



Department  
for Education

# **Educational psychology services: workforce insights and school perspectives on impact**

**Research report**

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Social Research

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## Glossary

AEP	Association of Educational Psychologists
AP	Alternative Provision
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CBT	Cognitive Behavioural Therapy
CCE	Child Criminal Exploitation
DfE	Department for Education
EAL	English as an additional language
EBSA	Emotional-based School Avoidance
EHCP	Education, Health and Care Plan
EP	Educational Psychologist
ELSA	Emotional Literacy Support Assistants
GP	General Practitioner
HCPC	Health and Care Professions Council
LA	Local Authority
MAT	Multi-academy Trust
NAPEP	National Association of Principal Educational Psychologists
ONS	Office for National Statistics
PEP	Principal Educational Psychologist
PRU	Pupil Referral Unit
PTSD	Post-traumatic Stress Disorder
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
SENCO	Special Educational Needs Coordinator
SWC	School Workforce Census

VCSE	Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Sector
VIG	Video Interaction Guidance
YOT	Young Offending Teams

## Executive summary

Educational Psychology services (EP services) play a key role in supporting the development, learning and wellbeing of children and young people aged 0 to 25. They work with education settings, including special schools and alternative provision schools, and other services, such as health and social care, to support the most vulnerable children and young people, and those with the most complex needs. The service may involve one to one work with children and young people and their parents/carers, work with schools and other agencies or local authority wide initiatives.

A key aspect of EP services is contributing to the development of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). EHCPs were introduced in 2014 as part of the education reforms for children and young people with special educational needs. Educational Psychologists (EPs) have a statutory role to play in providing expert information and advice which is used to inform these EHCPs.

This research aimed to a) explore the range of services delivered by EPs beyond statutory EHCPs and how service delivery may look in the future; b) explore the demand for EP services, and whether the service was effective at meeting schools' needs and its impact on children and young people; and c) explore the drivers and barriers to EP training and workforce recruitment and retention.

The research used a mixed method, multi-informant approach. It consisted of:

- a) one online survey of EPs, including trainee and Assistant EPs, and another online survey of Principal Educational Psychologists (PEPs);
- b) interviews and focus groups with EPs and PEPs, representatives from the wider provider network working with children and young people, doctoral training providers and other stakeholders including the representative bodies AEP and NAPEP;
- c) case studies of EPs working in schools involving teachers, Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs), health care professionals, parents, children and young people;
- d) quantitative modelling of the size and composition of the EP workforce.

## Training of Educational Psychologists

The doctoral training programme for EPs is a three-year course currently delivered by 12 universities and one NHS trust. It is publicly funded through a) the DfE paying the study fees over the three-year period plus a bursary for the first year and b) the funding of placements in years 2 and 3 by local authorities, typically through bursaries. Since 2020, the annual number of funded training places for EPs was increased to over 200, from 160. The first cohort since this increase will graduate and enter the workforce in September 2023.



Location and reputation of the training provider were the most commonly cited reasons for trainee EPs and recent graduates choosing their training course. Availability of funding and location of training placements were also commonly given reasons.

Location of training placements was also important when trainees were selecting their placement provider, with diversity of settings and opportunities to learn a range of skills also being important.

Trainees and EPs expressed a high level of satisfaction with the EP training model, and this was echoed by PEPs. The most frequently mentioned concern about the current training model was the perception, held by trainees, EPs, PEPs, and training providers, that the bursary amount was too low. Respondents across all groups expressed concerns that this may discourage people from applying, limit diversity in the profession and make the experience of training more challenging.

While some EPs and PEPs were in favour of moving to a salaried system for trainees, this was not supported by the training providers who thought this could create a costly and inefficient system.

There was evidence of a pipeline between trainees undertaking a placement in a particular local authority and subsequently going on to work in that local authority after graduation. This has important implications for local authorities that find themselves unable to offer placements as they lack the capacity to supervise someone on placement.

## **Recruitment and retention of Educational Psychologists**

Overall, 88% of local authority PEPs reported that they were currently experiencing difficulties recruiting. Of these, 77% said that they consistently experienced difficulties recruiting. PEPs most commonly attributed these difficulties to a general lack of applicants, which was related to an overall shortage of EPs being trained, negative perceptions of local authority work and competition from other local providers of EP services, including private providers of EP services.

Increased demand for EHCPs was perceived by PEPs and EPs as creating capacity issues in the system. They suggested that a vicious cycle existed, in which EPs lacked capacity to engage in early intervention and advisory work, because statutory assessment took up so much of their time. As a result, the issues experienced by children and young people escalated and could no longer be resolved by early intervention work, leading to them seeking an EHCP.

Overall, 34% of local authority PEPs reported that they were experiencing retention issues. Respondents suggested that this was related to the high proportion of time EPs were spending on statutory work and the opportunities to do more varied work in private practice.

Solutions to these recruitment and retention issues suggested by PEPs included 'growing your own', in which local authorities create a pipeline incorporating Assistant EPs, who become trainee EPs and then eventually take up employment in the local authority once they are qualified. The use of locums, joined up working between local authorities, and generally trying to improve the attractiveness of the work they offered were also mentioned as potential solutions. Addressing both the supply of EPs in the system and demand for statutory services was seen by EPs and PEPs as a longer-term strategy for intervening to address recruitment and retention issues.

While increasing the number of EPs being trained may address some of the supply side issues, exploring demand-side issues and possible interventions, either in isolation or conjunction with supply-side interventions, could potentially yield a stronger impact.

## **Delivery of Educational Psychology services**

While some children and young people, parents/carers, and education and wider services stakeholders had a good understanding of the role and what could be expected from EP services, others did not, and it was clear that there was some misunderstanding of the role. There was inconsistent awareness of the work EPs did outside statutory assessments, particularly their work around early intervention and systemic work<sup>1</sup>.

The extent to which EPs engaged in statutory and non-statutory work was linked to the model of EP services within their local authority (for example, whether they were using a traded or non-traded service model)<sup>2</sup>. Regardless of the different models used, there was consistent reporting that EPs did not have enough capacity to meet demand for their services.

EPs do broadly similar work across different educational settings, particularly across primary and secondary schools. EPs described examples of working directly with children and young people but also expressed a preference for working at the education setting level to deliver consultations, whole-school interventions, earlier intervention and staff training, which they believed could help maximise the impact of their role.

Overall, interviewees reported that EP services were extremely valuable and unique. EPs brought a distinct, useful skillset, expertise, and knowledge to support children and young people and professionals.

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<sup>1</sup> EPs systemic work involves working at the whole-system level, for example with local authorities, services, or schools, rather than the individual child, young person or family level. This may include project or research work, developing policies or practice, and whole-school or local authority wide initiatives.

<sup>2</sup> Local authority funding models and the influence on EP services are further discussed in the section: [Educational Psychologist services' funding models for educational settings](#).

## Working with wider service providers

EPs worked with a range of wider services, including early help and children's social care services; local authority inclusion teams; Youth Offending Teams (YOT) and violence reduction teams; and the Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector. They also supported health services including General Practitioners (GPs), Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), speech and language therapists (SALTs), paediatricians, mental health services, portage<sup>3</sup>, and hearing impairment teams.

Multi-agency stakeholders valued EPs' specialist knowledge, experience and approach to supporting children and young people's physical and mental health. The qualitative research with PEPs, EPs, and multi-agency stakeholders demonstrated EPs' role in supporting local authorities to inform and set their strategic direction. EPs and wider stakeholders valued EPs' training and research skills to upskill local staff and inform local provision and for giving children, young people and families a voice.

There was some evidence that some multi-agency stakeholders did not understand the difference between EP and CAMHS support to children's and young people's mental health.

Suggestions for how EP services could enhance multi-agency working and local provision included utilising EPs' research and training skills, raising awareness of the EP role and its impact, and freeing up EPs' time to enable them to get more involved in early intervention and systemic work.

## The impact of Educational Psychology services

Interviewees identified a range of positive outcomes from EPs' support for children, young people and families, school/education settings, and more widely at the system level.

A range of interviewees reported improved outcomes following engagement with EP services directly related to the EHCP process. Namely, that children and young people's needs were accurately identified during the EHC needs assessment, and suitable EHCPs put in place.

Perceived impacts of EPs' work for children and young people included children and young people's needs being identified more efficiently than without EP intervention, and children and young people feeling heard, understood, and empowered. Parents/carers reported having enhanced parenting skills as a result of their improved understanding of their child's needs and their own strengths as parents/carers.

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<sup>3</sup> Portage is a home-visiting, early intervention support available for pre-school children with additional needs.

Key outcomes for education setting staff included increased knowledge, ability and confidence to identify children and young people's needs. Some school staff also felt emotionally supported by EPs. Outcomes for the whole school included improved relationships with families, and implementation of new, whole-school approaches to tackling issues.

System level outcomes arose from EPs' strategic work. These included informing local authority-wide policies, strategies and initiatives and an improved ability to identify local level needs and positive influences on multi-agency practices.

At times EPs felt that the indirect nature of some of their work meant that they were unsure of the impact they had achieved for children and young people specifically.

Interviewees identified a range of factors that supported effective delivery of EP services. These included EPs working with other professionals; at the whole system level; with creativity and flexibility; applying skills across a range of education settings and wider services; their relationships-based approach to working with others; and capturing the voices of children and young people. These aspects of the role were considered to be conducive to meeting the needs of children and young people and bringing about positive change. Effective internal management within the local authority EP service systems and EPs being linked to specific schools also facilitated positive change.

The main perceived challenges for EPs to meet the needs of children and young people and create positive impact was the limited capacity of the EP services. EPs felt there was not enough time or resource to apply their skills to the work deemed to be the most conducive to achieving positive outcomes, most notably early intervention and prevention work, rather than statutory assessments.

Other challenges related to other professionals having limited time to implement EPs' recommendations and advice in EHC needs assessments. This included schools and education settings, and specific services such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), who were crucial in effectively supporting children and young people.

## **Educational psychology in the future**

Overall, 69% of PEPs were not very confident or not confident at all that they would be able to continue to meet demand for Educational Psychology services if funding, training and service delivery models stayed the same. Just 11% PEPs stated that they were very or quite confident in their continuing ability to meet demand.

There was very little support amongst EPs, PEPs and training providers for introducing a self-funded or part-funded doctoral training model. The majority of current and recent trainee EPs said that they would not have embarked on training if it had been self-funded or part-funded. Similarly, PEPs expressed concerns that a self-funded or part-funded model could lead to a fall in the number of EPs being trained. Both groups, as well as the training providers, believed that such a model would reduce diversity in the profession

and mean that the EP workforce would lack understanding of the communities they were trying to serve.

The use of Assistant EPs to increase capacity in local authorities varied. One way in which increasing the number of Assistant EPs in a local authority could increase capacity in the longer term was in viewing the Assistant EP role as the start of a pipeline. In this, the Assistant EP formed an early connection with the local authority and retained that connection, becoming a trainee and, after completing their doctorate, an EP in that local authority. There was some caution about the use of Assistant EPs, particularly in supporting statutory work.

Views varied on the potential impact of extending the period for which newly qualified EPs were required to work in a local authority, or similar organisation providing support for local authority statutory work, from the current two years. Some EPs and PEPs thought that it was reasonable to extend the requirement given the investment local authorities made in training. Other PEPs and EPs were concerned that such a policy would amount to newly qualified EPs having to take employment in unfavourable working conditions, including employment that they considered stressful, with high workloads, poor work-life balance, lack of diverse experiences and opportunities to use their skills and perceived low pay levels. This could provide a disincentive to actually improve such poor conditions.

## **Conclusions**

Overall, EPs deliver an important and valued service, providing unique functions as part of a complex system of support for children and young people. Capacity, primarily driven by the rise in EHCP numbers, has become an increasingly pressing issue and was consistently identified as the main barrier to EPs delivering the most effective service. A vicious cycle was identified in which the need for EPs to prioritise EHCPs reduced the time available for early intervention work and whole-school advisory work. Without this early intervention, the issues experienced by the child or young person can intensify, leading them to need an EHCP, and placing further pressure on EPs' capacity to engage in early intervention and systemic work.

## Introduction

Educational Psychology services (EP services) play a key role in supporting the development, learning, and wellbeing of children and young people aged 0 to 25. They work with education settings, including special schools and alternative provision schools, and other services, such as health and social care, to support the most vulnerable children and young people, and those with the most complex needs. EP services provide direct support to children, young people, families, and schools, alongside training for education professionals and others, and strategic input at a local authority level.

EP services are led by a Principal Educational Psychologist (PEP). The PEP is responsible for managing a team, which can include senior EPs, EPs, trainee EPs on placement and Assistant EPs (Harland, Kitchingman and Elder, 2022). While most EPs work in local authorities, a small share work for private providers or are self-employed. (Lyonette, Atfield, Baldauf and Owen, 2019; unpublished 2022 AEP data).

EPs must demonstrate that they have undergone appropriate training and achieved qualifications that are recognised by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC). In England, new trainees are required to complete a 3-year doctoral training programme, which is publicly funded and currently delivered by 12 universities and one NHS trust. The Department for Education (DfE) funds the course fees and the first-year bursary, and the local authorities in which trainees have their placement fund a second- and third-year bursary (occasionally paid as a salary).

Trainees in their second and third year spend between three and four days per week on a placement with a local authority EP service, or other approved provider of EP services, as part of the doctoral programme, and receive regular supervision from EPs.

With an undergraduate degree in Psychology and relevant experience with children or young people, Assistant EPs work under the supervision of an EP carrying out a broad spectrum of activities, including casework (Harland, Kitchingman and Elder, 2022). The posts are typically fixed-term (Harland, Kitchingman and Elder, 2022) to enable Assistant EPs to prepare for the EP doctoral programme (Soulbury Committee, 2019).

Due to limitations in the data, deriving from different sources, the total number of EPs in England currently providing EP services is difficult to determine. The School Workforce Census (SWC) reported 2325 EPs working for a local (education) authority in 2022. In contrast the Association of Educational Psychologists (AEP) reported a membership of 2989 EPs in 2022, including local authority EPs, self-employed EPs and trainees, while HCPC had 3672 EPs on their register in 2020. This divergence results from the SWC underestimating the EP workforce because it does not encompass EPs working entirely

privately and not all local authorities submit a return each year<sup>4</sup>, while HCPC data may be an overestimate as it does not record whether an EP on the register is currently providing EP services, retired or inactive. However, the sources concur that the great majority of EPs are female and aged from 35 to 60. More information is provided in [Annex 4](#).

Prior to 2008, EP services had been provided free of charge to schools. However, a range of factors, including public sector cuts, and a move towards academisation, led to many local authorities reviewing their service model, with some local authorities subsequently moving to a partially or fully traded services model to generate income (Lee and Woods, 2017). This model involves local authorities providing specified services to schools for a fee. EP services therefore operate different funding models, ranging from all services being free of charge to schools, to partially or fully traded services.

A key aspect of the EP service is informing and contributing to the development of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) for children and young people who need additional support beyond special educational needs (SEN) support. An EHCP is a legal document which describes a child or young person's special educational needs, the support they need and the outcomes they would like to achieve. EHCPs were introduced in 2014, following the Children and Families Act 2014. Importantly, EPs have a statutory duty providing expert information and advice which is used to inform these plans. This means that demand for contribution to EHCPs may need to be prioritised over other services.

Earlier research commissioned by the Department for Education (Lyonette et al., 2019) found that 90% of PEPs reported experiencing 'more demand for EP services than could currently be met', and that this was largely due to an increase in EHCPs. The research also suggested that there was an 'under-supply' of EPs, with more than two thirds of local authorities experiencing recruitment challenges. Following the publication of this report, the number of DfE funded training places for EPs was increased from 160 to 203 per year from 2020 to help increase capacity in the system.

The latest statistics show that there has been an increase in the percentage of pupils with EHCPs from 2.8% in 2016/17 to 4.3% in 2022/23, corresponding to an increase in the number of pupils with an EHCPs (or SEN statements prior to the SEND reform) by 60.7%

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<sup>4</sup> We anticipate that most data on EPs will be provided by local authorities as it is unlikely that they are employed directly by schools. However, it is possible for schools to directly employ EPs and therefore they can also return data. This may lead to duplication of data returned, for instance if a local authority returns a figure for all their centrally employed EPs and a school inadvertently returns data for an LA employed EP who is working in the school on census date. It is estimated that this could lead to an overcount of up to ~50 EPs (headcount, up to 2-3%) in total per year. However, not all LAs submit a return every year.

over this period (242,184 to 389,171) (GOV.UK, 2023). Similarly, the number of initial requests for an EHCP rose: from 64,555 to 114,457 during 2017 to 2022, representing an overall increase of 77.3% per cent. While the number of initial requests for an EHCP temporarily dropped in 2020, the year the pandemic began, they rose faster in 2021 than compared to previous years (GOV.UK, 2023)

There is also increasing evidence that lockdowns following the outbreak of COVID-19 negatively impacted the education and wellbeing of children and young people (Anders, Macmillan, Sturgis and Wyness, 2021). Importantly, children from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with SEND appear to have been disproportionately impacted. Reasons for this include difficulties in accessing or adapting to remote learning, and loss of access to specialist equipment or services they rely on (Ashworth, Kirkby, Bray and Alghrani, 2021, cited in HM Government, 2022; Ofsted 2021; House of Commons, Committee of Public Accounts, 2021).

In March 2022, DfE and the Department for Health and Social Care jointly published a Green Paper entitled SEND Review: Right support, right place, right time: Government consultation on the SEND and alternative provision system in England. This acknowledged the challenges in the SEND system and offered a plan to help address these (Department for Education, 2022).<sup>5</sup>

It is within this context that DfE commissioned new research to provide updated insights into the EP workforce in England and to understand the impact that the EP service has on the communities it serves. The research was conducted by the Institute for Employment Research at the University of Warwick and Ecorys between Spring 2022 and Winter 2022.

## **Aims of the study**

This research aimed to develop a better understanding of the system, practice and impact of EP services in England. The research sought to:

- 1) Understand the range of services that EPs deliver, including their role in early intervention work;
- 2) Explore the demand for EP services and the impact that EP services have on children and young people, families, schools and other professionals;
- 3) Identify the drivers and barriers to EPs entering and staying in the workforce.

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<sup>5</sup> In March 2023, this was followed by the publication of the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and Alternative Provision (AP) Improvement Plan (HM Government, 2023). This outlined the Government's mission for the SEND and alternative provision system to fulfil children's potential, build parents' trust and provide financial sustainability.





## Methodology

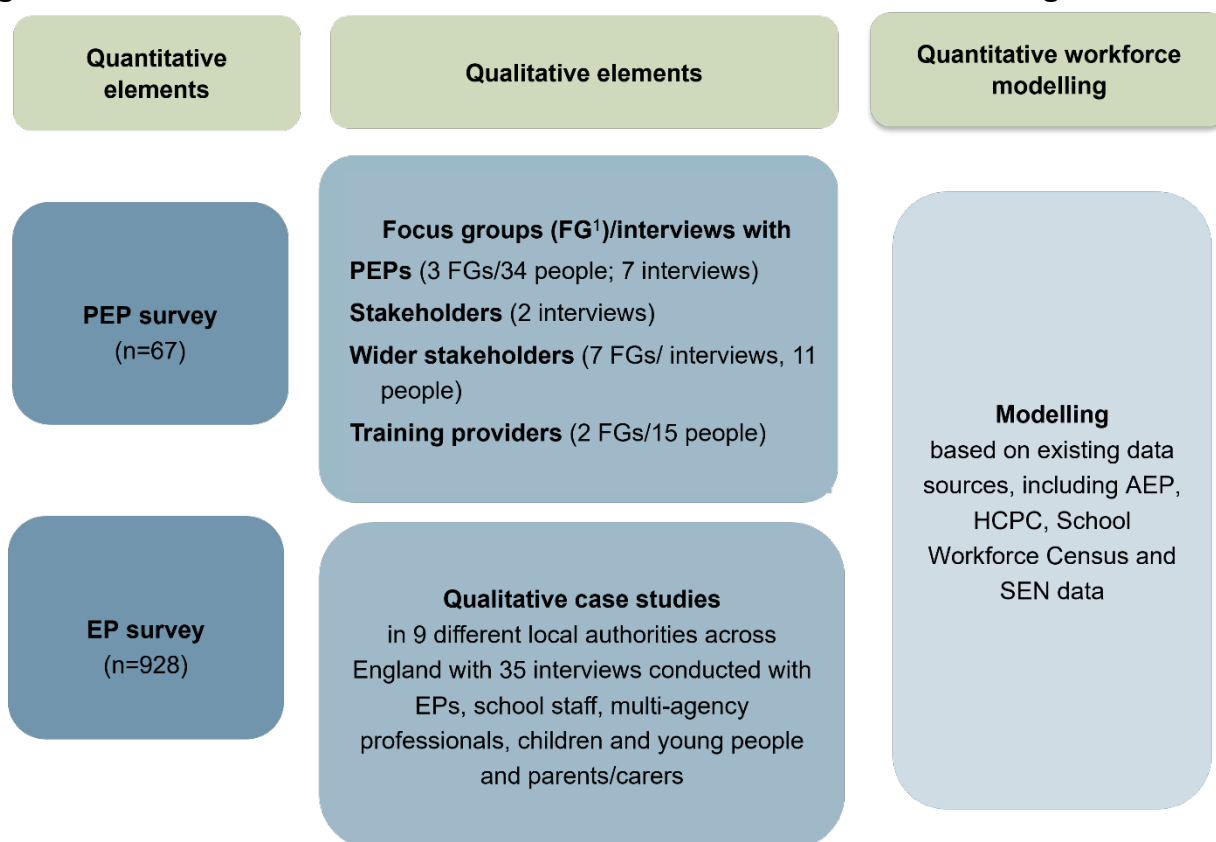
This study adopted a mixed-method multi-informant approach. Methods included:

- a) An online survey for PEP, EPs, trainee EPs and Assistant EPs;
- b) Focus groups and interviews with PEPs, training providers and wider stakeholders;
- c) Case studies in schools;
- d) Workforce modelling.

Taking this approach allowed for a range of perspectives to be captured and ensured that we developed a rich and comprehensive understanding of the EP workforce and practice in England.

Ethical approval was received from the University of Warwick's Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee and the Ecorys Ethics Committee in Spring 2022. The research team was also asked by two local authorities to gain local ethical approval to conduct case studies in those areas. The research was approved by both ethics boards. Participants were sent participant information leaflets and informed consent was given prior to taking part in the study.

**Figure 1 Overview of the mixed methods multi-informant research design**



## PEP survey

An online survey of PEPs was conducted between June and August 2022 by IER using Qualtrics software. It was primarily a quantitative survey with some open responses and took approximately 27 minutes to complete. The survey included questions on the EP workforce employed at the local authority and EP recruitment and retention challenges. Respondents were also asked if they would be willing to contribute to a focus group discussion later in the research. A link to the survey was sent directly to all local authority PEPs whose contact details were held by IER and a survey link was also distributed by NAPEP and AEP through their networks and an online public forum for EPs (EPNET: Educational Psychology List).

A total of 67 responses were received from PEPs (or equivalent most senior person). Of these responses, 64 were from PEPs or other senior staff working in local authorities, the remaining three from PEPs working exclusively in private practice.

## EP survey

An online survey targeting EPs, trainees and Assistant EPs was conducted by IER between June and August 2022 using Qualtrics software. Again, this was primarily a quantitative survey with some open responses. The survey link was distributed via PEPs, through the AEP, on the EPNET discussion board and through direct contact with EPs who had given their permission to be contacted in the previous research conducted by IER between 2018 and 2019. The survey also asked respondents if they would be willing to be involved in a focus group discussion and/or part of the Ecorys-led case study strand of the research.

A total of 928 responses were received: 69% of respondents were EPs (N=641), 22% trainees (N=204) and 9% Assistant EPs (N=83), with [Annex 2](#) providing further details.

Survey data was analysed using the statistical software package SPSS, with a thematic approach to analysis of qualitative information from the surveys.

## Focus groups with PEPs and interviews with stakeholders and PEPs

The focus group with PEPs aimed to gather rich insights into the services that EPs deliver, understand the role of the EP services within the wider service landscape and explore what EP services might look like in the future.

PEPs who had expressed an interest in participating in this strand of the research were invited to one of three online focus groups during July 2022. Focus groups included 9-15 participants and lasted approximately 100 minutes each. IER also conducted 7 interviews

with those who were unable to attend the focus groups. These interviews used the same topic guide as the focus group and lasted between 50 and 110 minutes.

In addition, IER conducted two stakeholder interviews with professional associations (NAPEP and AEP) in July and November 2022.

Discussion topics included recruitment to the doctoral programme, delivery and impact of the EP services, and recruitment and retention challenges in local authorities and how those could be addressed.

## **Focus groups with training providers**

Views of training providers have been sought on the doctoral training programme and their perceptions on recruitment and retention challenges in local authorities. Two online focus groups were held by IER in December 2022, with a total of 15 participants attending, representing 11 training providers. Both focus groups lasted around 100 minutes.

## **Focus groups and interviews with wider stakeholders**

The Ecorys research team carried out online focus groups and interviews with multi-agency representatives from local authorities, healthcare, and the VCSE during summer 2022. The purpose of the focus groups was to gather views from a range of stakeholders who work with EP services. This provided wider context about how the EP services worked with other professionals to enable the research team to triangulate the qualitative data gathered from PEPs, EPs, schools, and parents/carers, children and young people.

The research team purposively contacted a range of stakeholders from across local authorities, health and VSCEs. The team sought to engage stakeholders from a range of services, geographies (for example, north/south, urban/rural) and local authority type (for example, counties, unitary, London Boroughs).

Multi-agency stakeholder participants comprised:

- 6 local authority representatives, from 5 local authorities, covering SEND services, Inclusion teams, Children's Services, and Learning Support teams;
- 3 health representatives covering Speech and Language services, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and programme delivery;
- 2 VSCE representatives from Mental Health Services.

An assistant PEP also attended one of the multi-agency focus groups.

## Qualitative case studies

The research team conducted 9 in-depth case studies with EPs and schools to explore how schools and EP services work together. Building on the survey data, the case studies sought to explore, across a range of participant groups, how EP services deliver alongside wider education and children and young people's services. The case studies focused on EPs' current and future statutory duties for Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) and broader early intervention work. The case studies also aimed to provide further information about the extent to which EP services meet the needs of schools, are effective, and achieve the intended outcomes and impact for schools, teachers, and children and young people.

The original intention was for the case study visits to comprise a research observation<sup>6</sup> and interviews in schools. The observations involved viewing EPs' activities with children, young people and professionals, for information gathering purposes only. Case studies also involved interviews with a range of stakeholders, including, where appropriate to the case study setting and individual circumstances, children and young people. When the research team invited EPs to participate in the study, EPs raised concerns that only focusing on their work in schools risked excluding their wider work, particularly around early intervention and systems change. There were also concerns about access to some schools due to capacity to accommodate a face-to-face visit within the study's timescales. The research team adapted the qualitative strand of the study to ensure it captured a range of EPs' support to schools and children and young people.

As noted in the [EP survey section](#) above, EPs who had responded to the survey were given the option to volunteer and consent to participate in the qualitative case studies. Due to timing and pressures on EPs and schools, the research team adopted a pragmatic and purposive sampling approach to the case studies. The research sought to include a range of EPs' work covering early intervention, statutory work, and systemic work, and to include EPs from a range of local authorities.

