



# Lost in transition? The destinations of children who leave the state education system

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February 2024

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## Foreword from Dame Rachel de Souza



When I became Children's Commissioner, one of the first things I did was to conduct a nationwide inquiry into the educational experiences of children leaving state education. These children had fallen off the radar during the pandemic. Local authorities confided that they did not know where they had gone or how to support them to reengage in education.

Three years on and we have still not shifted the dial on this issue. Thousands of children, still of compulsory school age, continue to leave state schools each year. Many have started to disengage, and some have left the school system altogether.

This report shines new light on the vulnerabilities of children who left the state education system last year. For the first time ever, we have been able to examine the destinations, pupil characteristics and educational histories of children who left state education.

We have found that over 10,000 children left the state education system to destinations unknown to their local authorities. Despite questions from my office, local authorities were unable to confirm that they were safe and in education. These children's whereabouts are unknown: they have fallen through the cracks of our education system.

Around 13,000 left the state education system for home education. My office heard that the number of children in home education has been growing steadily and that many parents opting for home education are not doing so through choice. These children were disproportionately more likely to have special educational needs or to come from disadvantaged backgrounds. My office's research shows that the recent exodus to home education is clearly linked to rising absenteeism rates. Over 80% of all children who moved into home education were persistently or severely absent in the previous year. All of this shows that we must do more to tackle the root causes of absenteeism and give children the support they need to engage and thrive in school.

And nearly 3,000 children became a child missing education. These children were much more likely to have come from deprived neighbourhoods and to be known to social care. Local authorities told my office that they were worried about this group of children and did not have sufficient resources or powers to identify and support these children to return to school.

As Children's Commissioner, I am determined to use my role to make the right to education a reality for all children. Wherever they grow up, whatever their background, every child deserves a world class education which is as ambitious for them, as they are for themselves. We must go much further to ensure that our school system lives up to this principle.

This report charts the way towards a reformed education system, with inclusion at its heart. We must all work together to create a school system which enables every child to reach their potential.

## Executive Summary

*'I would have wished for him to have somebody to work with him, to be educating him, he has aspirations just like the next child and I feel like they've been washed away' - Mother of a 13-year-old boy with autism.*

Since starting her term, the Children's Commissioner has made enshrining children's right to education a top priority. One of her first reports in 2021 shone a spotlight on local authorities' powers to identify children missing education.<sup>1</sup> The office surveyed all local authorities in England and found that nobody could accurately estimate how many children were in their area, let alone how many were not receiving suitable education.

This report delves further into this topic and explores the educational experiences of children who leave the state education system. Using our statutory powers, we have created the first ever pupil level database of the destinations of children who leave the English state education system.<sup>i</sup> We have supplemented this with expert interviews with parents and local authorities to further understand the experiences of children who leave state schools.

Our research found that between Spring 2021/22 and Spring 2022/23:

- **An estimated 13,120 children left the state education system and entered home education.**
  - Parents interviewed for this report said this was often a forced choice influenced by shortcomings in support for children with SEND.

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<sup>i</sup> This report considers leavers from schools and other education settings, but many children also fail to enrol in a school the first place. This may be due to never starting school after pre-school age or being newly arrived in a local authority's area.

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- **Children who left school for home education were much more likely to have had poor attendance in the year before leaving their school roll.** 82% of children in our sample who left the state education system for home education had been either persistently or severely absent in the previous academic year.
- **The proportion of children who were severely absent was 15-times higher among children who left for home education.** 26% were severely absent, relative to 1.7% of all state-funded pupils.
- **Children who left the state education system to go into home education were more likely to be living in disadvantaged areas.** Over half (64%) of children in our sample who went into home education lived in the more deprived half of neighbourhoods.
- **A disproportionate number of these children had identified special educational needs.** 25% of children in our sample who went into home education had SEN Support. This is more than double the proportion of children in state-funded schools in receipt of SEN Support.
- **An estimated 10,181 children left the state education system to unknown destinations.**
  - **Children whose destinations were unknown had higher rates of persistent and severe absenteeism, compared to their peers in state-funded schools.** 31% of children who had an unknown destination had a history of persistent or severe absenteeism, compared to 24% of children in state-funded schools.
- **An estimated 2,868 children left the state education system and became a child missing education, meaning they were not registered at a school or otherwise receiving an education.**
  - Local authorities speculated that some of these children may have left the UK, but lacked data sharing arrangements to check whether this was the case.

- Our analysis showed that children known to social care were much more likely to become a child missing education, compared to their peers. The proportion of children missing education recorded as a child in need was 2.7 times higher than the proportion of child in need recorded among pupils in state-funded schools.
- Children with a history of poor attendance were much more likely than other children to be known or suspected to be a child missing education. In total, 62% of children identified as known or suspected to be a child missing education were either persistently absent or severely absent in the previous year.
- Our analysis found that children living in most disadvantaged quarter of areas were much more likely to be a child missing education. Nearly half (46%) of all children known or suspected to be missing education were from the most deprived quarter of neighbourhoods.

**Table 1: Summary of findings**

	All pupils in state-funded schools	Children who left state education and moved to...				
		Independent school	Elective home education	Unknown destinations	Known or suspected to be a CME	
<b>Age</b>						
4- to 9-year-olds	55%	39%	24%	54%	41%	
10-year-olds	9.5%	45%	12%	20%	22%	
11- to 14-year-olds	36%	16%	64%	25%	37%	
<i>Total</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	
<b>Ethnicity</b>						
White	71%	63%	80%	56%	63%	
Asian	12%	18%	3.4%	16%	11%	
Mixed	6.6%	9.0%	7.6%	9.6%	6.9%	
Black	5.8%	4.9%	3.4%	8.2%	7.6%	
Other	2.2%	2.1%	1.2%	6.6%	7.6%	
Not recorded	1.6%	2.5%	3.9%	4.4%	4.4%	
<i>Total</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	

<b>Gender</b>					
Male	51%	50%	45%	50%	50%
Female	49%	50%	55%	50%	50%
<i>Total</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>
<b>Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index</b>					
Most deprived neighbourhoods	31%	13%	36%	22%	46%
More deprived neighbourhoods	26%	17%	28%	24%	26%
Less deprived neighbourhoods	23%	26%	21%	25%	17%
Least deprived neighbourhoods	21%	44%	15%	30%	11%
<i>Total</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>
<b>Special educational needs</b>					
No identified SEN	84%	87%	70%	87%	78%
SEN Support	12%	8.4%	25%	9.5%	17%
Education, Health and Care Plan	3.9%	5.0%	4.9%	3.9%	4.9%
<i>Total</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>
<b>Child in need status</b>					
Child in need on the 31 <sup>st</sup> March 2022	2.6%	2.4%	3.9%	2.8%	7.1%
Not a child in need	97%	98%	96%	97%	93%
<i>Total</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>
<b>Looked after child status</b>					
Child looked after on the 31 <sup>st</sup> March 2022	0.6%	1.3%	<1%	1.3%	1.4%
Not looked after	99%	99%	>99%	99%	99%
<i>Total</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>
<b>Attendance pattern</b>					
Rarely absent	76%	83%	18%	69%	38%
Persistently absent	22%	16%	55%	26%	44%
Severely absent	1.7%	1.5%	26%	5.4%	18%
<i>Total</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>100%</i>



Our conversations with parents and local authorities revealed that many children are leaving the school system because their parents do not feel it is set up to allow them to reach their true potential. We heard of children with special educational needs and poor mental health who do not receive the support they need.

Our report also exposes the gaping holes in local authority data arrangements. Local authorities rely too heavily on individual relationships and goodwill to learn about the destinations of children who leave their schools. Despite the growing number of children leaving schools, the data sharing practices in place are flimsy and not fit for purpose.

This paper sets out a plan to ensure that no child slips through the net. Our recommendations lay out a blueprint to deliver:

- A more inclusive school system;
- Powers to identify children wherever they are educated;
- Protections for children with additional vulnerabilities; and
- An accountability system which enshrines every child's right to education.

## Key terms

Throughout this report, we refer to several key terms and acronyms. For the sake of clarity, we have provided the below summary with definitions. Where possible, the definitions have been pulled from government guidance which is cited in the references.

- **Children missing education:** Department for Education guidance defines children missing education as children of compulsory school age who are not registered pupils at a school and are not receiving suitable education otherwise than at a school.<sup>2</sup>
- **Special educational needs (SEN):** a child or young person has SEN if they have a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made for him or her.

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

- has a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of others of the same age, or
  - has a disability which prevents or hinders him or her from making use of facilities of a kind generally provided for others of the same age in mainstream schools or mainstream post-16 institutions.<sup>3</sup>
- **SEN Support:** SEN Support means support that is additional to, or different from, the support generally made for other children of the same age in a school. It is provided for pupils who are identified as having a learning difficulty or a disability that requires extra or different help to that normally provided as part of the school's usual curriculum offer. A pupil on SEN Support will not have an Education, Health and Care Plan.<sup>4</sup>
  - **Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs):** a local authority may issue an EHCP for a pupil who needs more support than is available through SEN Support. This will follow a statutory assessment process whereby the local authority considers the child's SEN and any relevant health and social care needs; sets out long term outcomes; and specifies provision which will deliver additional support to meet those needs.<sup>5</sup>

- **Education Other Than At School (EOTAS):** a local authority in England may arrange for any special educational provision that it has decided is necessary for a child or young person for whom it is responsible to be made otherwise than in a school or post-16 institution or a place at which relevant early years education is provided.<sup>6</sup>
- **Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI):** IDACI measures the proportion of all children aged 0 to 15 living in income deprived families. It is a measure of the proportion of the population in an area experiencing deprivation relating to low income. The definition of low income used includes both those people that are out-of-work, and those that are in work but who have low earnings.<sup>7</sup>
- **Persistently absent:** a school pupil is persistently absent if they are absent for 10% or more, but less than 50%, of possible sessions in school. A session is a morning or afternoon at school. So a persistently absent full-time pupil would be absent for at least one day per fortnight on average.<sup>8</sup>
- **Severely absent:** a pupil is severely absent if they are absent for 50% or more of possible sessions in school.<sup>9</sup>
- **Rarely absent:** a pupil is rarely absent if they are present for more than 90% of possible sessions at school.
- **Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS):** These services assess and treat children and young people with emotional, behavioural or mental health difficulties. They range from basic pastoral care, such as identifying mental health problems, to specialist in-patient care for those who are severely mentally ill.<sup>10</sup>
- **Independent school:** Independent schools (also known as private schools) charge fees to attend instead of being funded by the government. They are not maintained by the government, and do not have to follow the national curriculum.<sup>11</sup>
- **Virtual School Heads:** the role of the Virtual School Head for is to promote the educational achievement of children with a social worker through the provision of information and advice to their parents, educators and others who the Virtual School Head considers necessary.<sup>12</sup> Each local authority has a Virtual School Head.

