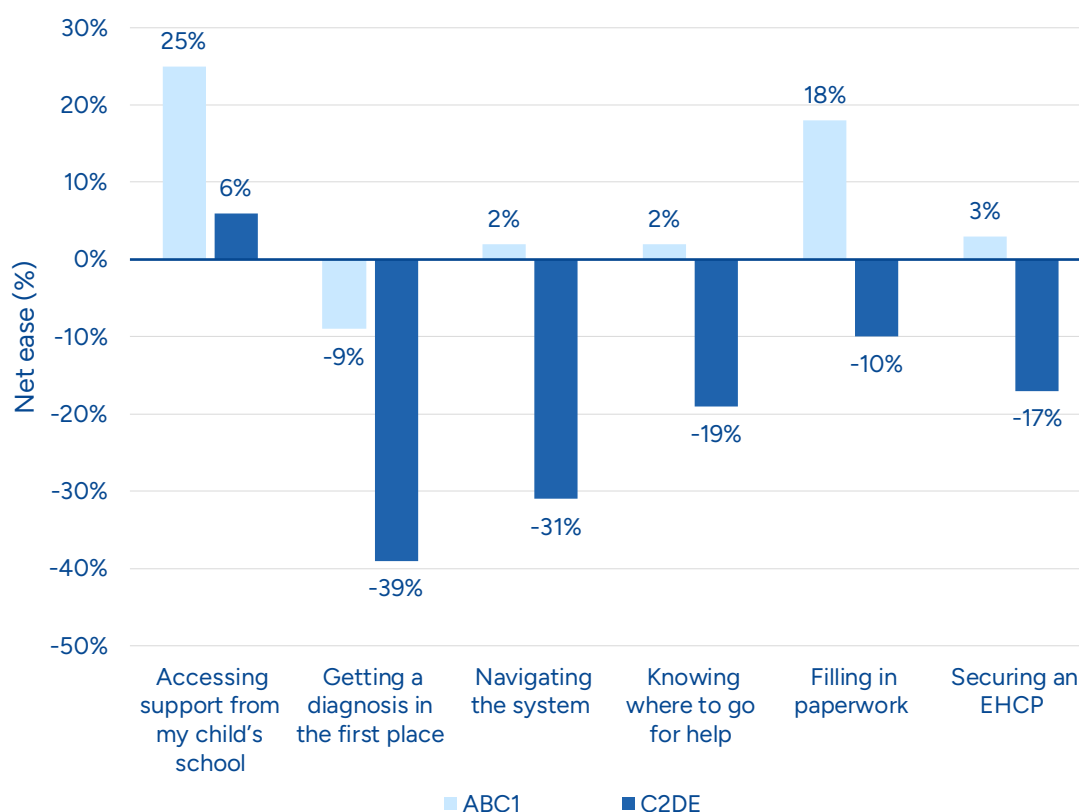
55% of working-class parents waited 12 months or more for their child’s formal diagnosis compared to 40% of middle-class parents (see Figure 7). 31% of working-class parents waited more than 2 years compared to just 19% of middle-class parents.

Much of these differences in waiting times can be attributed to middle-class parents being able to afford private diagnosis. When a private diagnosis was paid for, parents were twice as likely to wait less than six months compared to when an NHS diagnosis was used. Parents relying on NHS diagnosis were also twice as likely to wait more than 12 months and nearly four times more likely (31% vs 8%) to wait more than two years.

Socio-economic differences in navigating the SEND and EHCP system

Another reason for more successful applications might be middle-class parents' ability to navigate complex systems. Parents of both groups of children with SEND were asked to identify how easy they found various elements of the system. Using these responses, we have calculated a 'net ease' by subtracting the percentage of parents who reported it somewhat or very difficult from those who reported it to be somewhat or very easy. This is shown in Figure 8.

Figure 8: How easy was it to access each aspect of support, as reported by parents of a child with SEND?



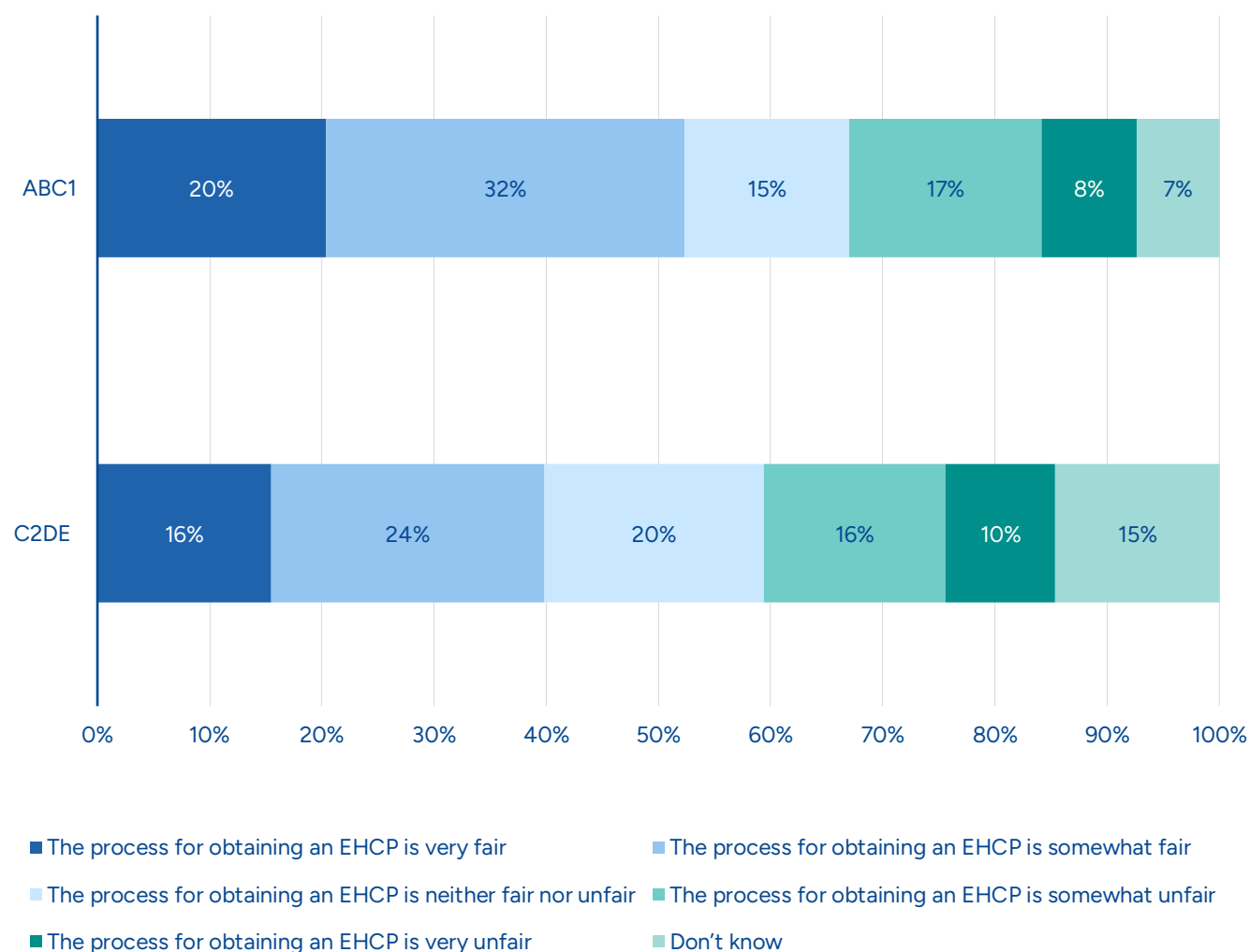
Here we can see socio-economic differences at every stage of the process. Working-class parents reported that they found almost every step difficult whereas middle-class parents only identified one area – getting a diagnosis – as difficult. Overall, only 1 in 4 parents (28%) reported 'Getting a diagnosis in the first place' as being somewhat or very easy. This is potentially due to the backlog of assessments and long waiting times in some parts of the country. When we look specifically at those parents who were successful in securing a diagnosis, 36% of them found it easy (42% within middle-class parents and 31% amongst working-class parents).

“Working-class parents reported that they found almost every step difficult whereas middle-class parents only identified one area – getting a diagnosis – as difficult.”

Perceptions of fairness of the EHCP process

Finally, there are socio-economic differences in perception of how fair the EHCP process is among parents who have a child with SEND (see Figure 9).

Figure 9: Perception of fairness of the EHCP process by socio-economic status as reported by parents of a child with SEND



While more parents across both groups felt the EHCP process was fair than unfair, middle-class parents were more likely to feel that the current system is fair than working-class parents.