The Ecorys research team carried out 9 case studies across England during late November and early December 2022. The case studies comprised:

- 9 local authority areas from London, the North-East, North-West, South-West, and the Midlands; these included rural and urban local authorities.
- 35 one-to-one or group interviews including the following participants:
  - 16 EPs

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<sup>6</sup> The purpose of the observations was to inform the research team about EPs work and to get to know the circumstances around a child/school, where appropriate. These were non-judgemental observations and were not intended to provide an assessment of the quality of EPs work; these were for information gathering and research purposes only.

- 15 school staff from early years, primary and secondary schools, special schools, and pupil referral units (PRUs), including Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs), pastoral staff, teaching assistants, and school leaders
- 6 multi-agency partners, including specialist teachers, local authority Children's Services and education leads, Early Help professionals, and mental health and wellbeing specialists
- 8 children and young people aged between 10 and 18 years<sup>7</sup>
- 4 parents/carers.

As part of the case studies, the research team carried out 6 observations; most of these were in person with one being carried out online (via MS Teams).

The focus of the case studies aligned with activities as outlined in the Currie Report EP role illustrative matrix (see [Annex 3](#)). Case studies included a focus on EPs' work with the child and family; school or setting; and local authority. These included EPs' early intervention, statutory, and systems-change work.

Through the interviews with EPs, the research team were able to gather detailed information about EPs' work in these areas and more broadly.

The research team used NVIVO (a computer assisted qualitative data analysis software) to manage and sort the data. Led by the research questions and themes, the team undertook a systematic thematic analysis of the data. The research team adopted a predominantly inductive (bottom-up) approach to coding the data to identify themes and sub-themes. Analysis was carried out within and between the case studies and participant groups to provide a clear overall summary of the key findings. The qualitative data has been triangulated with the wider research findings; and vignettes and short case studies are included throughout this report.

[Annex 1](#) provides a detailed overview of the key research questions addressed in each of the study elements.

## Workforce modelling

The aim was to create a model which could be used to project the size of the EP workforce over the medium term under different funding scenarios. These estimates would then be compared with information on the likely demand for the services of EPs in order to provide an assessment of whether future demand can be met sustainably. Unfortunately, the lack of definitive data on the number and characteristics of EPs and more importantly the lack of time-series information on the flows of people into and out of

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<sup>7</sup> There was one participant who was over 25 years of age and who was still receiving support from the EP service.

the profession meant that the key relationships within a projection model could not be estimated. More details are provided in [Annex 4](#).

## **Assessment of the methodological approach**

A key strength of this study is that it has adopted a multi-method approach to understand the system, practice and impact of the EP workforce in England.

Collecting quantitative survey evidence was vital for understanding the training decisions of EPs and for understanding the scale of recruitment and retention challenges. Although the PEP and EP survey achieved a good response rate, it is not possible to assess how representative the sample is in terms of characteristics. However, it is likely the EP survey will under-represent those working outside of local authorities given our distribution channels and snowballing sampling approach.

Qualitative evidence was vital for developing a comprehensive understanding of impact and for identifying the mechanisms by which EPs improved outcomes for children and young people, schools, and families. We gathered the views of over 100 individuals and sought to capture a range of different perspectives, including those of EPs, health professionals, schools, families and children and young people. Taking this multi-informant approach enabled an in-depth understanding by allowing us to triangulate and compare the views of the different participant groups.

# Educational Psychology training

## Key findings

Location and reputation of the training provider were the most commonly cited reasons for trainee EPs and recent graduates choosing their training course. Availability of funding and location of placements were also commonly given reasons.

There was evidence of a pipeline between doing a placement in a particular local authority and subsequently going on to work in that local authority after graduation. This has important implications for local authorities that find themselves unable to offer placements, either due to capacity issues or because they are simply unable to recruit a trainee to join them on placement.

Trainees and EPs expressed a high level of satisfaction with the EP training model, and this was echoed by PEPs. The most frequently mentioned concern about the current training model was the perception held by trainees, EPs, PEPs and training providers that the bursary amount was too low. Respondents across all groups expressed concerns that this made the experience of training more challenging and that this limited diversity in the profession.

While some EPs and PEPs were in favour of moving to a salaried system, this was not supported by the training providers who thought this could create a costly and inefficient system.

This section focusses on:

- the decisions EPs made about entering doctoral training;
- the operation of the doctoral training delivery model, including the aspects that were seen to be working well and those that were seen to be working less well;
- the impact of training experiences on subsequent career choices.

There is a national application system for people wishing to apply for doctoral training in Educational Psychology. As noted previously, each year the number of applicants far exceeds the number of available places.

The training delivery model for EPs consists of a first year based predominantly at the university providing doctoral training, followed by practice placements in years two and three. DfE funds the three years of course fees and the first year bursary. The local authorities where the trainee is doing their placement fund the second and third year bursary.

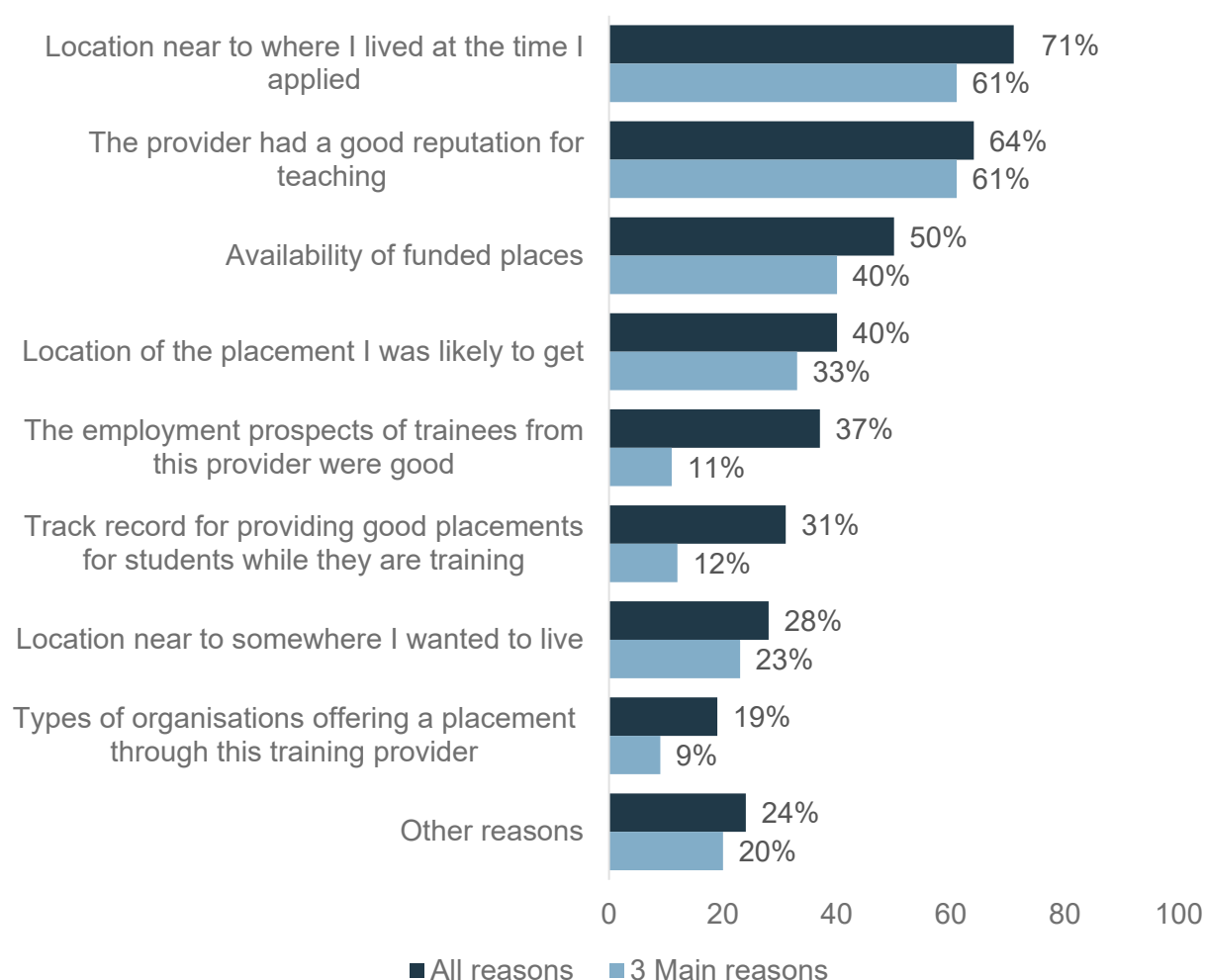
EPs are required to work in a local authority or alternative setting which supports statutory work in England for at least two years after graduation.



## Decision-making on doctoral training

Location is a key consideration in trainee decision-making. Figures 2 and 3 show that over 70% of respondents said that the location of the training provider in relation to where they were currently living was one of the reasons they chose their training provider, with just over 60% saying this was one of their main reasons. Similarly, 68% said that the location of their placement(s) was a consideration in choosing their placement provider and 63% said that it was one of their three main reasons. The location of placements offered by the training provider and the location being somewhere the respondent wanted to live were also fairly important considerations. While the reputation of the training provider for offering employment after graduation was a consideration for only around 20% of respondents, the location of the placement in relation to where the respondent wanted to work after graduation was a consideration for 40%.

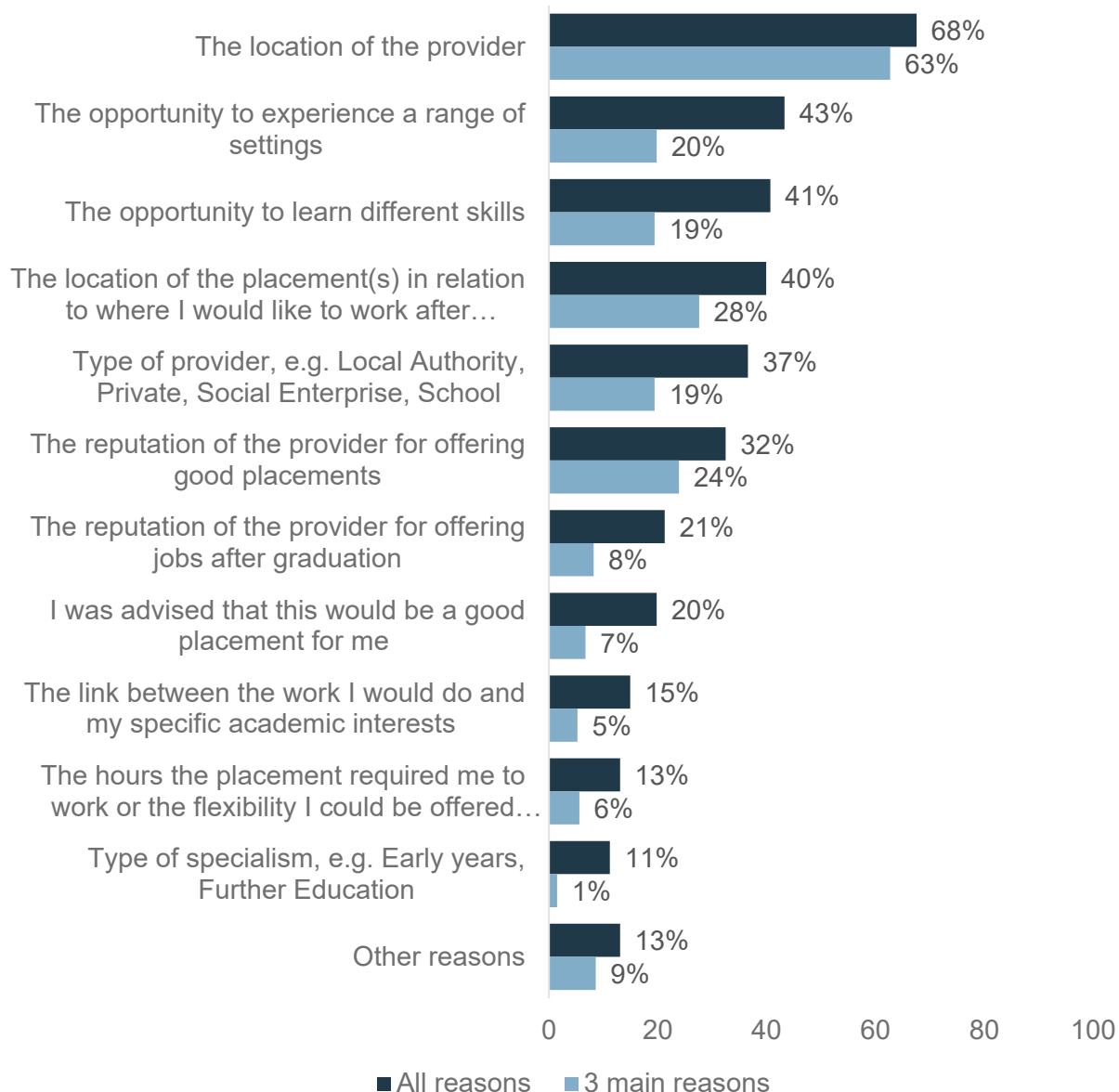
**Figure 2 Reasons EPs gave for choosing their training provider**



Source: EP survey Trainees and EPs who completed a doctorate in the past 5 years n=436

'All reasons' = percentage of respondents who selected each reason when asked to indicate all the reasons they had for choosing their training provider. Respondents were also asked to select up to three main reasons they chose their training provider, and the figure shows the percentage of respondents who selected each reason as being amongst their three most important.

**Figure 3 Reasons EPs gave for choosing their placement provider**



Source: EP survey Trainees and EPs who completed a doctorate in the past 5 years n=436

This emphasis on location highlights some of the issues faced by potential trainees who live some distance from a training provider and from potential placements. The cost and time required to travel to attend teaching or a placement was highlighted by respondents as a key barrier to promoting diversity in the profession, and therefore in the ability of the profession to reflect and understand the communities they serve. It also highlights the issues faced by local authorities that are some distance from a training provider or located in an area that is viewed as less desirable by respondents.

Quality and reputation of both the training provider and the placement organisation were also key factors in trainees’ decision-making processes. Gaining a reputation for providing good placements, with a variety of work, was seen as an important way in which local authorities and other organisations could attract and retain their trainees after

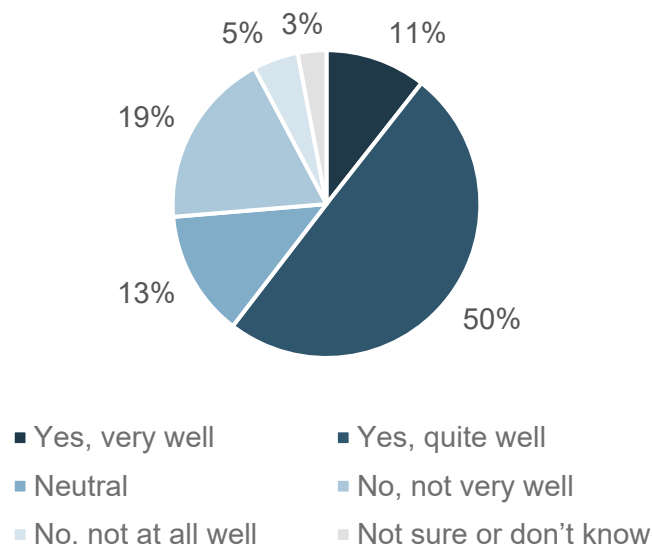
graduation. In contrast, having a less favourable reputation could lead a local authority to struggle to recruit and retain its trainees. This could lead to a 'spiral of decline' in which these local authorities found it difficult not only to recruit and retain staff, but also to offer placements to trainees due to a lack of supervisory capacity.

## Satisfaction with the training delivery model

The previous sub-section discussed the key factors trainees considered when making decisions about where to train. This sub-section looks at the way training is delivered and how this affects the educational psychology workforce.

Overall, the majority of EPs who took part in the surveys held a positive view of the EP training model. As Figure 4 shows, 61% of respondents thought that the training model in its current form works 'very' or 'quite' well, while 24% thought that it did not work very well or did not work well at all.

**Figure 4 Do you think the Educational Psychology training model in its current form works well?**



Source: EP survey Trainees and current qualified EPs, n=831, PEP survey n=66

When asked what was working well in the training model, the content and delivery methods were most commonly highlighted by respondents.

The variety of work offered in different placement settings was noted by respondents as a positive aspect of the training model, although some commented that it was becoming more difficult for local authorities to offer placements due to a lack of supervisory capacity. Respondents also reflected that there could be some variation in quality between placements and that the cost of travelling to placements could be high for some. Respondents noted that there was also an overall lack of EP training places.

Respondents believed that the availability of bursaries for doctoral training was a good feature of the current training model, and that this helps to promote diversity in the profession. However, the perceived low level of the bursary was the most commonly reported reason respondents gave for thinking that the training model did not work well. This was also most frequently mentioned as the area that respondents would like to see improved.

Reflecting on the training programme itself, the training providers taking part in the focus group session thought that the doctoral programme delivered good quality training; equipping EPs for the demands of the job through the breadth of knowledge, the integration of theory and practice, and the research skills they acquire. This view was similarly reflected in the comments provided by EPs and PEPs.

The national application system was seen as a valued feature by training providers, although it was less commonly mentioned as either a positive or a negative by trainees, EPs or PEPs. The programme also attracts a large number of suitable applications indicating a strong interest in the programme.

The programme was described by one participant as a 'complex system' as training providers need to work in partnership with local authorities to secure placements for years 2 and 3 yet the process was thought to be 'surprisingly successful.' However, securing placements required considerable professional time from training providers and PEPs. It also introduced an element of instability, due to training providers being reliant on local authority co-operation.

Training providers, trainees, EPs and PEPs all thought that the programme was not working as well as it could be in terms of geographical location of training programmes as those living on the outskirts of a region may have to travel quite far to the nearest training provider. This adds to the overall cost of training, particularly given the rising cost of living. One participant noted a 'a big mismatch' between the interest of suitable applicants within the area and the number of funded training places and/or the number of placements local authorities could offer. Some areas had benefitted more from the recent expansion of training places than others because local authorities were in a position to offer placements.

Training providers asserted that they are conscious of the need for the profession to match the diversity of the communities within which they work. Funding has an impact on diversity as typically trainees were reported to rely on other sources of funding, be it savings, part-time job(s) or financial support from relatives or partners, in addition to their bursary or employment in years 2 and 3. The training providers thought that this made it harder for working parents, those from lower socio-economic groups or first generation students, in particular, to commit to the training programme. As will be seen later in this report, this view was strongly supported by EPs and PEPs.

## Funding of placements

Overall, 94% of current and recent trainees said that they received a bursary while they were on placement and 6% said that they received a salary.

The qualitative research suggested that the local authorities that offered a salary rather than a bursary tended to be clustered together geographically, with agreements between them about whether or not to offer a salary.

As the quotes below illustrate, EP and PEP respondents in the survey had somewhat mixed views on the importance of receiving a salary rather than a bursary. However, a large number highlighted the benefits of being paid a salary in relation to access to mortgages, in-work benefits and employment protection, as well as the overall greater income they said they received.

Bursary is too low. I would prefer local authorities to be obliged to pay TEPs [trainee EPs] on an employment basis on Soulbury pay scale <sup>8</sup>, with a standardised set of terms of conditions to reduce their risk of exploitation - *EP*

I think it is fit for purpose in providing both the taught and research requirements of the doctorate. It is tough to juggle academic and placement demands, but this is not overbearing. I think that TEPs are perhaps better protected by the University providers when a bursary is given, rather than a salary directly from the placement provider - *EP*

Some EPs were in favour of a salaried system of placement funding. This was seen by some PEPs as a way of making their service more attractive to trainees as somewhere to do a placement and, hopefully, to subsequently work. Other stakeholders and some training providers were less in favour. This had been a topic of discussion amongst training providers, with the lead of one consortium of providers reporting that as a group they collectively preferred a bursary system to a salaried one, as they regarded the bursary as more efficient and cost effective. They also perceived bursaries to be more consistent with student status and believed that bursaries ensured that placement experiences were aligned with training provider, HCPC and BPS standards.

However, the level of the year 1 bursary is currently a particular concern for training providers due to the rising cost of living and trainees reported that they were experiencing difficulties managing costs, even with a carefully planned budget, without having to take on a part-time job. Training providers expressed a wish to find a solution

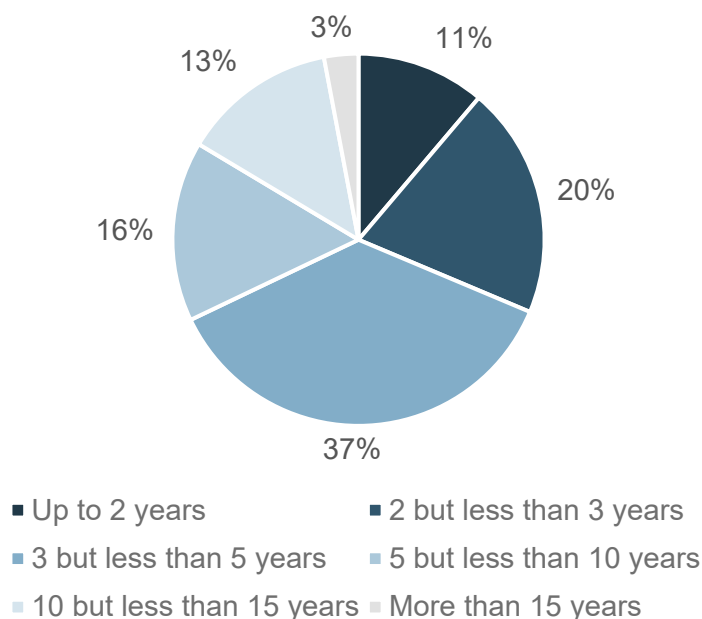
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<sup>8</sup> The Soulbury pay scale is the national pay scale for EPs. More information can be found at: <https://www.aep.org.uk/support/soulbury-payscales-202122>

similar to an uplift on a different funding programme. Meanwhile some local authorities running placements for years 2 and 3 have offered or are working to offer a bursary increase, but the research uncovered no consistent practice in this.

As Figure 5 demonstrates, Educational Psychology is a profession that people usually enter after being in employment for some time, which may have implications for how they view the level of the bursary.

**Figure 5 Time spent in previous career before starting training**



Source: EP survey Trainees and EPs who completed a doctorate in the past 5 years n=436

The median time spent in previous employment before starting training was at least 3 but less than 5 years, but 32% had been working for longer than this. The two most common jobs held by respondents before they started training were Assistant Educational Psychologist and teacher, while a minority came from other health and social care professions.

Respondents who had previously been Assistant EPs or teachers faced somewhat different issues in relation to funding. For teachers, deciding to retrain could bring with it a large drop in income, particularly as these respondents tended to have a longer career history than those coming from other professions, although this did give some respondents the opportunity to save in preparation. To an extent, the Assistant EPs faced the same issues, as many of them had moved from a career outside educational psychology into a relatively low-paying role as an Assistant EP, prior to starting their doctoral training. However, unlike those who had been teachers, those moving from an Assistant EP role into training had limited ability to save in preparation for the time they would spend training, due to their previous lower income.

I am financially dependent on my partner at the moment due to the cost of living crisis. I am fortunate, but if I was single I would be struggling at the moment and may have had to discontinue training. Travel is incredibly expensive and time consuming. More universities across the country should offer the course. Moreover, it should be funded at a higher level and trainees should be treated as employees so that sick pay or maternity leave is possible. Pay for trainees (and post qualifying) ought to be more competitive than teaching, as many teachers may just continue to teach because their wage is higher - I took a considerable pay cut to train - *Trainee EP*

As a parent, going from a teaching salary to a TEP bursary was a big pay decrease and quite a risk. People later in their life/careers have more to lose and, often, more depending on them and their income than those younger/earlier in their career. I know SENCOs [Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator] that would like to be EPs but the drop from a senior teaching wage is too great. I'm not sure whether demographics on courses reflect the wider population or the populations of schools they serve - *EP*

## **The effect of training experiences on career decisions**

The majority of placements undertaken by trainees were with local authorities. The location of placements in local authorities is important, as over half of the trainees who responded to the survey (54%) said that they hoped to work, once qualified, in the local authority where they did their placements, while 21% said that they did not and 22% said that they had no preference. These aspirations seem to broadly accord with the reality of the EP job market, as 43% of qualified EPs stated that they had, at some point, worked in the local authority where they did their placement and 38% said that they had been employed by an organisation where they did a placement. Just under half (48%) of recent trainees said that their placement experience affected the type of employment they decided to go into, while 42% said it did not and 10% were unsure. Overall, it appears that a large proportion of trainees have a preference for remaining in the local authority where they did their placement and those who want to do this are able to. This suggests that it is possible in some areas to create a pipeline from training into employment in a particular local authority, but that local authorities that do not take any trainees on placement may face difficulties when they need to recruit qualified EPs.

## Recruitment and retention

### Key findings

The majority of local authority PEPs (88%) reported that they were experiencing difficulties recruiting staff and that this was a consistent issue. PEPs most commonly attributed these difficulties to a general lack of applicants, which they related to an overall shortage of EPs being trained, the existence of alternative sources of employment, including with private providers of EP services, and negative perceptions of local authority work.

Increased demand for EHCPs was perceived by PEPs and EPs as creating capacity issues in the system. They suggested that a vicious cycle existed in which EPs lacked capacity to engage in early intervention and advisory work. They were unable to do this work because statutory assessment took up so much of their time. As a result of being unable to do this work, the needs of children and young people escalated, and could no longer be resolved by early intervention work, leading to EHCPs being required.

Overall, 34% of local authority PEPs reported that they were experiencing retention issues. Respondents suggested that this was related to the high proportion of time EPs were spending on statutory work and the opportunity to do more varied work in private practice.

Solutions to these recruitment and retention issues that were suggested by PEPs included 'growing your own' EP workforce in which local authorities create a pipeline incorporating Assistant EPs, who become trainee EPs and then eventually take up employment in the local authority once they are qualified. Other solutions included using locums and joined up working between local authorities. While increasing the number of EPs being trained may address some of the supply side issues being experienced by local authorities, this is unlikely to be a sustainable solution and there may be a need to also address demand side issues related to the number of EHCPs.

Having examined [routes into the profession](#), this section examines recruitment and retention of qualified EPs and the different factors that promote or hinder these practices. In each sub-section, the extent of the issues faced is outlined, followed by a discussion of the processes that underpin and contribute to the development of these issues. Finally, this section outlines some of the ways in which Local Authorities have sought to address this.

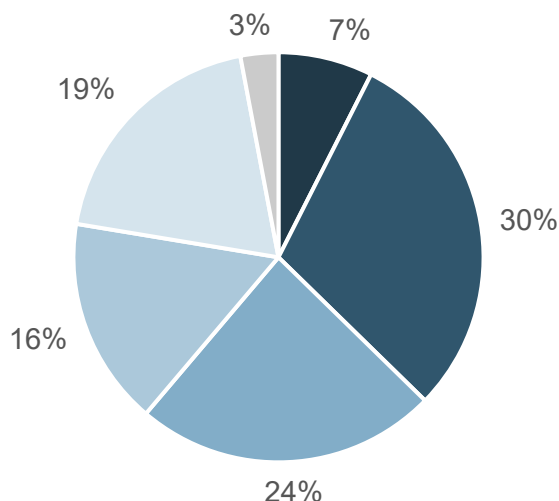


## Recruitment

### Changes in the number of EPs in local authorities

In total, 37% of local authorities had seen EP staff numbers increase since 2019, but 35% had seen staff numbers fall.