- **Looked after children:** a child is looked after by their local authority if they are: provided with accommodation for a continuous period of more than 24 hours; is subject to a care order (a court order placing a child in the care or supervision of a local authority); or is subject to a placement order (a court order allowing a local authority to place a child for adoption).<sup>13</sup>
- **Children in need:** an umbrella term referring to a child with a social worker, usually because they are looked after, on a child protection plan, or on a child in need plan. In legislation, a child in need is a child who is unlikely to reach or maintain a satisfactory level of health or development, or their health or development will be significantly impaired without the provision of children's social care services, or the child is disabled.<sup>14</sup>
- **Unique Pupil Number:** a unique pupil number (UPN) identifies each pupil attending a state-funded school in England.<sup>15</sup>
- **School2School database:** the School2School system allows schools and local authorities to securely share information.<sup>16</sup>

# 1. Background

## 1.1 Ensuring children receive suitable education

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that every child has a right to education. In England, parents have a duty to secure education for any of their children of compulsory school age. The local authority has a parallel duty to establish the identity of children in their area who are not receiving a suitable education and has powers to enable them to return to the school system, if needed.

The duty of parents to secure education for their children is expressed under Section 7 of the Education Act 1996. This section states:

'The parent of every child of compulsory school age shall cause him to receive efficient full-time education suitable –

- a) To his age, ability and aptitude, and
- b) To any special educational needs he may have

either by regular attendance at school or otherwise.<sup>17</sup>

Local authorities have a duty under section 436A of the Education Act 1996 to:

'Make arrangements to enable them to establish (so far as it is possible to do so) the identities of children in their area who are of compulsory school age but –

- a) Are not registered pupils at a school, and
  - b) Are not receiving suitable education otherwise than at a school.<sup>18</sup>
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## 1.2 Previous research by the Children's Commissioner

Following the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been heightened concern about the number of children regularly missing school and the increasing number of children leaving the school system. The Children's Commissioner made it her mission to identify the children who had started to disengage or leave schools and to ensure that every child receives a high-quality education. In 2021, the office published 'Where are England's Children? Interim findings from the Children's Commissioner's Attendance Audit'.<sup>19</sup> This report found that local authorities are ill-equipped to meet their statutory responsibility to identify children in their area who are not receiving suitable education.

This survey was the first national attempt at identifying the total number of children not in education across England. From the survey, the office concluded that the data systems in place to identify children and to safeguard their right to education were inadequate. The report found that most local authorities were unable to provide an accurate estimate of the total number of children in their area. They often did not know where children went when they left the state school system. In many cases, local authorities relied on out-of-date data sources and time lagged estimates to get a rough picture of the situation in their area.

Local authorities told the office that they would make attempts to identify children when they left state-funded schools but the data collection for education settings outside of the state-funded school system is patchy and can lead to children falling through the gaps. The report also found that there were hundreds of children who had never interacted with the state-funded school system about whom local authorities knew very little.

Through the Attendance Audit, the office heard that many children were leaving the school system because they felt that it was ill-equipped to meet their needs. The team spoke to over 300 young people and interviewed professionals working in 10 local authorities to understand why increasing numbers of children were leaving the state education system.<sup>20</sup>

## 1.3 Our analysis in this report

Every year, thousands of children leave their school roll. The majority enrol at another school and while the process of starting anew may be a big life event for that young person, it's a common feature of our education system.

However, there is another group of children who do not simply move schools but seem to instead appear to disappear from the state education system altogether. Their destination cannot be easily tracked in school and local authority data returns.

Missing education can be a safeguarding risk. Children may be withdrawn from school by abusive or neglectful parents. Even in simple cases of moves between schools, children's education may be disrupted.

In this report, we examine the education destinations of children who left the state education system at some point between Spring 2021/22 and Spring 2022/23. We have focused on children who were previously in a state-funded school, or local authority commissioned alternative provision. Children who have never been enrolled in either of these types of settings were out-of-scope of this research.

Using the Department for Education's administrative data, we have identified children who left a state-funded school or local authority commissioned alternative provision. We asked local authorities to provide us with information about these children's destinations.

We have therefore been able to create the first ever pupil-level dataset of children who left the state-funded or local authority funded education system in England (henceforth for brevity the 'state education system') of which we are aware. Using this data, we have looked at the characteristics and educational histories of children who left.

This report explores the journeys these children take off school rolls. We examine the different destinations which children go on to, look at the groups of children who are most likely to leave, and investigate their past experiences of education. This report also examines the structures in place to identify and track children when they leave the state-funded school system.

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We have supplemented this analysis with interviews with parents and local authority professionals to further understand the motivations behind leaving the state education system and the processes in place to support these children.

Our investigation reveals the difficulties local authorities face in identifying children and ensuring that they are receiving a suitable, full-time education. It exposes how an inability to share data and to support children in school has led to thousands of children being outside of the school system, without access to the education and support that they deserve.



## 2. Children who leave the state education system

### 2.1 What are the processes around leaving the state education system?

#### 2.1.1 Parents' responsibilities

Local authorities and schools encourage all parents to notify their child's school if they decide to take their child off the school roll. The Department for Education guidance on Children Missing Education states that effective information sharing between parents, schools and local authorities is key in preventing children from missing education.<sup>21</sup>

Most parents abide by this. Parents whose children who remain on a school roll but do not attend could face prosecution for not securing regular attendance, so there is a strong incentive to inform the school when you decide to deregister.

In our interviews with local authorities, the office heard of some instances where parents had not told schools about their decision to take their child off-roll. This happened most often in cases where the child was newly admitted to a school and the parent had decided to turn down the place but had failed to inform the school.

#### 2.1.2 Schools' responsibilities

Schools must record details of pupils on their school roll through the admissions register. Schools can remove pupils from their school roll if they meet one of the fifteen grounds outlined in regulations.<sup>22</sup>

At the point of deregistration, schools should also upload information about the pupil to the School2School database. Local authority maintained schools must share information through School2School and academies are strongly encouraged to do the same. Schools use this platform to share Common Transfer Files with other schools to ensure that the destination school has full records on a child's school history. The files contain information about the child's Unique Pupil Number, contact details, free school meals eligibility, looked after child status, special educational needs history, school history, and prior attainment.

Schools should fill in a Common Transfer File when a child leaves their school rolls. When a child moves to another state-funded school, the original school should use the destination school's unique number assigned by the Department for Education in the Common Transfer File. This ensures that the information goes to the right school. When the child moves to a school which is not state-funded or is outside England or Wales, they must use the code 'MMMMMMM'. When a child leaves to an unknown destination, the code 'XXXXXXX' should be used.<sup>23</sup>

Local authorities told the office that School2School is not used consistently across the country. The office was told that the system is clunky and difficult to use and reported instances where schools had failed to use School2School to share information. When schools do not use School2School, it can be difficult to get the necessary information about a child's previous educational history or assessed needs. The office heard that when children arrive in a new school with no Common Transfer File found on School2School, the destination school must create a new Unique Pupil Number and, where necessary, conduct additional checks on children's attainment levels and special educational needs.

## **2.2 What are the processes to locate children who leave state education?**

### **2.2.1 Schools' responsibilities**

If a school removes a pupil's name from the admissions register under any of the fifteen permitted grounds, they must inform the local authority, either as soon as the ground for removal has been met or no later than the time at which the pupil's name is removed from the register.

This duty only applies when a child is removed from the admissions register at a non-standard transition point. Schools do not have to routinely share information about children who leave their rolls at standard transition points, i.e. when a child leaves primary school at the end of Year 6. If local authorities want to collect information about standard transitions, they must ask schools to give them this data. One local authority told us they asked their schools for this more complete data on all pupil moves.

In the office's conversations with local authorities, we heard that it was relatively common for schools to not tell them about a child who had left their rolls. Despite this being a duty in legislation, there is very little scrutiny of the extent to which schools abide by it. One local authority told the office that they only received reports from about half of the schools in their area. Effective information sharing was only possible in areas where the local authority had strong relationships with schools. In areas with hundreds of schools, local authorities said it was often difficult to build a productive information sharing culture.

Local authorities rely upon this information sharing from schools as they do not automatically receive data about deletions from school rolls. If a school does not tell the local authority, they can lose track of children moving around the education system.

Where the school knows the child's destination, they must inform the local authority. Schools must provide local authorities with the name of the pupil, the contact details for the parent or carer with whom the pupil lives, the pupil's destination school details (if applicable), and the ground under which the pupil's name has been removed.

When there is no known destination, the school must undertake 'reasonable enquires' to identify where the child might have gone. Department for Education guidance provides a list of actions which it is reasonable to expect that the local authority and the school will complete.<sup>24</sup> This may include calling the child's parents or conducting a home visit. If they gain any further information about where the child has gone, they must record this and update the local authority.