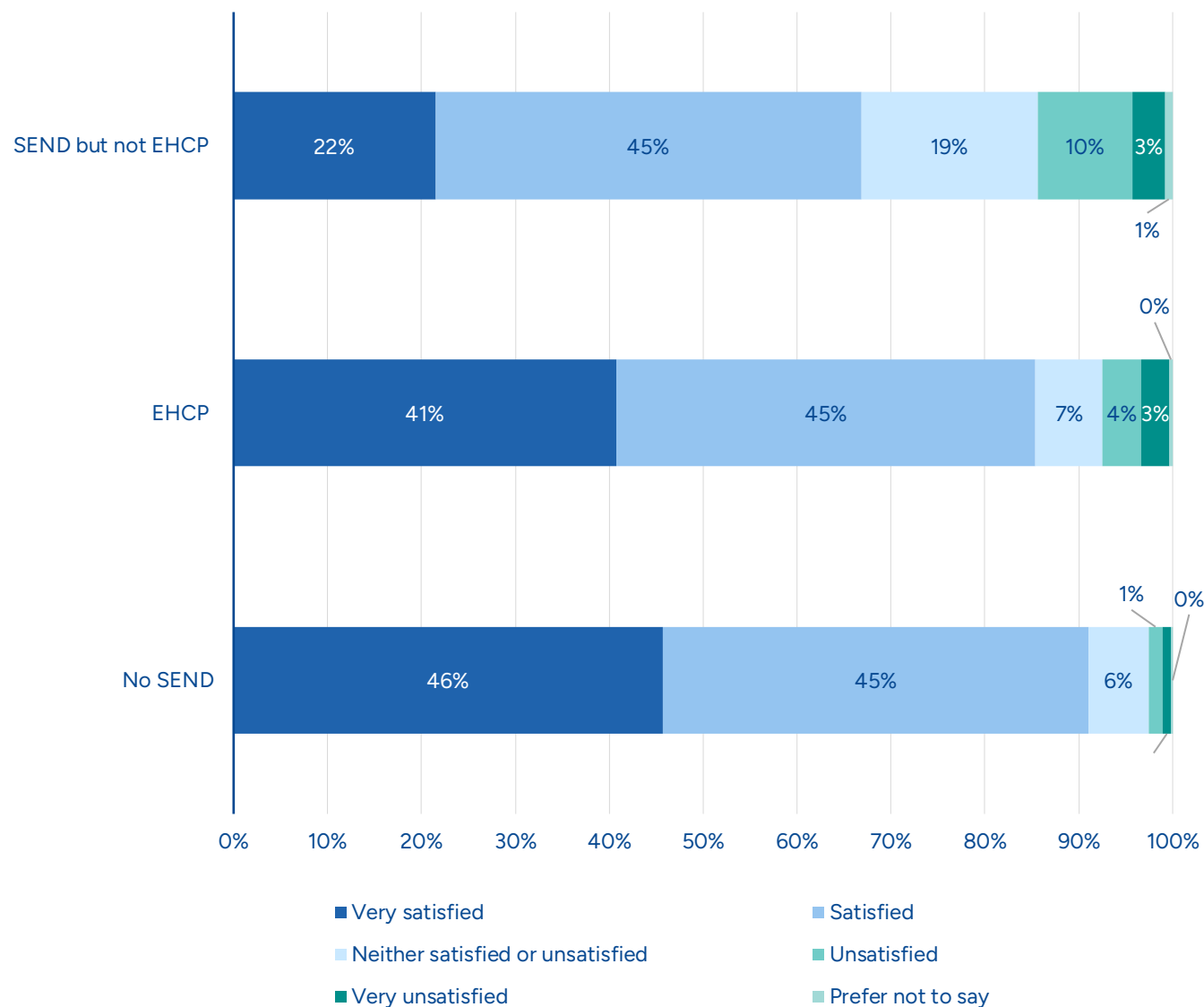
Having an EHCP can lead to a more positive school experience

Securing an EHCP seems to have a mitigating effect on some of the challenges associated with pupils having SEND.

EHCPs and reported levels of satisfaction with school place, happiness at school and feeling of belonging.

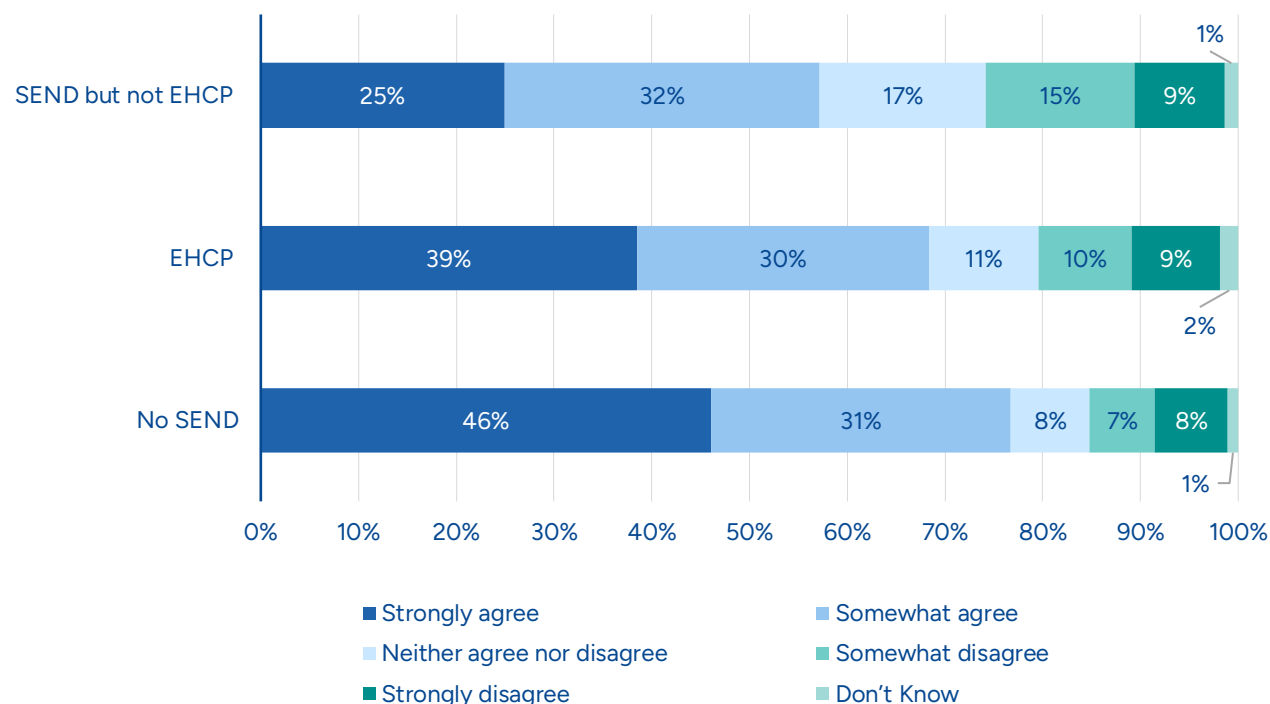
Overall parents of children with SEND report lower levels of satisfaction with their child's school than other parents, as shown in Figure 10.

Figure 10: Level of parental satisfaction with school place by SEND need



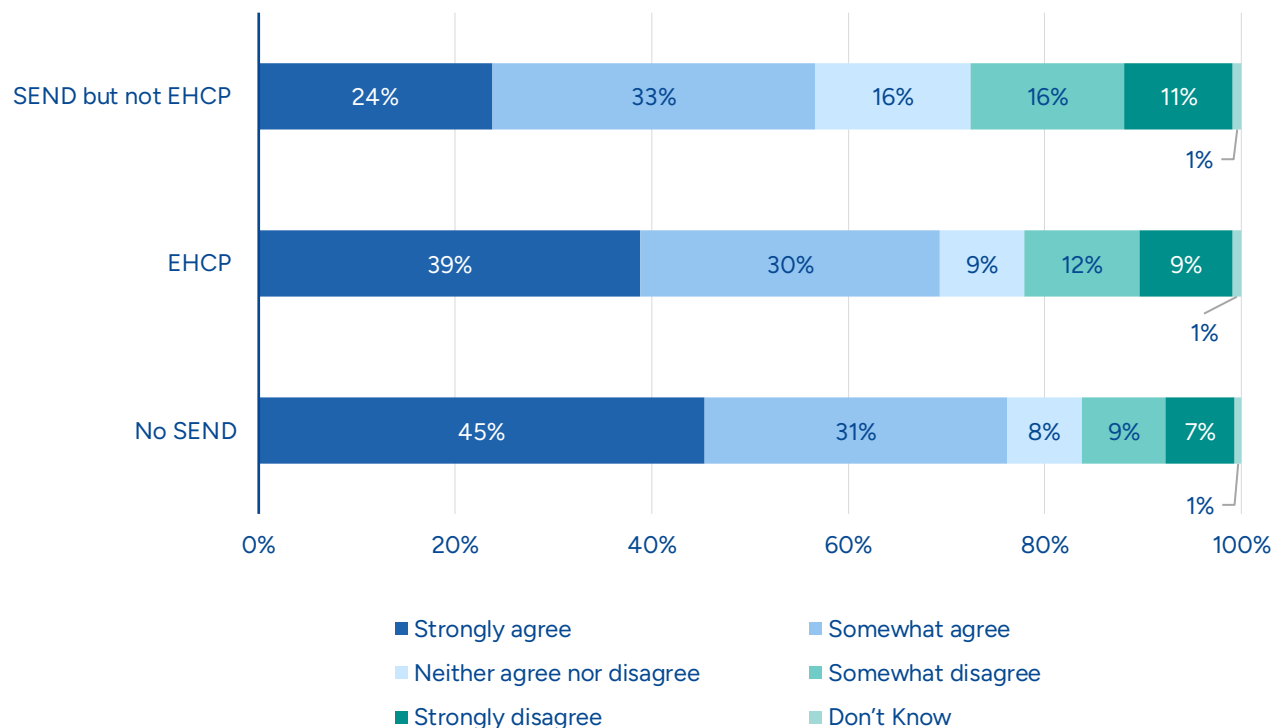
Similar patterns are seen in reported feelings of belonging (Figure 11 below), with parents of pupils who have SEND but not an EHCP reporting the lowest levels of school belonging.

Figure 11: Response to the statement 'my child feels like they belong at their school' by SEND status



Finally, these trends are once again seen in reported levels of happiness at school (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Response to the statement 'My child enjoys school' by SEND status



Across all three areas, parents of children without SEND report the most positive experiences and parents of children with SEND but no EHCP report the least positive experiences. Our survey of parents suggests that often those children with an EHCP have a closer experience to children without SEND than those without an EHCP. Overall, EHCPs appear to be having an overall positive impact on children with SEND's experience of schooling according to their parents.