**Figure 6 Change in FTE EP numbers since 2019**



- Increased a lot (for example, by more than 25%)
- Increased a bit (for example, the workforce has increased by less than 25%)
- Stayed about the same
- Decreased a bit (for example, the workforce has decreased by less than 25%)
- Decreased a lot (for example, by more than 25%)
- Don't know

Source: PEP survey, n=66

This suggests that while there is outflow from the profession, another reason for recruitment and retention issues in some areas may be movement between local authorities. Participants suggested that local authorities with more preferable conditions were able to draw staff away from local authorities where workloads and workforce strategies are regarded less favourably, increasing competition between local authorities.

There is a continuous cycle of services locally competing with each other to offer better conditions (such as a more diverse range of work and reduced workloads) following their own near collapse and recruitment issues that then led to more attention to this. This draws people from other services, increases demand there and they then are in trouble. Then they restructure and the cycle continues - *PEP*

EPs have left to take up preferential working arrangements elsewhere, for example neighbouring authorities with significantly

more leave or to work privately as an Associate EP for the same salary but fewer hours. In addition, some EPs have opted not to continue onto retirement age but to work as an Associate as an alternative - *PEP*

Where local authorities were looking to recruit, the most common reasons given by PEPs was to meet increased workloads, particularly the increased amount of statutory work, although some also mentioned an increase in traded services which increased demand and commissioned work. Backfilling of posts that had been vacant for some time also accounted for the increase in some local authorities.

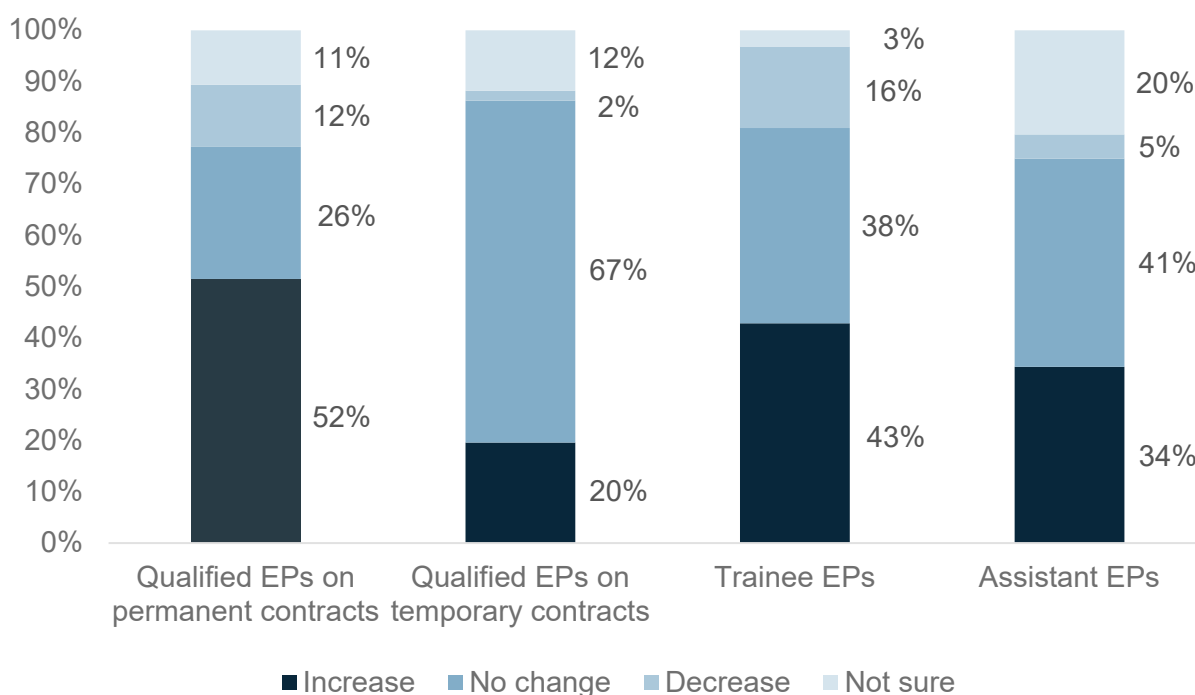
Local authorities that had experienced a decrease in FTE numbers attributed this to a range of factors, most commonly retirement, EPs reducing their hours for family reasons, and EPs moving either partially or completely into private practice.

EPs reducing hours after having children, as well as others leaving the service for private practice - *PEP*

Retirement, staff reducing hours for family reasons such as having children so going part time, leaving local authority work to go into private practice - *PEP*

Figure 7 shows how PEPs anticipated that their workforce would change over the next one to three years.

**Figure 7 Anticipated change in EP staff numbers**



Source: PEP survey, n=67

As the Figure shows, just over half (52%) of PEPs anticipated increasing their number of qualified EPs on permanent contracts, with over two thirds (67%) anticipating that their number of qualified EPs on temporary contracts would stay the same. Findings on trainee EP numbers were mixed. Almost 20% of PEPs said that they anticipated taking fewer trainees, but 43% of PEPs said that they anticipated taking more trainees.

### Extent of recruitment issues

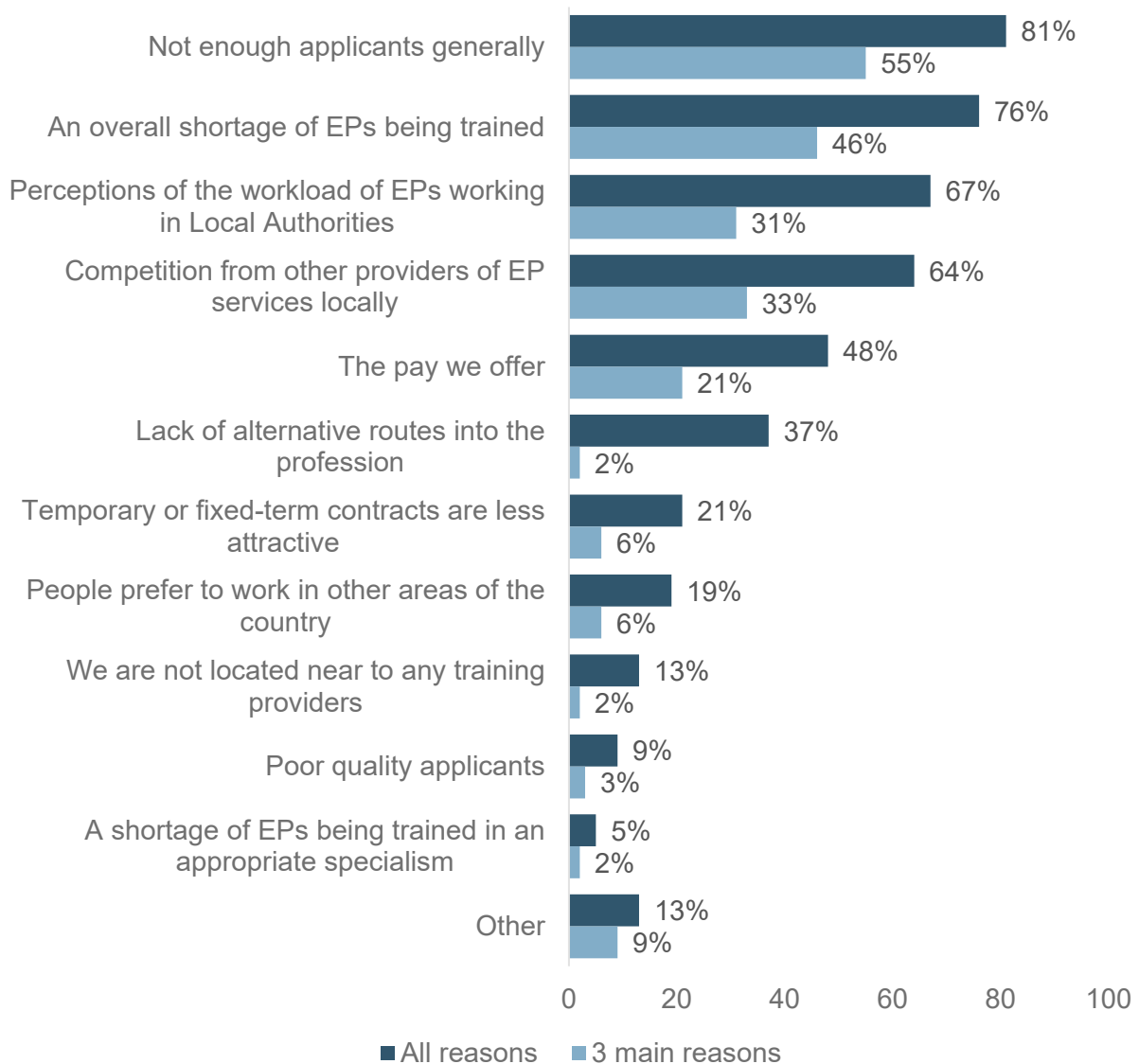
Overall, 88% of PEPs working in local authorities said that they were experiencing difficulties recruiting staff, 11% said that they were not experiencing difficulties and 2% said that they did not know as they were not currently recruiting. Local authorities that indicated that they were experiencing difficulties were asked if they consistently experienced difficulties recruiting, and more than three quarters (77%) stated that they did. Of those currently experiencing recruitment difficulties, 20% stated that they did not usually experience difficulties and 4% did not know.

### Reasons for recruitment issues

Figure 8 shows all the reasons (chosen from a list of potential reasons) and the three main reasons given by PEPs for the difficulties they had with recruitment. The two most frequently selected reasons relate to capacity issues within the system – there are not enough applicants and there are not enough EPs being trained. The next three, perceptions of workload, competition from other providers, and pay, all relate to how the

job itself is organised and the conditions associated with educational psychology work. The lack of alternative routes into the profession was commonly mentioned as a reason, but not as one of the main reasons for current recruitment issues. This is discussed further later in this report.

**Figure 8 Reasons Local Authorities were experiencing difficulty recruiting**



Source: PEP survey, n=52. Respondents were asked to select all the reasons they were experiencing difficulties and then select up to three of the most important reasons.

Despite location being identified as a strong motivating factor in decision-making on training and placement by EPs, the two location-related reasons for recruitment issues, a preference to work in other parts of the country and the local authority not being located near to any training providers, were less frequently mentioned by PEPs as being key issues.

## Capacity issues in the system

Demand for EP services has largely been driven by the increase in demand for EHCPs. A commonly held view amongst EPs, PEPs and other stakeholders was that there is not enough capacity in the system to meet these demands.

Just 20% of PEPs and EPs said that they were “always” able to meet the necessary timescales for (statutory) EHCP work, 39% said that they were able to meet the necessary timescales “most of the time”, 25% said that they were “sometimes” able to and 15% said that they were “rarely or never able” to<sup>9</sup>.

PEPs suggested that this increase in demand for statutory assessment had arisen from two main factors. Firstly, EHCPs were increasingly seen as an entrance point for accessing other services. There was evidence in the accounts provided by PEPs and EPs that a vicious cycle had emerged in which demand for formal EHCPs had reduced the time EPs had available to engage in early intervention work, and in training and advising schools to support pupils before their needs became so great that formal intervention in the form of an EHCP was necessary. As a result, needs that could have been addressed through less formal support mechanisms escalated to the point that an EHCP assessment was requested. The time that EPs then spent on these assessments further reduced their capacity to undertake early intervention work and training in schools.

The increase in EHCPs is like a sink overflowing and EP time being spent mopping up the floor rather than (...) working on turning the taps off decreasing the flow or increasing the capacity of the sink -  
*PEP*

At the moment I don't feel like we are making much of an impact. Schools and parents see us as gatekeepers for EHC [plan]s and funding. I don't feel that our reports are valued for how much time and effort goes into them. Children are being excluded from school but the only way schools can access us is by waiting until it gets so bad that they apply for EHC [plan]s. The system is entirely broken. -  
*EP*

Secondly, PEPs noted a general increase in awareness around neurodiversity and additional needs, specifically autism and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD),

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<sup>9</sup> For further information on EHCP timescales see: [Education, health and care plans, Reporting year 2022 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/explore-education-statistics) This data shows that the proportion of EHCPs issued within the 20 week time limit consistently hovered around 60% between the 2015 and 2021 calendar years. In 2021, there was considerable variation between local authorities, with 18% of local authorities issuing more than 90% of EHCPs within the 20 week time limit but 11% issuing less than 30% within the same time limit.

but they also noted that there was a lack of resources to provide support for these needs. This led to an increase in requests for EHCPs to access support. PEPs also noted that there had been a general increase in the pressures children were facing in schools and in their lives more generally. While the disruption associated with the COVID-19 pandemic had clearly had an impact, PEPs discussing this issue agreed that this increase in requests for EHCPs was a long-standing issue that pre-dated the pandemic.

There are three main ways in which local authorities have sought to address the capacity issue:

- by trying to increase the number of qualified EPs that they employ;
- by trying to increase the number of Assistant EPs and trainee EPs, they employ; and
- by focussing on making their own local authority an attractive employer, allowing them to attract and retain EPs from the limited number available.

These solutions all broadly focus on addressing supply-side issues within the system. As will be seen later in this report, this may not be the most effective way of addressing these capacity issues, but they may be the most immediate mechanisms within the control of the local authorities.

Capacity issues appear at different levels in the workforce. While PEPs consistently agreed that there was a simple lack of EPs at all levels, particular issues were identified by some PEPs in recruiting more experienced staff.

The most commonly mentioned issue in relation to recruitment of more experienced staff was the relative attractiveness of work in private practice. Private practice was often seen as providing better paid work, an opportunity to work fewer hours, and offering a greater variety of work with less emphasis on statutory work. This is discussed further in the next sub-section.

As the following quote shows, many EPs thought that demand for EP training outstripped the number of funded EP course places and, consequently, that there would be no issues in filling any additional course places if they were created to help meet the additional demand for qualified EPs.

The EP doctorate course is massively oversubscribed, 18-1 places are allocated. There should be some scope for increasing those allocations for a few years. Also looking at where EP training courses can increase places depending on need - *EP*

## **Job organisation and working conditions**

As [noted above](#), negative perceptions about local authority working were a key factor contributing to recruitment challenges. This includes the workload of EPs in local authorities, their pay, and, related to both of these, the relative attractiveness of other

employers of EPs, in particular private providers. The exit of EPs into private practice was also regarded by local authority PEPs as exacerbating the existing capacity issues in local authorities.

A vicious cycle can be seen as the exit of EPs to private practice, or a reduction in their hours, reduces the capacity in local authorities. This in turn means that in some local authorities, a smaller number of staff are working to meet a higher level of need, particularly in relation to statutory work. This means that a greater proportion of their time is spent on this, reducing the diversity of their work and increasing EPs' perception that their skills are under-utilised. As a result, work in these local authorities is seen as being less attractive and, consequently, they have difficulty recruiting the staff numbers necessary to remedy this situation.

The main reason is the lack of ability to undertake any work other than statutory work. EPs find themselves (due to the sheer volume and limited range of statutory work) unable to utilise their wide skill set. Private work with its flexibility, better pay and choice is attracting more and more EPs to leave local authority work. - *PEP*

It's very difficult to recruit EPs and it's a national shortage. But actually if you develop a reputation as a service for being very statutory focus[ed], then fewer EPs are attracted to come and work for you. (...) If you're an authority where you don't see change coming, all I'm ever gonna do is statutory work, even with a really, really supportive EPS manager, that's gonna be an issue - *PEP*

It should be noted that there is potential for the private provider network to operate in a way that is complementary to the existing work of local authorities. As will be seen later in this section, some local authorities have been able to develop ongoing partnerships and working relationships with private providers that have allowed them to address capacity and work organisation issues in a strategic way. However, a commonly held opinion amongst PEPs was that it was increasingly difficult to develop longer-term strategies to address both recruitment and retention issues. PEPs believed that this was in part because of the overriding lack of capacity in the system that would still exist if no EPs worked in private practice. It was also because they were increasingly forced to take a reactive, 'fire-fighting' approach to address immediate demands and issues, leaving them little time or other capacity to develop and enact longer-term strategic plans.

Similar issues were identified in developing a strategy to recruit trainees. While the increase in trainee numbers was welcomed by PEPs and other stakeholders, this strategy of increasing workforce capacity to improve working conditions and workloads came with a substantial, but necessary, time-lag due to the need for people to first complete doctoral training. Some PEPs also noted that as EPs preferred to work in local

authorities where they had done their placement, local authorities that were able to offer placements were most likely to be able to recruit qualified EPs.

The only way we can recruit is through the trainees that come to us through the universities, which again, like [two other FG participants] said, it's just not sustainable. Now I'm gonna put two jobs out that will be filled by year two trainees, so I don't get the capacity until after I need it - *PEP*

Aside from the nature and volume of the work in local authorities, pay was selected by just under half (48%) of PEPs as a reason they experienced recruitment issues. PEPs suggested that there were three ways in which pay levels affected recruitment of qualified EPs in local authorities.

Firstly, as has been discussed above, pay levels were generally thought to be higher amongst EPs working in private practice.

Secondly, pay levels were seen as being less attractive than those in comparable professions, in particular in Clinical Psychology. This was seen across EP careers, with respondents noting that trainee Clinical Psychologists received a higher level of financial support when they were training, and that Clinical Psychologists earned more when they were qualified. Given the high level of demand for places on Educational Psychology doctoral programmes, it is not clear that this has a direct impact on the size and nature of the EP workforce, but it appeared to make some EPs think negatively about their pay levels.

The third area in which PEPs noted that pay could have an impact was in relation to cost of living differentials in different parts of the country. While a small number of local authority PEPs commented that there were budgetary issues in their local authority, a more commonly mentioned issue related to the Soulbury pay scale<sup>10</sup>. PEPs commented on the difficulties associated with the lack of flexibility that comes with using a national pay scale and how this relates to the cost of living in different geographical areas and their ability to use pay as a driver to promote recruitment. They also commented on the variability of where EPs and in particular Assistant EPs, were placed on the scale.

Salary amount - I am looking to progress but Senior positions are often the same (or even less) money than I am on currently and involve a longer commute. For most SEP roles advertised, I would be worse off financially than I am current as a main grade - *EP*

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<sup>10</sup> The Soulbury pay scale is the national pay scale for EPs. More information can be found at: <https://www.aep.org.uk/support/soulbury-payscales-202122>



As has been noted, issues affecting recruitment also tended to affect retention.

## **Barriers faced by Educational Psychologists in finding the kind of work that they want**

EPs were asked about barriers people generally faced in finding the sort of work they wanted in educational psychology and then whether they had personally experienced any barriers. As would be expected, given the relatively high levels of recruitment occurring, the difficulties local authorities were experiencing in recruiting staff and the option to move into private practice, the majority (61%) said that they had not personally experienced any barriers, while 31% said that they had and 8% were not sure.

The two most commonly cited barriers EPs thought people generally faced were related to being able to do an educational psychology doctorate and a disjuncture between the kind of work that they wanted to do and the kind of work that was being offered by local authorities.

The barriers related to the educational psychology doctorate were largely related to access. This was discussed in the [section on training](#).

EPs were also asked whether they had personally experienced any barriers to finding the type of work they would like. In this context, availability of the type of work that they wanted to do was the most commonly mentioned barrier.

There are plenty of EP jobs out there. However, what I am finding is: our work is currently more reactive and less preventative, constantly working with extremely complex/ situations (much higher complexity and more frequent than previously), increased work demands, the feeling of being gatekeepers more than ever, constant changes to the way we work, not enough time for admin duties, etc. - *EP*

I don't want to just be a statutory writing machine I want more of a balance - *EP*

I would like to do more early intervention, but because of the demands of statutory work I can't - *EP*

A lack of flexible working for EPs with children or other family commitments was also noted by some EPs. A lack of opportunities for progression or to develop specialisms was also mentioned.

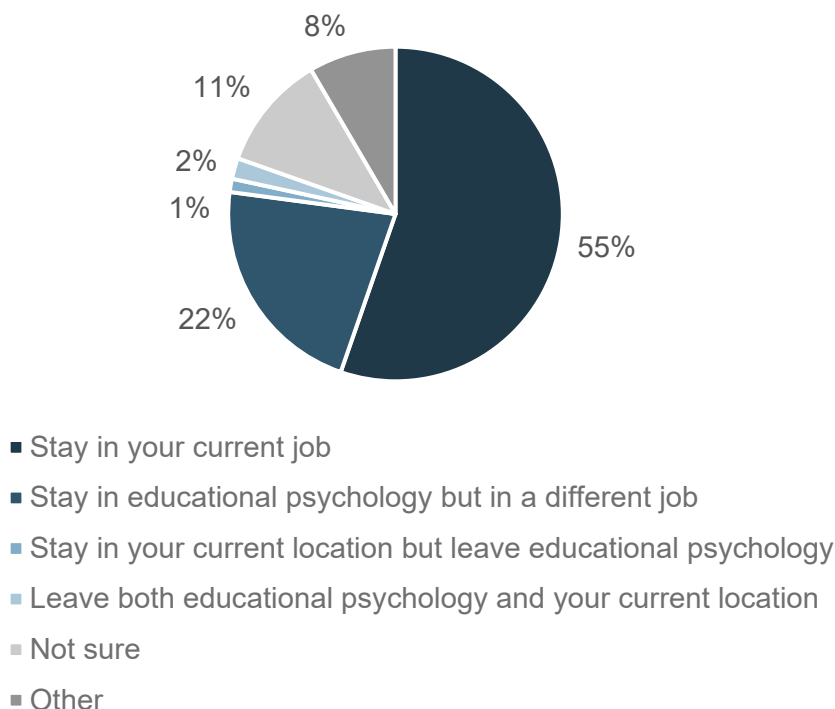
## Retention

### Extent of retention issues

Over a third (34%) of PEPs reported that they were experiencing difficulties retaining staff.

EPs were asked about their short and longer-term career plans. As Figure 9 shows, more than half (55%) anticipated remaining in their current job in the short-term, but just under a quarter (22%) anticipated moving to a different job in educational psychology, while 3% anticipated leaving the profession. There was a relatively high degree of uncertainty around career plans, with 11% saying that they were not sure what they planned to do over the next one to two years, and 8% giving 'other' reasons. These other reasons were largely aspirations to decrease their working hours in their current main job, but not to leave completely, while also taking on an additional job, often in private practice.

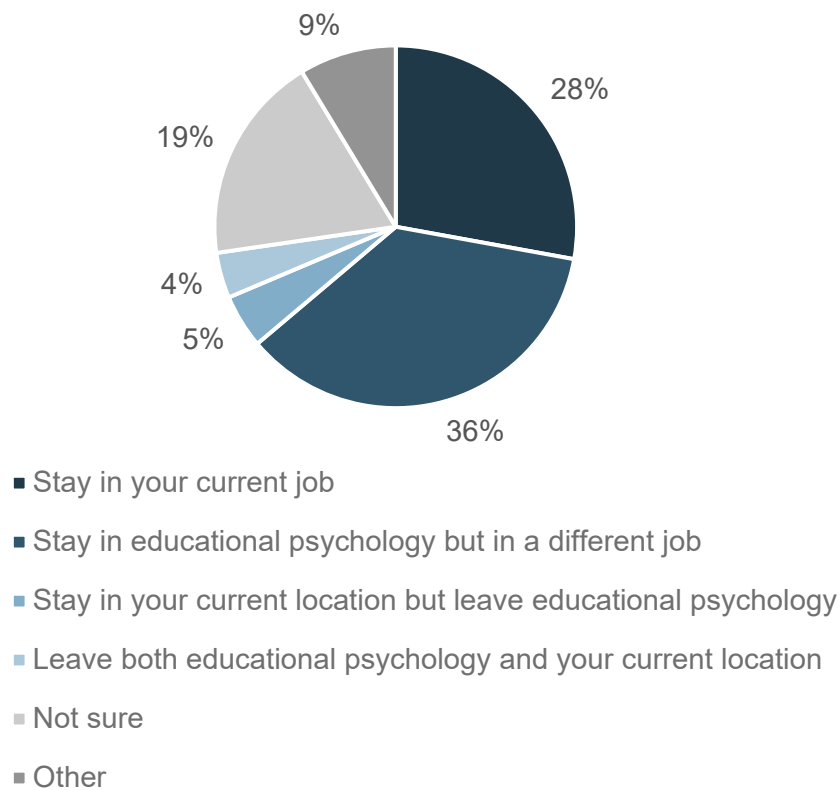
**Figure 9 Career plans of Educational Psychologists over the next one to two years**



Source: EP survey Trainees and current qualified EPs, n=837

Figure 10 shows the longer-term career plans of the Educational Psychologists surveyed. While anticipated outflow from the profession remains relatively low (9% anticipate leaving the profession), movement between jobs is anticipated to be fairly high. Just 28% anticipate that they will remain in their current job in the longer term, that is, beyond three years, while 36% anticipate remaining in educational psychology but in a different job. Almost one in five (19%) are unsure about their longer-term future.

**Figure 10 Longer-term career plans of Educational Psychologists**



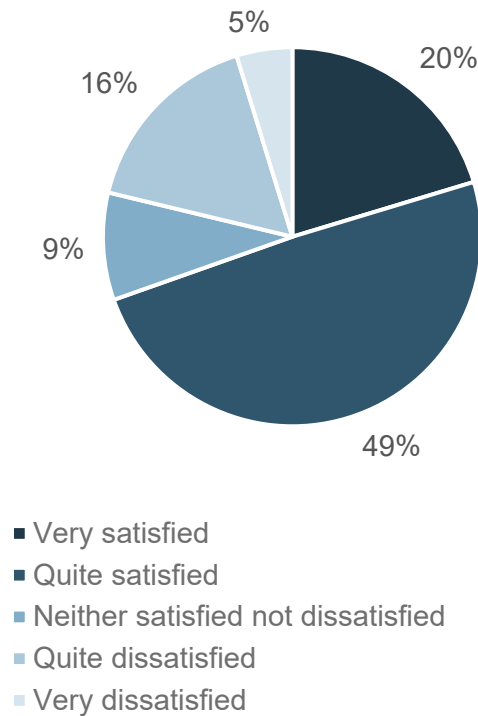
Source: EP survey Trainees and current qualified EPs, n=837

### Reasons for retention issues

The reasons PEPs to explain retention issues were largely similar to those they gave to explain recruitment issues. These mainly focussed on the inter-relationship between capacity issues, workloads and tasks.

As Figure 11 shows, there was a relatively high level of satisfaction with their current job amongst EPs, with 69% saying that they were either 'very' or 'quite' satisfied with their current job.