Figure 1: Requirements on schools and local authorities when children become a child missing education

	Child is registered on a school roll
Day 1:	Child does not turn up at school
Days 1-9:	School should 'undertake reasonable enquiries'
Day 10:	Schools should inform the local authority of the child
Days 11-19:	School and local authority jointly make reasonable enquiries
Day 20:	School can remove child from the school roll

## 2.2.2 Local authority's responsibilities

Following these initial checks, if the school still cannot locate the child, the local authority's Children Missing Education team will undertake further checks. These involve trying to contact the family, conducting a home visit, making enquiries with neighbours, and searching existing databases. Local authorities told us that the nature and extent of their actions would vary on a case-by-case basis.

Local authorities told the office that it was often difficult to trace a child who had no known education destination. In some instances, local authorities were able to use the School2School database and School Census returns to identify children with no known destination who had reappeared in another school or local authority. However, identification could be made more difficult if a child had been assigned another Unique Pupil Number.

Local authorities may have access to other existing databases, such as HM Revenue & Customs, and the Border Force, which can provide helpful information on the whereabouts of a child if they move. However, this access is inconsistent across the country and a local authorities' ability to search for a child missing education relies on pre-existing relationships with database holders. Local authorities told the office that poor access to databases could severely delay efforts to locate vulnerable children.

Data sharing across local authorities can be a particular challenge. Department for Education guidance says local authorities 'should not make blanket enquiries, as contacting all local authorities with a list of children is poor practice.'<sup>25</sup> The guidance says best practice is for local authorities to carry out 'thorough local checks in their own authority area before contacting specific local authorities that they believe to be linked to the child'. However, a local authority may not know which other local authority in England a child has moved to.

Local authorities told the office that it can take several months of investigative work by the team to confirm that a child has moved abroad or returned to their home country.<sup>26</sup> One study of children missing education found that the time taken for the council's CME team to solve a case varied widely, from cases resolved on the first day of investigation, to a maximum of 2,307 days (more than 6 years).<sup>27</sup> On average over the period 2016-2021, one study of data found that there were approximately 1,000 CME cases for the 2.5 full-time equivalent officers to investigate.<sup>28</sup>

## 2.3 How many children appear to leave the state education system?

In the office's data collection, we identified 81,940 children of compulsory school age who were previously recorded in either a state-funded school or local authority commissioned alternative provider (AP) in the 2021/22 Spring censuses<sup>ii</sup> but who did not appear to be in state-funded schools or local authority commissioned alternative provision in the following 2022/23 Spring censuses.

As part of our data collection, we asked local authorities to provide us with information on the destinations of children we had identified as no longer being in state-funded schools or local authority commissioned alternative provision in Spring 2022/23. To reduce the burden on local authorities, we only asked for them to provide data on a representative stratified sample of 44,839 children, or 55% of the 81,940. This means that all the quantitative findings in this report, including where absolute numbers have been inflated back to 100%, should be considered estimates.

Our data return found that the most common destination for children in our full sample was 'moved home or moved to a school outside of England' (Figure 2). A full breakdown showing all destinations is shown in Annex 1. Around a quarter (24%) of children who appeared to have left the state education system had moved abroad. This was 10,569 children in our sample, or an estimated 19,013 weighted up to the whole of England.

A further 22% of children (9,765 in our sample, or an estimated 18,129 weighted up to the whole of England) had moved to state-funded mainstream schools. Local authorities told us that one reason these children may be untraceable in centrally held data is the destination school assigning them a new Unique Pupil Number.

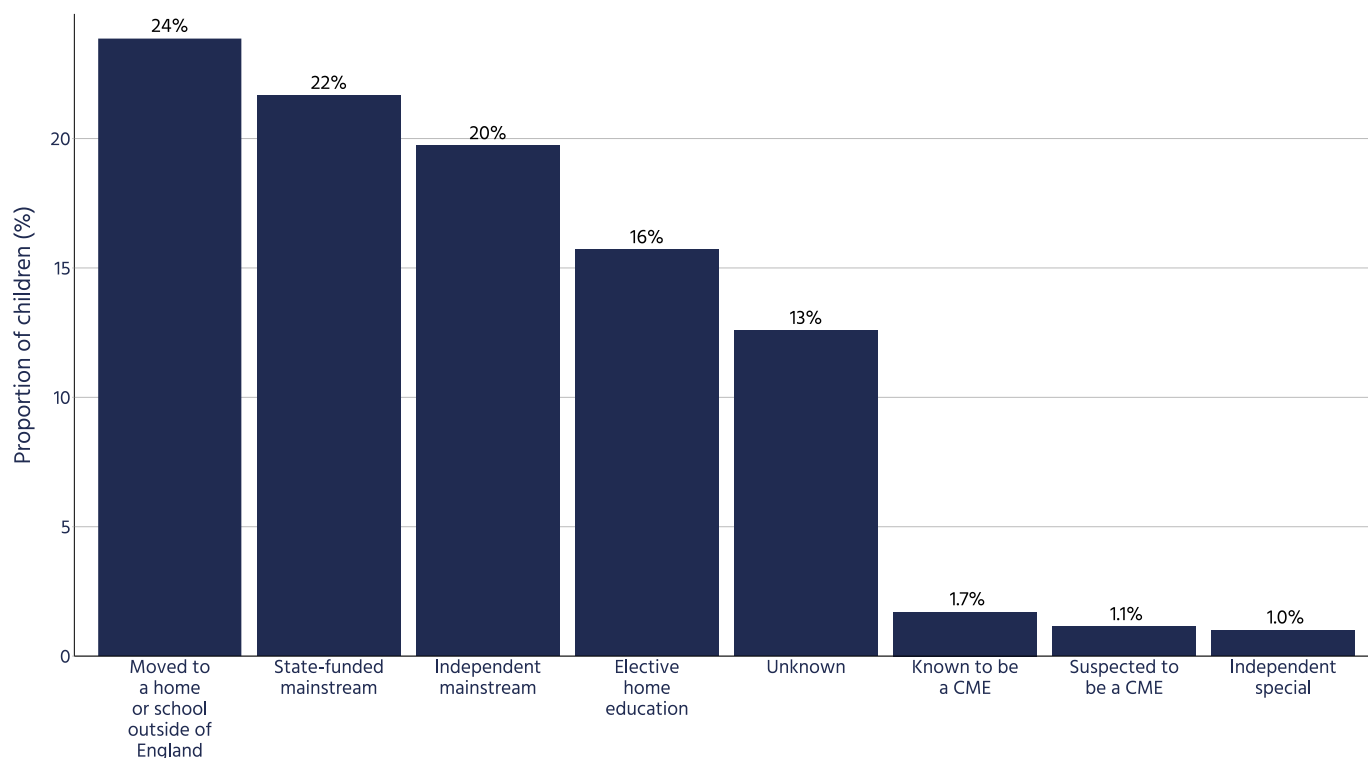
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<sup>ii</sup> The 'Spring censuses' is used in this report to collectively refer to the Spring School Census and the AP Census. The coverage of the School Census is state-funded schools and nurseries, and non-maintained special schools, which are collectively referred to as 'state-funded schools' in this report for brevity. The coverage of the AP Census is children in placements commissioned and wholly funded by their local authority, and not already within the coverage of the School Census.

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They said that this was largely due to delays in information sharing between the destination school and previous school. Schools should share information about a pupil with the new destination school, but the office heard that this was not done systematically and relationships often determined the extent to which information was shared in a timely manner. The Department for Education does not publish statistics on the extent of pupil moves between state-funded schools, so these findings offer new insights into pupil mobility in England.

**Figure 2: Most common destinations of children who were recorded in the state education system in Spring 2021/22 but not in Spring 2022/23**



### The 'study sample'

The remainder of this paper focuses on four groups which make up our 'study sample'. These are children who left the state education system: and moved to an independent school; or went into home education; or whose destinations were unknown to the local authority; or who were known or suspected to be a child missing education. These groups have in common that they remained in England but moved to destinations outside the scope of the Department for Education's Spring censuses. Local authorities told the office that it was hard to track these groups of children as they are not subject to any pupil level data collections and were often not known to the Education team in the local authority.