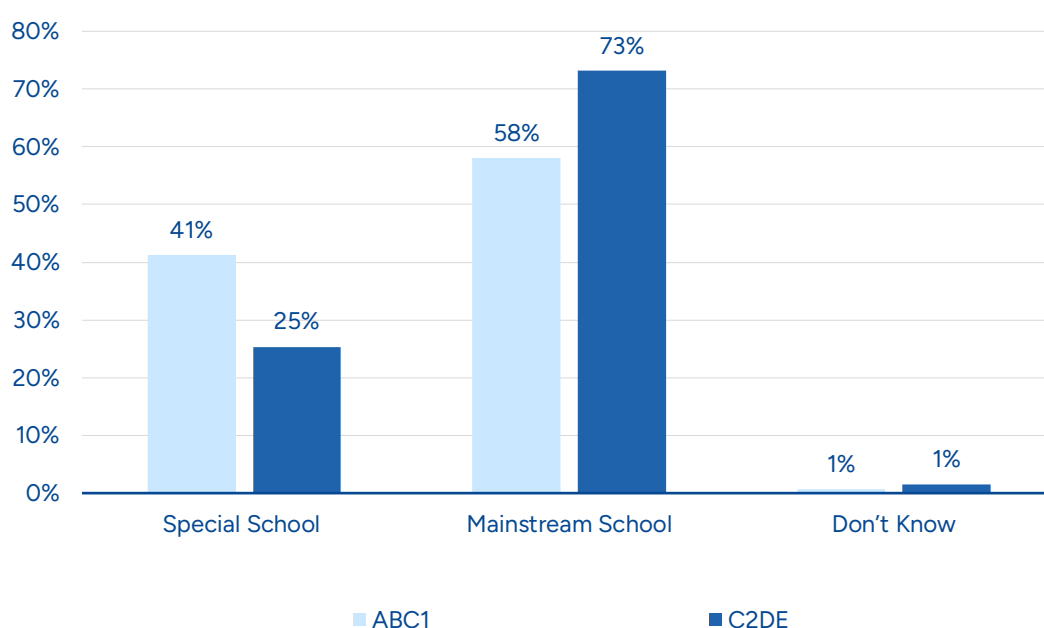
Those from more affluent families are more likely to access special school places

One of the biggest incentives for securing an EHCP is to increase the chance of securing a place at a special school.

More affluent families were more likely to secure special school places for their children. 41% of middle-class parents of a child with SEND reported securing a special school place compared to 25% of working-class parents of a child with SEND.

“41% of middle-class parents of a child with SEND reported securing a special school place compared to 25% of working-class parents of a child with SEND.”

Figure 13: School place for children with SEND by socio-economic status



15% of middle-class parents of a child with SEND secured a place at an independent special school, compared to 5% of working-class parents of a child with SEND. This is in part, but not exclusively, due to more affluent parents being more likely to pay for independent school fees. It might also reflect the increased confidence of more affluent parents navigating the system and securing an EHCP in the first place.

There may be a relationship between spending money on an EHCP application and securing a special school place. 12% of parents in special schools had spent over £5,000 on their EHCP application compared to just 1% of those in mainstream education.

Parents of pupils in special schools tend to have a more positive view of their child's schooling

Levels of parental satisfaction and belonging differ by school type

Greater levels of satisfaction were reported by parents of a child with SEND when they attend a special school. Overall, 91% of parents were satisfied or very satisfied with their special school compared to 68% of those in mainstream schools.

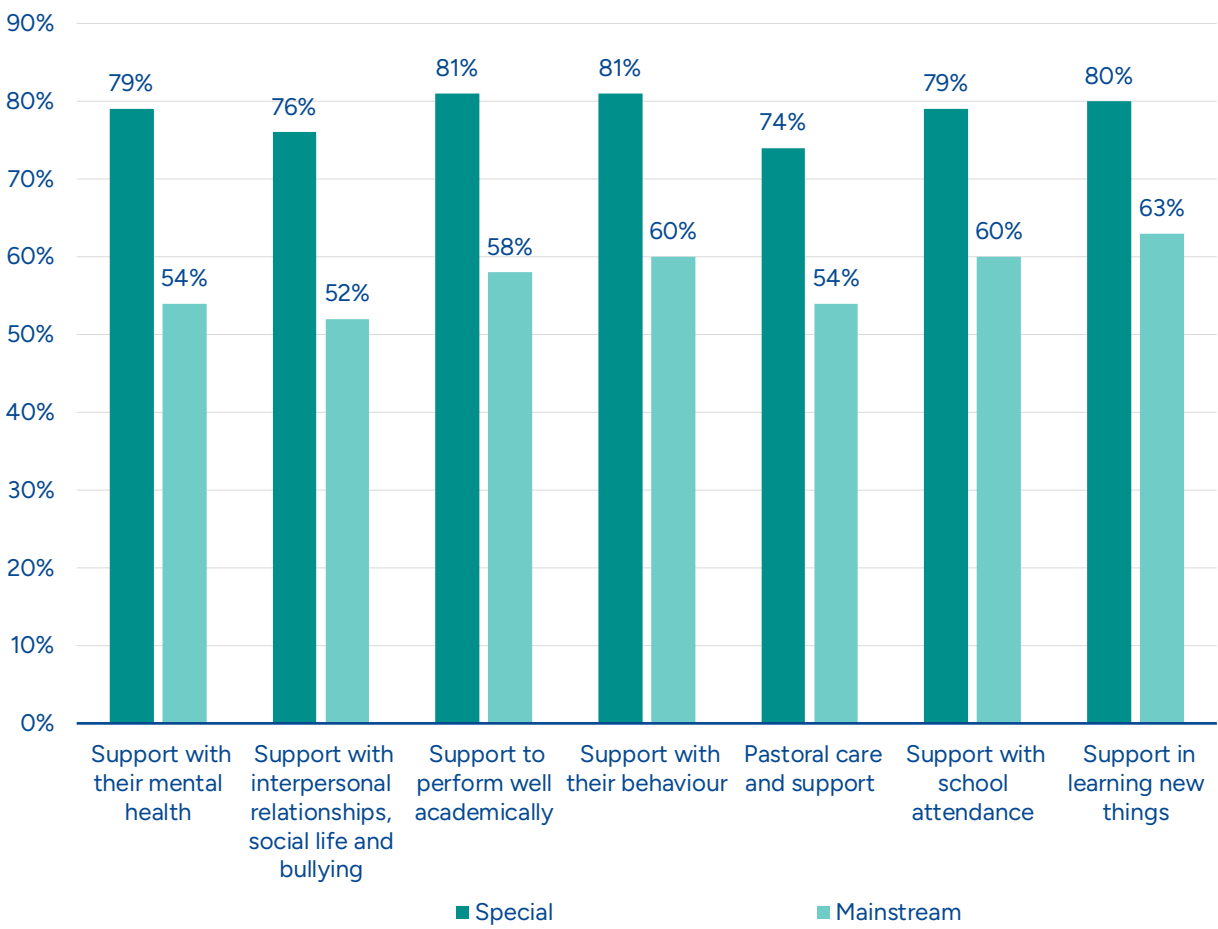
There were significant differences in satisfaction for children with SEND in mainstream schools compared to independent schools, with 84% of families in independent mainstream schools being satisfied or very satisfied compared to 69% in state mainstream schools. It is worth noting that the parents of a child with SEND in an independent mainstream school was a small cohort of 41. In contrast there was no significant difference in satisfaction between maintained and non-maintained special schools.

Parents perception of their child's feelings of belonging were also higher for children with SEND in special schools compared to children with SEND in mainstream schools. 75% somewhat or strongly agreed with this in special schools compared to 57% in mainstream schools.

Parental satisfaction with specific areas of support varies by school type

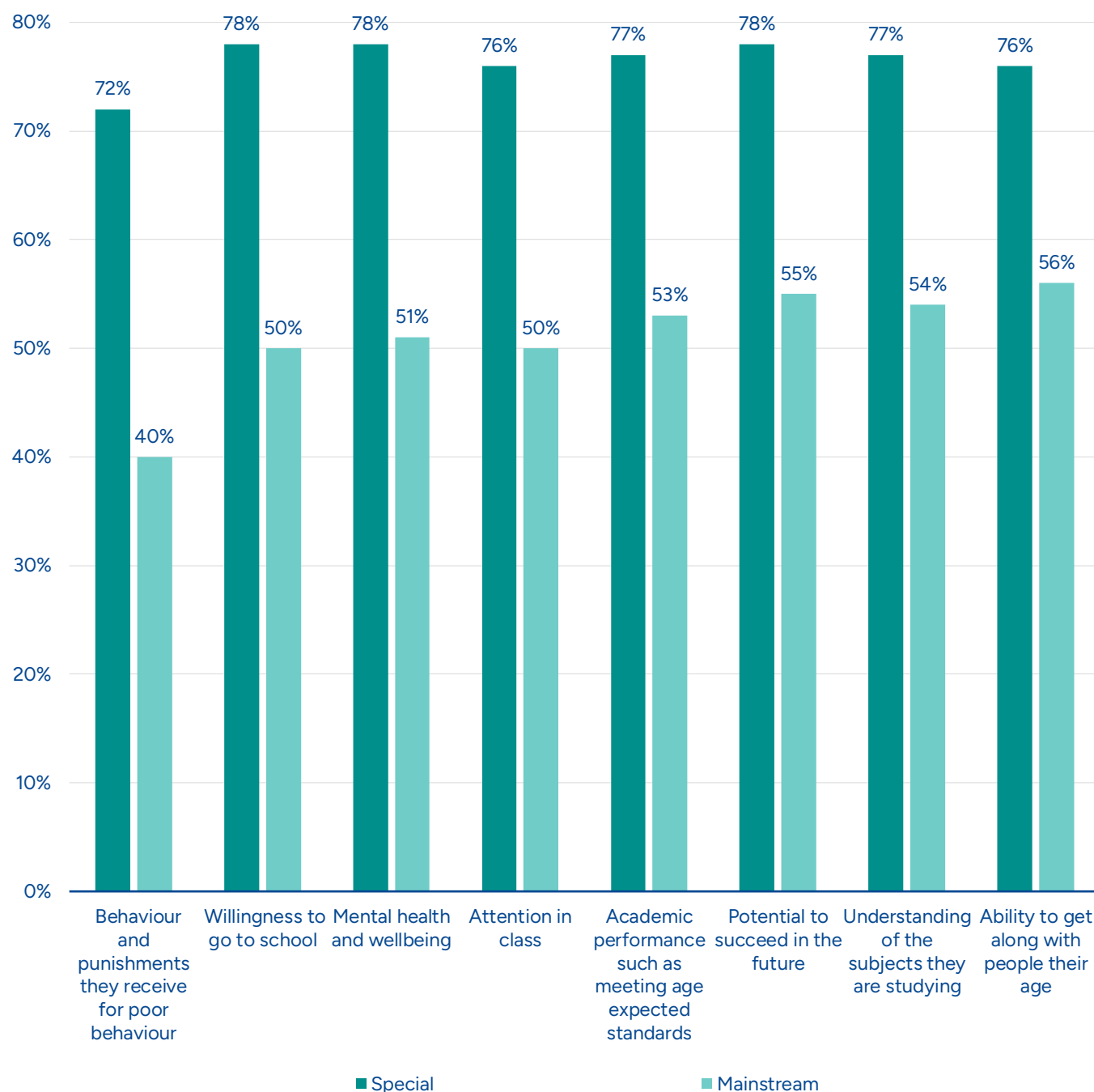
Parents of children with SEND in special schools were also more likely than those in mainstreams schools to be happy with the support their child was receiving in a range of areas, as shown in Figure 14 below.