**Figure 11 Educational Psychologists' satisfaction with their current job**



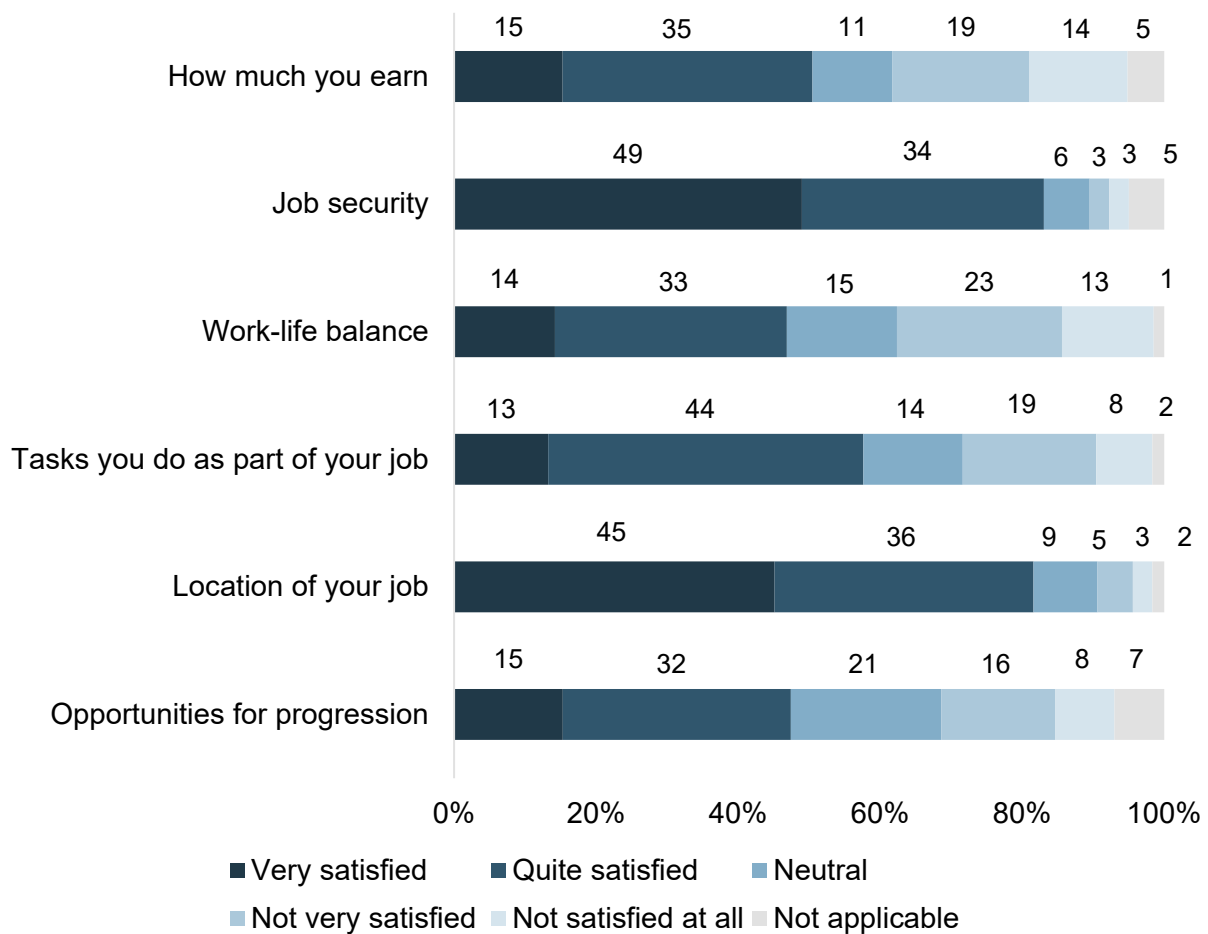
Source: EP survey Trainees and current qualified EPs, n=921

EPs were also asked about their satisfaction with different aspects of their job. As Figure 12 shows, there were high levels of satisfaction with job security (83% being 'very' or 'quite' satisfied) and the location of the job (82% very or quite satisfied). Less than half (47%) said they were 'very' or 'quite' satisfied with their work-life balance and their opportunities for progression (also 47%), and half (50%) said that they were 'very' or 'quite' satisfied with how much they earned.

Good income once qualified, well respected, lots of statutory work available makes the role feel more secure around not being made redundant - EP

I think it remains an attractive option in terms of job security (that is, a job likely to be available at the end of the training due to the shortage of EPs) and it is an interesting role which enables people to apply psychology and make a difference - EP

**Figure 12 Educational Psychologists' satisfaction with aspects of their job**



Source: EP survey Trainees and current qualified EPs, n=921

### Work composition

The proportion of EPs who said that they were satisfied with the tasks they did as part of their job was 58%.

Despite this fairly high level of satisfaction with the nature of their work, when EPs were asked about why they were dissatisfied with their job and about their views on the desirability of the profession (discussed later), by far the most commonly mentioned area of dissatisfaction related to the amount of statutory work EPs were being asked to perform.

For some EPs, this simply made the work less interesting, because of the repetitive nature of the tasks they were doing, and they felt over-worked.

It's tedious - same thing, day in day out. Most of my colleagues have left so we are at staffing capacity of 45%. No opportunities for systemic work, early intervention, 1:1 work with children, training. When we do have CPD, we don't have an opportunity to utilise new

learning or knowledge. Just EHC advices to write. Under pressure, constantly - *EP*

Others expressed concerns about the impact they were able to have on the lives of children and young people, and their inability to maintain the kinds of ongoing relationships that would allow them to understand the impact that they were having.

Because a lot of people come into Ed Psychology to help people and sometimes it can just feel like a carousel of statutory with no real relationships being formed and no idea of how our involvement helped - *EP*

High levels of statutory work increased stress levels which impacted morale. This pressure relates to both the volume of EHCP work and the need for EHC plans to be delivered within the required time period.

It's really adversely affecting the wellbeing of our service because we have people going off sick long term. And one of the reasons that their fit note says is work related stress because professionally we can't get our advice in on time. We say to the EPs just do the best you can - *PEP*

Some PEPs also noticed that staff go part-time to tend to their wellbeing, which reduced the capacity of the workforce further.

## **Competition from other providers of EP services**

The impact of declining satisfaction in the composition of EP work appears to be interlinked with growth in alternative opportunities for employment in Educational Psychology. There was a perception amongst PEPs and EPs that private practice had expanded and that this meant that if an EP is dissatisfied, they have somewhere else to go. As has been noted before, while private providers generally can be seen as 'competitors' in the sense that they provide an alternative source of employment to local authorities, the relationship between private providers and local authorities is not necessarily, or even most commonly, a competitive one. There are numerous examples of local authority work and private work co-existing and complementing each other to produce a holistic, diverse set of responses to the needs of children and young people and schools.

Overall, 24% of PEPs working in local authorities said that they outsourced work to private providers and 76% of PEPs in local authorities said that some of their staff also worked as private EPs. Of those EPs working in private practice, 48% said that they did not anticipate ever returning to local authority work, although 29% said that they thought they would and 23% were not sure.

This move into private practice particularly affects retention of more experienced staff. Of the EPs in the survey who were working in private practice, 89% said that they had worked in a local authority at some point in their careers, with 74% having worked in a local authority for more than five years before they moved, either wholly or partly, into private practice.

EPs who were working either partly or wholly privately were asked why they had chosen to work as a private EP. The most common reasons given were the opportunity to do more diverse work, flexibility, pay levels, and work-life balance, the latter particularly for EPs with children or other family commitments. As Figure 12 showed, all of these are aspects of the job that EPs rated relatively poorly when asked about job satisfaction.

Because [in local authority employment] I wasn't able to practice as the EP that I wanted to be and to apply my knowledge and skills to support children, young people and adults. I was only doing statutory and tribunal work and it was having an impact on my enjoyment of the role and my mental health - *EP working in private practice*

The workload is high [in local authority employment] the job is monotonous, there is very low morale, a high focus on EHCPs and tribunal work, private work is more appealing and pays well (I already also work as an associate) - *EP working partly in private practice*

These views were echoed by PEPs and EPs who had not moved into private practice themselves, but who saw this as something EPs might do due to dissatisfaction with work organisation and pay in local authorities.

Because literally all we do is statutory assessments. The workload is unmanageable. There is no obvious way out of this situation apart from working in private practice - *EP*

If a person is looking for a high salary then private EP work is very lucrative - *PEP*

Private practice was also perceived to offer greater opportunities for career progression, particularly for EPs seeking specialist roles.

Work composition and the relative attractiveness of educational psychology work outside local authorities were mentioned consistently by PEPs and EPs across a range of local authorities. Other retention issues were more local authority-specific. These included: the costs faced by EPs needing to travel across local authorities covering large geographical areas; the cost of living in some areas and the potential for EPs to move to areas where cost of living is lower; concerns about job security in local authorities where difficulties

were very obvious; and particular difficulties related to delivery of services during the pandemic.

## Examples of Local Authorities' responses to recruitment and retention issues

Overall, 96% of PEPs working in local authorities that experienced difficulties in recruiting or retaining staff, or both, stated that these difficulties affected outcomes for children and young people requiring support. This section looks at some of the solutions and responses from local authorities to address recruitment and retention issues.

### Addressing recruitment issues

As highlighted, "growing your own" is a key strategy to address recruitment issues and increase capacity to address both demand for EHCPs and demand from EPs for more diverse work. This involves taking on trainees and potentially also Assistant EPs who may return to the local authority after the completion of the doctoral programme, as the following quotes illustrate:

We're gonna have to support trainees, whether we get them or not, somebody's got to do it, otherwise we're not going to get any EP -  
*PEP*

We brought in assistant EPs because of the crisis in recruitment -  
*PEP*

However, not all local authorities are able to fund placements, or have the capacity to supervise trainee EPs. Some local authorities were instead using locums to increase capacity and were building ongoing working relationships with private providers that allowed them to develop a co-ordinated strategic approach to meeting need.

To be able to retain trainees, local authorities want to give trainee EPs a good experience, and this may mean giving non-statutory work to trainees to develop the breadth of their skills, leaving EPs to pick up relatively more of the statutory work, as one PEP noted. Increasing the variety of work to make the local authority a more attractive place to work was another key theme. How this can best be achieved was a matter of much discussion. As an example, one local authority currently only doing statutory work is diversifying its work by working with senior managers at a local authority level who are involved in supporting individuals who are on the verge of exclusion. This brings together a range of professionals and organisations through additional funding.

Another PEP talked about the importance of the work environment and being people-focussed as an employer:



The feedback we've had from trainees and people [who] have joined us is that they liked the feel of our service, they like the relationships and the service. We tried to be very personal centred service. And that seemed to do us in good stead for recruitment and retention. It's not enough to kind of get us through everything, but it seems to be an important factor. And so basically being a decent employer, it's probably part of it - *PEP*.

## Addressing retention issues

Providing more early intervention work, thereby reducing the need for EHCPs further down the line, and providing more diverse work for EPs, was mentioned in the focus groups as a strategy to address both demand and supply-side issues. This was a strategy that had a lot of support, but that was seen as very difficult to implement, as it involved essentially re-setting the system and how local authorities were managing workloads. It could also potentially involve a period of adjustment as a local authority transitioned from one approach to another.

What more can we do to address the shortage of EPs - encourage schools to implement evidence-based interventions at SEN Support, so less EHC plans are needed and less EHC assessments are undertaken, which in turn frees up more EPs to do more early intervention, it's a win-win solution - *PEP*

Other approaches to addressing retention issues focused on providing a supportive working environment and ensuring that staff feel recognised and valued for their contribution, both within their local authority and externally. This included ensuring that schools and other services were aware of the types of work EPs could do, rather than allowing them to be viewed as simply being the providers of statutory assessments. In local authorities where there was a traded offer, this would encourage schools to request more diverse work from EPs, while in other areas it would increase the status of the profession and encourage greater use of EP's skills.

If I knew that my SENCOs really value me and it made a difference to the children and young people and my line manager was praising me for that, I think that would make a big difference. I would feel valued. Recognition, feedback and feeling valued is key - *EP*

It's really important that there are people high up in the local authority that understand the role of EPs, what they can do and the different levels of work they can do and that they value that - *EP*

## Service delivery and demand

### Key findings

The extent to which EPs engaged in statutory and non-statutory work was linked to the model of EP services within their local authority.

The research found inconsistent awareness about EPs' work outside of statutory assessments (particularly around early intervention and systemic work) and evidence to suggest that EPs' role and remit was misunderstood by some professionals and families.

EPs' work across different education settings tended to be broadly similar, particularly across primary and secondary schools. However, there were some key differences between different phases and types of institutions.

EPs' direct work with children, young people and families included EHC needs assessments, parenting support, individual consultations, and delivering interventions.

EPs commonly expressed a preference for working at the education setting or wider system level to deliver consultations, whole-school interventions, and staff training, which they believed could help maximise the impact of their role.

Overall, interviewees reported that EP services were extremely valuable and unique. EPs brought a distinct skill set, expertise, and knowledge to support children and young people.

However, as outlined previously, there was consistent evidence across interviewee

This section summarises key findings from the interview, focus group, and case study data about EP service delivery and demand. It starts by outlining the extent to which the EP role is understood and how EPs work with different education settings.

## Understanding the role of Educational Psychologists

One of the aims of the research was to explore understanding of the EP role and service delivery. Overall, the evidence suggested that there was inconsistent awareness about the wider role of EPs, particularly their work in early intervention and systemic work.

Some EPs, school leaders, multi-agency professionals, and parents/carers reported that EPs were seen as a mechanism for getting specific children and young people an EHCP or access to specific services or provision as part of the EHCP. Examples included parents/carers wanting EP support to access CAMHS or alternative provision (AP) or believing that an EHCP would lead to further EP support. One SENCO said that

parents/carers often considered EPs as a replacement for other services that they had been unable to access:<sup>11</sup>

In quite a lot of cases, [parents/carers] think that the EP is going to come in and wave a magic wand. They sometimes see it as a shortcut instead of going through CAMHS. – *SENCO*

However, understanding of the EP role was broader and more comprehensive when interviewees had greater contact with the EP service. This enabled EPs' expertise and skills in early intervention and systemic work to be recognised and valued. In particular, education settings that had regular contact with named EPs had a much better understanding of the breadth of EPs' support offer.

[The school] had a much better understanding of the work and the depth and breadth of our knowledge because we were meeting regularly and because, I guess, I built up that relationship. I [worked with] the same schools. – *EP*

Within schools, SENCOs appeared to have the best understanding of the EP role and service. Some EPs and school staff noted that often school senior leadership teams and wider staff did not have the same depth of understanding.

SENCOs probably understand our role more than anybody else... I think some headteachers see us as a sort of gateway to a statutory assessment. – *EP*

In some local authorities, EPs had established mechanisms to promote their early intervention and systemic work to education settings. Examples included brochures about the traded support available and promoting early intervention work in school planning meetings:

Through our planning meetings, we're really trying to push that graduated approach, building capacity at that early intervention [level]. And really thinking about how we can support the adults around the young person rather than [schools] necessarily always needing to call us in and as a kind of a 'firefighting fix, this individual child model' but more of a 'empowering those adults who know the child best' to build their capacity to work with the young people. – *EP*

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<sup>11</sup> The work EPs do with CAMHS, and wider services understanding of the EP role, is discussed further in [Educational Psychology and the wider children and family services landscape](#).

In contrast, some EPs felt that they did not know how to advertise and showcase the breadth of their skills and services in their local area.

### **EPs' presence in the community**

In one case study, EPs, staff within educational settings, parents/carers and multi-agency professionals believed that the EP service had a 'strong identity' within the community. They explained that the EP service worked closely with local multi-agency services and facilitated various networking opportunities for education settings. Most education settings in this local authority were therefore familiar with the EP service and the breadth of its support offer compared to other local authorities where the EP services were less embedded in the community.

Of the children and young people interviewed, most were unclear about the role or purpose of the EPs they had met. EPs and school staff explained that children and young people often had limited contact with EPs, so it was difficult for them to understand the role. Furthermore, where children and young people had contact with multiple services and professionals, they tended not to distinguish between different services or roles.

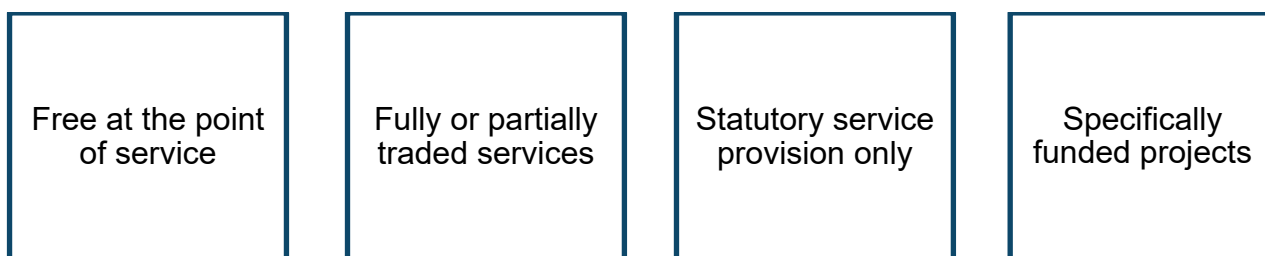
## **Balance of Educational Psychologists' work**

One of the aims of the research was to understand more about the statutory and non-statutory work of EPs. This section outlines evidence from the case studies, interviews and focus groups which suggested that the extent to which EPs engaged in statutory and non-statutory work was influenced by the model of funding for EP services within their local authority.

### **EP services' funding models for educational settings**

EP support to schools and wider education settings was funded in different ways by different local authorities, as summarised in Figure 13. The influence of these funding models on EP services is discussed in this section.

**Figure 13 Different local authority funding mechanisms of EP services**



Schools and wider education settings could also pay for EP support directly through private or local authority EP services using school budgets.

### **Free at the point of service**

EPs often said their local authorities provided free consultations to schools. The extent of the consultation offer varied between local authorities, with some offering a defined number of EP hours to schools, which schools could use flexibly, whereas others offered a quota of consultations per term.

Beyond this, some local authorities provided further funding for the EPs to facilitate wider local priorities, such as reducing Emotional-Based School Avoidance (EBSA) and school exclusions, formal opportunities to signpost to other services, or responding to critical incidents.

### **Fully or partially traded services**

In a traded model, schools paid for local authority EP support. Examples included being given a time-allocation, pay-per-activity, or tiered packages of support.<sup>12</sup>

In traded models, some schools bought packages of support at the beginning of an academic year or on a termly basis. In some local authorities, EPs and school staff valued the flexibility of the traded offer as it enabled them to adjust the package of support throughout the school year depending on their needs. This flexibility was not offered consistently in all local authorities that adopted a traded model.

Interviewees highlighted some challenges with the traded model. These included:

- ensuring the right people were involved in agreeing the EP support individual schools needed; this appeared to work well when the SENCO and EP agreed the support rather than, for example, school leaders and PEPs making arrangements at the start of the academic year when the level and type of needs were yet unknown;
- difficulties with EPs adapting and taking on new requests throughout the school year due to demand on EP services and inequity between different education settings as some were able to afford more intensive packages of support compared to others (due to other budget priorities);
- EPs believed the model could sometimes encourage schools to focus on activities rather than outcomes for children and young people;

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<sup>12</sup> In a time-allocation model, schools may pay for a set number of hours of EP time that could be used for a range of activities. In a 'tiered' model, schools paid for different levels of EP support. In a pay-per-activity model, the EP services had a 'menu' of activities that schools paid for, such as training, individual casework, and consultations.

- a small number of EPs described the model as a marketisation of their service to generate income rather than focusing on creating impact for children and young people.

### **Statutory service provision only**

As a minimum, some local authorities commissioned the EP service to meet statutory duties related to EHC needs assessments. In some cases, it was the only way EPs worked with schools, either through the local authority EP service or by paying for private EPs. Some EPs gave examples of local authorities that had entirely outsourced their EP service to private EPs, resulting in schools having no access to local authority EP services.<sup>13</sup>

### **Specifically funded projects**

EPs, schools, and multi-agency professionals gave examples of EP activities that had been funded through central government programmes, either directly or indirectly through the local authority. Examples included ring-fenced funding for EPs to dedicate time each week to help reduce youth violence or to provide support to refugee families. These funding streams enabled EPs to work with specific educational settings to support children, young people and families with specific risk factors or needs.

### **Private EPs**

As discussed previously, schools and wider education settings can pay for private EP support. Examples included using private EPs to input into requests for EHC needs assessments, working directly with children and young people, and (although less common) consulting on individual children and young people. School staff frequently said they had used private EP time due to the constraints around accessing local authority EPs, particularly on providing evidence for a request for an EHC needs assessment.

School staff reported several challenges associated with working with private EPs. Firstly, private EP support was not seen as cost-effective for schools, however one SENCO explained that employing a private EP was cheaper per hour than their local authority's EP hourly rate (through a traded model). Secondly, some interviewees believed that local authority employed EPs produced higher quality reports because they had a deeper understanding of the context of the school or family.

Often there's been things that have been written in plans [by private EPs] that are inaccurate that I've had to then go back to our service and...ask them to rectify. .... It probably works better when it's not a

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<sup>13</sup> Schools may access EPs outside of the local authority EP service. For example, by paying for private EPs or by accessing EPs funded through central government or other project funding.

locum [private EP] because they work within the [local authority] EP team. – SENCO

## Requesting and accessing Educational Psychologist support

Before requesting EP support, school and wider education setting stakeholders explained that they had already undertaken extensive observations of pupils and gathered information from discussions with staff, parent/carers, and sometimes the pupils themselves. Where schools felt a child needed additional support because the school was not able to meet their needs, SENCOs would then request EP support. This was done in a variety of ways depending on the local EP service model. For example, school staff could request EP support through their regular consultations or planning meetings or directly to the EP service. This could include a request for specific traded activities, such as staff training.

School staff said they tried to use the opportunity to access an EP through regular consultations as much as possible. This enabled them to discuss the emerging needs of a child or young person, strategies to support children or young people's specific needs, and/or to gather EP's advice or evidence to support a request for an EHC needs assessment.

### EHCPs

An EHCP is provided for children and young people aged up to 25 years who need additional support over and above what is ordinarily available in education settings (which is known as SEN support). The EHCP identifies educational, health and social needs, and sets out the provision that will be put in place to meet those needs. A request for an EHC needs assessment is made to a local authority, who, if they agree to the request, is then responsible for securing the assessment and deciding whether an EHCP is necessary. An EP can be involved in the EHCP process in several ways, including advising schools about whether a request for an EHCP is appropriate, providing the statutory EP advice and information to the local authority for the assessment, and advising school staff on how to support a child or young person with an EHCP.

When making a request for an EHC needs assessment, some school staff reported that, initially, such requests would often be rejected. In these instances, the school would be asked to implement strategies to support the child or young person before an EHC needs assessment could be considered. School staff described feeling frustrated, particularly where they had already adopted a graduated response to support their pupils before making the initial request. However, some reported that accessing an EP before applying for an EHC needs assessment added stronger evidence to their EHC needs assessment request and facilitated assessments being agreed sooner.

In one local authority, school staff described their lack of understanding about how to request EP support to feed into a request for an EHC needs assessment. When an EP

visited their school to carry out an EHC needs assessment, school staff would take the opportunity to ask the EP about getting support for others as well. The SENCO explained that they had not wanted to take that approach but believed this was the best route for accessing the EP service. This was a view echoed by a parent/carer.

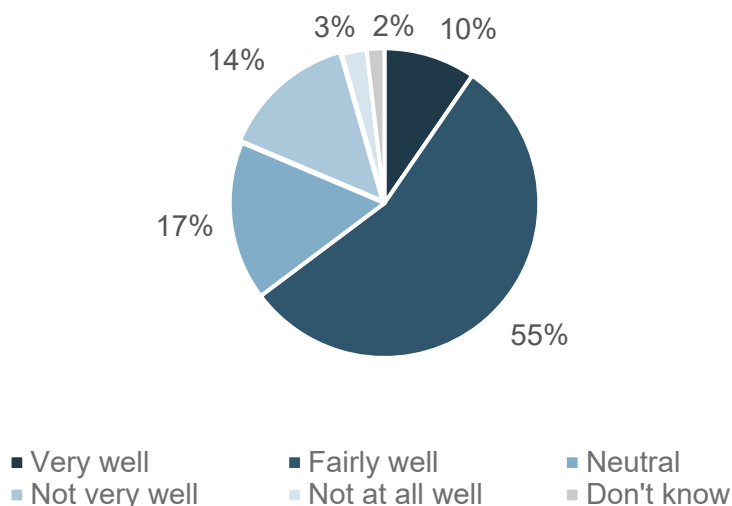
It's pants to have to feel like you've got to hijack somebody else's meeting to get your child on the agenda. – *Parent/carer*

## Demand for Educational Psychologist services

As discussed throughout this report, overwhelmingly, EPs, school staff and multi-agency professionals reported that EP services were in high demand due to the increase they perceived in the number of children and young people with complex needs. Reflecting the findings in the section on [reasons for recruitment issues](#), many interviewees explained that EP services tended to be accessed when needs had escalated and when an EHC needs assessment was being sought rather than for early intervention support.

The PEP survey data showed that almost two thirds (65% per cent) of respondents thought that their service met the needs of children and young people either 'fairly' or 'very' well. However, 17% per cent indicated that their service did not meet the needs of children and young people 'very well' or 'not well at all' (see Figure 14). Findings from the interviews, focus groups and case studies highlight this further.

**Figure 14 Overall, how well would you say your EP service is able to meet the needs of children and young people requiring support?**



Source: PEP survey, n=67

School staff explained that due to the limited availability of EPs, schools could only secure EP time for children and young people with the highest levels of needs. Furthermore, as discussed above, EPs would only engage when schools had exhausted a range of prior interventions (see [Requesting and accessing Educational Psychologist support](#)).



Some multi-agency professionals, EPs and school stakeholders reported that the number of children and young people needing EP support and the complexity of needs had increased following the COVID-19 pandemic. They cited increased levels of need among young children (for example, communication and social interaction) and in primary and secondary school-aged children (for example, social skills and mental health).

We are getting more complex situations post-COVID because the [lack of] early intervention, we aren't able to get in as early as we would want to. – *Specialist teacher*

However, some PEPs cautioned against framing the COVID-19 pandemic as the central narrative for the increased demand for EP services. They argued that levels of need and demands on EP services were increasing prior to the pandemic:

I think it's really important that we don't frame this current situation, purely in terms of 'oh, this is COVID, once we manage COVID we're back to normal'. 'Cause we've seen that steady increase. COVID just exacerbated that. – *PEP*

The interview data showed that demand for EP services was high among children and young people of all ages. Commonly, parents/carers, school staff, and EPs suggested that the lack of early intervention support from wider services for families had contributed to the high levels of need. One SENCO explained that some parents/carers were increasingly medicalising their children's needs, which in turn led to more requests for EHC needs assessments:

Community intervention at a young age is really, really important. So now we've got children who don't know how to socialise, or parents automatically think they can't socialise because they're autistic. But sometimes it's nothing to do with that, it's that they've never learned to socialise. – *SENCO*

Interviewees argued that demand for EP support was increasing in both primary and secondary education settings. Some EPs and parents/carers argued that secondary schools tended to have a higher level of need because they experienced more issues around non-attendance and exclusions, although increased exclusions were also reported in some primary schools. In addition, some EPs, multi-agency professionals, parents/carers and children and young people gave examples of secondary school pupils experiencing heightened levels of anxiety that schools were not always well equipped to understand or effectively support, resulting in escalation of need. One EP explained:

Schools were intervening with SEMH [Social, Emotional and Mental Health] needs but they were not necessarily intervening appropriately. Because they didn't truly understand the needs, the interventions would not work. – *EP*

Some parent/carers explained they would like schools to better understand and support pupils with SEND or mental health issues, and for schools to seek non-exclusion solutions. Many acknowledged that due to schools' competing priorities around attainment and attendance, schools were not always able to support pupils.

A big secondary academy is not right for everyone, but it's about whether schools could be more inclusive and supporting schools to focus on that relationship. It's those priorities of schools sometimes, like exams. It's just the structure of those big academies. – *EP*

In addition to mainstream schools, PRUs also had high demand for EP services as their pupils often had a range of complex needs (for example, cognition and learning needs, SEMH, speech and language issues, physical and sensory needs).

As a result of the growing demand, EPs, school staff, and parents/carers reported that it was common for EP support as part of the EHCP process to be delayed. One SENCO gave an example of the turnaround time for requesting and receiving an assessment not always being met. School staff acknowledged this was not the fault of EPs but were concerned about children and young people's needs not being met.