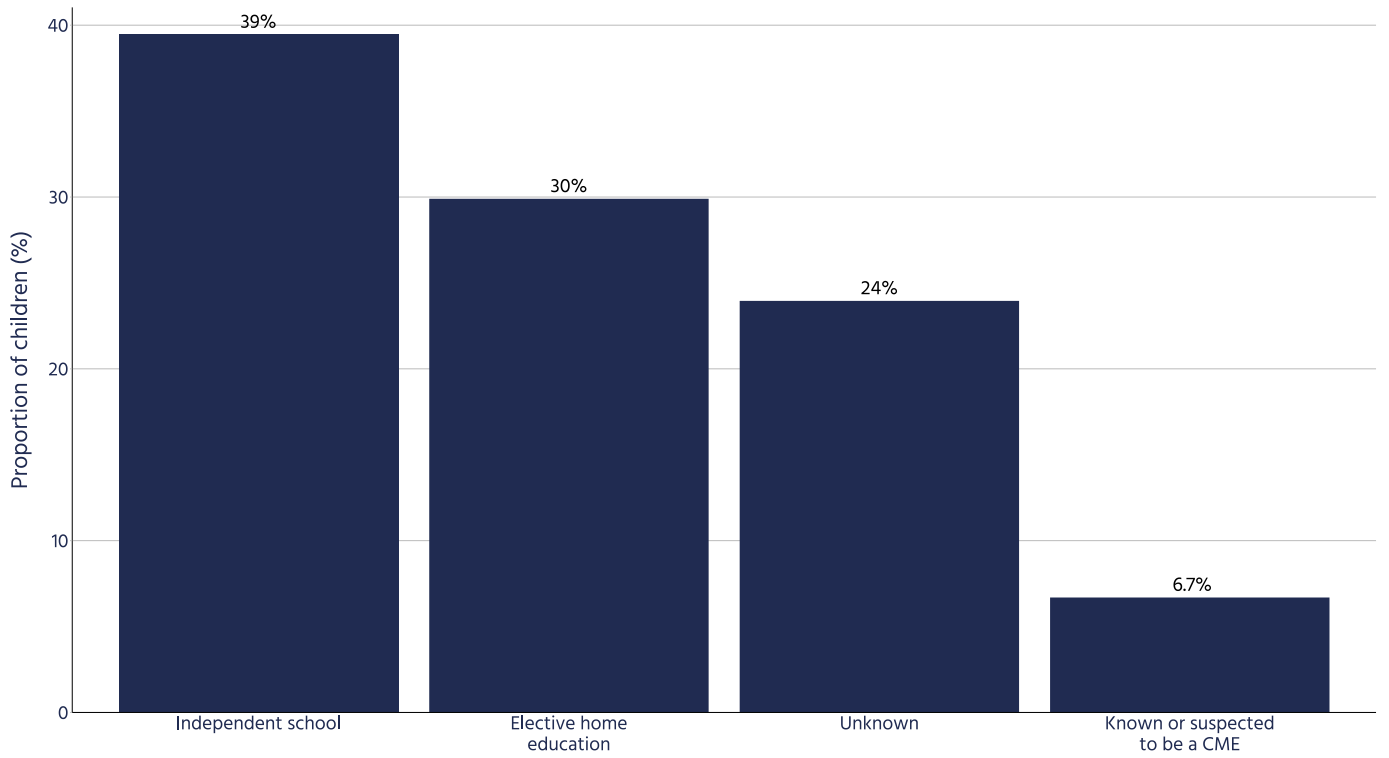


This cohort made up 53% of the total children captured in the office's data collection and was 23,257 children in our sample, or an estimated 43,514 weighted up to the whole of England. The number of children in each destination is listed in Annex 1, but their characteristics have not been analysed. Destinations outside the study sample include, for example: children who moved abroad, died, entered a work-based placement or medical care, were sent to a young offender's institute, or enrolled at a state-funded or unregistered education setting.

The most popular destination for children in the office's study sample was independent schools, which made up 39% of children in the sample (Figure 3). A further 30% of children in the office's study sample were recorded as being home educated. 24% had an unknown destination. The remaining 6.7% were either known or suspected to be a child missing education.

The following chapters explores in further details the journeys, pupil characteristics, and educational histories of these groups of children. We make comparisons between these four groups of interest and the general population of children in state-funded schools.

**Figure 3: Destinations of children in the study sample who were recorded in the state education system in Spring 2021/22 but not in Spring 2022/23**



### 3. Children who leave and go to independent schools

In total 39% of children in our study sample (who remained in England but moved to destinations outside the scope of the Department for Education's Spring censuses) and 21% of the whole sample, moved to independent schools. This was 9,178 children in our sample, or an estimated 17,347 weighted up to the whole of England.

Most children who moved to independent schools went to independent mainstream schools: 95% children went to independent mainstream and 5% went to independent special schools.

#### 3.1 Reasons for leaving

Local authorities told the office that children tended to move into independent schools either because their parents thought it would better prepare them for academic success or because they thought that independent schools were better resourced to provide further pastoral support and enhanced extra-curricular opportunities.

Some children left the state-funded school system to go into independent special schools. The office heard that this was happening more often. Local authorities said that it was often difficult to access a place in state-funded special schools and that they had become more reliant on independent special schools to meet the needs of children with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs).

The office heard that it was common for children to go to a state-funded primary school and then move to an independent school for secondary.

#### 3.2 Pupil characteristics

The pupils in our study sample who left state education for independent schools were more likely to be age 10 (the transition age to secondary school) and from more affluent backgrounds. Children with no identified special educational need (SEN) were overrepresented in the proportion of children who moved to independent schools, as were children with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs).

### 3.2.1 Age

Nearly half (45%) of the children in our sample who moved to an independent school were aged 10 at the start of the academic year in which they left the state education system, meaning that they would have started Year 7 in the following academic year.

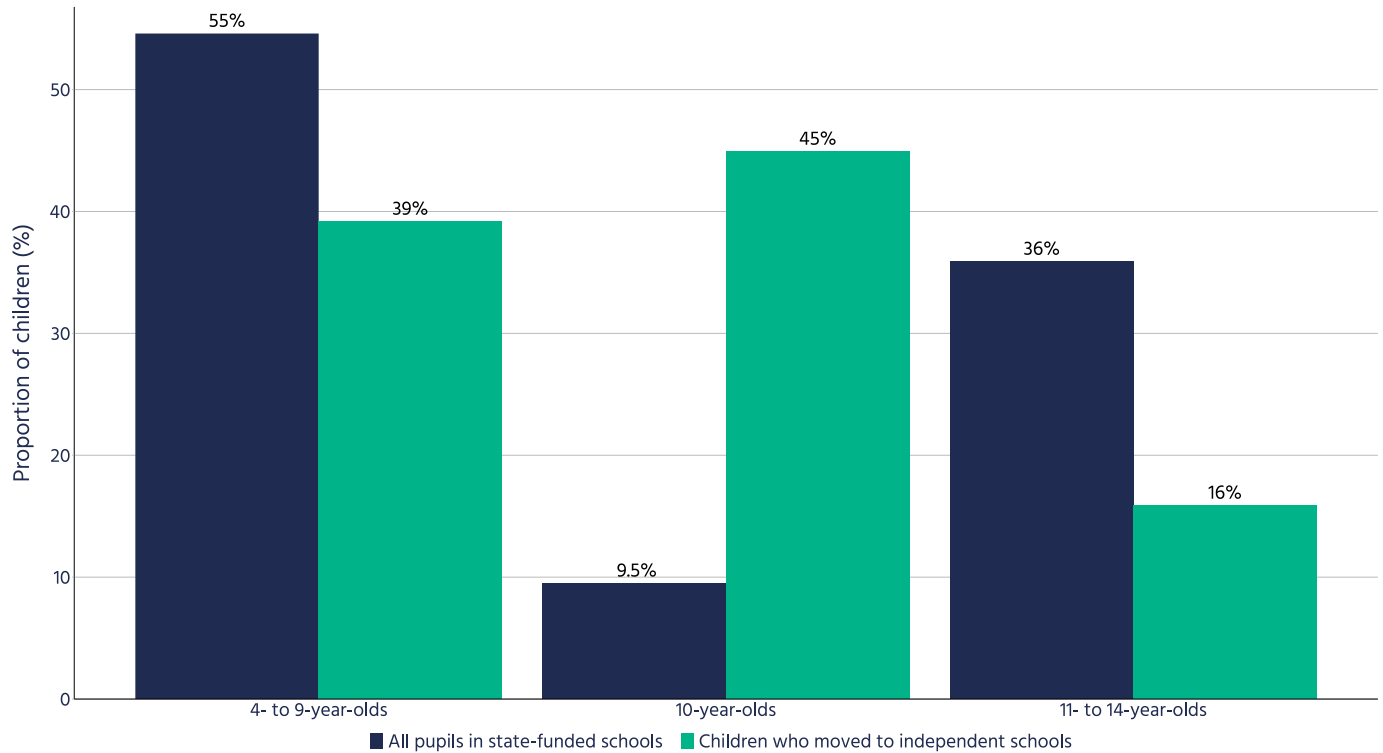
Local authorities told us that this was a very common age for children to leave for independent schools as this is a standard transition point. They said that many children in the independent school system in secondary are educated in state-funded schools up until the end of primary.

As this is a standard transition age, we heard that local authorities were often uninformed about these moves because the current regulations state that schools do not need to tell local authorities about moves at standard transition points. Local authorities can conduct a data collection exercise to gather information on children who move at standard transition points and, if they do, schools are expected to comply.

In our interviews, local authorities said that they rarely ran checks on this year group and several stated that they had only tracked destinations of these children prompted by the Children's Commissioner's data request for this report and had otherwise not sought information on where these children were being educated.

Moves to independent schools in the middle of primary education or secondary education were rarer (Figure 4). However, a greater proportion of children left primary school aged 4 to 9 and entered independent school compared to those aged 11 to 14. Local authorities said that moving children to independent schools at a younger age was more common because the impact of an education in an independent school was likely to be greater the longer a child was in said school.

Figure 4: Age at the start of the 2021/22 academic year of children who left the state education system and moved to an independent school