Figure 14: Proportion of parents who were somewhat/very satisfied with different areas of support by school type



The biggest difference seen are in ‘Support with their Mental Health’ and ‘Support with interpersonal relationships, social life and bullying’. Given these differences, it is perhaps unsurprising that there were also differences in perceptions of the impact of support, as outlined in Figure 15 below.

Figure 15: Proportion of parents who say support received has been somewhat/very positive by school type



Special schools show higher reported impact in each measure, the most profound difference being in the impact on the child’s behaviour and the punishments they receive for poor behaviour. 72% of parents of children with SEND in special schools reported positive or very positive impact in this area compared to only 40% of parents of children with SEND in mainstream settings. Behaviour and punishments also had the lowest impact scores

showing that this is a particular area of concern for parents of children with SEND.

There are socio-economic differences in school experiences for children with SEND

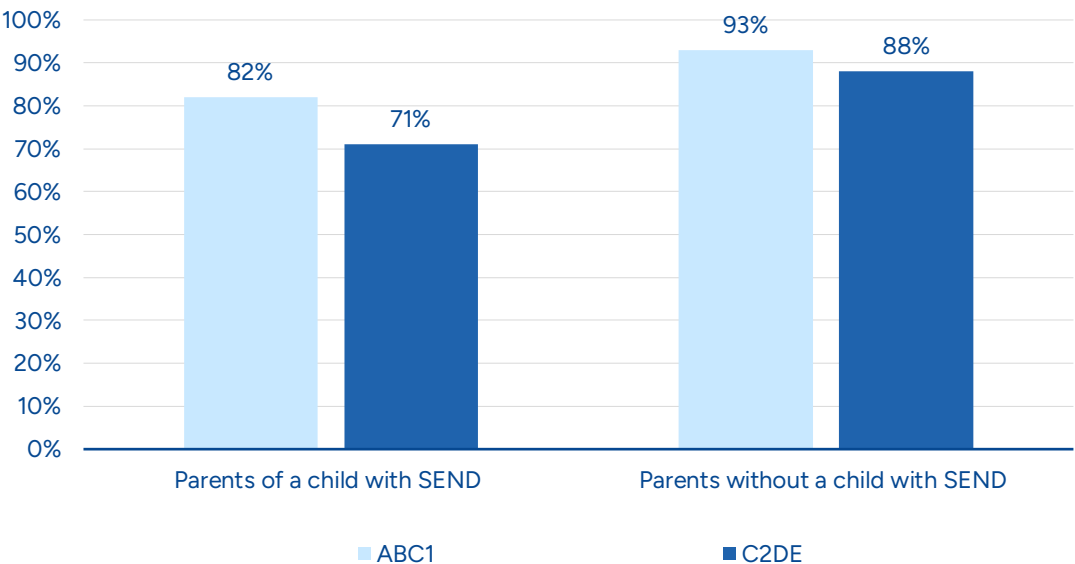
We have seen that more affluent parents are more likely to successfully secure an EHCP, which is associated with a more positive reported school experience. They are also more likely to secure a special school place, which again is associated with a more positive reported school experience.

When we look holistically at parents of children with SEND in our polling we can see clear socio-economic disparities in their school experience .

Socio-economic differences in satisfaction with school, support received and reported impact of support

82% of middle-class parents of a child with SEND report being somewhat or very satisfied with their school place compared to 71% of working-class parents. This gap in satisfaction is wider than the gap between non-SEND parents, as shown in Figure 16.

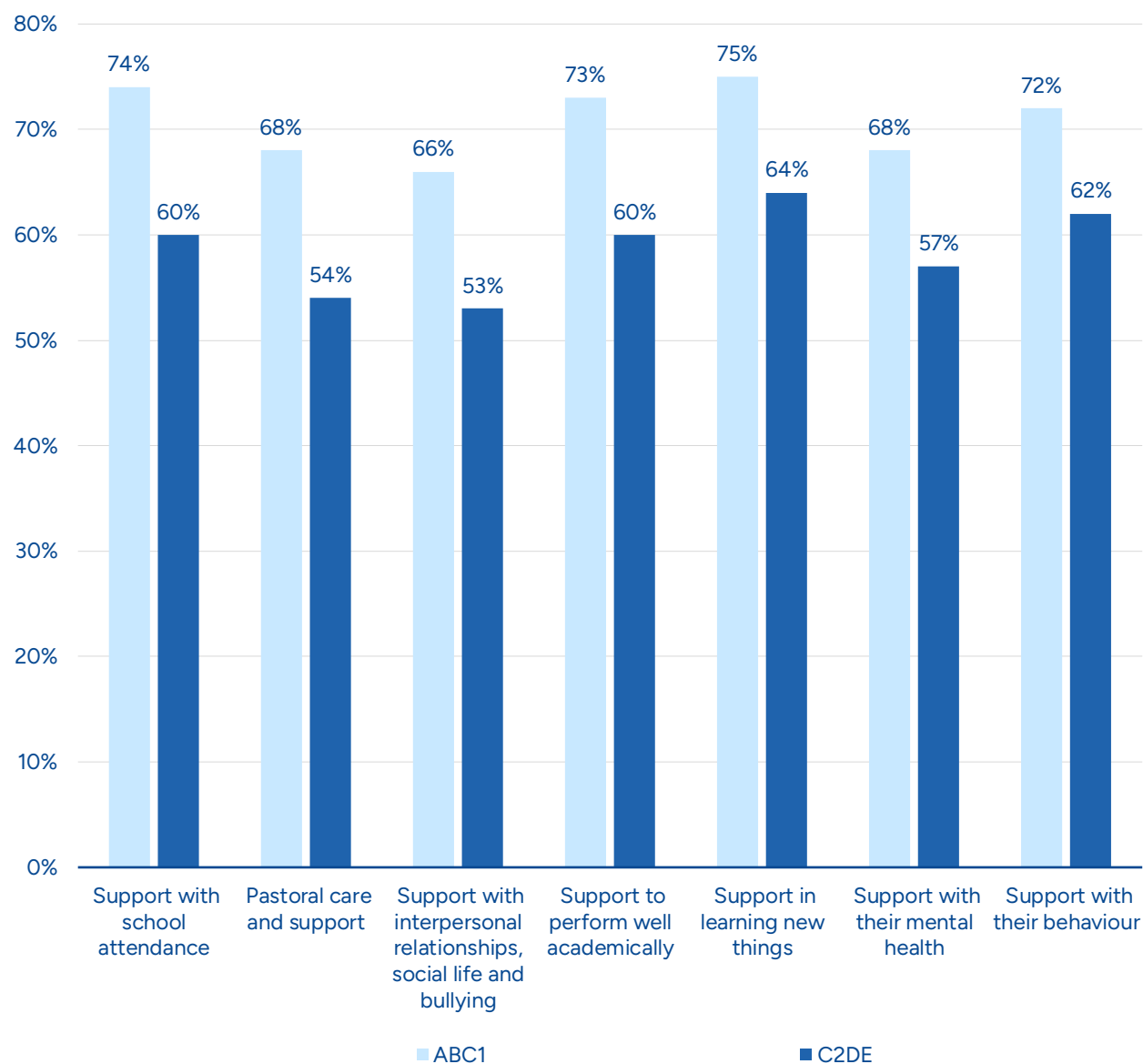
Figure 16: Proportion of parents who are somewhat/very satisfied with school place by SEND and socio-economic status



Within the SEND cohort there are socio-economic disparities in the reported quality of support received. Middle-class parents were more likely to be very or somewhat satisfied with the support they received for their child with SEND

across a range of measures than working-class parents as shown in Figure 17 below.