Some schools and parents/carers wanted more direct contact between EPs and children and young people, including for EHC needs assessments and direct intervention work. In one example, EPs had assessed pupils via telephone which had resulted in inaccuracies being recorded in the assessment. Furthermore, the SENCO argued, it was not always appropriate for children and young people with communication issues to be assessed in this way. Some school staff believed that EPs' direct intervention work with children was more impactful than other support that EPs could provide to schools, such as staff training. One SENCO explained:

I said, look, if you're not going to come in and work with the kids, I don't need you to work with my staff. I can work with my staff. I've got huge amounts of expertise here. I need you to see children and families because that's got the biggest impact and the best outcomes. – *SENCO*

However, this view was not echoed by EPs, who often felt that the greatest impact was realised when working at an education setting or local authority level.

Interviewees explained that long waiting lists for other services, such as CAMHS, pushed some parents/carers to seek support from other sources, such as EPs, which further exacerbated the demand on the service (this is further discussed in [Effective Educational Psychology Support](#)).

Finally, a minor theme identified in the data related to EPs needing the capacity and greater flexibility to support children and young people whose needs had escalated. One

SENCO suggested that they needed more flexible arrangements with EPs to accommodate ad-hoc emergency support:

For the nature of the young people that we work with, sometimes these people are in crisis, or an ad hoc incident will happen, where we need that emergency response as a school to know what to do in the best interest of the child. – *SENCO*

## Early intervention and systemic work

A strong view held by EPs, PEPs and some education setting staff was that EPs needed to do more early intervention and systemic work to prevent children and young people's needs from escalating. They believed this could potentially reduce the demand for EHCPs. These interviewees emphasised the importance of a graduated response to supporting children and young people.

As noted above, in many cases, schools had already developed and implemented support strategies for children and young people and accessed EP support when needs had escalated. The next step, they felt, was to request an EHC needs assessment. In such cases, EPs felt that whilst they could still provide support, the optimal time for early intervention had passed. One SENCO explained that they accessed EPs to verify evidence of the existing support in place, confirming they had done everything they could at a school level. They believed this would result in the local authority granting their request for an EHC needs assessment:

If we were to use that [consultation] report to support an EHCP application and the local authority felt that we'd not demonstrated that we'd implemented that support, it's likely that [the local authority] reject that application. – *SENCO*

To enable effective early intervention, EPs and school staff argued that local authorities and schools needed appropriate funding mechanisms to access earlier support. Some school staff felt that EP services needed to provide clearer guidance to schools for implementing a graduated response and accessing timely support. In particular, they wanted more guidance around attendance and strategies to prevent exclusions.

You can have much more impact the earlier you come into a case. Once behaviours or problems are entrenched, it's much, much more difficult to have an impact and shift that. Early intervention works every time really, it's just a no-brainer. – *EP*

## Examples of Educational Psychologists' work with schools

This section summarises interviewees' specific examples of EPs' activities and support in schools. The findings relate to Currie's (2002) matrix of an EP's role, which is split into

five main areas: consultation, assessment, intervention, training and research.<sup>14</sup> Firstly, the section summarises EPs' roles within different education settings.

## Educational Psychologists' work across different education settings

EPs worked with education settings in a range of ways. They could be linked with a specific group of schools (for example, Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) or a secondary school and their feeder primary schools) or work across a range of settings depending on current needs. EPs and school staff felt that having EPs matched to schools worked well (as further outlined in the [Effective Educational Psychology Support](#)).

### EPs linked to specific education settings

In one example, the education setting funded their own private link EP to be embedded and co-located within their setting. Staff described the efficiencies this afforded when applying for EHC needs assessments. They felt this saved time because the EP was already aware of the child's background, embedded in the school's internal ways of working and systems, and aware of the strategies and support already in place for children and young people. As such, their contributions to requests for EHC needs assessments were more meaningful and efficient.

Overall, within their local authority, EPs' work across different settings tended to be broadly similar, particularly across primary and secondary schools. However, there were some key differences between different phases and institutions. These are outlined below.

- **Early years:** Within some local authorities, specific EPs focused on working within early years. This included supporting portage services, which could include direct work with families, such as home visits. Home visits tended to be less common across other education phases. In early years education (the under 5s), EHC needs assessment processes also varied from mainstream schools: there was a separate EHC needs assessment panel for early years and all EHC needs assessments involved the EP observing the child.
- **Special schools:** EPs working in special schools tended to be linked to a particular school and were more involved in regular planning meetings to meet the needs of the pupils. EPs' work rarely involved EHC needs assessments as the pupils already had a plan in place.
- **Alternative provision including PRUs:** EPs tended to support AP settings with SEMH issues but said the breadth of this support could be wider, for example around

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<sup>14</sup> See [Annex 3](#)

reducing wider risk factors such as Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) and violence reduction. EPs provided examples of supporting staff to help young people's emotional regulation to facilitate reintegration. In other local authorities where PRUs provided longer-term educational provision, EPs' work had less of a focus on reintegration specifically.

- **Further (post-16) education:** EPs' work in further education settings often involved updating EHCPs for young people whose needs had changed. A specialist teacher reported that for those aged 16 years and above, re-assessments tended to be forward-looking, focusing on employment, rather than current or future educational needs.
- **Virtual schools**<sup>15</sup>: Some EPs were seconded to work for or collaborated with the Virtual School. When working with the virtual school, EPs delivered attachment training to schools and local VCSE organisations that worked with looked after children and young people. In some cases, EPs also sat on the virtual school leadership team.

Several EPs reported challenges associated with working with secondary schools compared with primary schools. In primary schools, EPs tended to support one member of staff (usually the SENCO) to implement a specific strategy, whereas in a secondary school, EPs needed to work with a range of staff depending on their pastoral, SEND or inclusion strategies. Some EPs found that, due to the larger size of secondary schools, it was harder to get all the relevant staff together to identify need, implement support, and suggest strategies, particularly at a whole-school level.

Particularly in secondary schools, there can be a split between what is seen as SEND and what is behavioural issues. There isn't even communication about this with school staff. I think it's the worst when the system is very fragmented and not communicative. – *Specialist teacher*

Local authority strategic stakeholders highlighted specific challenges for the EP service working with secondary schools within MATs. Some EPs found that they needed to adapt their work to comply with MAT policies. Where EPs wanted to influence policies, for example, by trying to enhance a behaviour policy to be more inclusive of pupils with SEND, this was found to be particularly challenging.

It's much harder [working with secondary schools in MATs]. It's like trying to turn the Titanic. - *Local authority education representative*

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<sup>15</sup> The Virtual School is a statutory local authority service which coordinates educational services for children who are in or have been in care. It exists to promote and monitor their progress and educational attainment.

## Support for children, young people and families

EPs worked with children, young people, families and education settings in consultations, assessments, interventions, and training. As discussed in the section on [demand for EP services](#), the extent to which EPs were involved in this range of work varied across local authorities. Further discussion of each of these activities is discussed below.

### Consultations

EPs used consultations to build a holistic picture of individuals or groups of children and young people and the wider context. This enabled EPs to understand children and young people's difficulties and collaboratively develop solutions or strategies to best support them.

EPs' consultations often involved school staff and other adults around a child (where relevant), parents/carers, and the child or young person. EPs commonly described using strengths-based approaches to consultations, supporting school staff, parents/carers, and children and young people to co-develop possible solutions. Different approaches to consultation included:

- one-to-one consultations with a member of school staff, most commonly the SENCO;
- 'Circle of Adults' meetings and 'Solutions Circles'; where EPs involved parents/carers and children this was highly valued:

I just kind of think it's so, so important that parents have a voice and are listened to. – *Parent/carer*

- group consultations with staff within or across schools, for example bringing together different staff in one school, or staff from across different feeder primary schools.

EPs explained that consultations did not necessarily lead to further direct work with the child or young person.

To support schools and parents/carers, EPs would often suggest a range of approaches to support children and young people. Examples included initiating a new way of welcoming a child or young person back into a classroom after an absence; using visual timetables; adopting specific interventions (such as arts and crafts-based play to support emotional literacy), or particular types of therapy. The research team also observed EPs providing parents/carers and school staff with specific hints and tips that could work alongside existing strategies.

Other consultation activities included consulting on and establishing whole-school policies and a graduated approach to supporting children and young people. One PEP described strengths-based approaches to bringing about change, including Appreciative Enquiry (a research method) and co-production. Examples included an EP gathering pupil voices to transform the school's behaviour policy into a more inclusive 'relationship

policy' and an EP suggesting inclusive environmental changes to classrooms and corridors. EPs sought to review progress after solutions had been developed, providing further support and alternative solutions as needed. This included more intensive or individualised support, or applications for an EHC needs assessment, as needed.

### **EPs providing advice, guidance, and strategies**

In one example, following an EP consultation, a parent/carer explained that they were trying to encourage their autistic child to verbally express their emotions using an 'emotion wheel'. This enabled the young person to point to named emotions, which the parent/carer said had made a positive difference at home.

It's not something complex, it can be something that's really simple. You know, when you're in my position, sometimes you just can't see the wood for the trees. - *Parent/carer*

### **Assessments**

All EPs involved in the research study were involved in assessing the needs of children and young people. School staff reported that EP assessments were often, but not always, used as evidence to support a request for an EHC needs assessment, a statutory EHC needs assessment, or to update a current EHCP.

Assessments often involved observing the child or young person in a class and/or interacting with a member of school staff. However, this was not always possible due to time constraints or the specific circumstances of the child or young person. EPs also met with adults around the child or young person and/or worked directly with the child or young person. Where children and young people had English as an Additional Language (EAL), an interpreter was also present during assessments if needed.

EPs described using a range of techniques to carry out needs assessments. Generally, EPs preferred to use their 'creativity' for dynamic assessments by using games and play, rather than standardised assessments, although these were also used. After being involved in a dynamic assessment, a child who was involved in a case study said that despite being a 'little nervous' when they first found out about the needs assessment, they enjoyed the play-based assessment, describing it as 'really fun'.

A common view amongst EPs was that standardised assessments were often requested by school staff because they were seen as 'hard' quantified evidence for an EHCP. EPs explained that standardised assessments enabled EPs to benchmark children and young people but were not always appropriate. Furthermore, these assessments did not provide insights into what support would be effective for a child or young person, as one EP explained: 'assessment alone doesn't help you make things better.'

After an assessment, EPs usually wrote a report outlining their findings and recommendations to inform the school's next steps. The report took various forms, including a child-friendly letter addressed directly to the child or young person. EHC needs assessment reports were summarised in the EHCP, if granted. EPs tried to develop the reports as quickly as possible to meet schools' needs and to enable school staff to put support in place quickly, without waiting for the EHCP outcome.

The educational psychologists have come in, and the fact that they stay in, take time to talk to the staff and give advice and top tips, it means that we're not waiting for a report weeks ahead, or not waiting for the end of the EHCP process. Staff can put something in place straight away. – *School leader*

However, one SENCO explained that they often had to explain to parents/carers what the EP report meant as they tended to contain jargon and lacked clarity about next steps.

Whilst the EHCP process included multiple professionals, interviewees acknowledged that statutory assessments, and some standardised assessments, could only be administered by EPs. Relatedly, one parent/carer described EPs as 'the gatekeepers to getting anything changed' on EHCPs.

It was broadly understood that, while EPs are the only professionals to formally conduct some standardised assessments, they carried out different assessments with input from others. For example, an EP explained that they valued teachers' experiences in informing alternative assessments and developing a collaborative solution:

[Teacher is] like 'oh can you come in and just check out these assumptions by doing a cognitive assessment?', But I'm like, I believe you. If you're telling me they've got poor memory, they've got poor memory. You're experienced, you're qualified, I trust your judgement. – *EP*

Some school staff saw a role for themselves in assessing children and young people's needs to inform an EHC needs assessment. They, and some multi-agency professionals, reflected that, due to low EP capacity, it could be beneficial for teachers or other school staff to be upskilled to manage assessments and support children and young people with complex needs. One SENCO argued that school staff could also be trained to formally carry out cognitive assessments.

On the other hand, some school staff believed that EPs' input into a request for an EHC needs assessment increased the chances of the assessment being granted (see [Support for children, young people and families](#)). One school described that they had previously consulted with private EPs to support requests for an EHC needs assessment but now chose to do the application process themselves, thus suggesting that the EP's role in providing evidence for a request for an EHC needs assessment could be reduced. An EP



echoed this view, arguing that school staff's professional judgement of a pupil's needs should not require EP validation.

For many parents/carers and school staff, EPs' authority and expertise to conduct and make changes to assessments helped validate teachers' and parents/carers' concerns about children and young people. One SENCO explained that, although they could do most of what an EP can offer (for example, observe a child and provide interventions or different approaches), they relied on the EP to support staff wellbeing and to undertake the legal aspects of the EHCP process.

## Interventions

EPs were involved in delivering a range of psychology-informed interventions with children, young people, families, and school staff. Whilst EPs shared experiences of delivering interventions with individuals (see [Demand for EP services](#)), in general they shared a preference for delivering interventions with school staff or at a whole-school level. EPs argued that this provided effective support for many children and young people and had scope for wider impact (further discussed in [Effective Educational Psychology Support](#)). Examples of interventions EPs delivered to school staff included programmes about Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSA)<sup>16</sup>, EBSA, inclusion, and applying cognitive psychology theory to lesson-planning.

When working with groups of schools, EPs sometimes arranged cross-school networking and group problem-solving. This included activities such as whole-staff training (INSET days or bespoke training), sharing resources, including toolkits and checklists, co-developing action plans, facilitating reflective sessions, and providing ongoing supervision and solutions-focused coaching. Interventions aimed to build capacity within schools and create a graduated approach to, for example, EBSA or inclusion.

Some EPs had supported schools to gain external accreditation for certain achievements, for example for a trauma-informed approach, or for gaining co-production awards. This involved EPs conducting whole-school audits of policies, practices, interactions, and teaching, including gathering pupil and parent/carer voice. Depending on the accreditation requirements, EPs had delivered training, helped develop school policies, or co-created action plans and strategies. School staff who had worked with an EP in this way valued their input as they understood the school context yet provided an objective and external perspective.

While generally EPs' involvement in direct intervention was limited, they shared several examples of direct intervention work with children and young people. In some cases,

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<sup>16</sup> ELSA is a recognised programme whereby teaching assistants are trained to provide support to emotional needs of children.

these were co-delivered by Assistant EPs or those training to become an Assistant EP. One-to-one and group-based examples included providing:

- diversionary interventions with children and young people known to the youth offending services;
- one-to-one therapeutic interventions such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and therapeutic play;
- an autism awareness group for secondary school aged children and young people;
- a 'transition' group for refugee children using a narrative therapy to support participants to share their stories;
- a project designed to reintegrate children and young people who had been excluded from school;
- 'a 'Circle of Friends' support network for a child or young person by involving their friendship group in the intervention.

Whilst not commonly mentioned, EPs also delivered interventions in the family home, taking a whole-family approach around issues such as EBSA, CCE, or for early years interventions. Examples of EPs' Early Years and portage work (described in [Working with wider service providers](#)) in families' homes involved structured approaches to teaching and play-based modelling.<sup>17</sup> One example included using Video Interaction Guidance (VIG) to support parents/carers and children to communicate and interact. This involved videoing parents/carers interacting with their child, and then editing and reviewing the recording with them to celebrate positive parenting approaches and relationships. One EP who supported parents/carers with older children adopted a 'coaching' approach, adapting the sessions to meet the needs of individuals: 'I have to be flexible and creative.' EPs argued that working within the family home worked well as families felt comfortable in their own environment.

In some local authorities, other professionals had taken on roles that, in other areas, were carried out by EPs. This included Education Wellbeing Officers and the Medical Tuition Team working with children, young people and families on EBSA and reintegration into education and Family Support Workers (FSWs) supporting children and young people who were not attending school due to ill health, neglect, and/or grief. One EP suggested that they could play a valuable role in training, supervising, and overseeing FSWs and other professionals on psychological approaches as this would enhance wider support for families. However, they noted other professionals may lack the capacity to undertake such training.

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<sup>17</sup> Portage is a home-visiting, early intervention support available for pre-school children with additional needs.

## Critical incident support

Critical incident support involved the EP service supporting pupils, school staff, the whole school or wider community after a critical incident had occurred. This might be a significant incident that caused distress or trauma, such as the death of a child or teacher, or other local incident.

Our critical incident team [of EPs and specialist teachers] is at the very acute end, in a school supporting staff to manage instances of significant trauma and grief. - *Local authority strategic stakeholder*

## Training

Across the board, all EPs were engaged in delivering training to education staff. Some examples are outlined below.

### Training delivered by EPs

Training offers included:

- whole-school approaches, such as being attachment-friendly; trauma-informed practice; inclusive teaching; criminal justice and restorative practice; anti-racism;
- psychology behind children and young people's behaviour;
- emotional regulation strategies;
- embedding co-production in school systems;
- improving attendance and supporting EBSA;
- SEND, including awareness and strategies to support children and young people's sensory needs;
- understanding and supporting children and young people's mental health, including stress, anxiety, self-harm and suicide;
- supporting staff to deliver interventions to children and young people, such as: Lego therapy, ELSA or how to support refugee children and young people.

In the main, EPs designed training courses to support school staff to adapt their practices and processes at a whole-school level. However, some training programmes were delivered to specific individuals for them to cascade training in their school, to support a graduated approach, or deliver an intervention directly to children and young people. In

one example, an EP had trained a teacher in Lego therapy,<sup>18</sup> and subsequently co-delivered a group session to pupils. The teacher maintained a Lego therapy group after the EP had stopped working with the school.

Some EP training was delivered local authority-wide (and co-delivered with other multiagency professionals),<sup>19</sup> bringing together staff across different schools, either online or in-person, or via multi-agency conferences. Training often aimed to share local authority-wide initiatives or approaches, such as trauma-informed practice, with schools. One EP noted the benefit of online delivery in that new school staff members could access a recorded session which helped to onboard staff to local authority-wide ways of working:

We totally recognise that the staff turnover in schools is absolutely massive. So, we need to continually offer sort of a basic core offer, so that staff who are coming into our settings can get some basic information. – EP

EPs also provided formal and informal supervision to school staff. Examples included coaching and support to individual and groups of staff involved in implementing new interventions or approaches. Having the opportunity to reflect on their practice helped school staff to recognise what had worked well, or not, and take learning forward when supporting other children and young people (see [Outcomes for education settings and their staff](#)). However, EPs explained that education staff often lacked time for this reflection.

In another case, an EP described a lack of distinction between their remit and that of other professionals across different settings, suggesting a need for more communication and clarity about different roles. In this instance, the EP explained it was not always clear what their and the local authority SEND practitioner's<sup>20</sup> respective roles were, as the SEND practitioner was undertaking one-off assessments and attachment training.

Whilst not commonly reported, EPs were sometimes involved in delivering training directly to parents/carers. Examples included workshops for groups of parents/carers around trauma, CCE, EBSA, parental and children's mental health, and attachment-training specifically for foster carers. Workshops were sometimes co-delivered with other multi-agency professionals, such as social workers, or school's mental health leads.

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<sup>18</sup> Lego therapy is an evidence-based social development programme that uses Lego to develop children's communication and social skills.

<sup>19</sup> As further discussed in Training to wider professionals.

<sup>20</sup> A SEND practitioner is trained to provide support and advice to parents/carers and/or schools.

# Educational Psychology and the wider children and family services landscape

## Key findings

EPs worked with a range of wider services, including early help and children's social care services; local authority inclusion teams; YOT; violence reduction teams; and the VCSE sector. They also supported health services including GPs, CAMHS, speech and language therapists, paediatricians, mental health services, portage, and hearing impairment teams.

Multi-agency professionals valued EPs' specialist knowledge and experience of supporting children and young people's physical and mental health. However, at times, it was difficult for some multi-agency professionals to understand the difference between EP and CAMHS support for children's and young people's mental health needs.

The qualitative research with PEPs, EPs, and multi-agency professionals demonstrated the role of EPs in supporting local authorities to inform and set their strategic direction.

EPs and wider stakeholders valued EPs' training and research skills to upskill local staff, inform local provision, and for giving children, young people, and families a voice.

Suggestions for how EP services could enhance multi-agency working and local provision included further utilising EPs' research and training skills, raising awareness of the EP role and its impact, and supporting EPs to do more early intervention work.

Building on the evidence presented in the section on [understanding the role of EPs](#), this section explores the ways in which EP services work with wider children and family services.

## Strategic role of Educational Psychologists

The interviews provided a range of examples of EPs supporting the strategic direction of local services. This included meeting with multi-agency services and informing local service provision often through research and consultation.

## Multi-agency meetings

In one local authority, multi-agency meetings took place in schools to convene a group of specialist, interdisciplinary support services to support children, families, and teachers. This included behaviour support, specialist teacher services, and EPs. EPs added specific value through their psychological knowledge and expertise, identifying how best to meet the needs of children and young people with a focus on the individual child's overall development.

EPs indicated that they were keen to further utilise their research skills to support schools and wider services. PEPs, EPs, and multi-agency professionals gave examples of EPs' research skills, which included:

- analysing data about pupil absences and those at risk of exclusion to inform their local authority's inclusion approach;
- evaluating specific initiatives or interventions, such as trauma-informed training for schools or a therapeutic thinking model;<sup>21</sup>
- supporting local authorities to enhance current and future practice and provision for children and young people with complex needs;
- undertaking action research to understand current exclusion rates;
- consulting with children, young people and families to inform local authorities' attendance strategy or provision;
- disseminating research findings to wider local authority services.

## Informing service provision

In one local authority, the local CAMHS appointed an EP to co-develop a better local offer to meet the needs of children and young people. The EP developed a referral pathway to provide a more comprehensive referral process. In other local authorities, EPs attended multi-agency meetings, special school admission panels, mental health strategy groups, and Family Hub planning to inform serviced provision.

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<sup>21</sup> Therapeutic thinking is a philosophical approach to supporting children and young people with their emotional wellbeing, mental health, and/or behaviour.

## Working with other services

This section summarises the interview data on EPs' work with health services; early help and children's social care services; local authority inclusion teams; YOT and violence reduction teams; and the VCSE sector.

### Health services

The interviews provided a range of examples of how EPs work with health services, including CAMHS, speech and language therapists, paediatricians, mental health services, portage, and hearing impairment teams. Overall, health representatives explained that EPs provided specialist input around children and young people's physical and mental health.

There is nobody else that is professionally responsible with the knowledge and skills around assessing children's learning and learning potential, things like memory and processing speed and skills. – *Health professional*

The case studies highlighted some particularly strong examples of EPs collaborating with health services. These included:

- informing assessment pathways for autism and other neurodivergent diagnoses;
- working with portage to assist early years teams;
- helping to ensure the multi-agency support for refugee children and families was aligned and complementary;
- mediating between CAMHS, families, and schools to give children, young people, and families the support they needed;
- supporting some children and young people with CBT or those with severe mental health issues (such as psychosis) where no specialist CAMHS provision was available.

Despite these positive examples of collaboration, some challenges between EP and health services were also given. In one area, an EP spoke about the difficulties of working with GPs and wider professionals who did not always understand the EP role. At times, this made it more difficult for EPs to effectively support children and young people.

Medical professionals, for example, don't necessarily understand the work that an educational psychologist does and see us as a means to a cognitive assessment which is by no means the bulk of our work.  
- *EP*

A small number of EP and multi-agency interviewees explained that it was sometimes difficult to determine the difference between EPs' and CAMHS' mental health support for

children and young people. In some areas, EPs were reported to be undertaking the work of CAMHS due to long waiting lists and funding constraints. The challenges associated with this are discussed further in [Access to further, multi-agency support](#). Furthermore, some interviewees reported a professional rivalry between some EPs and CAMHS staff. In one area, convening regular meetings had supported a better understanding of each other's roles and was expected to further improve joint working and the overall functioning of the local system.

Although they don't agree always on the best way forward for children and young people, particularly those with moderate to severe learning disabilities, there is dialogue now, which is a huge step forward. – *Health professional*

## Early help and children's social care services

Most interviewees gave examples of EPs working with early help teams and/or children's social care services. Examples of EPs' work with early help services included:

- regular multi-agency meetings;
- supporting FSWs working with, for example, refugee families to help coordinate multi-agency support;
- providing helplines for parents/carers who needed EP advice or signposting to other services;
- setting up and/or attending Parent/Carer Forums.

### Parent/Carer Forum

In one case study, the EP service and local Parents/Carers' Forum ran an authority-wide initiative to promote co-production and systemic change. The participant parents/carers understood the EP service well, particularly EPs' systemic work and support for children and families. One individual explained that her understanding of the EP role changed when they joined the forum:

My opinion of an EP before...[was] that they just do this statutory work. They assess children and they kind of prepare reports... What I've realised is their role can be so much more if they've got the time and capacity...they've got all these skills and knowledge that could be used in so many other ways. –  
*Parent/carer*



Some EPs supported social workers by attending joint meetings with parents/carers or attending Child in Need or Team Around the Family meetings.<sup>22</sup> EPs, local authority, and school-based practitioners reported that increased thresholds for accessing children's social care support had resulted in EPs working with children and young people who had increasingly complex needs.

Some families and multi-agency professionals noted that where families had worked with and been let down by services previously, EPs provided an important role in listening to and sharing the voice of children, young people, and families. Consequently, this supported families' engagement with services.

Interviewees gave several examples of EPs providing supervision to a range of professionals. In addition to school staff, as discussed in the section on [EPs work across different education settings](#), this also included multi-agency staff employed by local authorities, for example, FSWs.

## Wider services

Interviewees provided a range of examples of how EPs worked with wider children, young people, and family services. As noted above, these included working with:

- Local authority Inclusion Teams, for example, by monitoring exclusion data and those at risk of exclusion; offering strategic level support to develop a local inclusion strategy; or as part of a graduated support pathway to help children to attend school;
- YOT or violence reduction teams who worked with PRUs and children and young people who were vulnerable to CCE; EPs tended to provide advice and support and focus on problem-solving activities with staff (and parents/carers) to enable them to better support children and young people;
- VCSEs, as illustrated by the boxed example below, however some EPs and multi-agency professionals said it could be difficult to collaborate due to the capacity pressures on VCSEs.

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<sup>22</sup> Child in Need and Team Around the Family meetings take place between a child, young person, their family, and the professionals supporting them. The meetings are designed for professionals to share information and establish different types of plans to support the family's needs.

## EPs and mental health VCSEs

VCSE stakeholders explained that EPs complemented voluntary sector organisations' mental health support for children and young people by providing influence and advice on educational issues. They noted that VCSEs tended to support children and young people's mild to moderate mental health issues by delivering one-to-one and group preventative interventions in youth clubs and schools, family activities, and support for staff. EPs, however, provided a deeper, more targeted level of support for children and young people.

## Training to wider professionals

As discussed above in [EPs work across different education settings](#), EPs provided training to school and wider local authority services' staff. The EP, PEP and multi-agency stakeholder interviews provided several examples of EPs training local services, which included:

- how to best to support refugee families;
- trauma-informed approaches<sup>23</sup>;
- Zones of Regulation<sup>24</sup> training for foster carers, social workers, and Children's Home staff.

As with training in schools, it was common for EP training to be co-produced and delivered with other professionals such as specialist teachers, speech and language therapists, or mental health practitioners, including CAMHS.

## Suggestions for improvements

Interviewees made a number of suggestions for how EP and wider services could be better aligned and/or EPs' impact enhanced. These are summarised below.

- EPs could work more closely with wider services to inform local authority and wider policies and strategic planning.
- EPs could promote and apply their expertise, mediation, supervision, and research skills to enhance understanding about their role and its impact locally. A range of interviewees argued that an enhanced understanding of the EP role would facilitate

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<sup>23</sup> Trauma-informed is an approach grounded in the understanding that the experience of trauma can impact an individual's development.