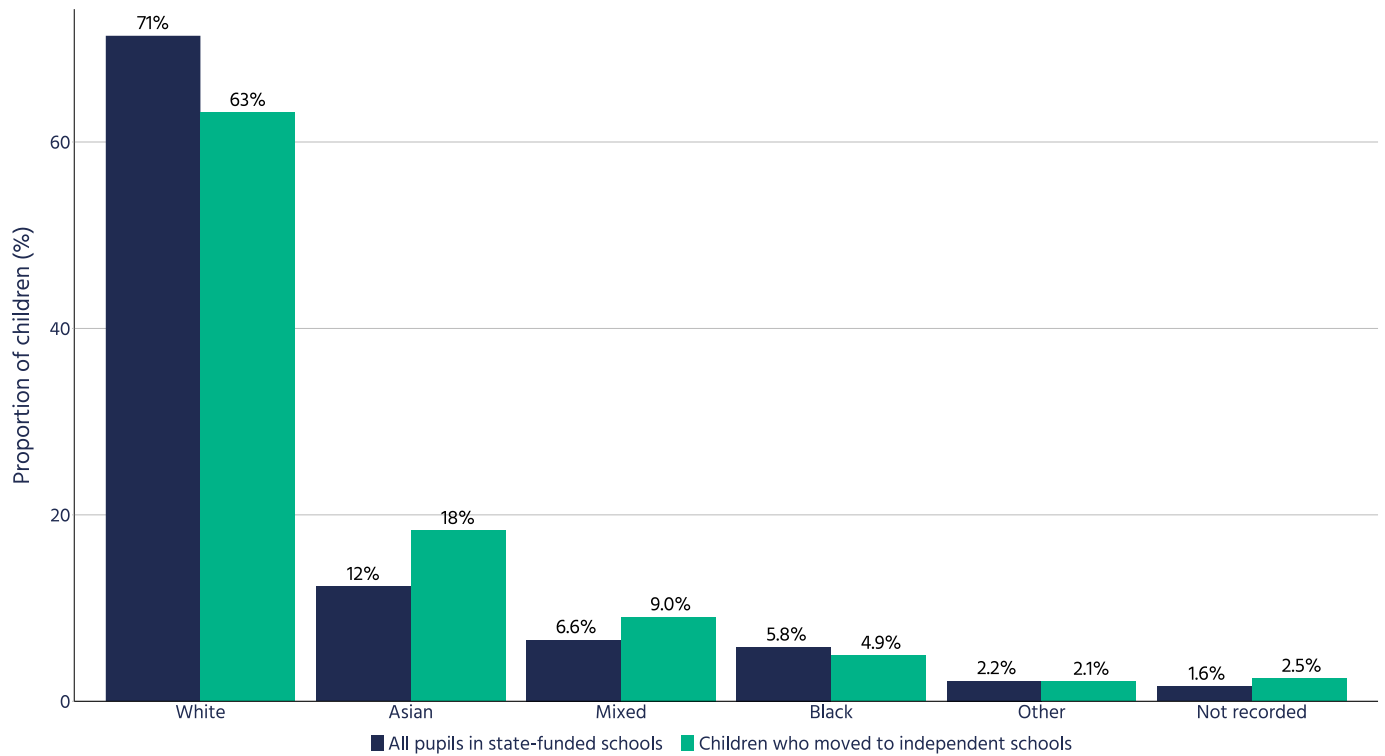


### 3.2.2 Ethnicity

Children in our sample who left state education and moved to an independent school were more likely to be Asian or mixed ethnicity, relative to state-funded pupils in general (Figure 5). 18% of children in our sample were Asian, compared to 12% of children in state-funded schools. Similarly, 9.0% of children in our sample were mixed ethnicity, compared to 6.6% of all state-funded pupils.

White and black children were underrepresented in our sample relative to all state-funded pupils.

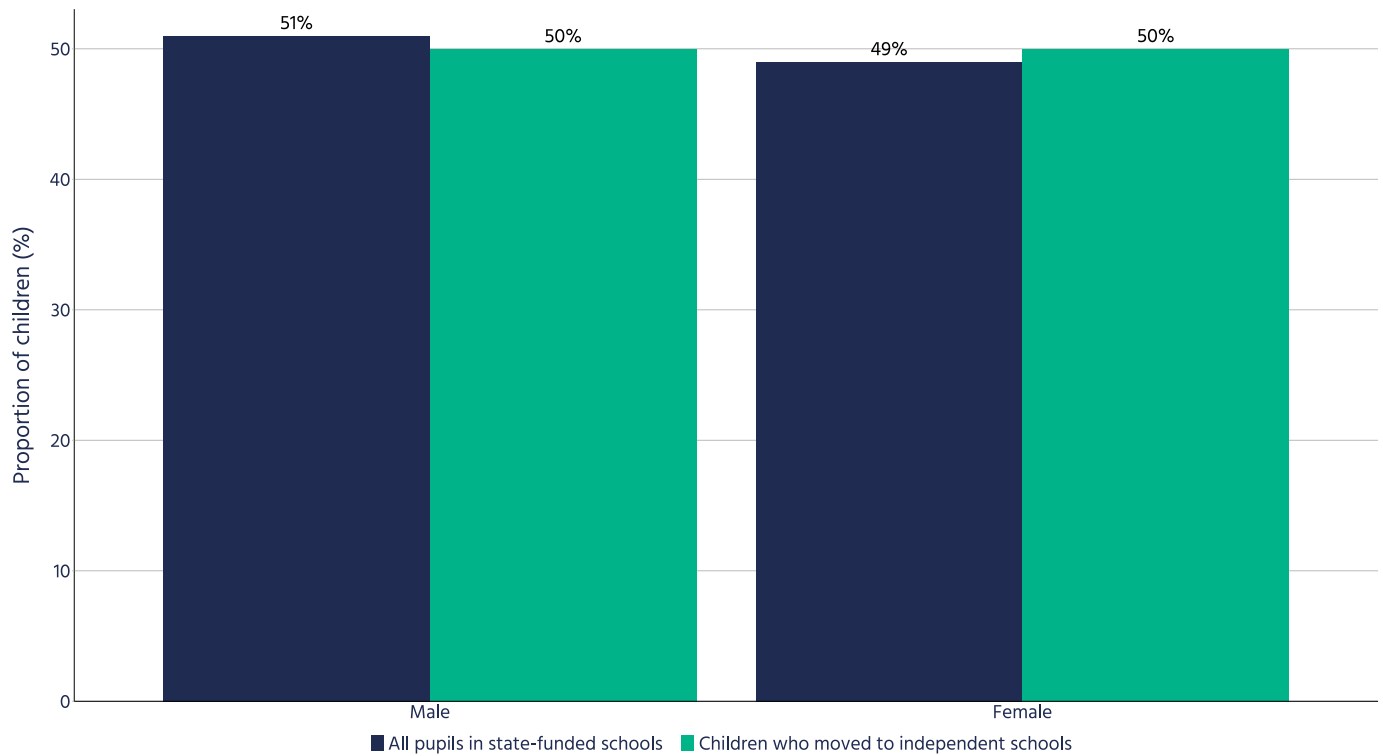
Figure 5: Ethnicity of children who left the state education system and move to an independent school



### 3.2.3 Gender

There was no significant difference in the proportion of females and males in our sample of children who left state-funded education and moved to an independent school (Figure 6). Half of children in our sample were male, and the other half were female. This broadly mirrors the proportions of males and females in state-funded schools.

Figure 6: Gender of children who left the state education system and moved to an independent school



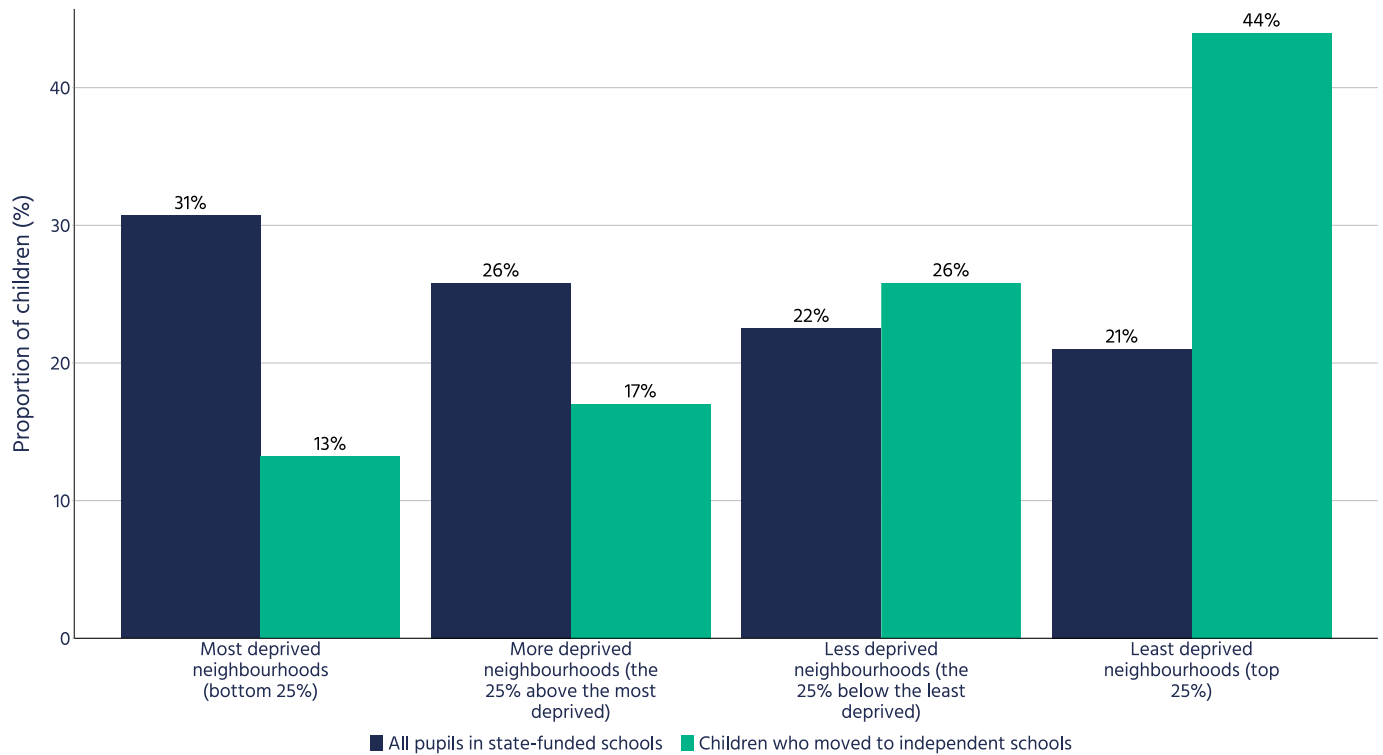
### 3.2.4 Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index

We used the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index to measure the local deprivation of the children in our analysis, based on their home postcodes.

70% of children in our sample who moved to an independent school were from the less deprived half of areas (Figure 7). 44% of children were from the least deprived quarter of neighbourhoods and a further 26% of children were from the next least deprived. For comparison, 44% of all state-funded pupils were from the least deprived half of areas.

Children in our sample who moved to independent schools were much less likely to come from the most disadvantaged areas. 13% of children in our sample who moved to an independent school were from the most deprived neighbourhoods. This compares with 31% of the population of state-funded pupils who were from the most deprived neighbourhoods.