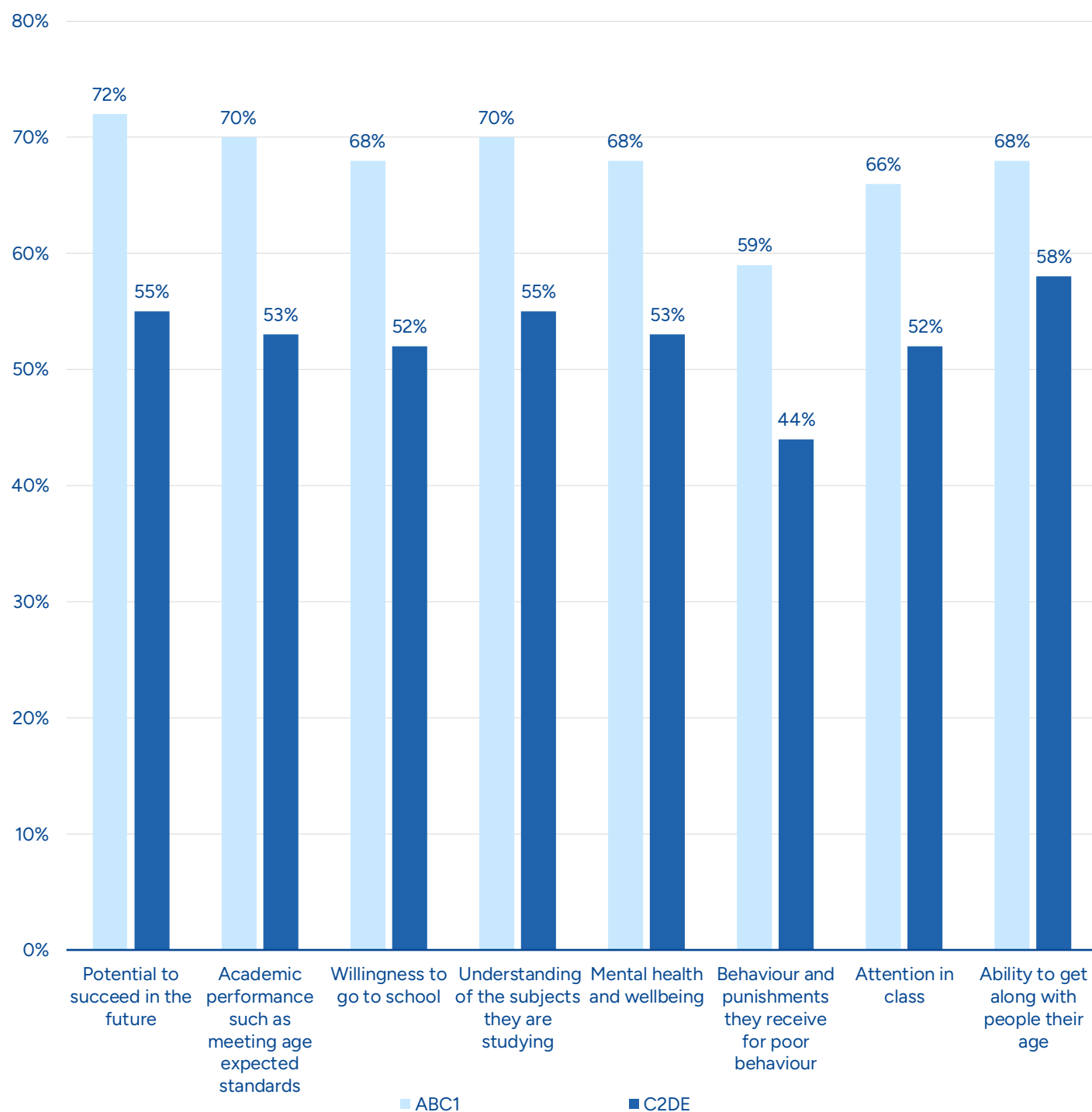
Figure 17: Proportion of parents who are somewhat/very happy with support from school by socio-economic status



One of the biggest differences in support satisfaction is seen in attendance. 74% of middle-class parents were very or somewhat satisfied compared to 60% of working-class parents. This may contribute to the attendance gaps highlighted earlier in the report. Similar gaps are seen in pastoral care and support and support with interpersonal relationships, social life and bullying.

Parents of children with SEND were also asked to consider whether the support their child was receiving was having a negative or positive impact on their child's progress across different areas. Figure 18 shows that across all categories, middle-class parents were more likely to report that their school's support was having a positive impact on their child.

Figure 18: Proportion of parents who report somewhat/very positive impact of support from school by socio-economic status



The system does not adequately support parents and families of children with SEND

Finance and employment implications for parents

Parents may encounter financial challenges in their efforts to support their child with SEND. 25% of parents of a child with SEND reporting spending more money on child support to get the support their child needs while 14% reported going into debt to pay for the resources their child needed.

Having a child with SEND can impact the employment decisions of parents. 15% of families reported having to take on more work to cover the costs of supporting their child. Meanwhile, 27% of parents of children with SEND had reduced their working hours to support their child. This was a more common course of action among middle-class parents (33%).

A third of parents (33%) had requested flexible working patterns with their employer in order to get the support their child with SEND needs. Again, this was more common among middle-class parents (41%).

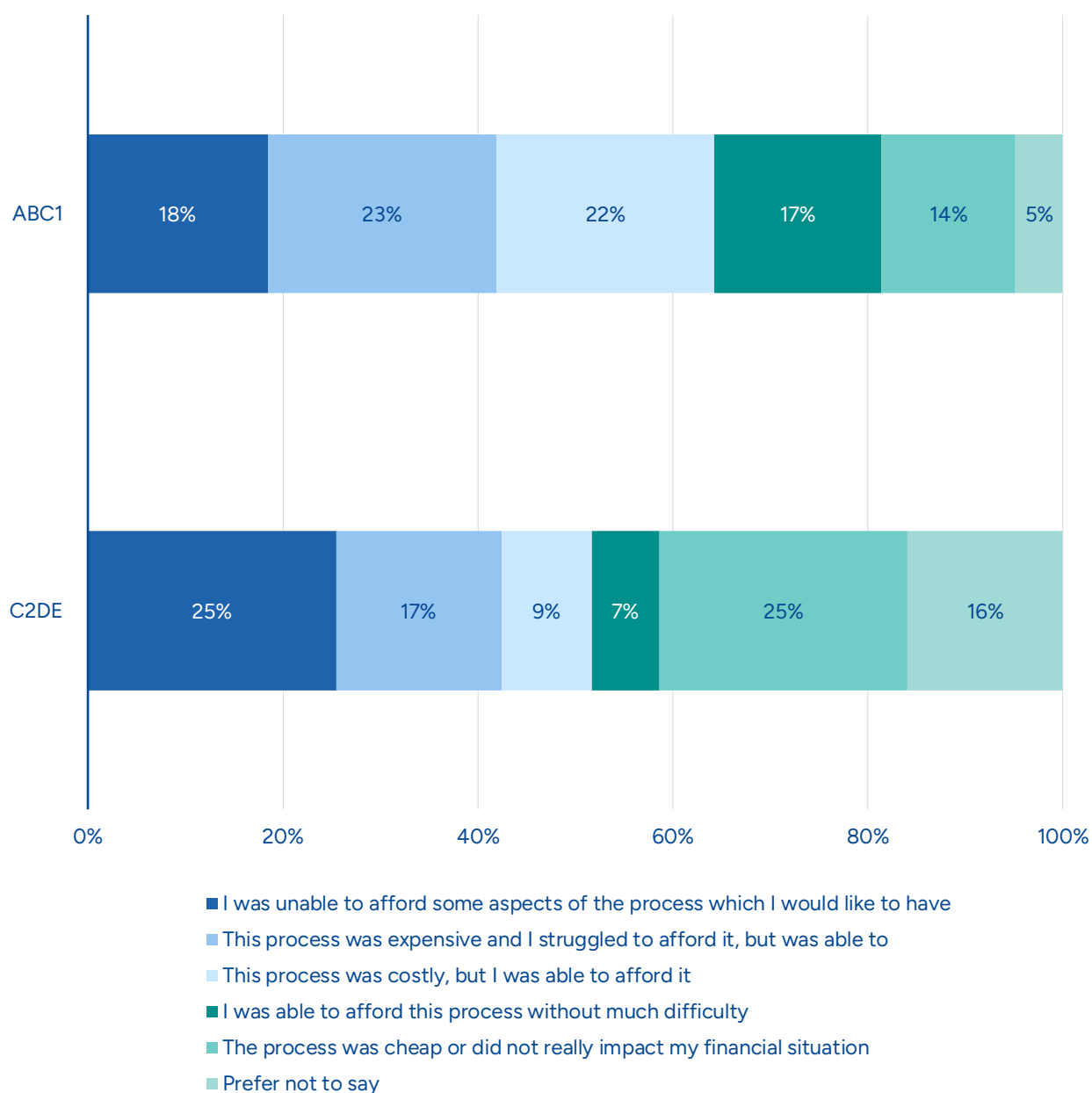
34% of parents of a child with SEND reported taking time off from paid work, while 16% of all parents of children with SEND reported leaving employment altogether and 16% reported having changed their job to better support their child with SEND.

Others asked family and friends for help with child support, 33% of middle-class parents and 28% of working-class parents.

When asked about the expense of the process of securing support working-class parents had a split response, as shown in Figure 19 below.

“25% of parents of a child with SEND reporting spending more money on child support to get the support their child needs while 14% reported going into debt to pay for the resources their child needed.”

Figure 19: Parents’ ability to afford the process of securing support by socio-economic status



Working-class parents were more likely than middle-class parents to say that there were aspects of the process that they could not afford but would have liked to have (25% compared to 18%). However, they were also more likely to say that the process was cheap or did not really impact their financial situation (16% compared to 5%). One partial explanation for this could be working-class parents not feeling like spending money was an option.

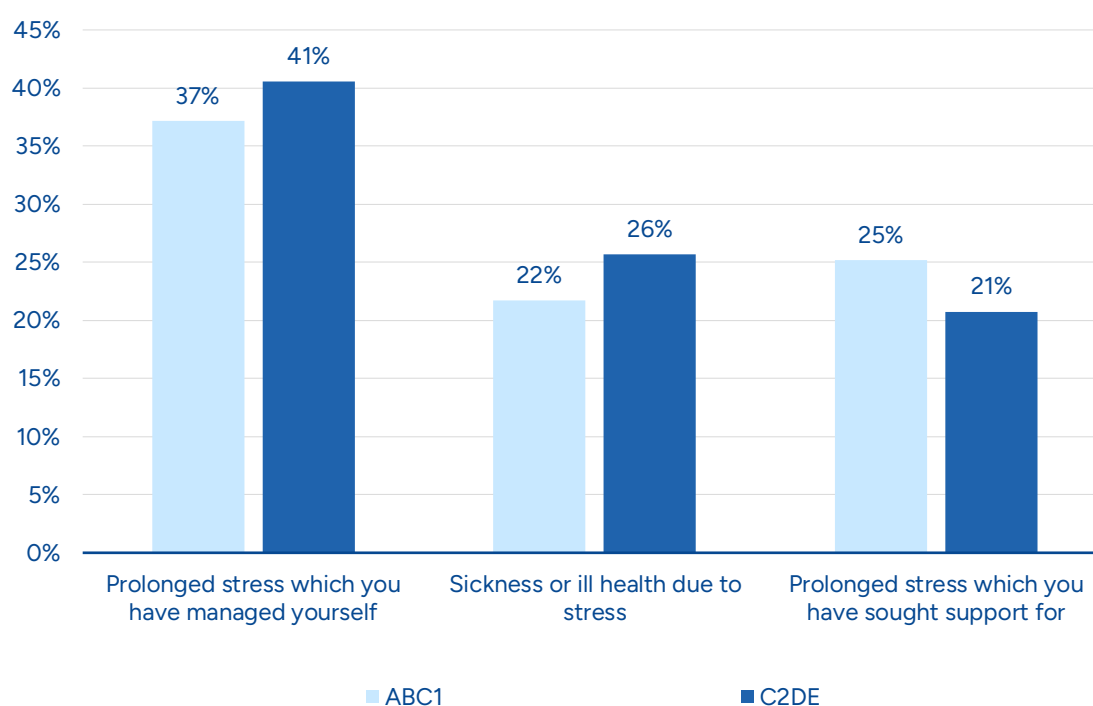
These polling results strengthen existing research³⁵ showing the link between SEND and disadvantage and that having a child with SEND can exacerbate financial hardship, which is itself associated with educational challenges.