<sup>24</sup> Zones of Regulation is an established approach to support the development of self-regulation.

effective multi-agency working, as the right professional/s would be supporting the right people and would not duplicate work.

It's a little bit about breaking down some of those barriers and being accessible and developing the understanding of our role and what we can support with. We can support with sharing different research if that's helpful and providing different professionals with consultations and supervision. – *EP*

- EPs' input into EHC needs assessments could be enhanced if they had more time and capacity to provide more in-depth support.
- Relatedly, if EPs were able to provide earlier support for children, young people, and families, for example, by reducing their involvement in EHC needs assessments, this could maximise their impact and help prevent children and young people's needs escalating.

It's not until you sort of look at the end result - where it's a child that is deeply involved with CAMHS that you work back, and you think well if the educational psychology service were used for their full skill set in schools maybe we wouldn't be overwhelming that service. – *School leader*

Where EPs' work overlapped with other agencies, it is important for all professionals to be aware of who is working with each child, young person or school, to avoid duplication of effort or confusion between different approaches.

# Improving outcomes and the impact of Educational Psychologist services

## Key findings

Interviewees identified a range of positive outcomes, following EPs' support, for children, young people and families, schools and education settings, and more widely at the system level.

Perceived impact of EPs' work with children and young people included needs being identified more efficiently, and children and young people feeling 'heard', 'understood', and empowered.

Interviewees reported improved outcomes directly related to the EHCP process. Namely, that children and young people's needs were accurately identified, and suitable plans put in place.

Interviewees gave examples of parents/carers having improved parenting skills following a better understanding of their child's needs and their own strengths.

Key outcomes for school and education setting staff included increased knowledge, capacity, and confidence to identify children and young people's needs. School staff also felt emotionally supported by EPs.

Outcomes for the whole school included improved relationships with families and implementing new, whole-school approaches to tackling specific issues.

EPs' strategic work led to system-level outcomes, including informing local authority-wide policies, strategies, and initiatives. Other outcomes included improved ability to identify local needs and positively influence multi-agency practices.

However, EPs felt they had little visibility of the outcomes and impact of their work. They attributed this to often working with children and young people indirectly (for example, by supporting adults around a child) and at a specific point in time rather than developing a longer-term relationship.

This section summarises the perceived outcomes of EPs' work from the case studies, focus groups and interviews with children, young people and families, school and wider education setting staff, and wider local authority services.

## Outcomes

EPs, PEPs, and multi-agency and education professionals commonly reported that EPs had limited visibility of the impact and effectiveness of their work with children, young people and families, and education settings. As EPs often worked in an indirect and time-limited way with children, young people and families, they did not see outcomes realised.

This created an evidence gap around longer-term impacts from EPs' early intervention work.

Children and young people, parents/carers, school staff, and wider multi-agency professionals who had on-going relationships with EPs provided several examples of improved outcomes they attributed to EPs' support. These are outlined in this section.

## **Outcomes for children, young people and families**

Interviewees highlighted several outcomes of EPs' work with children, young people and families. These are explored below.

### **Efficiently and effectively identifying needs**

School staff and parents/carers believed EPs' work had led to children and young people's needs being identified more effectively and efficiently. Where EPs worked directly with children and young people, interviewees explained that EPs were able to capture children and young people's experiences and accurately understand their situation. This work was complemented by EPs upskilling school staff to identify children and young people's needs early and by adopting a whole-school graduated approach. Interviewees valued EPs' ability to gather pupil voice and facilitate discussions between staff, for example, using structured approaches such as 'Solutions Circles'.<sup>25</sup> This helped to develop a shared understanding of need and suitable actions, as one SENCO explained:

As a staff body, we literally replicated a Solution Circle regarding some students. And the outcome was that [staff] sang from the same sheet because as a group of professionals, we all sat around and agreed or were willing to be on board with putting things in place. –  
*SENCO*

### **Listening to and empowering children, young people and families**

Interviewees gave several examples of children, young people and parents/carers feeling empowered following support from the EP service. Examples included children, young people and parents/carers feeling 'listened to', 'safe', and 'less alone', with one parent/carer describing their EP as 'calming'.

Where EPs supported children, young people and families to share suggestions for how services could improve, this enhanced their confidence and created a sense of achievement. They felt proud that they were helping other families by sharing their experiences and suggestions with services.

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<sup>25</sup> Solution Circles are a structured conversational approach to support staff to discuss issues as a group and develop solutions.

## Children and young people SEND forum

One EP service established a group for children and young people to empower them to inform local service improvements to better meet the needs of children and young people with SEND. The purpose of the group was largely to enable children and young people's voices to be heard. Those who participated expressed appreciation for their EP's support, as one young person explained:

I just like being heard. I have PTSD [Post-traumatic Stress Disorder] from my old school. They would never listen to me, therapists, even some psychologists didn't listen...as soon as I came here, I just felt heard. I felt like everyone was listening to me. – *Young person*

Other ways in which parents/carers felt listened to and empowered included feeling more confident to share their views with wider professionals during day-to-day interactions. In some cases, parents/carers had been involved in EP-facilitated co-production, which gave them the confidence and motivation to seek employment.

Children and young people who were regularly supported by EPs were also positive about their experiences. For example, two young people who participated in an EP-led group intervention said:

Sometimes you feel like the world is on your shoulders, and you feel like there is nothing to get up for in the morning. But having friends that understand you can really make your life a bit more meaningful and exciting...having people who understand you more in the community. – *Young person*

I brought [another young person] along and [she] says it was the first time she felt like she had a voice. – *Young person*

## Enhanced parenting skills

EPs and school staff reported that EPs used strengths-based approaches to support parents/carers to better understand their child's needs, their own strengths, and alternative parenting strategies.

I suppose it offered that reassurance that we were doing the right thing. – *Parent/carer*

Other examples of improved outcomes resulting from EPs' direct work with or training for parents/cares included:

- a stronger bond between infants and parents/carers and improved parent-child relationships;
- enhanced communication between parents/carers and children;
- feeling better equipped to establish and maintain boundaries;
- improved parental mental health and ability to reflect on their personal trauma.

## Parental resilience

One EP gave a specific example of supporting a parent/carer who had struggled with their child's autism diagnosis and episodes of violence. The EP supported the parent/carer through weekly telephone calls and when they last spoke the parent/carer had been through a particularly challenging episode with their child's mental health. Whereas previously, the EP said this would have overwhelmed the parent/carer, they reported feeling more confident and better equipped to talk to their child and access the right support.

## Improved attendance and behaviour

Whilst stakeholders reported challenges in demonstrating quantifiable outcomes from some interventions (for example, EBSA or school exclusion strategies), school staff and EPs gave many examples of positive attendance and behaviour outcomes.

This was a young man who was in his bedroom and wasn't attending school, wasn't spending time with his family, wasn't leaving the home, wasn't seeing friends. It's slow progress but he's now going to school for 1 hour a day. He goes and does independent work, not in the classroom, but he's doing work. He had a sleepover with his friend over half term and he's been fishing. So, to me, that's really meaningful. – EP

## Meeting needs through Educational, Health, and Social Care Plans

Whilst EPs generally described their non-statutory work as the most impactful, interviewees acknowledged the positive outcomes achieved from a high-quality EHCP process.<sup>26</sup> These included children and young people:

- feeling happier;

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<sup>26</sup> EPs identified themselves as key stakeholders in obtaining and/or updating EHCPs alongside other professionals such as speech and language therapists and paediatricians.

- moving to more suitable education provision (for example, to a special school or from a PRU into mainstream education);
- having their educational needs better met
- having enhanced social interactions with peers.

## **Outcomes for education settings and their staff**

EPs and school staff provided several examples of improved outcomes for school staff. These outcomes are discussed in detail below.

### **Improved knowledge and capacity**

Several school staff and EPs highlighted improved staff knowledge following EPs' training and consultation activities. EPs evidenced their views by citing staff feedback after training sessions, seeing staff implement newly learned skills and strategies with children and young people, and cascading their learning to other members of staff. School staff echoed this, sharing examples of delivering training to other members of staff, applying learning, or sharing resources that EPs had provided. School staff and EPs saw this as highly impactful and sustainable beyond the direct EP support. Furthermore, up-skilling school staff in this way would benefit multiple children and young people over time.

### **Increased confidence to identify needs and support children and young people**

Although not reported by school staff themselves, EPs regularly gave examples of school staff who felt more confident to identify the needs of, and practically support, children and young people. They attributed this to knowledge-sharing and providing tangible actions to take forward. EPs argued that, over time, school staff were increasingly able to do this independently of the EP service.

I can see the confidence of the teachers, how having an informed plan makes people feel different about supporting young people. –  
*EP*

### **Feeling emotionally supported by the EP service**

EPs and school staff said the EP service had helped school staff, in particular SENCOs and some teaching assistants, to feel emotionally supported. EPs highlighted that the role of a SENCO is often challenging and can be isolating. SENCOs agreed and generally appreciated EPs offering a listening ear or supporting them to build networks with other SENCOs through their peer support or cross-school programmes.

It's nice to have somebody outside coming in, and is kind of a listening ear, not just about feelings and emotions but also about



unpicking why a case is so complicated, helping me to think things through in a way that's really, really powerful. – *SENCO*

Where EPs provided supervision to school staff, this was also reported to be beneficial for those involved.

### **Reviewing or implementing new whole-school approaches**

Another key outcome that EPs, school staff, and wider multi-agency professionals discussed related to schools adopting new whole-school approaches and embedding evidence-based practice. Examples included adopting more inclusive school policies, cultural change, adapting the physical learning environment, and changes to the language used. In some schools, EPs and SENCOs said these changes helped reduce exclusion rates, led to more positive engagement with pupils and families, and had improved attendance.

### **Opportunities for self-reflection**

EP support also enabled school staff to reflect on and share best practice. School staff valued this opportunity, noting that there was limited opportunity for reflection in their day-to-day work due to capacity constraints.

They often have the answers themselves, but they don't have the space and time to reflect. – *EP*

School staff also appreciated EPs' external perspective and peer-learning opportunities with other local schools. This had encouraged them to identify their existing good practice and progress that had been made. A school leader believed this had, in turn, had a positive impact on staff wellbeing.

### **Improving relationships with families**

Finally, where schools had developed new mechanisms for parent/carers engagement, such as parent-carer forums, school staff believed this had improved their relationships with families.

We think we have always listened to parents, but we didn't really hear them. And so, it really helps you to understand parents' lived experiences for sure. – *School leader*

### **Outcomes for local authorities and wider children and family services**

When asked about how EPs had supported improved outcomes at the local authority and systems-level, interviewees gave a range of examples. These are summarised below.

## **Informing local authority-wide policies, strategies and initiatives**

As with schools, multi-agency professionals commonly reported that the EP services had informed local-authority-wide policies, strategies and initiatives, through research and capturing children, young people's and families' voices. They shared examples of EPs helping to develop local SEND strategies, embedding a culture of co-production, or influencing the local authority to change their approach to supporting pupils at risk of exclusion.

## **Improved culture across schools**

EPs contributed to an improved culture across local schools, namely that they had become more inclusive. Multi-agency professionals within two local authorities shared that, although it was not necessarily reflected in their local authority-level exclusions data, EPs had contributed to an improved culture of inclusivity across the schools in their area. In one local authority, a multi-agency partner explained that analysis of Ofsted reports for their local schools had highlighted an increasingly inclusive culture which they attributed to the work of the EP service.

I'm confident that our EP service are an essential part of that overall system. I'm confident that what we are delivering is of high quality. And I'm confident that it is therefore having an impact on outcomes for children and young people, albeit the teaching and learning element still has to catch up. – *Multi-agency professional*

## **Improved identification of need at the local authority level**

Multi-agency professionals highlighted that the EP service had enabled them to better identify the needs of the local community within their local authority. They explained that EPs' research skills and knowledge of local schools had helped build an evidence base of local needs which subsequently informed multi-agency service delivery. One multi-agency professional stated that EPs' research skills had saved the local authority the time and cost of externally commissioning research.

## **Influencing the practice of other multi-agency professionals**

Although not commonly reported, one EP believed that they had influenced the practice and culture of wider partners working with children, young people and families in the local authority. They argued that they had supported other professionals, such as children's homes and FSWs, with training around language and communication needs, and strengths-based approaches to engaging families.

# Effective Educational Psychology practice: what works well and what could be improved?

## Key findings

The qualitative research highlighted a range of factors that helped or hindered EPs' ability to improve outcomes for children, young people, families, and wider professionals.

Factors that helped EPs bring about positive change included: EPs sharing their knowledge and expertise with professionals working with children and young people; working creatively and flexibly; undertaking early intervention and systems-change activities; developing positive relationships with children, young people and families, schools and education settings, and wider professionals; being linked to specific schools; and effective multi-agency working.

EPs and other stakeholders also emphasised the importance of effective internal management of the EP service to help EPs to work optimally.

The main perceived barrier to EPs work in improving outcomes was their limited capacity to apply their broad range of skills to maximise impact for children and young people - most notably, early intervention and prevention work.

Other barriers included: the capacity and priorities of other professionals, such as schools, wider education settings, and specific services such as CAMHS, to effectively support children and young people; a lack of understanding of the EP role; and challenging relationships between schools and education settings and parents/carers.

This section explores what works well and what limits EPs' practice and ability to support and improve outcomes for children and young people, families, and wider professionals. It is based on interviewees' views collected through multi-agency focus groups, PEP focus groups, and case studies.

## What works well?

### Sharing knowledge and psychological expertise

As discussed throughout the report, EPs commonly believed that working with the adults around a child or young person was highly effective in improving outcomes for children, young people and families. It helped EPs to empower and upskill those already supporting a child or young person by sharing their unique psychological insights to existing support. One EP explained that although school staff were very experienced and skilled at supporting children and young people with SEND, EPs were able to provide specialist psychological expertise.

SENCOs and EPs explained that EPs' training gave them specialist knowledge about the education system and broader landscape of children and young people services, children's learning and development, and research skills. PEPs and EPs explained that this, combined with EPs' practical experience of working across settings and with strategic and operational stakeholders, helped them apply their skills and share knowledge to support other professionals in a range of specific, and sometimes highly complex, situations.

You've not only got the psychology side of things, but you've got the knowledge of the education system, you've got the experience of going into the different types of settings in your local area. And then you've also got all of the kind of systemic work that you do within the local authority... So you're in a really good position to be able to see many different perspectives. - *EP*

For some children and young people (such as those with complex needs or who had experienced trauma), it was sometimes best for them to continue to work with adults with whom they already had a positive relationship (such as school staff or a speech and language therapist), rather than to introduce the EP as a new professional.

It's better for the people who know the young people to be supporting them. Or it might be that we'll work with staff alongside them, to support young people. - *EP*

## **Working creatively and flexibly**

EPs and school staff emphasised the importance of EPs having the autonomy to work creatively and flexibly. This enabled them to develop targeted support for those with which they worked. Examples included EPs providing tailored training or bespoke interventions. These were often developed in consultation with education settings and/or families and were reported to have been highly effective in meeting children and young people's and schools' needs.

Some EPs believed the impact of their work was limited when they were unable to tailor support. For example, where local authority-wide training was not tailored to specific provisions or existing frameworks, or where schools were prescriptive about the support they wanted from the EP.

## **Early intervention and system-level work**

As noted throughout the report, EPs providing early intervention and systems-level support were seen as key enablers to achieving longer-term outcomes for wider groups of children and young people at scale. EPs and PEPs believed working in this way broadened the impact they could have for children and young people by, for example,

delivering bespoke whole-school or group training to staff, or by reviewing and influencing school or local authority policies.

Our training is around - how does the context work? How do we change the system? How do we adapt? How do we then meet the needs of many children who are a bit like this one, rather than one at a time. - *PEP*

EPs' research skills worked well in supporting in-depth data collection, co-production<sup>27</sup>, and analysis to inform this system-level change (see [Outcomes for local authorities and wider children and family services](#) for more detail). A multi-agency professional emphasised the importance of EPs' skills in capturing children and young people's voices to support this work:

I think having an EP service that understands and has the ability to translate children and young people's voice into policy is really important. - *Multi-agency professional*

## **Developing positive relationships with children, young people, families and wider professionals**

Establishing positive relationships with children, young people, families, and wider professionals helped EPs to bring about change. EPs, parents/carers and school staff highlighted that children, young people and families being open and honest with their EP was key to facilitating improved outcomes. All stakeholders who discussed this believed EPs were highly skilled in promoting open interactions in a collaborative and constructive way. They attributed this to EPs:

- relationship-based approach to working with children, young people, families, and professionals;
- voluntary support for children, young people and families which helped parent/carer buy-in;
- non-judgemental approach (and a lack of stigma for families who are supported by EPs);
- strong interpersonal skills and clear communication style, particularly with children, young people and families;
- skill in triangulating different perspectives;
- approach to facilitating productive, efficient, and clearly structured meetings in which participants felt 'safe';

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<sup>27</sup> Co-production is an approach where stakeholders (including service providers and service-users) work together to develop or enhance services or provision.

- ability to help manage complex relationships between families and professionals and between different professional groups to help empower them to bring about change:

It's part of the skill of the role... having a relational approach<sup>28</sup> that's a real strength of our service because we really emphasise relationships and quality of relationships. So, we build strong relationships not only with schools, but also with parents and with the young people...it's about systemically thinking about...how can we gently challenge without destroying that relationship. - *EP*

EPs believed these skills led to strong, positive relationships with schools and wider services, and were conducive to providing effective challenge as a 'critical friend' and 'mediator' to improve practices. A SENCO echoed this view, saying they would not have considered adapting their curriculum had the EP not challenged them to do so.

As discussed in [Outcomes for children, young people and families](#), EPs were unanimous that they are uniquely placed to capture the voices of children and young people. They described using different methods to elicit children and young people's views and believed they had a unique, independent, and neutral position within the wider education and children and families services landscape to advocate for children and young people. Some EPs, multi-agency professionals and school staff spoke about the importance of EPs being objective professionals who keep children and young people at the heart of their work. Consequently, they are often highly regarded, respected, and valued.

I think we are in a unique position to really champion child and young people voice because we have the skills and tools to gather those in a different way than perhaps others might. I think being a neutral person outside of the school system, outside of the family system, we're in a unique position to gather that. - *EP*

That said, some SENCOs shared that, occasionally, parents/carers did not understand (due to the use of jargon) or agree with EPs' findings as outlined in their reports. In these instances, this could result in parents/carers ceasing to engage.

## **EPs being linked to specific schools and education settings**

As discussed in the section on [service delivery and demand](#), in local authorities where EPs were linked to specific education settings, school staff and EPs felt this worked well in efficiently achieving outcomes for children and young people. In particular, SENCOs argued that having a dedicated EP linked to their school helped develop trusting

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<sup>28</sup> Relational approaches provide an open, honest, compassionate, and inclusive way of interacting or communicating with others.

relationships with staff and families and provided EPs with an in-depth understanding of the school context. Where EPs worked with the same education settings over time, they argued that the long-term nature of the relationship enabled them to 'ground' themselves in the setting and collaboratively shape their support offer to the wider school context.

Having a named person is crucial. I think if we had different EPs coming in all the time, it would be really tricky. - *SENCO*

We've been fortunate that we've had quite stable educational psychologists that have worked with us. So, they get to know the school, the staff, our ethos, sometimes families, and the way we work. - *SENCO*

EPs that were linked to specific schools found that schools would often contact them for immediate advice or guidance, which school staff found helpful for quickly accessing appropriate support. However, EPs working within such models were not always able to meet ad hoc requests and often needed to work flexibly across a range of schools to meet emerging needs.

Some interviewees believed that EP support should be linked to specific children and young people, rather than settings, to ensure continuity of support. One parent/carer and their EP shared disappointment when the EP's support for the family ceased due to the child moving school. They both felt there should be consistency of EP support for children and young people:

EPs should go with you. It shouldn't be connected with the school, it should be connected with the problem and the person. - *Parent/carer*

## **Effective multi-agency working**

Effective multi-agency working between EPs and wider local authority, health and VCSE professionals was identified as a key enabler in achieving outcomes for children and young people. Multi-agency working enhanced understanding about different roles and supported knowledge development across a range of professionals. Furthermore, it facilitated ad hoc conversations about specific schools or children, young people and families, aiding a holistic perspective. Multi-agency meetings, co-located services, and close working relationships between different services and EPs worked well. One PEP believed that working in a small local authority also helped to facilitate multi-agency collaboration as EPs tended to work with the same professionals.

EPs are sometimes thought of as child psychologists but our work is very much about working through the adults around the child. Hence, multi-agency working is key. - *PEP*

On the other hand, siloed working and skeleton EP services within some local authorities, with a lack of co-location, integration, or capacity for collaboration, were cited as barriers to multi-agency collaboration. One PEP also mentioned challenges associated with IT systems not working together, which limited the impact of multi-agency working. This, stakeholders felt, was not supportive of a holistic, integrated approach most conducive to achieving outcomes.

## Management of EP services

EPs highlighted the importance of collaborative and supportive management of EP services within the EP service. They explained that this helped with multi-agency collaboration, early intervention support, and working creatively with schools and other professionals. They also emphasised the importance of internal supervision from more senior EPs within their service which provided EPs a safe space to reflect on their practice to support continuous improvement and focus on improving outcomes.

## What could be improved?

### The capacity of EP services

A recurring theme throughout the report has been EPs' capacity to effectively provide the support that they and others believe to be most impactful. Stakeholders agreed that EPs' time tended to be monopolised by EHC needs assessments and that they could add further value through systemic work, multi-agency collaboration, and early intervention. In particular, school staff wanted further direct intervention work with children, young people and families.

Statutory work is really important. But I don't know if it's the most efficient way to make a difference. - *EP*

School staff explained that constraints on EPs' capacity negatively affected the delivery of interventions and training in their settings. They felt that more regular access to an EP would further embed knowledge, skills, and learning. EPs echoed this view; they wanted more involvement in delivering interventions and training but often had to prioritise their statutory work (discussed further in [Demand for EP services](#)).

EPs' limited ability to get involved in non-statutory activities, due to capacity constraints, affected children's, young people's, families', and professionals' understanding of EPs' broader skills, such as training and consultation (as discussed in [Understanding the role of EPs](#)).

EPs can do huge amounts of work and it's really frustrating, you know, in a local authority, for example, where they're bringing in people to do training around social pedagogy.... Why aren't they asking the EPs to deliver that training? - *EP*



## Schools' capacity, resources, and priorities

EPs' work in schools tended to be indirect, with school staff taking on the role of direct support with children and young people (discussed in [Examples of EPs' work with education settings](#)). Some EPs, multi-agency and education professionals described this as a potential barrier to achieving outcomes for children and young people.

EPs and PEPs wanted school staff to transfer learning from having supported one child to other children and to reflect on their practice and learning. They also wanted to ensure schools were able to implement EPs' recommendations as outlined in EHCPs. EPs explained that education settings were struggling with high staff turnover or staff shortages, including a lack of teaching/learning assistants, and often did not have the capacity themselves to implement suggested strategies and practice. One PEP explained:

We did a service evaluation last month with all our SENCOs and they said the biggest barriers for them implementing the recommendations they have been given by the EP was lack of staffing. - *PEP*

EPs believed that where schools had limited budgets, they often prioritised EHC needs assessments over potential early intervention or systems change support. This limited the amount and type of work EPs were able to engage in, as it was sometimes constrained by the priorities of school senior leaders. EPs gave examples of some senior leaders being unwilling or unable to review their systems and policies, thus limiting the scope for EPs to bring about change.

Some EPs also argued that a proportion of their local authorities' traded services should be free for all schools, children and young people. A commonly cited example related to support to improve attendance. They felt this should not only be available to schools that could afford EPs' support in this area.

One of the biggest restraints is time and money. Schools feel they have to do a certain level of assessment and exploring of needs at an individual level, in order to meet those kids' needs in schools. So, EPs don't necessarily have the freedom or time to do the additional work, that work that stops you needing to request so many EHCPs. It's a tricky catch-22. - *EP*

Furthermore, some EPs expressed frustration with traded service models whereby school priorities could shape the support they purchased from the EP service. EPs welcomed the opportunity for greater consultation about the support they could provide as this may enable them to deliver more early intervention or systems-level support.

## Access to further, multi-agency support

Interviewees highlighted challenges in accessing wider support services, including CAMHS in particular, and argued this needed to improve to better support children and young people. EPs reported that many of the children and young people they worked with needed intensive therapeutic support for their mental health but were unable to access this due to challenges with accessing CAMHS services (discussed in [Working with other services](#)).

Mental health is the most difficult because CAMHS are saying 'no'. You know, the school knows, the parent knows that this child desperately needs therapeutic input. I'm not personally qualified to deliver that. - *EP*

EPs reported that some children, young people and families had been refused the additional and dedicated support that EPs recommended due to multiple services already being involved with a family. EPs explained that this may lead to needs escalating further. Some interviewees felt that EPs should play a larger role advocating for parents/carers to receive further support. As one multi-agency professional suggested:

Feeling listened to and heard that their children's needs are being taken seriously and that the school is being supportive. And just having somebody to advocate and help you navigate through some very confusing and complex processes, I think is always very helpful.  
- *Multi-agency professional*

## Enhancing understanding about the EP role

Whilst overall interviewees believed EPs had positive relationships with families, the data highlighted several key misunderstandings about their role. A small number of interviewees reported that some families initially felt intimidated by the word 'psychologist'. One EP explained that this could be misinterpreted to mean 'psychiatrist', which may be off-putting for some families.

To mitigate misunderstanding about EPs' roles, one EP service developed a resource for parents/carers with information about who EPs are and what they do, and had it translated into multiple languages to ensure it was accessible to all.

## Challenging relationships between schools and families

In a small number of examples, EPs, SENCOs and parents/carers explained that challenging relationships between some parents/carers and the school made it more difficult for EPs to provide support. EPs explained these situations were often difficult and time-consuming to negotiate. However, as discussed in [Developing positive relationships](#)

[with children, young people, families and wider professionals](#), school staff more commonly celebrated EPs' ability to mediate relationships between schools and families.

# Educational Psychologists in the future

## Key findings

Overall, the majority of PEPs were not confident that their EP service would continue to meet need if funding, training and service delivery models remained the same.

This chapter considers various policy scenarios that could address the current issues related to the supply of EPs and their workloads. This included:

- A self-funded or part-funded model of doctoral training
- Expanding the use of Assistant EPs
- Extending the period EPs were required to work in a local authority after graduation

There was very little support amongst EPs, PEPs and training providers for introducing a self-funded or part-funded model of doctoral training. The majority of current and recent trainees said that they would not have embarked on training if it had been self-funded, while PEPs similarly expressed concerns that a self-funded model could lead to a fall in the number of EPs being trained. Both groups, as well as the training providers, believed that such a model would reduce diversity in the profession, resulting in an EP workforce that lacked understanding of the communities they serve.