**Figure 7: Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index of children who left the state education system and moved to an independent school**



### 3.2.5 Special educational needs

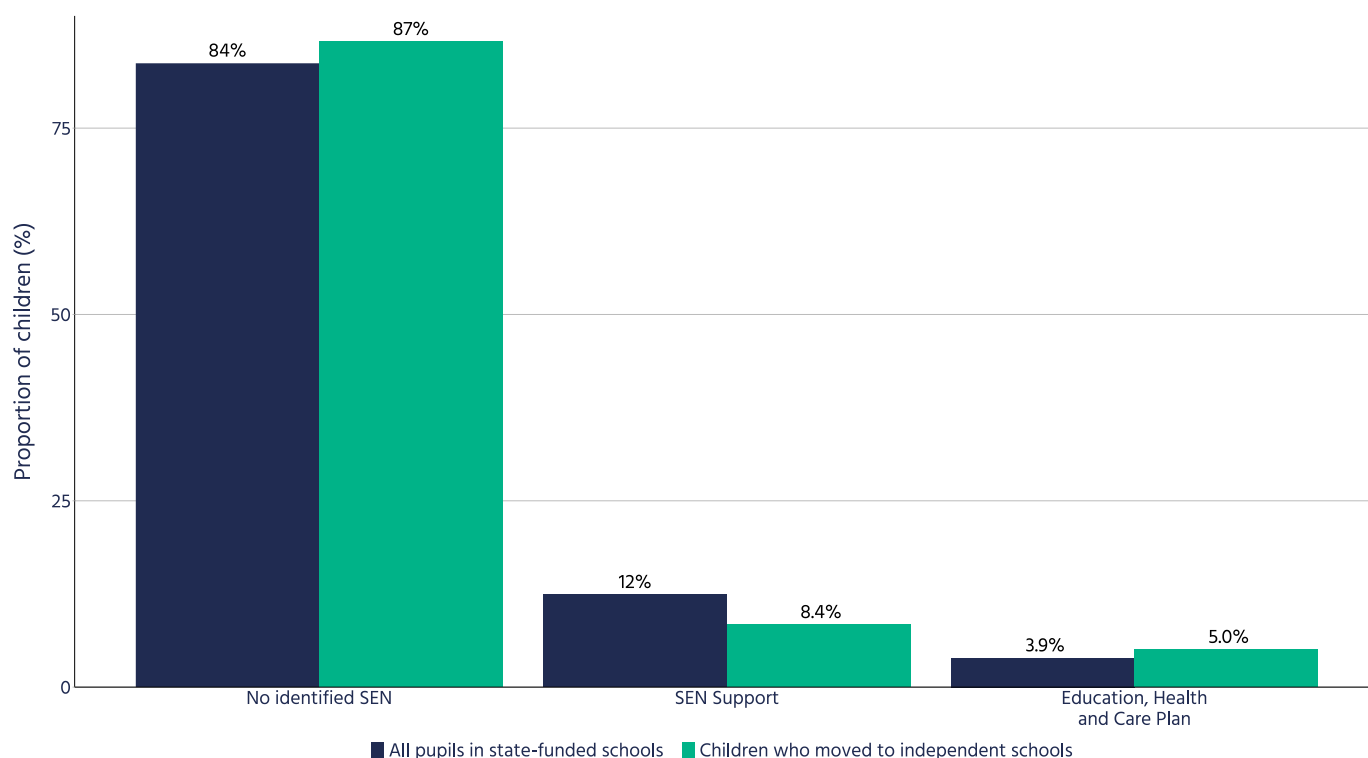
Children who left the state education system and moved to independent schools were less likely than pupils in state-funded schools to have identified special educational needs (SEN). 87% of children who went into independent schools had no identified SEN, compared to 84% of all state-funded pupils (Figure 8).

A slightly higher proportion of children had an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), relative to all state-funded pupils. In our sample, 5.0% of children who moved to an independent school had an EHCP. 3.9% of all state-funded pupils have an EHCP.

Children with SEN Support were underrepresented in our sample of children who moved to independent schools, relative to all state-funded pupils. Only 8.4% of children who moved to an independent school had SEN Support. This compares to 12% of the population of state-funded school pupils.



**Figure 8: Special educational needs provision of children who left the state education system and moved to an independent school**

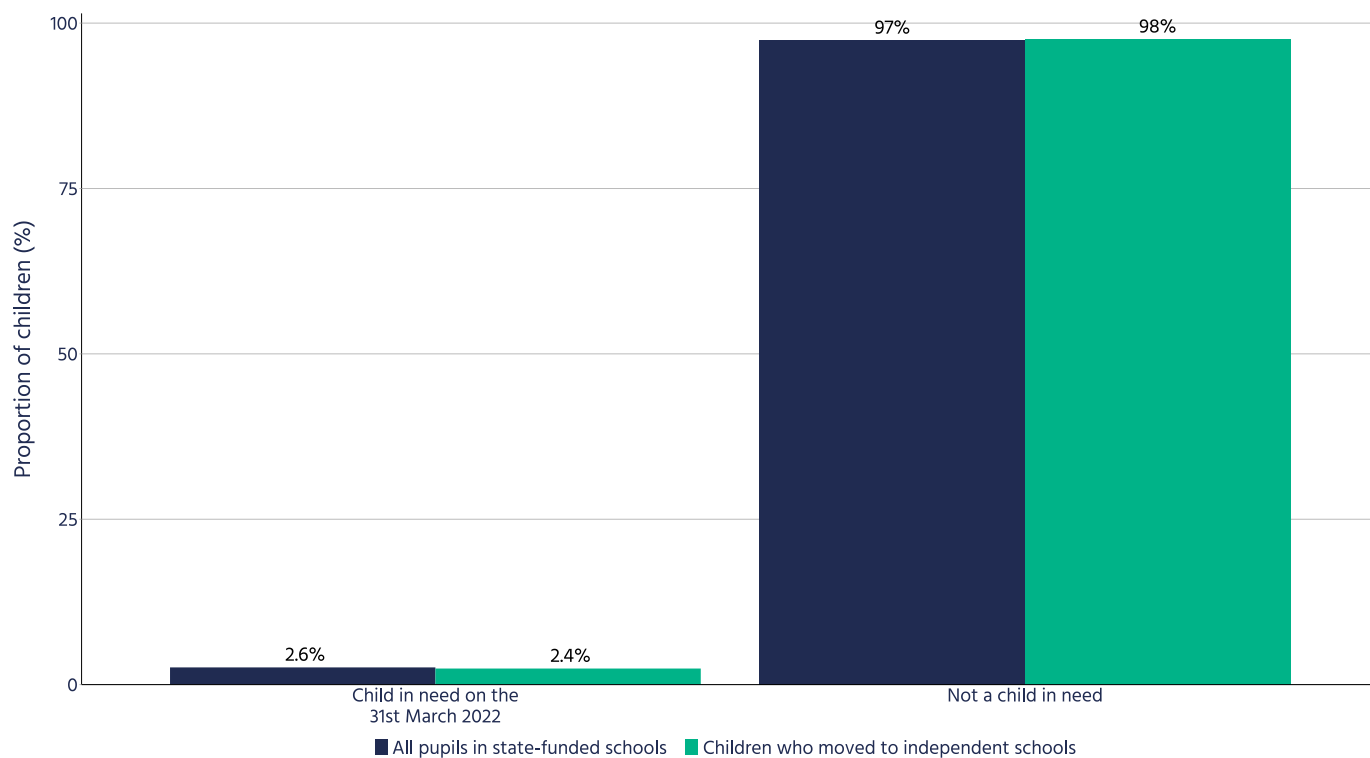


The proportion of children with special educational needs was higher in our sample of children who moved to independent special schools. Most children who moved into independent special schools had an EHCP. 78% of children who moved to an independent special school had an EHCP and a further 13% had SEN Support, according to their records in the 2021/22 Spring censuses.

### 3.2.6 Social care involvement

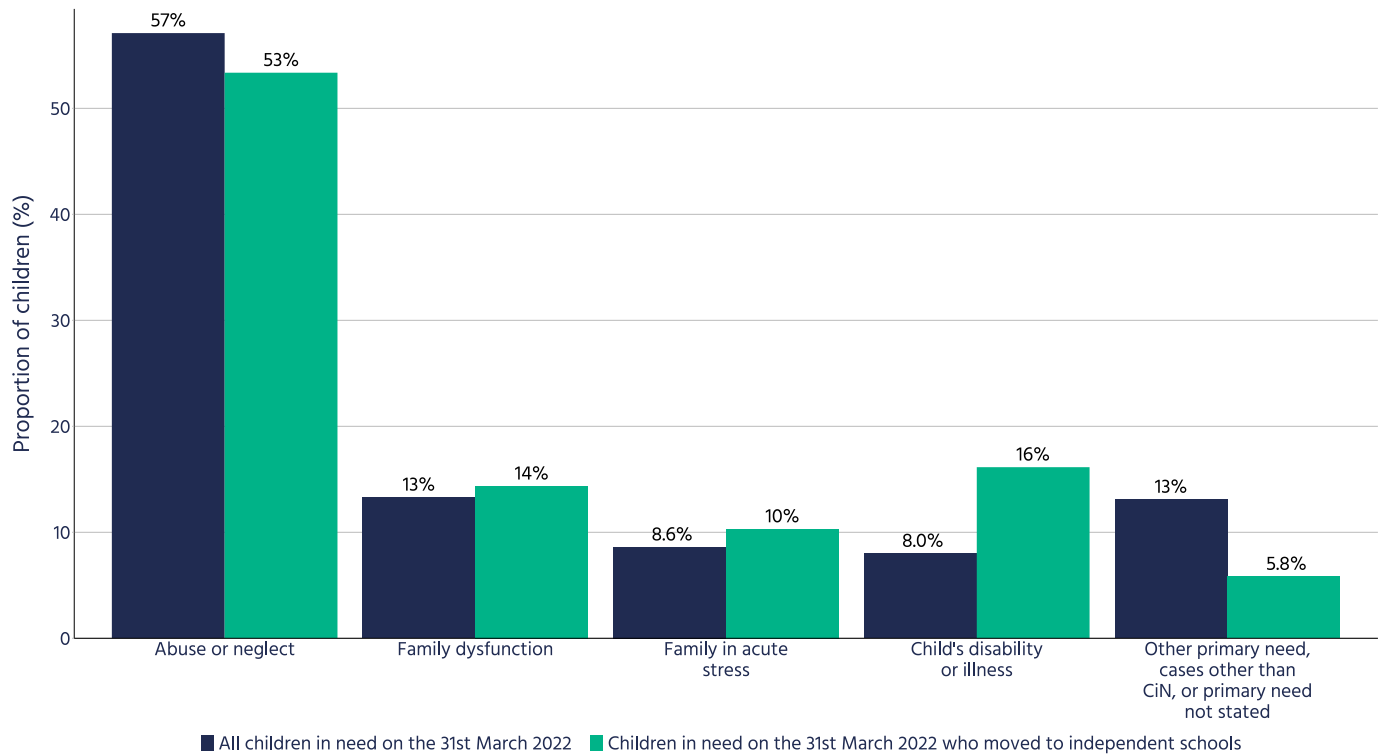
The proportion of children identified as children in need in the sample of children who moved to an independent school was lower than the respective proportion in state-funded schools. 2.4% of children who moved to an independent school were recorded as being a child in need on the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022 (Figure 9). This compares with 2.6% of all state-funded pupils.