Social and health implications for parents

Having a child with SEND was also associated with other challenges. There were socio-economic disparities in feelings of social isolation with 29% of working-class parents of a child with SEND reporting feeling isolated from peers compared to 22% of middle-class parents. 19% of working-class parents report having reduced contact with family compared to 15% of middle-class parents.

Stress and the impact of stress on parents saw other interesting socio-economic disparities as shown in Figure 20. Figure 20 illustrates how reported stress associated with supporting a child with SEND varies by socio-economic status.

Figure 20: Parents reporting stress as a result of supporting their child with SEND by socio-economic status



Both groups of parents of children with SEND reported some level of stress associated with supporting their child. However, working-class parents were more likely to report stress that they managed themselves and sickness or ill health caused by stress. Meanwhile, middle-class parents were more likely to report stress for which they had sought support.

What do parents think about SEND provision in mainstream schools?

It is widely expected that the reforms to SEND provision in England will include efforts to include more SEND pupils in mainstream schools, while acknowledging that this requires improvement and increased capacity in mainstream provision.³⁶ Movement in this direction will require support from parents of all pupils. Our polling asked parents their views on current SEND support in mainstream schools, which pupils will benefit from further SEND support in mainstream schools, and current spending on SEND support.

Non-SEND parents' view of SEND support

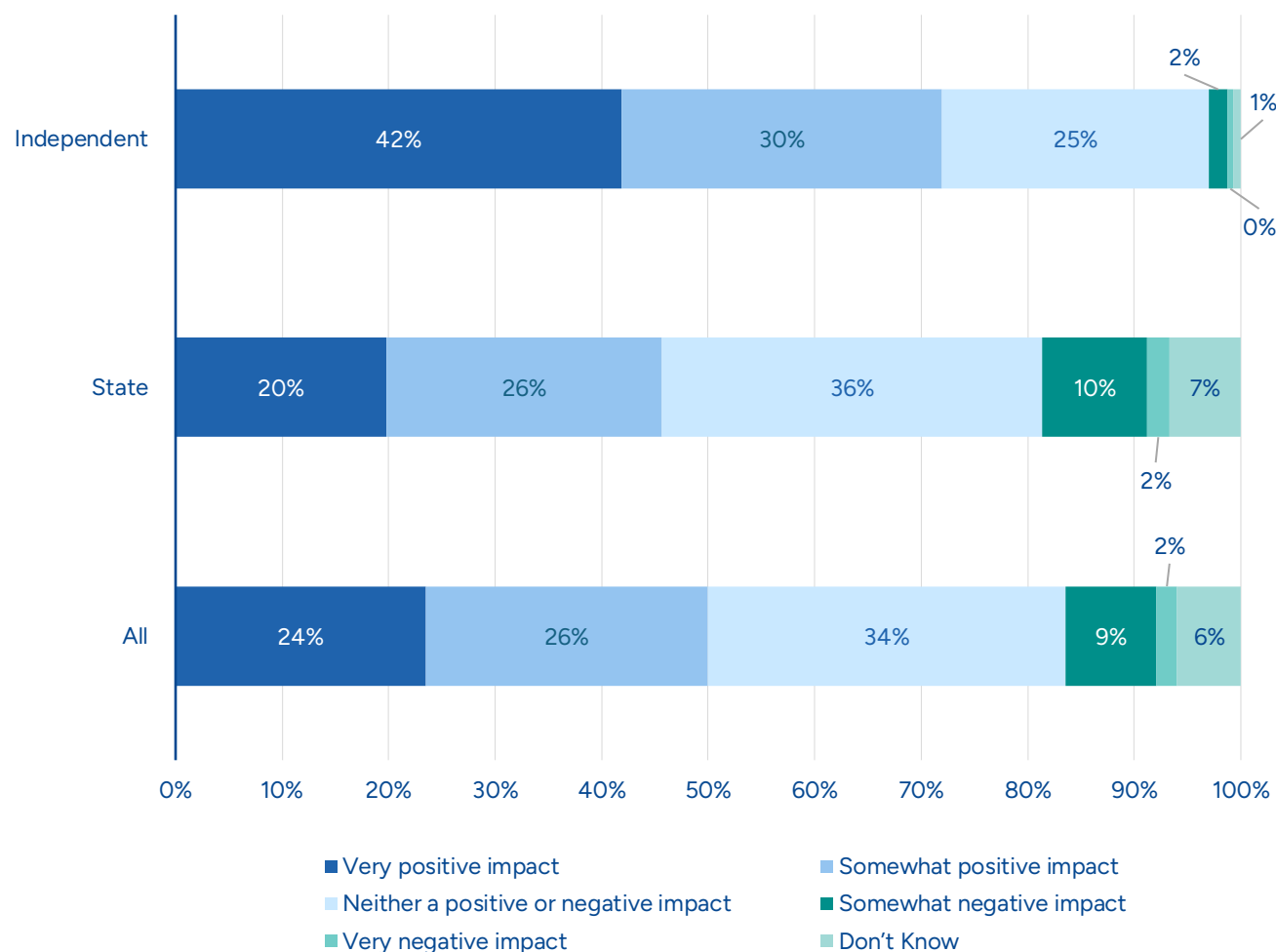
As we have seen above, parents of children with SEND in mainstream and state schools are generally less satisfied with the support they get than parents of pupils with SEND in specialist or private schools. There were also differences in levels of satisfaction by socio-economic status.

In contrast, we found that parents of pupils without SEND were generally more positive about the SEND support in mainstream schools. 84% of these parents across all school types thought children with SEND in their own child's school were either very or somewhat well supported. Middle-class parents of pupils without SEND were more likely to think positively about SEND support (88%) than the equivalent working-class parents (80%).

Most parents feel that most children will benefit from being in an inclusive mainstream environment

Most parents of non-SEND pupils thought that having pupils with SEND in their child's school would have either a positive impact or no impact on their child's learning as shown in Figure 21 below.

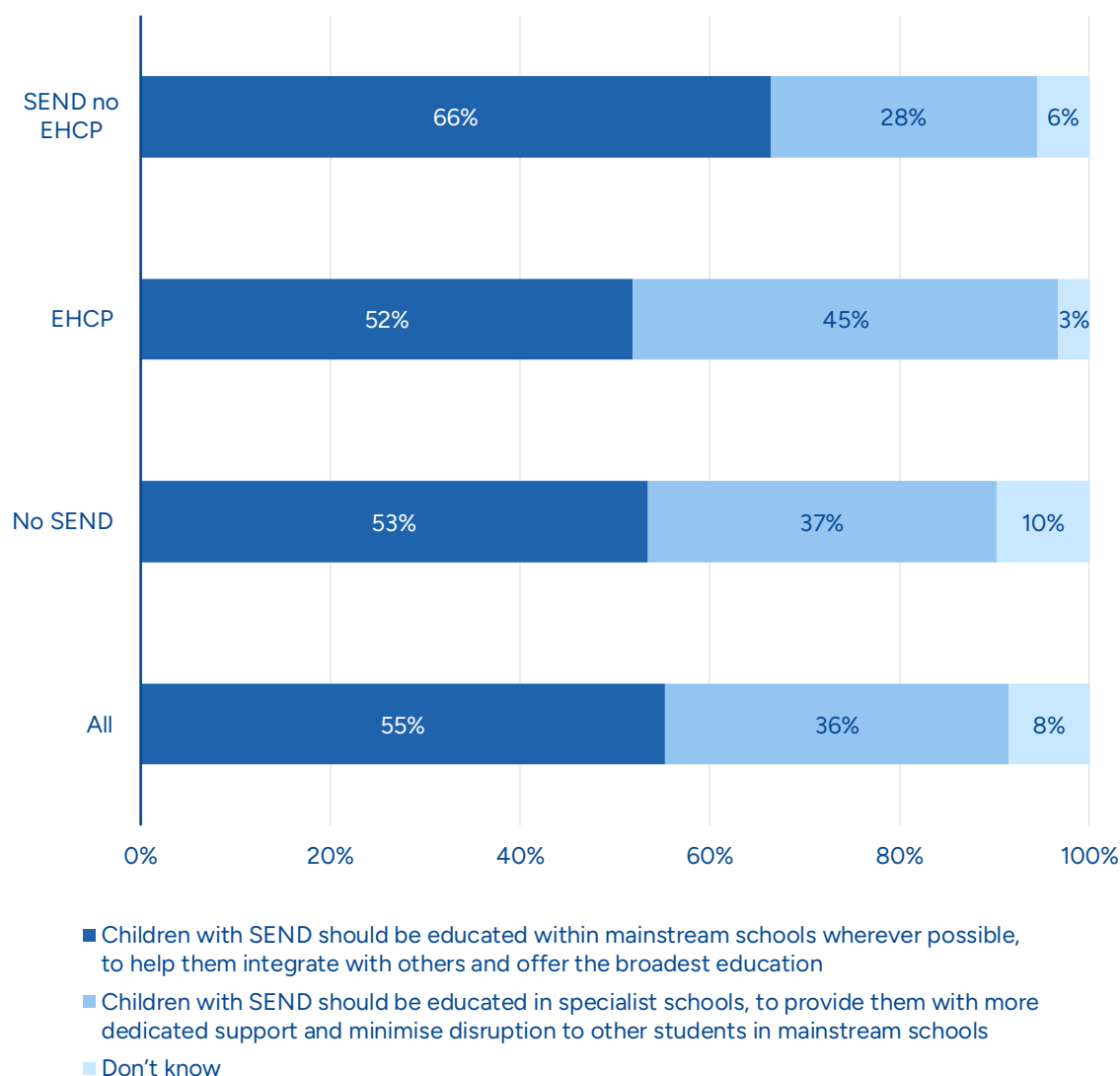
Figure 21: P Parents of children without SEND's view on the impact of having children with SEND in their child's school, by school type



Only 11% thought the impact was either somewhat or very negative. Parents in independent schools have a more positive view than parents in state schools.