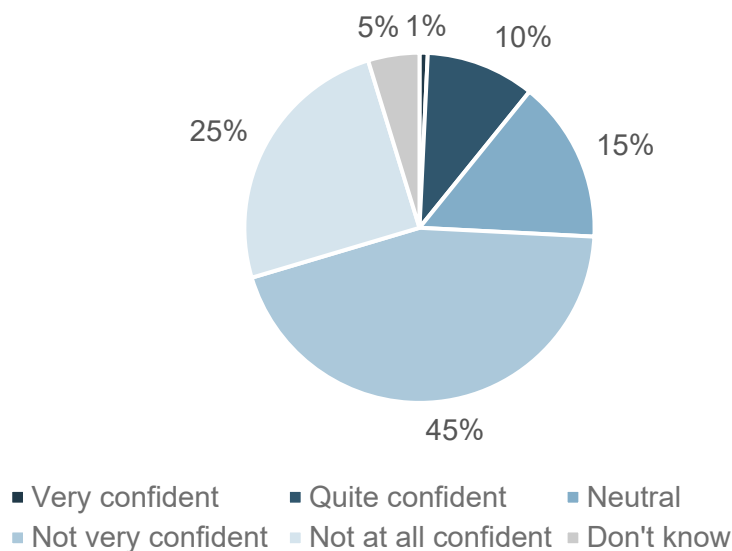
There was also some caution regarding the use of Assistant EPs to increase capacity, particularly in supporting statutory work. Assistant EPs usually have a BPS accredited undergraduate or master's level qualification and will often go on to pursue the EP doctorate. Where an Assistant EP has formed an early connection with a local authority before becoming a trainee, this can form a pipeline, with the Assistant later returning as a qualified in EP in that local authority.

Views on the potential impact of extending the period EPs were required to work in a local authority or similar organisation from the current two years varied. Some thought that it was reasonable to extend the requirement, given the investment local authorities made in training. Others were concerned that such a policy would result in newly qualified EPs working in potentially unfavourable conditions, providing a disincentive to improve such conditions.

The previous sections of this report have outlined some supply issues regarding the number of training places available and challenges in the recruitment and retention of qualified EPs within local authorities. Also identified were demand issues related to the year-on-year increase in the number of EHCPs being requested and how this has reduced the time available for EPs to engage in early intervention and systemic work. This section explores various policy scenarios to understand how these supply and demand issues could be addressed.

PEPs and EPs were asked how confident they were that their services would be able to meet future need if funding, training and service delivery models stayed the same. Figure 15 shows their responses.

**Figure 15 If funding, training and service delivery models remain the same, how confident are you that your services are able to meet future need?**



Source: PEP survey, n=66

As the Figure shows, 11% of respondents said that they were 'very' or 'quite' confident that their services would be able to meet future need, while 70% were 'not very confident' or 'not confident at all'. This suggests that changes to funding, training and service delivery may be needed if EP services are to meet future need<sup>29</sup>.

## Changes to funding of training

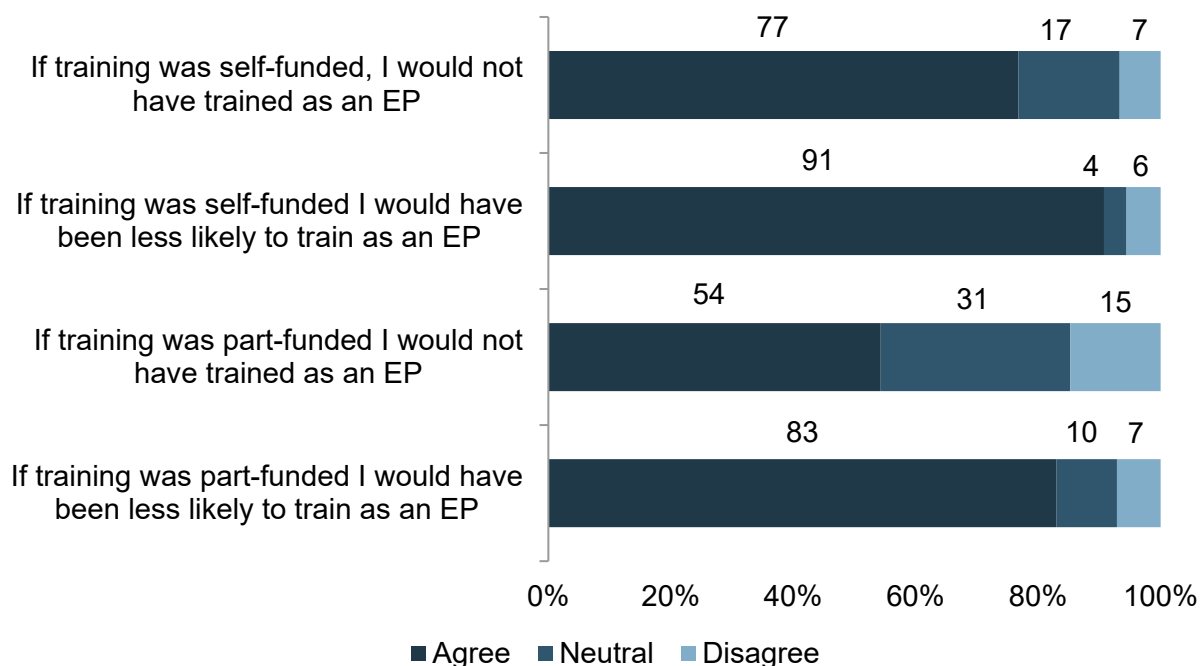
EPs, PEPs and training providers were asked in the surveys, focus groups and interviews about the potential impact of changing the funding model.

There was little support for changes to the funding model. If training had been self-funded, 91% of current and recent trainees said they would have been less likely to train as an EP, and 77% would not have trained at all. If training had been part-funded, 83% would have been less likely to train as an EP, and 54% said they would not have trained at all. If training had been self-funded, only 7% said they would definitely still have trained, with only 15% saying the same for the part funded model.

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<sup>29</sup> The impact of increasing the number of funded training places to over 200 will not be fully realised until September 2023 when the majority of these trainees complete their doctorates and move into employment. This impact is therefore outside the timeframe of this research.

**Figure 16 Impact of self- and part-funding on whether EPs would have trained as an EP**



Source: EP survey Trainees and current qualified EPs, n=831

The following quotes reflect these findings on the impact self- or part-funding would have on EPs’ decisions to train as an EP.

I can’t see any realistic way I’d have trained as an EP if it was self-funded- and I say this as someone from a relatively well off background, so I dread to imagine how self-funding would impact the diversity of the profession. I would have been much less likely to undertake the training as the pay after completing the course does not justify the cost of partial or full self-funding - *EP*

Self-funding would never have been an option to allow me to become an EP. As a trainee EP who comes from a working class background towards the start of my career I could not possibly have funded myself through the course and imagine this would be the same for the vast majority of trainees - *Trainee EP*

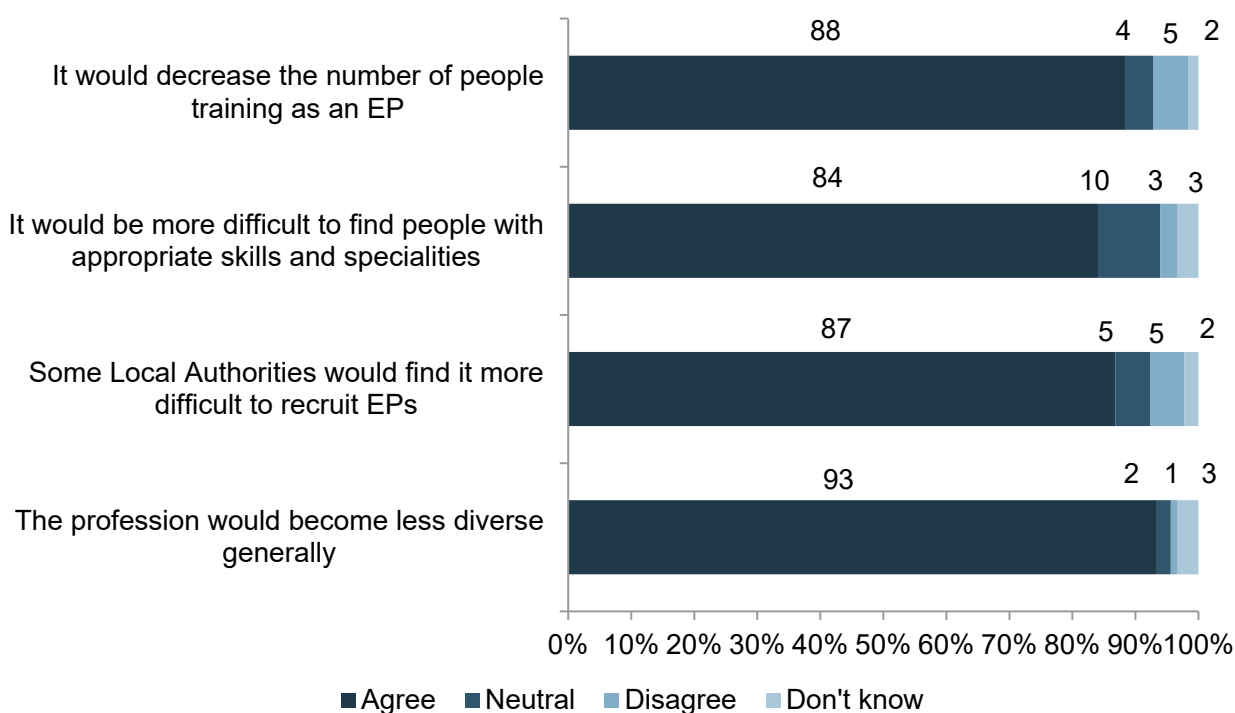
Similarly, qualified EPs and PEPs were asked what impact they thought training being self- or part-funded would have on the workforce. As Figures 17 and 18 show, 88%

believed that self-funded training would decrease the number of people training as an EP, with 77% believing the part-funded training would have a similar impact<sup>30</sup>.

There would be a sudden shortage of qualified EPs and those still remaining would find their work targeted towards statutory work thereby reducing opportunities for early intervention. In the end, this would mean less equal access to EP services - *EP*

The overwhelming majority of PEPs and EPs also thought that self-funded training would make it more difficult to find people with the appropriate skills and specialities (84%), that some local authorities would find it more difficult to recruit EPs (87%), and that self-funded training would make the profession less diverse generally (93%).

**Figure 17 Impact on the workforce of training being self-funded, according to PEPs**

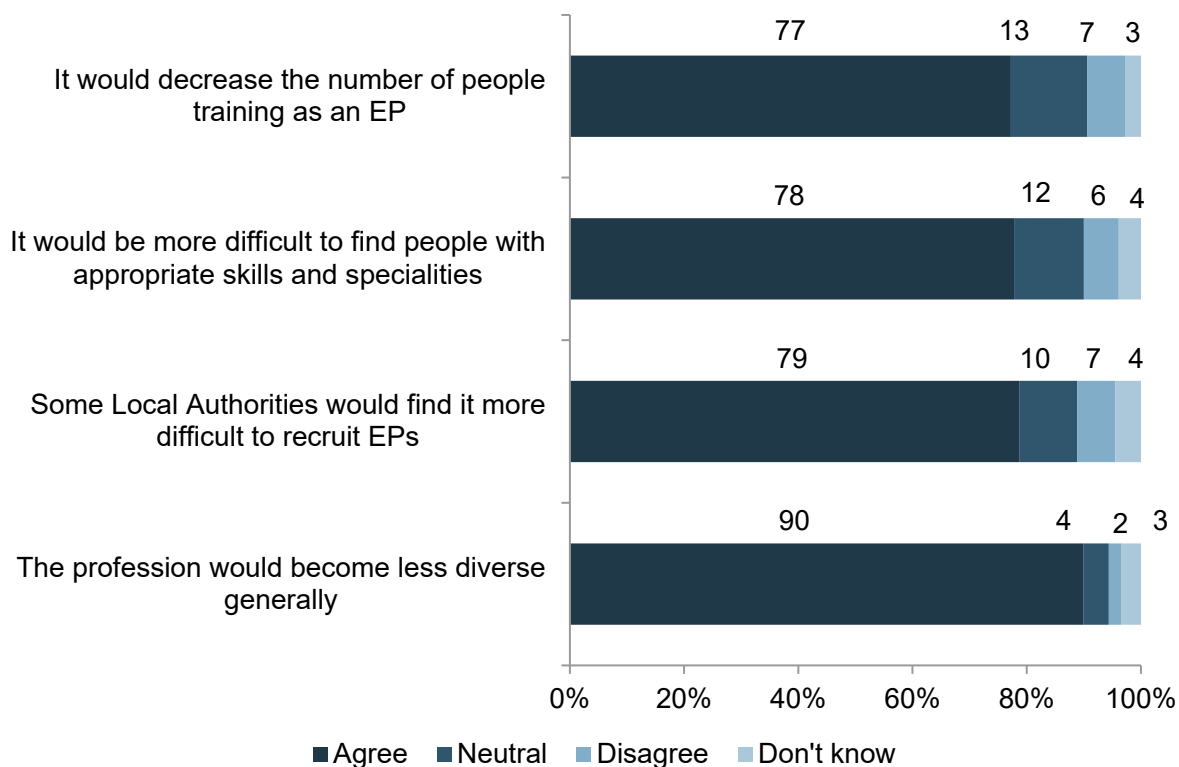


Source: PEP survey n=67

High proportions thought that part-funded training would have a similar impact on the EP workforce.

<sup>30</sup> It must be noted that the number of applicants for training places far exceeds the number of training places available, with 1103 applications being made for 203 training places in 2022 (AEP data)

**Figure 18 Impact on the workforce of training being part-funded, according to PEPs**



Source: PEP survey n=67

When asked about the impact of any changes to the funding model, EPs and PEPs most frequently cited concerns about diversity in the profession and the impact this would have on the ability to meet the needs of children and young people from a diverse array of backgrounds.

It would make what is already a largely middle-class profession even less diverse and even less reflective of the families and communities we work with. It would become a profession for those from highly affluent backgrounds. Diverse voices and experiences are essential for the development of the profession. Rather than selecting trainees on merit, courses would select based on who was able to afford to complete the course. Knowing the cost of completing the course alongside paying for living costs I would anticipate that the number of people able to self-fund would be very small. Local authorities are already facing significant difficulties recruiting qualified EPs, this could only exacerbate this problem - EP



## Role of Assistant Educational Psychologists

Largely drawing on the interviews and focus groups with PEPs, as well as survey comments from EPs and trainees, this section looks at PEPs' assessment of the role of Assistant EPs and how they are being deployed in EP services. As noted, Assistant EPs have a psychology degree and are typically employed on a fixed-term contract, as there is an expectation that they progress on to the EP doctoral programme.

Local authorities varied considerably in their use of Assistant EPs. Some had employed Assistant EPs for years, some had introduced them recently, and others had never employed an Assistant EP. Some PEPs explained that Assistant EPs had largely been introduced in response to EP recruitment challenges, funded through vacant EP posts.

PEPs reported that Assistant EPs can increase the capacity of EP services by supporting EPs in their work. There is, however, also a need for induction and supervision: one local authority suggested that Assistant EPs required approximately two months of shadowing an EP before they could work more independently. As this process is time-consuming, another local authority was in the process of supporting other local authorities in the region as to how best to support Assistant EPs.

It was also suggested that there was a range of practices in terms of how Assistant EPs work in local authorities. This led a working group being set up in one region to look at how different services are using Assistant EPs and what is and what is not appropriate.

Although Assistant EPs are not qualified to undertake statutory work, some PEPs explained that there was scope for Assistants EP to contribute at the information gathering stage.

... (the) psychology assistant would either support or come with me on a home visit, or they might carry out an observation in the playground and then we use that information as part of our report, but they're not able to do such work per se. (...) In the code of practice it states very clearly that it needs to be an educational psychologist who provides that information. - *PEP*

There are therefore limitations in the use of Assistant EPs in terms of meeting the large demand for EHCPs.

Responses from the EP survey suggested that Assistant EPs could take on a range of tasks. Most commonly this included observations of children and young people; conducting interventions, including early interventions; and conducting research, evaluation and developing policy and practice. Very few EPs thought that Assistant EPs could support communities in critical situations. These findings are supported by a recent survey of Assistant EPs, which found that most common amongst their wide-ranging

tasks were training for school staff, observations, consulting with school staff, and collecting children and young people's views (Harland, Kitchingman and Elder, 2022).

In terms of the benefits of employing Assistant EPs, one local authority at a relatively early stage of adopting Assistant EPs was cautiously optimistic, reporting that they have 'increased productivity and enthusiasm', while other indicators of success still needed to be monitored, including the contributions of Assistant EPs to EHCPs. It was also reported that some EPs welcome Assistant EPs getting involved in EHC needs assessments as supervision 'is another string to their bow' (i.e., their activities), while others might prefer to do the assessments themselves.

Currently, the Assistant EP role is broadly seen by PEPs as a precursor to embarking on doctoral training, rather than a long-term career in itself, with the Soulbury Report 2019 recommending a maximum of up to four years on the Assistant EP scale (AEP, 2022<sup>31</sup>). This is reflected in the qualitative research, which found that Assistant EPs were employed for a time-limited period by local authorities, with some referring to a year or two, after which they may wish to embark on the doctoral training programme. While temporary contracts were also predominant in the AEP survey, nearly a quarter were reported to be on a permanent contract (Harland, Kitchingman and Elder, 2022).

A recent study found that Assistant EPs were more likely to be accepted on to the doctoral programme than other applicants (Harland, Kitchingman and Elder, 2022). However, if the number of Assistant EPs continues to increase and the number of training places stays the same, the popularity of the course may mean that many Assistant EPs will be unable to embark on the doctoral programme. Furthermore, if local authority demand for EP roles does increase, this would need to be accompanied by sufficient EP supervisory capacity.

The possibility of developing Assistant EP roles as a longer-term career, potentially with an associated qualification such as a master's degree or an Apprenticeship, was discussed with training providers and PEPs. Training providers were not in favour of such a qualification due to several concerns, mainly that funding might be diverted from the EP doctoral training programme to afford this and that a one-year programme would not equip Assistant EPs properly for the role.

Due to difficulties recruiting EPs, local authorities welcomed the return of Assistant EPs to the local authority after they qualified as EPs. However, while there were some cases reported of Assistant EPs doing just this, it was less frequent than expected, as one PEP explains.

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<sup>31</sup> The Soulbury Committee (2019) The report of the Soulbury Committee on the salary scales and service conditions of educational improvement professionals, Educational Psychologists and young people's/community service managers. Available at <https://www.aep.org.uk/system/files/2022-03/Soulbury%20Report%202019.pdf>.

And the original hope was that they would come back and work for [name of local authority] afterwards, but that hasn't really come to fruition. We've had a couple come back to be fair, but you know out of the numbers that we've sort of trained and then advanced onto the doctoral training, not that many really have come back. It still seems to be that where they did the final placement [was relevant] than go back to the service where they were an Assistant EP. - *PEP*

## Changing the requirement for local authority work

Currently, EPs who have received funding for their training are required to work in a local authority for two years after graduation. The research sought to understand whether increasing the length of time a newly qualified EP was required to work in a local authority would affect uptake of training and/or improve capacity issues.

Responses from PEPs and EPs were mixed. Around a third (35%) thought that increasing the amount of time newly qualified EPs were required to work in a local authority would reduce uptake, but a further third (33%) thought that it would not and a final third (32%) said that they did not know what the impact would be.

Those who thought that increasing the time requirement would have no impact on the uptake of training were generally also in favour of doing so. Their reasons, most commonly, related to a sense that training an EP was expensive and that it was reasonable to expect that EPs would give back in return. In addition, this group commonly mentioned that they thought that most EPs wanted to work for local authorities, at least initially.

I personally don't think it is a hardship to work for the local authority and with the cost of professional training, I think 5 years is a reasonable commitment in return for funding - *EP*

I think applicant numbers are at a year-on-year high. I think increasing the demand for EPs to remain working for the local authority for a minimum of five years is reasonable given the costs of training (plus on-costs to local authorities of supporting trainee EPs). I think it is unhelpful that people can train for free and then work in private practice, very often away from where they are most needed and in many cases, against the local authority - *PEP*

I think ideologically most EPs want to work for local authorities, through traded models have impacted this. Most EPs are doing their role for the children and young people not for personal gain. Most [Newly Qualified Educational Psychologists] want a period of embedding their skills by working in a local authority. The only

exception may be if there were extenuating circumstances why they could not continue to work for a local authority - *PEP*

Some PEPs expressed concern that extending the amount of time newly qualified EPs were required to work in local authorities could restrict them to work that was less desirable in terms of content, pay or other conditions. This would just move retention problems slightly further into the future and reduce the incentive to local authorities to improve these conditions.

Because most EPs do not like to do statutory assessments for EHCPs, it doesn't use our skills well, so I think committing to local authority work for five years would be off-putting for some - *EP*

Respondents also mentioned that they thought this could have a particularly negative impact on people planning to have children and anticipating reducing their hours or seeking more flexible work, and that it could impact on diversity and inclusion and creativity in the profession.

As a trainee, you already have to make life decisions years in advance (3 years for training and 2 years post qualification) to make this even longer would not be possible for many for example, those with or thinking about starting a family - *Trainee EP*

5 years is a big commitment for people. The EP 'market place' is a rapidly changing arena and there are more diverse roles EPs can go into and creative ways of delivering EP services. 5 years would be a big constraint on EPs working in diverse ways - *EP*

Data presented in the [section of recruitment and retention](#) showed that movement out of local authority work is not particularly common in EPs' early careers and is seen much more frequently amongst more experienced EPs. Consequently, if the current policy were changed, this is unlikely to have a great effect on capacity issues in local authorities, as it is targeted towards a group within the workforce that has not demonstrated particularly high levels of outward mobility from local authorities.

# Conclusion

## The range of services delivered by EPs

The first aim of the research was to explore the range of services Educational Psychologists (EPs) deliver beyond statutory Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), including EPs' current role in early interventions and how this might look in the future.

The research showed that EP services are in high demand. EPs deliver unique services as part of a complex system of support for children and young people. Their work is highly valued by schools, children and young people, families, and other professionals. However, their contribution is limited both by their capacity and, to an extent, the limited understanding of their role amongst some other specialist support services. The high demand for EP services is, in part, due to the increase in the number of EHCPs seen over recent years. This places particular capacity constraints on EPs' ability to meet demand for non-statutory services.

There is some potential for Assistant EPs and non-EP professionals from the wider service provider network to offer greater support for EPs. However, due to the specialist training undertaken by EPs, and the amount of statutory work they conduct, EPs thought that there is a limited selection of their work that it would be either desirable or possible for others to take on, even if they had the capacity to do so.

EPs, PEPs and multiagency stakeholders described a cycle in which, due to a large amount of EHCP work, EPs lacked capacity to engage in the early intervention work that they felt could reduce the initial number of EHCP requests. Interviewees highlighted a need for EPs to engage in early intervention work at the individual, institutional and system-wide levels to prevent the escalation of need. However, instead of early intervention and prevention work, EPs are increasingly working with children and young people at the point that they require specialist support, for example, through an EHCP, and have limited capacity outside of meeting local authorities' statutory duties regarding EHCP assessments. EPs generally agreed they wanted to do more early intervention work in the future, but PEPs were not sure of the feasibility of this within the current structure of EP services.

## Demand for EP services and their impact

The second aim was to explore the demand for EP services in education settings, and whether EP services were able to meet schools' needs. Additionally, the research aimed to discover whether the service was perceived as effective and its impact on children and young people.

The research showed that demand for EPs often exceeded supply, and this was most acute in relation to EHCPs and early intervention work. This meant that while the service

was generally held in high regard by service users, issues were arising due to a lack of capacity. This had also resulted in some confusion about what services EPs were able to offer. When schools and other service providers only saw EPs doing statutory work, they thought that this was all they could or should be doing. This resulted in an under-utilisation of the skills and knowledge of EPs.

Despite the challenges associated with identifying outcomes and impacts from EPs' work, interviewees identified a range of positive outcomes at the child/young person and family level, school/education setting level, and more widely at the system level. Whilst for some children and young people, outcomes directly related to the EHCP process, overall it was suggested that the most impactful aspect of an EP's role was early intervention and systemic work.

### **EP training and retention and meeting demand for EPs sustainably**

The third aim of the research was to explore views on EP training and retention in local authority Educational Psychology services and the ability to meet demand for EPs sustainably.

Overall, PEPs and EPs had a positive view of the current EP training provision. It was regarded as being of high quality and generally providing a good mix of theoretical and practical skills. Concerns were expressed by PEPs, EPs, and training providers that the bursary amount was perceived to be low and that this was a disincentive for some people to train as EPs. Given that the training course is over-subscribed, concerns largely related to the impact of the bursary level on diversity in the profession, rather than on attracting a sufficient number of applicants. PEPs also noted that some local authorities struggled either to provide placements, either due to lack of capacity or because they were not perceived as attractive to trainees, largely due to their location or the type of work they could offer. This had long-term consequences for the ability of these local authorities to recruit qualified EPs.

Moves into private practice, particularly by EPs in mid- or later careers had a considerable impact on the workforce. PEPs and EPs perceived that private practice could offer more diverse work because generally private providers had more flexibility in the type of work they undertook, and often did not choose to take on high levels of statutory work. Respondents also perceived that pay levels were higher in private practice.

Despite the perceived benefits of private work, local authority working was seen as one way in which EPs could achieve various altruistic motivations, such as the desire to help those most in need. It was also seen to offer stable work, often with better access to workplace benefits and pensions than private practice was able to offer.

Due to the mismatch between the growing number of EHCPs and the number of EPs in the workforce, demand for EPs is very high and PEPs and EPs generally thought this

was unsustainable. Increasing the number of EPs being trained every year is unlikely to meet this demand sustainably due to the continued upward trend in the number of EHCPs being requested and issued. However, there was little evidence that any other supply-side interventions (for example, using Assistant EPs, or lengthening the time EPs work in local authorities after qualifying) would have sufficient impact to address this mismatch.

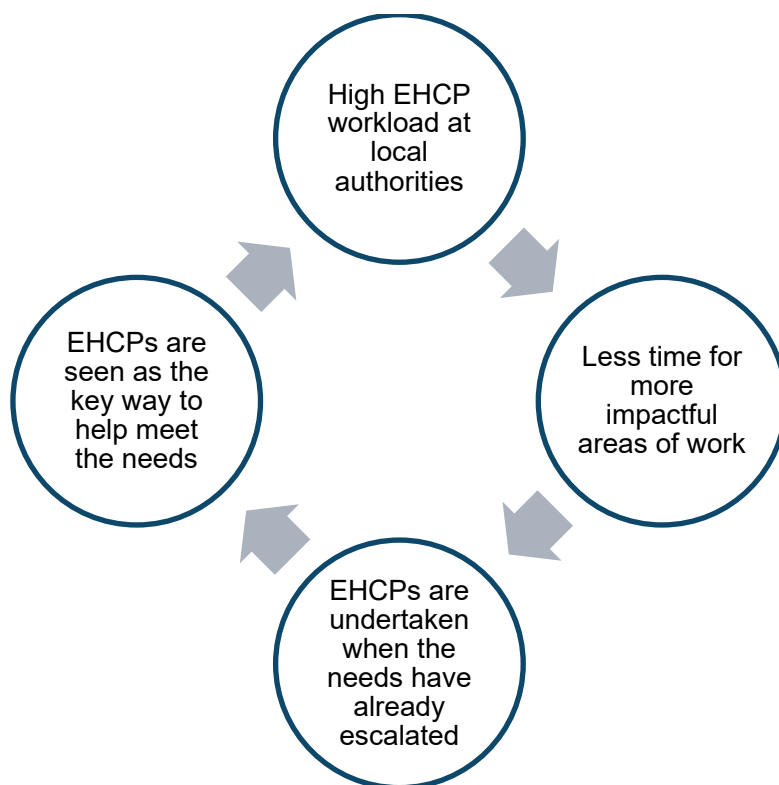
Given how widespread the recruitment and retention issues faced by the educational psychology profession were, there was little evidence of a geographical pattern to these issues. There were very few local authorities who were not affected.