**Figure 9: Child in need status of children who left the state education system and moved to an independent school**



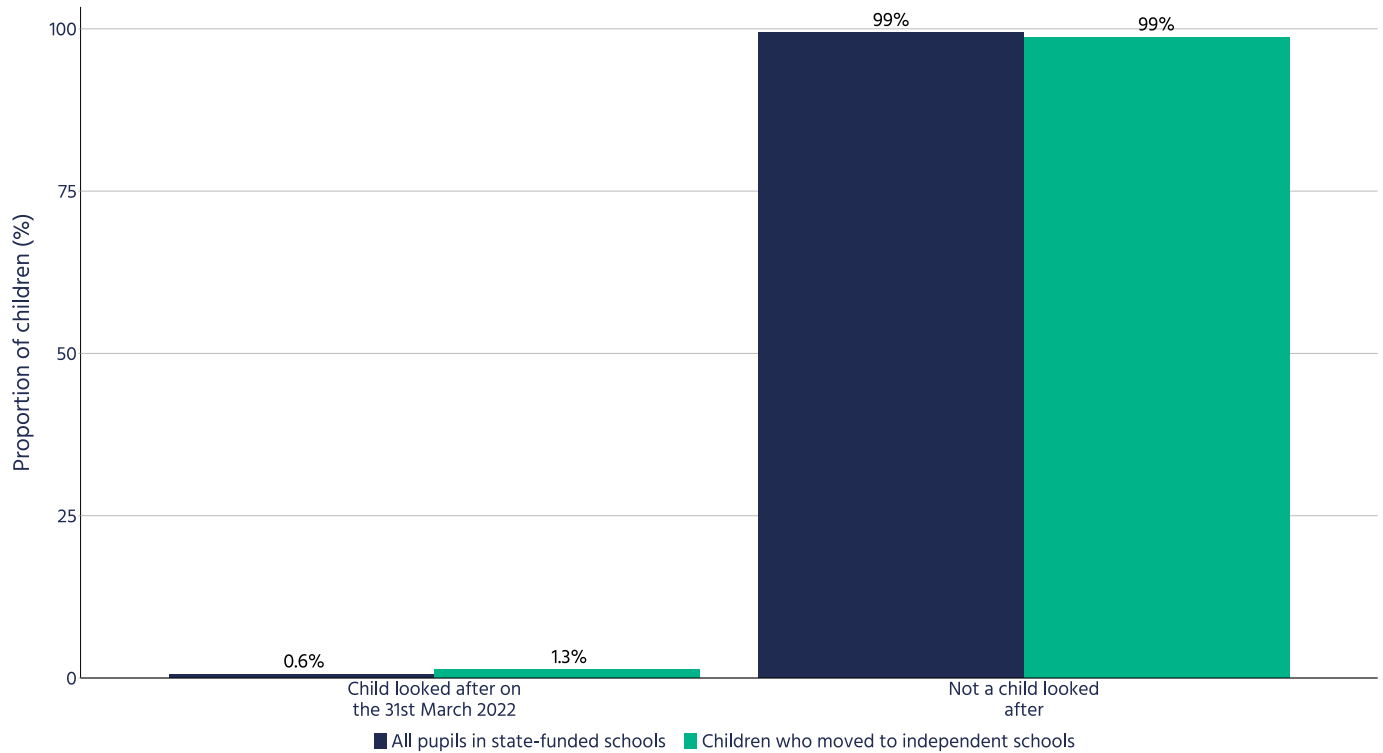
A higher proportion of children in need who moved to independent schools had the child's disability or illness recorded as their primary need, compared to children in need in state-funded schools (Figure 10). 16% of children in need who went into independent schools had the child's disability or illness identified as their primary need, compared to 8.0% of all children in need.

Figure 10: Primary need of children in need who left the state education system and moved to an independent school



The proportion of children who were looked after was higher in the sample of children who moved to an independent school relative to the population of children in state-funded schools. 1.3% of children in our sample who moved into independent schools were looked after on the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022, compared with 0.6% of all state-funded pupils (Figure 11).

**Figure 11: Child looked after status of children who left the state education system and moved to an independent school**



### 3.3 Educational history

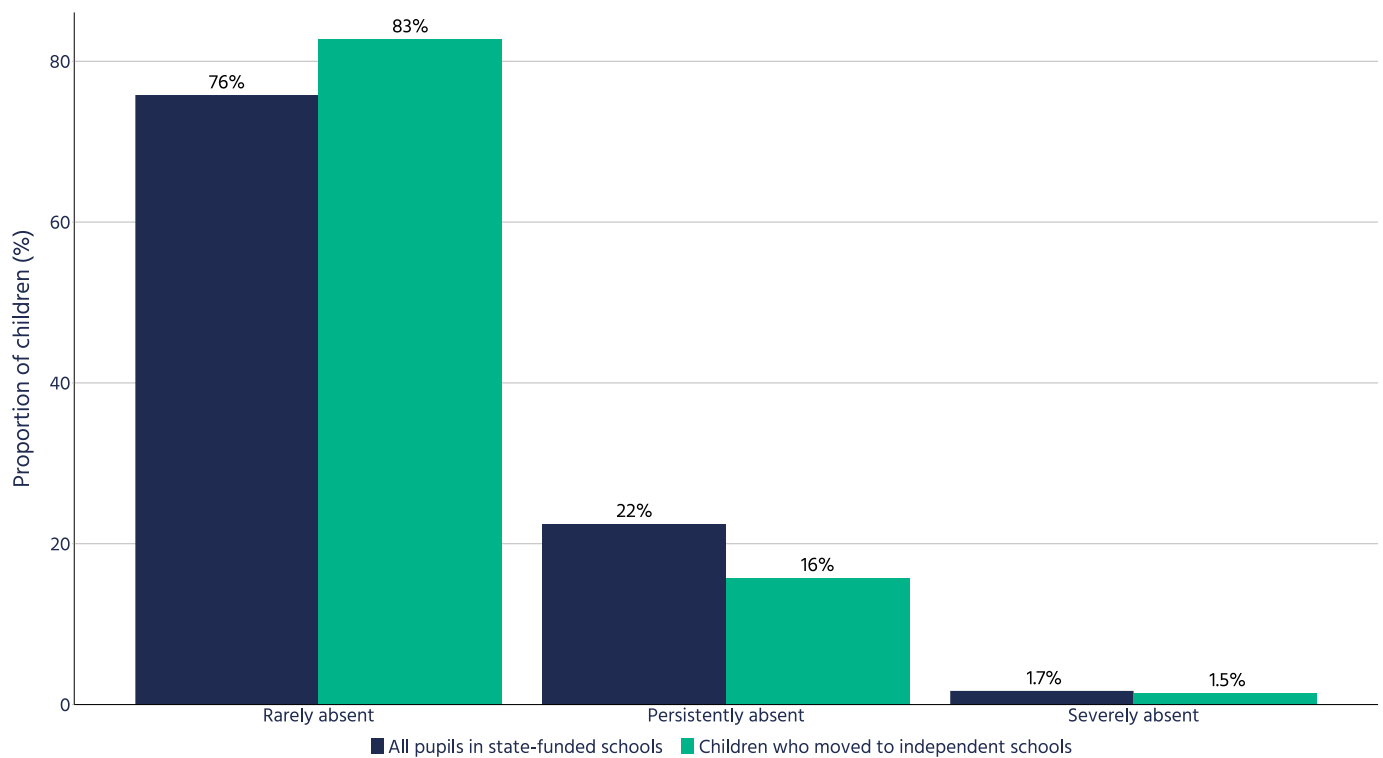
Children who moved into independent schools were less likely than the overall pupil population to have a history of persistent or severe absenteeism. Children we identified as entering independent schools were more likely to come from schools rated 'Outstanding' by Ofsted.

#### 3.3.1 Attendance pattern

Children who left state-funded education for independent school were less likely to have a history of persistent or severe absenteeism, relative to all state-funded pupils. 16% of children who moved to an independent school were persistently absent in the previous academic year, compared to 22% of all state-funded pupils (Figure 12).

A further 1.5% of children who moved to an independent school were severely absent in 2021/22. For comparison, 1.7% of all state-funded pupils had a history of severe absenteeism for the same period.