We also asked parents about where they thought children with SEND should be educated as shown in Figure 22 below.

Figure 22: All parents view on where children with SEND should be educated

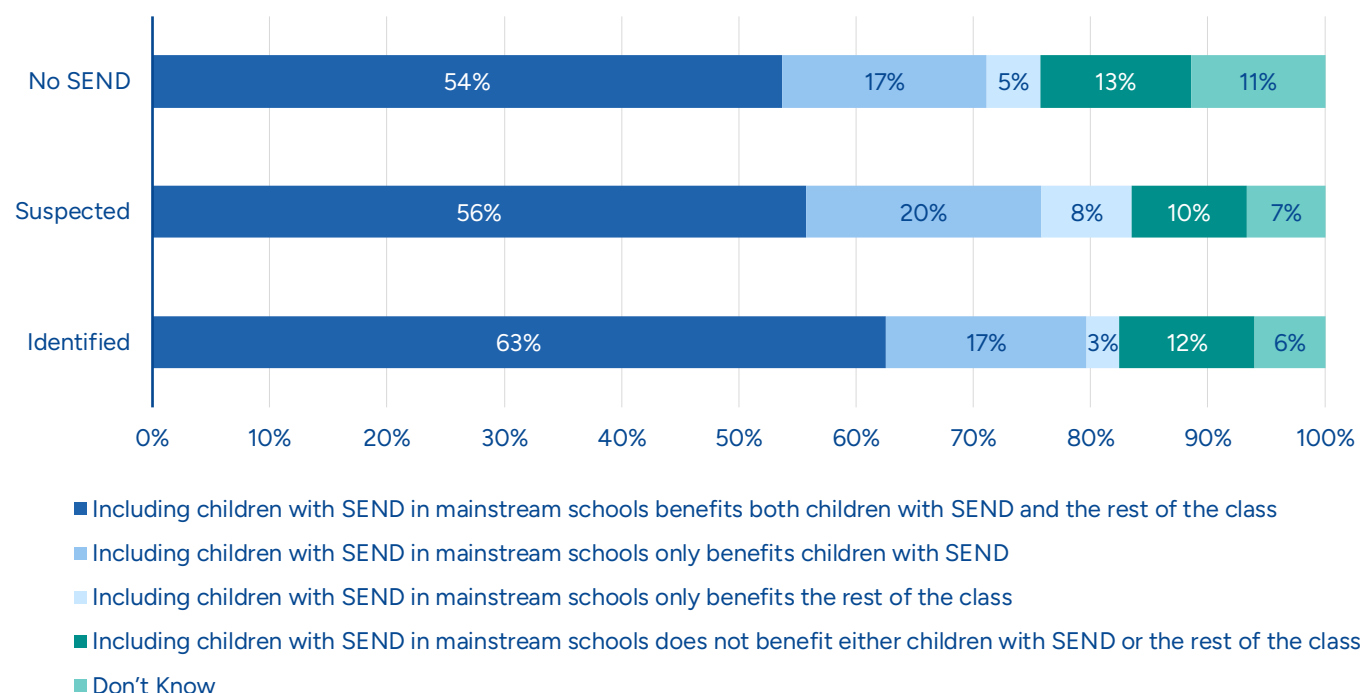


The majority (55%) of parents (of both SEND and non-SEND pupils) thought that children with SEND should be educated in mainstream schools wherever possible, to help them integrate with others and offer the broadest education. This was similar across socio-economic groups. A significant minority (36%) thought that SEND pupils should be educated in specialist schools to provide them with more dedicated support and minimise disruption to other students in mainstream schools.

A majority of parents (55%) thought that including SEND pupils in mainstream schools benefits both SEND pupils and the rest of the class, as shown in Figure 23 below.

“The majority (55%) of parents (of both SEND and non-SEND pupils) thought that children with SEND should be educated in mainstream schools wherever possible, to help them integrate with others and offer the broadest education.”

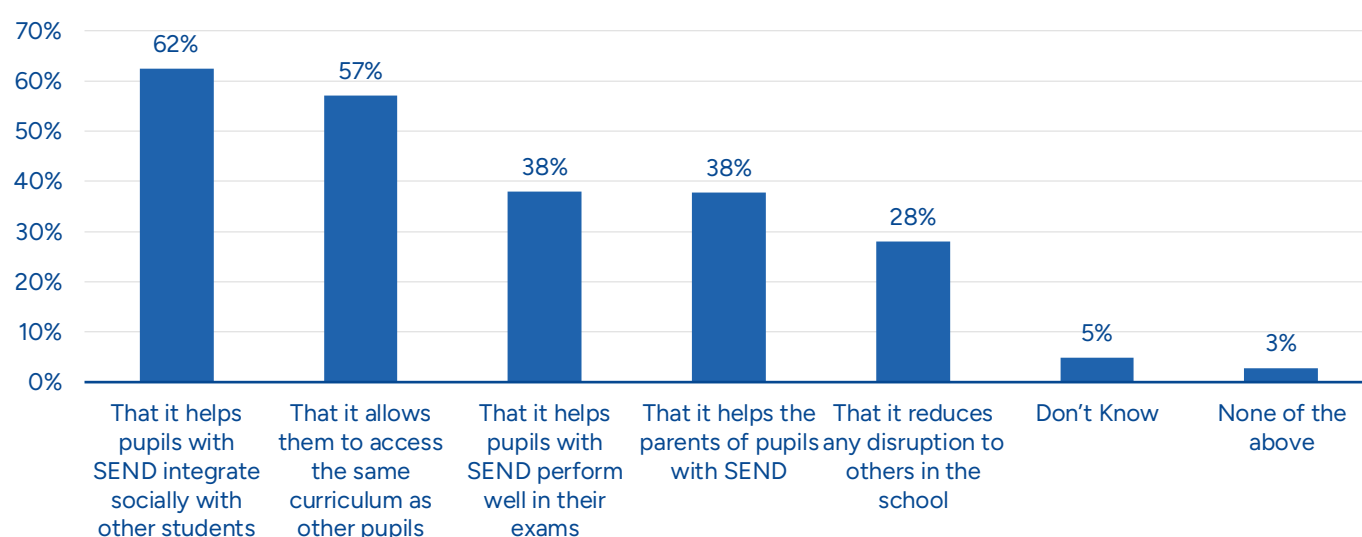
Figure 23: Who benefits from integration of children with SEND into mainstream schools?



Parent views on priority for SEND support within mainstream schools

We asked parents what is most important for SEND support in mainstream schools to achieve, as shown in Figure 24.

Figure 24: Parents views on what is most important for the support offered to children with SEND at mainstream schools to achieve

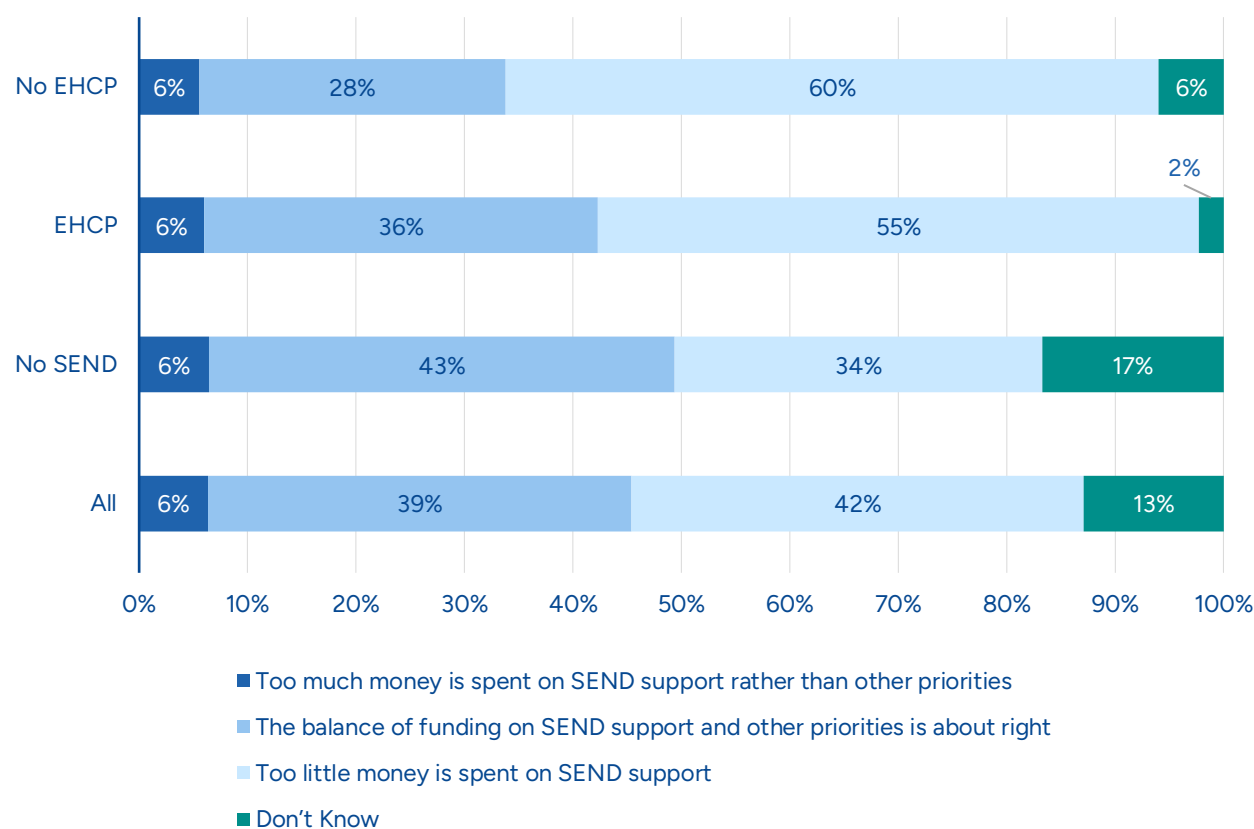


The majority of parents agreed that support should focus on helping SEND pupils integrate socially with other students (62%) while 57% agreed it should allow them to access the same curriculum. This is broadly similar across parents of both SEND and non-SEND pupils, however it was most strongly felt by parents of SEND pupils without an EHCP (67%).