## **Key conclusions**

The key overall message emerging from this research is that EPs provide an important and valued service. However, as their capacity has become stretched by rising demand for statutory work, exacerbated by other funding and resourcing constraints, there is a growing perception amongst EPs, and those who work with them, that achieving the impact they desire is becoming increasingly challenging.

The research has shown that the role of EPs has evolved over recent times. In particular, with the emergence of a vicious cycle in which demand for statutory work has limited the extent to which EPs can engage in the kinds of work that might reduce the need for this statutory work. EPs reported having little time to support schools in identifying potential issues and advising them on how to address these issues early before they escalated in scope and seriousness, until they reached a point where specialist support was needed. They also reported that they lacked time to provide guidance to other professionals supporting children, young people and families.

**Figure 19 The vicious circle between high EHCP workloads and early intervention work**



How this might be addressed is a matter of debate amongst EPs and other stakeholders. Some of the issues identified here could be addressed in the short-to-medium term by increasing capacity within the system, in other words by addressing supply-side factors. However, the timeliness, sustainability and cost of purely supply-side interventions present challenges. The benefits of increasing the number of EPs being trained takes time to move through the system, with a three-year lag between a trainee starting their training and graduating to be able to work as a qualified EP. The cost and sustainability of attempting to increase the size of the EP workforce year-on-year to match the increases in the number of EHCPs also presents a barrier to such supply-focussed interventions. This research has considered some more nuanced supply-side initiatives, such as making adjustments to the funding of training, increasing the time newly qualified EPs are required to work in local authorities, and exploring the potential for expanding the use of Assistant EPs to grow capacity in local authorities. However, evidence to suggest that such initiatives will have an impact of sufficient magnitude to address the issues is mixed.

Generally, trainees, EPs and PEPs expressed satisfaction with the current training model, with the perceived small size of the bursaries and the limited number of training places being the only consistent criticisms. Consequently, initiatives that involve increasing the amount trainees are required to support themselves during their training period were not well supported by respondents. The majority of current and recent trainees stated that they would not have trained as an EP if they had been required to pay for this training themselves, most commonly, because they simply would not have



been able to afford to do so. Concerns were expressed that the introduction of self-funding or part-funding to the training model on a large-scale would impact diversity in the profession and the ability of EP services to understand and meet the needs of the diverse populations they are intended to serve.

EPs provide a unique and fundamental role in collaborating with other services to meet the needs of children, young people and families. Their ability to adapt and to apply their specialist, expert knowledge and skills in a range of ways and settings was seen by EPs themselves, and those who work with them or use their services, as being key to their impact. EPs were valued for their creative, flexible, inclusive, and solutions-focused approaches to supporting other professionals and children, young people and families. Their ability to give a voice to, and advocate for, other professionals, children and young people, and parents/carers, and to build relationships with them, is at the heart of their work. Any initiatives that reduced diversity in the profession would present a challenge to their collective ability to do this work.

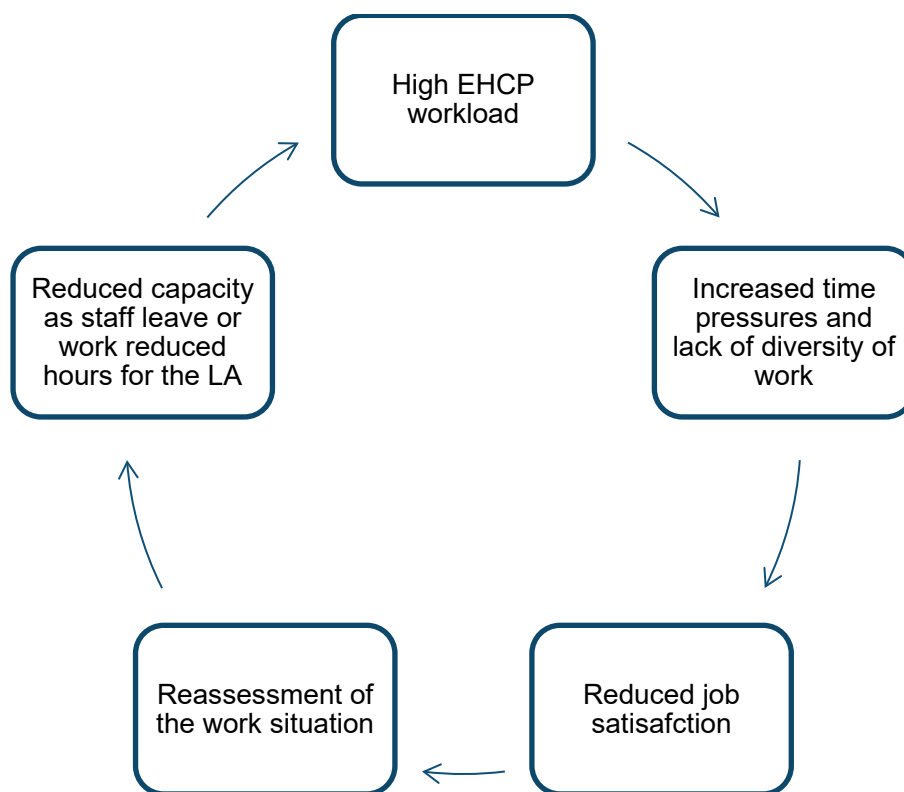
EPs work within a complex system that is under pressure, and in high, and increasing, demand due to demand for EHCPs, funding constraints, resourcing, and conflicting priorities between some services. This has an impact on EPs' job satisfaction, work-life balance and their ability, alongside other services, to meet the need of children and young people with increasingly complex needs. Local authorities face difficulties recruiting staff and, to a lesser extent, retaining them. Set against this backdrop, some participants raised reservations about the desirability of initiatives like increasing the amount of time newly qualified EPs were required to work in local authorities or other organisations providing support for statutory work. While some participants thought that such initiatives represented a fair return by newly qualified EPs for the time and money local authorities invested in their training, others thought that mandating people to work in what they perceived to be undesirable working conditions would serve as a disincentive to improving those conditions. Moreover, the research showed that there did not appear to be a great movement out of local authority work during the early years of EPs' careers. Where local authorities lost staff, this appeared to happen later in EPs' careers, with movements into private practice and EPs reducing their hours limiting the amount of EP time available to local authorities. There was also evidence that many local authorities felt increasingly powerless to address these issues.

EPs' work is determined by the funding models within local authorities, and this varies across the country. Some EP services are provided free at the point of access (i.e., at school), while some followed a traded model whereby additional support could be bought in. Other areas employed private EPs and/or accessed local or central government funding for EPs to work on specific projects and interventions. Some models offer more scope for initiatives to improve EPs' perceptions of their working conditions, in particular, to provide them with the type of work that they believe uses their training and skills to their best potential. Some local authorities had, to an extent, been able to organise EPs' workloads to provide diverse opportunities to use their skills and experience, and to limit

the proportion of time EPs spent on statutory work. However, there was a generally held view amongst PEPs that local authorities were reaching the limits of their own ability to organise work in this way, in an attempt to recruit and retain staff.

Demand for statutory work, and the timescales they were required to meet, meant that statutory work needed to be prioritised. This provided an incentive for EPs to move out of local authority work into private practice in search of more diverse, less stressful work, which, they believed, also generally offered higher levels of pay. A particular trend in this research was the development by some EPs of hybrid careers in which they worked part-time in a local authority and part-time in private practice. As EPs moved out of local authority work, and the local authorities struggled to recruit replacements, those remaining had to take on more statutory work because completing statutory work had to be prioritised. This further reduced job satisfaction amongst this group and increased the risk that they too would leave the local authority.

**Figure 20 Impact of high EHCP workloads and composition on EP staffing in local authorities**



The research examined various potential ways in which a greater support network could be established around qualified EPs, namely the potential for an expansion of Assistant EP numbers and more joined up working with other local authority education and health professionals. EPs are highly qualified and skilled professionals, and these qualifications and skills are necessary for the kind of work that they do. However, EPs and the organisations that work with them identified various barriers to developing an impactful support network around them.

There were limits to the type of work Assistant EPs could or should be expected to take on. PEPs expressed reservations about, for example, involving them in statutory assessment work. Assistant EPs may be able to support some of the non-statutory assessment work undertaken by qualified EPs, but this would not address the issue of qualified EPs feeling that they were over-burdened by statutory work. The most successful strategic use of Assistant EPs appeared to occur when the Assistant EP role was viewed as part of a pipeline that would eventually lead that person to become employed in the local authority after they had completed their doctorate. However, while this would benefit local authorities who were able to employ an Assistant EP and support them through their training, the finite number of EPs available means that it also increases the risk of creating a 'have and have not' situation in which some local authorities thrive and grow while others decline. The relatively greater ability of some local authorities to offer placements to trainees was already identified by PEPs and training providers as a barrier to the recruitment of qualified EPs in some local authorities, as trainees showed a propensity to want to remain or return to a local authority where they did their placement after graduation. Adding the additional layer of whether a local authority could employ someone as an Assistant EP before they started doctoral training means that some local authorities could enjoy a considerable advantage when competing to recruit qualified EPs in later years.

Developing a greater support network around qualified EPs could also involve greater collaborative working with wider service providers in health, education and other local authority services. The research found that this was potentially hindered by two issues: understanding of the role and skills of EPs, and funding and capacity issues amongst the wider provider network. The research found a lack of understanding about what EPs do, can do, and should be doing, to improve outcomes for children, young people and families. As a result, EPs' role in early intervention and systems-level change was often overlooked. Understandably, the education and multi-agency professionals, parents/carers, and children and young people who had a closer and sustained working relationship with EPs had a more in-depth understanding about the EP role. They also saw what else EPs could offer if there were fewer constraints on their capacity within the current system. Linked to this variable and at times, narrow, view of the EP role, the research found there were also sometimes unrealistic or conflicting expectations of how EPs should be supporting education settings, wider services, and children and young people. When other professionals do not understand the role of EPs, they are also unlikely to understand how they can support them.

There was some overlap between the support EPs were offering, or could offer, and that of some other professionals, namely school and CAMHS staff. More needs to be done to explore how local structures/provision, resources, and other professionals may be best utilised to offer specific provision to free up the capacity of EPs. A greater understanding of how the complex system for supporting children and young people operates, and where different parts could work together and complement each other, would also make a positive difference for education and multi-agency professionals. Examples included

improved knowledge, confidence, and understanding to enable them to better support children and young people; opportunities for self-reflection and peer support and learning; and improved relationships with families.

The aforementioned initiatives largely focus on supply-side interventions, that is, ways to increase the number and capacity of EPs working in local authorities. As can be seen, the efficacy of these interventions is likely to vary across local authorities, but there is no evidence to suggest that, alone or in combination, these supply-side interventions will be sufficient to address the increasingly urgent capacity issues the Educational Psychology system is facing. This raises the question of whether there are demand-side interventions that could be introduced alone or in combination with supply-side interventions to address these issues. This research was not designed to investigate the potential for demand-side initiatives for addressing the capacity issues that have been shown to be limiting the impact EPs are able to have through their work. Given the complexity of such demand-side interventions, particularly when they are likely to relate to statutory duties, there is a need for further research before any conclusions can be reached.

Overall, it appears that while there are interventions that might improve how the finite capacity of the EP system is utilised in local authorities, further work and thinking is needed to enable the EP system to achieve the range of positive impacts that EPs, schools, children and young people, and parents and carers believe it both could and should have.

## Annex 1: Research questions covered in each of the study elements

**Table A1: Questions on service delivery – by research strand**

Service delivery	PEP survey	EP survey	PEP <sup>1</sup>	WS <sup>2</sup>	TP <sup>3</sup>	Case studies
What and how are EP services delivered in the context of a wider system of specialist support?	✓		✓	✓		✓
What services do EPs deliver in practice?	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
What service do EPs deliver beyond their statutory work on EHCP?	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
What services are uniquely deliverable by EPs?	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Are there elements of the EP role that Assistant EPs could carry out?	✓	✓	✓	✓		
What EP services can be delivered by other professionals?	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
What role do EPs currently play in early intervention and support?			✓	✓		✓
What role could EPs play in early intervention and support?			✓	✓		✓

Legend: <sup>1</sup> PEP interviews and focus groups, <sup>2</sup> Wider stakeholders: focus group and interviews, <sup>3</sup> Training provider focus group

**Table A2: Questions on meeting needs and impact – by research strand**

Meeting needs and impact	PEP survey	EP survey	PEP <sup>1</sup>	WS <sup>2</sup>	TP <sup>3</sup>	Case studies
What is the demand for EP services in education settings?	✓			✓		✓
What are the support needs of schools and does the service they receive meet their needs?				✓		✓
Do schools, children and young people, parents/carers, and EPs themselves perceive the service as effective?				✓		✓
How are services delivered to schools, and how does this link to pupil outcomes?						✓
What impact does the EP service have on schools and children and young people?	✓			✓		✓

Legend: <sup>1</sup> PEP interviews and focus groups, <sup>2</sup> Wider stakeholders: focus group and interviews, <sup>3</sup> Training provider focus group

**Table A3: Questions on training, workforce retention and meeting EP demand sustainably – by research strand**

<b>Training, workforce retention and meeting EP demand sustainably</b>	<b>PEP survey</b>	<b>EP survey</b>	<b>PEP<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>WS<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>TP<sup>3</sup></b>	<b>Case studies</b>
What is working well/less well in terms of EP training?	✓	✓			✓	
What factors influence EP's decision to undertake doctoral training?		✓				
What career decisions do EP's make and what does this mean for the size of the workforce?		✓				
What are the drivers of and barriers to EP's entering and remaining in the workforce?	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
How can the demand for EP's be met sustainably?	✓					✓
Are there any particular local/regional EP recruitment and retention challenges and if so how could LAs address those?	✓		✓		✓	
How might hypothetical changes to training and employment impact the workforce?	✓	✓	✓		✓	

Legend: <sup>1</sup> PEP interviews and focus groups, <sup>2</sup> Wider stakeholders: focus group and interviews, <sup>3</sup> Training provider focus group

## Annex 2: EPs, trainees and Assistant EPs responding to the EP survey (numbers and percentages)

	Percentage of respondents	Number of respondents
A Trainee Educational Psychologist	22%	204
An Assistant Educational Psychologist who is not a qualified Educational Psychologist.	9%	83
An Assistant Educational Psychologist who has completed doctoral training to become a qualified Educational Psychologist in the past 5 years.	1%	3
An Assistant Educational Psychologist who became a qualified Educational Psychologist more than 5 years ago	1%	4
A qualified Educational Psychologist who completed their doctoral training in the past 5 years.	25%	232
A qualified Educational Psychologist who qualified more than 5 years ago.	43%	399
A qualified Educational Psychologist who qualified more than 5 years ago and is not currently working in Educational Psychology.	1%	3



## Annex 3: Currie Matrix

	Consultation	Assessment	Intervention	Training	Research
Child and family	<p>Individual discussions.</p> <p>Contribution to IEPs</p> <p>Home visits.</p> <p>Parent meetings.</p> <p>Review meetings, as appropriate.</p>	<p>Overall assessment in context.</p> <p>Standardised assessment instruments.</p> <p>Identifying special needs.</p>	<p>Behaviour management programmes.</p> <p>Individual and family therapy.</p> <p>Working with small groups (e.g., self-harm, social skills, anger management).</p>	<p>Talks to groups of children (e.g., anti-bullying groups).</p> <p>Parenting skills.</p>	<p>Single case studies.</p> <p>Interactive video research with families (SPIN).</p>
School or establishment	<p>Joint working with staff.</p> <p>Advice on programmes for children and young people.</p> <p>Contribution to strategic planning.</p> <p>Policy advice for schools, children's homes.</p> <p>Review meetings, as appropriate.</p>	<p>Contribution to school assessment policy and procedure.</p>	<p>Contribution to whole-establishment interventions (e.g., anti-bullying programmes, playground behaviour, discipline, raising achievement).</p> <p>Contribution to curricular innovation/initiatives.</p> <p>Joint working with class/subject teacher.</p> <p>Supporting inclusion.</p> <p>Supporting special college placements.</p>	<p>Staff training.</p> <p>Disseminating evidence-based practice.</p>	<p>Design, implementation, and evaluation of action research in single establishments and groups of schools.</p>
EA/Council	<p>Contribution to strategic planning</p>	<p>Contribution to authority assessment policy and procedure.</p> <p>Contribution to Best Value reviews.</p>	<p>Contribution to establishing authority-wider interventions (e.g., anti-bullying initiatives, alternatives to exclusion, promoting social inclusion, resource allocation).</p>	<p>Authority-wide training in all areas relevant to psychology.</p> <p>Input to multi-disciplinary conferences.</p>	<p>Design, implementation, and evaluation of authority-wide action research (e.g., early intervention, raising achievement).</p> <p>Informing evidence-based policy and practice.</p>

[<http://www.aspep.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Currie-Report-2002.pdf> ]

# Annex 4: Number and characteristics of Educational Psychologists

## Introduction

This Annex presents information on the number and characteristics of the EP workforce based on membership data from HCPC and AEP and the DfE Schools Workforce Census. More information on the characteristics of the workforce is available from the DfE 2019 research on the educational psychologist workforce<sup>32</sup> and the AEP 2021 member diversity and inclusion survey<sup>33</sup>.

Using the data from these sources, we estimate that there were somewhere between 2900 and 3700 EPs working in England in 2022. Due to differences in the scope and detail of the different data sources it is not possible at this time to provide precise estimates of the current number of active EPs (headcount and FTE) in England. Data held by AEP on fully qualified and trainee EPs suggests that the great majority of EPs are female, of white ethnic background and aged between 35 to 60 (AEP data). Over two-fifths of EPs are located in the three southernmost regions (London, South-East and South-West) of England.

## Data sources

The data sources on the number of EPs and their characteristics are limited and coverage varies. The three sources available for analysis were:

- Membership data from the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) for 2020;
- Membership data from the Association of Educational Psychologists (AEP) for 2022;
- DfE School Workforce Census data on the aggregate number of EPs (with a current contract, for 28 days or more) working for local authorities by academic year (latest data for 2020/21).

## HCPC data

Anybody seeking to practice as an Educational Psychologist must be on the HCPC register. However, the register does not record whether members are actively providing services, employed, self-employed or retired. For this research the HCPC provided their public membership list for those practising as EPs, containing the geographical location

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<sup>32</sup> [Educational psychologist workforce research - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/research-data-and-analysis/publications/educational-psychologist-workforce-research)

<sup>33</sup> [Equality Diversity and Inclusion Member Survey Report Nov 21.pdf \(aep.org.uk\)](https://www.aep.org.uk/equality-diversity-and-inclusion-member-survey-report-nov-21.pdf)

of members registered in 2020. They also provided [several](#) tables reporting the characteristics of members.

### AEP data

AEP membership is voluntary and open to EPs at various stages of their career. There are four membership options:

- **Full membership** - Qualified and currently practicing EPs;
- **Trainee membership** - Students following an approved post-graduate training course in educational psychology;
- **Affiliate** - Qualified EPs not currently practicing;
- **Retired** - Retired EPs.

For this research, the AEP provided an anonymised membership data set including only “Full” and “Trainee” members in 2022.

### School Workforce Census

The DfE annual School Workforce Census (SWC) asks local authorities to report the headcount of EPs working for a Local (Education) Authority. The dataset provided by the DfE includes a time-series for 2009/10 to 2022/23, broken down by full- and part-time working, and full-time equivalents. No further characteristics on EPs are included in the workforce census. In addition, the SWC only provides aggregate data for local authorities. There is no indication whether this is due to non-response to the survey or because the local authority does not directly employ EPs.

### Comparing the three sources

Table A1 summarises the variables which are available in the three data sources.

**Table A1: Information provided by the three data sources**

Data source	AEP (2022)	HCPC (2020)	SWC (2022)
Headcount	Yes	Yes	Yes (LA employed only)
Age	Yes	Yes	n/a
Gender	Yes	n/a	n/a
Ethnicity	Yes	n/a	n/a
Region	Yes	n/a	Yes
Trainees	Yes	n/a	n/a

Data source	AEP (2022)	HCPC (2020)	SWC (2022)
Full-time/ part-time	n/a	n/a	Yes
Self-employed	Yes	n/a	n/a

## Number of EPs working

The three data sources provide different estimates of the number of EPs, because they are not measuring the same population. The HCPC membership list should be the most comprehensive because anybody practicing as an EP must be registered with them. Membership of the AEP is not compulsory. The SWC only covers local authority employment. While the SWC data shows how the number employed in local authorities (headcount) translates into full-time equivalents (FTEs), there is no information on whether HCPC or AEP members are working full-time or part-time. The AEP data records where a member works for more than one organisation (e.g. local authority and private sector). The HCPC membership list does not record the sector in which an EP is working. Moreover, we do not know whether those in the SWC data working part-time for local authorities additionally work as private EPs<sup>34</sup>.

There were 3672 members on the HCPC register with addresses in England in 2020. However, this total will overestimate the number working, since it includes an unknown number of retired and inactive members. There were 2989 fully qualified and trainee AEP members in 2022, while there were 2325 EPs recorded by the School Workforce Census for 2022/23.

However, not all local authorities responded to the SWC. Moreover, the survey of EPs conducted for this research project suggested that about an eighth of EPs work outside local authorities. Thus, the AEP data provides the best minimum estimate of the number of EPs in England.

## Demographic profile of Educational Psychologists

### Age and sex profile

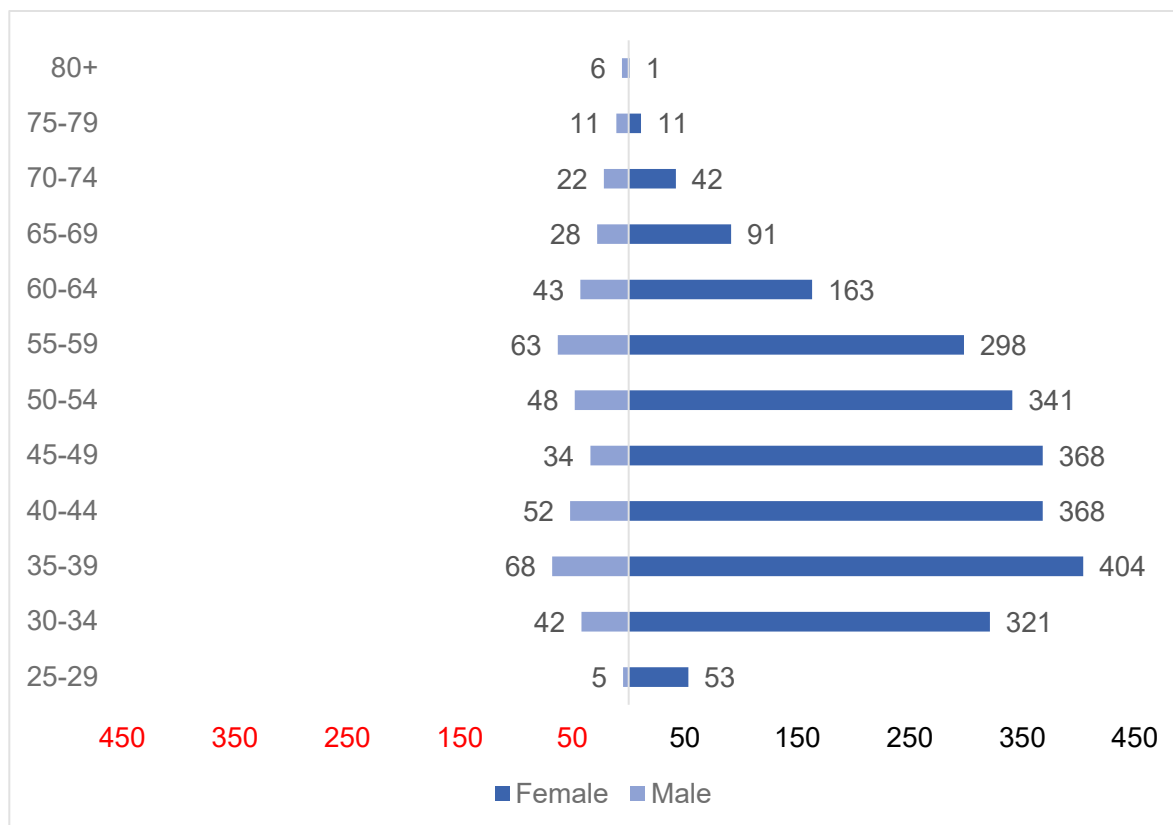
To give an indication of the characteristics of EPs, we provide more information based on AEP membership data below.). Of the 2976 trainee and qualified EPs in England on the AEP membership list in 2022, 85.1 per cent (2533) were female.

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<sup>34</sup> The AEP membership list does record where the member works for a local authority and a private company (or themselves) but does not record full- or part-time status in the posts in which they work. There is no information on employer and nature of employment in the HCPC membership list.

Of the 387 trainees, 156 (40.3 per cent) were aged under 30, and 4.2 per cent of trainees were aged 50 and over. Of the fully qualified members 70.9 per cent were aged between 35 and 59.

**Figure A1: Number of AEP members in each age group by sex**



Source: AEP membership register, 2022.

## Ethnicity

While the AEP register provides information on ethnic background, an unambiguous response was only recorded for 998 (less than a third) of the full and trainee members. However, the AEP Member Survey on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Issues (2021)<sup>35</sup> found that 86% of respondents identified as White.

## Regional distribution

All three data sources include information on the regional distribution of EPs. The SWC and HCPC register use ONS standard regions, but the AEP uses its own definition of regions and is thus not represented in Table A2. The SWC data represents the minimum number of EPs practicing in each region, while the HCPC data represents the maximum. The table presents the ONS mid-year estimate of the population in 2021 for 0 to 24 year

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.aep.org.uk/resources/member-survey-equality-diversity-inclusion-issues-report>

olds in each region. Table A2 shows that London contains the largest number of EPs and the largest population aged 0 to 24.

**Table A2: Regional distribution of EPs and regional distribution of the population aged 0-24**

Region	Population aged 0 to 24 in 2021 (000s)	SWC number of EPs (2022/23)	HCPC number of EPs (2020)
East of England	1876.3	241	359
East Midlands	1469.5	224	281
London	2769.0	323	722
North-East	778.5	126	172
North-West	2273.4	210	407
South-East	2766.7	415	619
South-West	1610.7	272	499
West Midlands	1867.5	287	320
Yorkshire & Humber	1685.7	227	288
England	17097.4	2325	3667

Sources: ONS Mid-year population estimates, DfE SEN data, HCPC membership list and DfE School Workforce Census 2020/21

## Modelling

One of the aims of the current research was to statistically model the potential number and characteristics of the EP workforce in England over the short and medium term, by using administrative data and survey findings. These estimates could then be used to assess to what extent the future workforce would be able to meet predicted future demand.

The current administrative sources available on the number and demographic make-up of the EP workforce (AEP membership, HCPC register, and DfE workforce census data), did not allow us at this time to robustly estimate the current number of active EPs (headcount and FTE). The available information on characteristics of EPs varied too much in coverage/quality to create definitive estimates of the number of EPs in work by age group, sex, type and sector of employment. Moreover, developing a model requires

information on the number of EPs moving into and out of the profession and from public sector to private sector employment by age group.

Unfortunately, it did not prove possible to make robust estimates of historic and likely future flows into and out of the profession (e.g., likely retention and career decisions around self-employment, part-time working, and moving into private practice). Due to these data challenges, we were unable to produce a robust model that is of sufficient quality to include in the report. Some of these data gaps might be filled by more detailed analysis of the membership records held by the AEP.

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