Parent views on SEND funding

A large minority of parents thought that too little is currently spent on SEND support in the school system in general (42%) with a similar proportion (39%) thinking current spending is about right, as shown in Figure 25.

Figure 25: All parents views on money spent on the SEND system



Very few parents (6%) thought that too much is spent on SEND support rather than other priorities. Across socio-economic groups, middle-class parents were more likely than working-class parents (46% to 32%) to say spending is about right and less likely (37% vs 46%) to say too little is currently spent on SEND. Unsurprisingly perhaps, parents of SEND pupils were considerably more likely to say too little is spent (55% of EHCP parents and 60% of non-EHCP parents vs 34% for non-SEND parents). Similarly, 43% of non-SEND parents thought the current spending is about right compared to 36% (EHCP) and 28% (non-EHCP) of SEND parents.

Conclusion

It is essential that all children and young people, regardless of background or individual characteristics, have access to an excellent education. To achieve this ambition, some children will inevitably require some additional support.

In recent years, we have seen a surge in the number of pupils being identified as having SEND, and despite increased high needs funding, significant concerns remain about the capacity and functioning of the system, and what this means for pupil outcomes.

Teachers, school leaders, support staff and other professionals work tirelessly to support the children and young people in their schools, including those with SEND. However, as this report demonstrates experiences of the SEND system differ greatly by socio-economic background.

With a complex, hard to navigate system, it is understandable that parents use every means available to secure what their child needs. As our polling lays bare, however, access to these means varies greatly – it is not a fair ‘fight’.

SEND identification is rising faster among affluent families, likely because they can better navigate the system, as the stakes for identification have got higher. Middle-class parents invest more money and resources into EHCP applications and find the process easier overall. Subsequently, they are more satisfied with the educational experience of their children.

Children with SEND from lower income families are less likely to secure an EHCP, a special school place and satisfactory support. As such their disadvantage is compounded – they are less likely to access the support they need to thrive. Meanwhile, our polling shows how challenges with the current SEND system can reduce the financial security of families, contribute to parental stress and ill health as well as lead to social isolation.

Looking to the future, SEND reform must acknowledge the socio-economic disparities in the current system and look to mitigate them. This entails improvements to the SEND system but also attending to the child poverty that drives so many of the challenges identified in this report.

Policymakers should also acknowledge the potential of early years in improving SEND outcomes and the preventative role that high-quality provision can play, especially in the case of SEND relating to Speech and Language needs.³⁷ Current disparities in who can access early years education as well as the

“Looking to the future, SEND reform must acknowledge the socio-economic disparities in the current system and look to mitigate them.”

consistency of training for those who work in early years could be an area for development for policy makers.

The government has given strategic direction towards having more inclusive mainstream schools that better support pupils with SEND. Our polling shows that parents broadly support having a more inclusive mainstream provision and think it will be of benefit to all children, not just those with SEND. However, it also finds that within the SEND cohort special schools have higher levels of satisfaction and positive impact across a range of measures. This highlights the challenge for greater inclusion in mainstream schools.

SEND is a highly complex area. It involves an extremely broad range of conditions and circumstances, contains numerous pathways and requires the co-ordination of a great number of external agencies and professionals. It is an expensive element of our education system and the number of children it impacts is growing rapidly. Without the right support the needs of children will likely escalate, causing further strain on the system.

As the government seeks to put the system on a more sustainable longer term footing it is vital that improvements are made so that all children, regardless of their backgrounds and their individual needs have equal opportunities to thrive throughout their childhood and go on to be happy adults.

Reflections for school leaders

- How does the socio-economic make up of your SEND cohort compare to the whole school cohort? Are there any disparities?
- How does the proportion of children eligible for FSM vary by type or category of SEND? Are there any unusual or unexpected differences?
- What opportunities are there for whole school work to identify and support pupils holistically? For example, does the Pupil Premium Lead collaborate with the SENDCo on how they might be able to support children eligible for FSM and who have SEND?
- How do parents approach your school if they think their child needs SEND support? Is the process simple and easy to navigate?
- Does your school have or need systems in place to support parents who may need help navigating the SEND system, especially with elements such as paperwork?
- How do you support families who are waiting for a diagnosis or EHCP? Those from lower income backgrounds are likely to be waiting for longer periods of time.
- Do children who are eligible for FSM and have SEND have any particular barriers to learning in your school? Is their attendance in line with other groups?
- What behaviour trends are relevant to this group in your school? Are any types of behaviours more common in children with SEND who are eligible for FSM?
- How well do children who are eligible for FSM and have SEND perform in public examinations in your school compared to other children? Is there an attainment gap within your attainment gap?

Appendix 1: Types of SEND

1. Communication and Interaction
 - Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN)
 - Autistic Spectrum Disorder/Condition including Aspergers
2. Cognition and Learning
 - Generalised support is needed because they learn at a much slower pace than peers even with appropriate support
 - Moderate Learning Difficulties (MLD)
 - Severe Learning Difficulties (SLD)
 - Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties (PMLD)
 - Specific Learning Difficulties – these are precise, diagnosable conditions that have an impact on a child's ability to learn:
 - Dyslexia
 - Dyscalculia
 - Dyspraxia
3. Social, Emotional and Mental Health
 - Attention Disorders – ADHD, ADD
 - Mental Health issues such as anxiety, eating disorders and self-harm
 - Attachment Disorders (commonly seen in care-experienced children)
 - Challenging behaviour which prevents children from taking part in typical lessons and school experiences
4. Sensory and Physical Needs – these tend to be medically diagnosed by a Doctor and this is an extremely broad range.
 - Visual/Hearing Impairment
 - Mobility Issues
 - Downs Syndrome
 - Terminal Illness etc

Appendix 2: Acronym and initialism guide

Acronym	Meaning
FSM	Free School Meals
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
EHCP	Education, Health and Care Plan
LA	Local Authority
ASD	Autistic Spectrum Disorder
HI	Hearing Impairment
MLD	Moderate Learning Difficulty
MSI	Multi-sensory Impairment
Phys	Physical Disability
PMLD	Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulty
SLD	Severe Learning Difficulty
SEMH	Social, Emotional and Mental Health
SpLD	Specific Learning Difficulty
SLCN	Speech, Language and Communication Needs

VI

Visual Impairment

ADHD

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

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- ² Department for Education, 'Special Educational Needs in England, Academic Year 2024/25'.
- ³ Eduin Latimer et al., *Support for Children with Disabilities and Special Educational Needs*, Institute for Fiscal Studies, 3 October 2025,
- ⁴ House of Commons Education Committee, *Solving the SEND Crisis: Fifth Report of Session 2024-25*, no. HC492 (House of Commons, 2025), <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5901/cmselect/cmeduc/492/report.html>.
- House of Commons Education Committee, *Solving the SEND Crisis: Fifth Report of Session 2024-25*, no.
- ⁵ For a helpful breakdown of some key developments in SEND since 2014, see House of Commons Education Committee, *Solving the SEND Crisis: Fifth Report of Session 2024-25*, 8–9.
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- ¹⁶ Shaw et al., 'Special Educational Needs and Their Links to Poverty'.
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- ¹⁹ Peps McCrea et al., *Inclusive Teaching—Securing Strong Educational Experiences and Outcomes for All Students*, 2025, https://resources.steplab.co/content/files/2025/05/Inclusive-Teaching-Discussion-Paper.pdf?_gl=1*vbyw54*_gcl_au*MTUyMDc4NjU2Mi4xNzUyNTYyOTk0*_ga*MjUxNjQ0ODQyLjE3NTI1NjI5OTQ.*_ga_4ZJGL6C6NE*czE3NTQ0ODY5NzAkbnzUkZzAkdDE3NTQ0ODY5NzAkajYwJGwwJGgw.
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- ²¹ EPI, 'High Needs Funding: An Overview of the Key Issues', *Education Policy Institute*, 3 April 2019, <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/high-needs-funding-overview/>.
- ²² Department for Education, 'Schools, Pupils and Their Characteristics, Academic Year 2024/25', January 2025, <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics/2024-25>.
- ²³ Department for Education, 'Special Educational Needs in England, Academic Year 2024/25'.
- ²⁴ Figure 1 shows the primary need that is recorded for children on the SEND. When children are placed on the SEND register a primary need is identified as well as secondary and other needs. This accommodates the prevalence of co-morbid conditions whilst allowing staff to identify the priority area for support. Using the primary need in our analysis therefore does not give the full scale of need but does allow us to identify emerging trends. A list of acronyms can be found in Appendix 2.
- ²⁵ Department for Education, 'Special Educational Needs in England, Academic Year 2024/25'.
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