**Figure 12: Attendance pattern in 2021/22 of children who left the state education system and moved to an independent school**

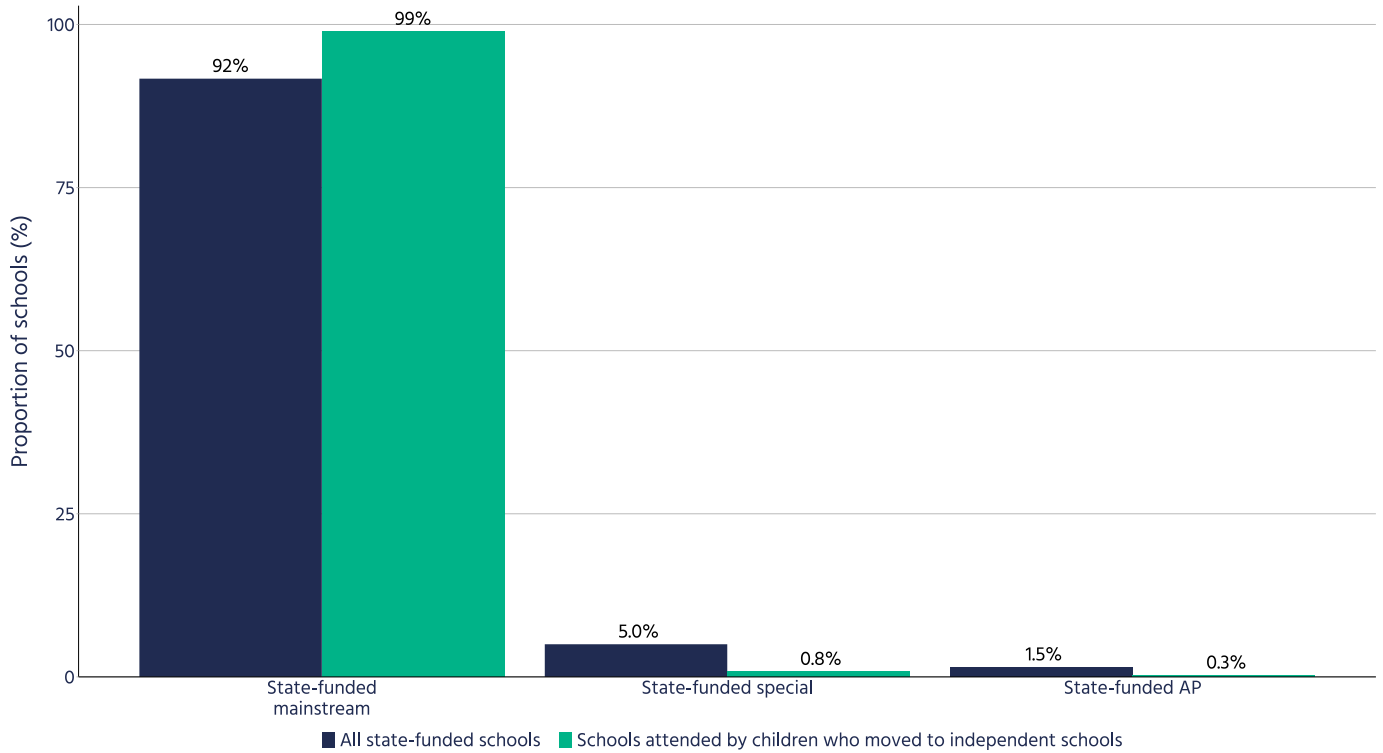


### 3.3.2 Previous school type

Almost all the children in our sample who moved to an independent school had left a state-funded mainstream school, rather than a special school or alternative provision (Figure 13). 99% of the schools attended by children who moved to an independent school were state-funded mainstream school. By comparison, 92% of all state-funded schools are mainstream schools.

Children from state-funded special schools or state-funded alternative provision (AP) were much less likely to go onto an independent school. Just 0.8% of the schools attended by children in the office’s sample who moved to an independent school were state-funded special schools. This compares with 5.0% of all state-funded schools. 0.3% of the schools attended by children in the office’s sample who moved to an independent school were state-funded alternative provision schools.

**Figure 13: Types of schools attended by children who left the state education system and moved to an independent school**



Children who moved to an independent special school were more likely to have previously been in a state-funded special or state-funded alternative provision school. In our sample of children who moved to independent special schools, 83% were previously educated in a state-funded mainstream school, 13% were previously in a state-funded special school, and 3.7% were previously in state-funded alternative provision.<sup>iii</sup>

### 3.2.3 Previous school's Ofsted rating

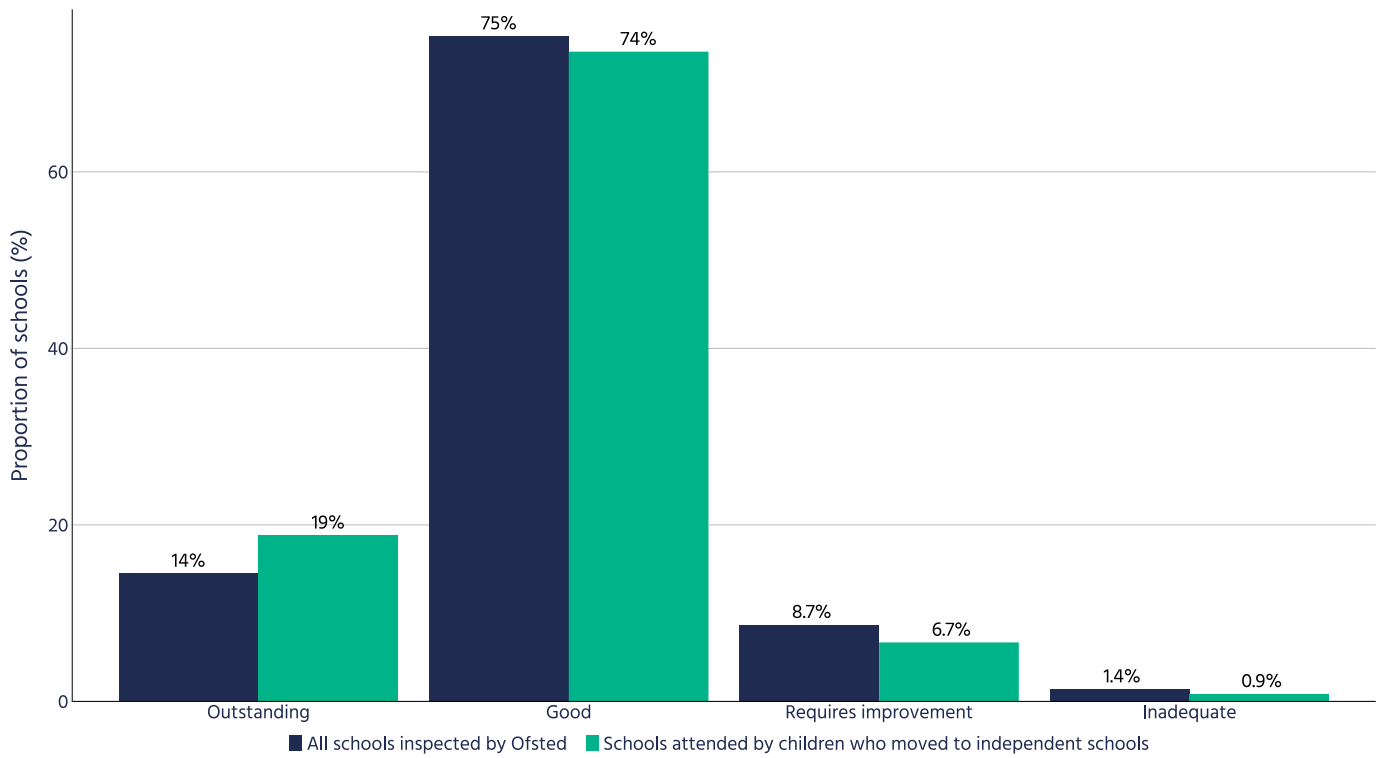
Children in our sample who moved to an independent school were much likely to have previously been in an 'Outstanding' school, relative to all state-funded pupils (Figure 14). 19% of schools attended by children who left state-funded education to go to an independent school were rated 'Outstanding' by Ofsted. This compares with 14% of all schools which have been inspected by Ofsted were rated 'Outstanding'.

**Figure 14: Ofsted ratings of schools attended by children who left the state education system and moved to an independent school**

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<sup>iii</sup> Where information was available on previous school attended.

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## 4. Children who leave and go into home education

30% of children in our study sample (who remained in England but moved to destinations outside the scope of the Department for Education's Spring censuses) and 16% of the overall sample moved into home education. This was 6,953 children in our sample, or an estimated 13,120 weighted up to the whole of England.

Local authorities and parent groups we spoke to agreed that in recent years an increasing number of parents had withdrawn their children to home educate.

### 4.1 Reasons for leaving

In our data return, we did not capture the reason parents gave, if any, for moving into home education. However, our discussions with parents and local authorities allowed us to identify common perceived reasons for leaving school and moving into home education.

Most parents who the office spoke to said that they had chosen home education as a last resort. Parents detailed a series of incidents where schools had not offered the support their child needed to engage in education. Often, their child had started to not attend school regularly or had been subject to a series of sanctions in school. The office heard that parents were opting for home education because they believed that sending their child to school without support was having a negative impact on their child and making it harder for them to access education. Parents who were part of wider home education groups said that the large majority of parents they knew to be home educating had not freely decided to home educate, they said they felt forced to do so.

Parents commonly mentioned a lack of support for children's mental health and anxiety. They told us that their children were often anxious about going to school and in some instances spoke of suicidal ideation. Parents told the office that their children would not show their real feelings at school, which meant that schools did not always believe parents when they raised concerns. Often, parents had been trying to support their child at home for a period of months before their child had started to disengage from school. Parents said that they did not receive a consistent approach from schools. They said that schools were often inflexible and did not offer graduated support to help their children to reengage in education. Parents also told the office that their children faced lengthy waits for Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and may not meet the threshold for support, even when exhibiting signs of suicidal ideation. Parents said that they found it hard to send their children into school when they had severe mental health difficulties. Many parents and local authorities also told us about the challenges children face in trying to secure appropriate special educational needs and/or disability (SEND) provision. The offices heard of some instances where parents and schools disagreed over whether the child had a special educational need and the level of support that would be necessary to enable them to engage in education. Parents told us that they found it difficult to get the support they needed without an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). Often, children face long waits for a needs assessment. Even when children had an EHCP, parents detailed how the provision outlined was often not delivered.

Some parents said that their children had been bullied while at school. They said that the bullying had made their child feel unsafe and had led to a loss of confidence. Parents said that they did not know where to turn to when they felt like schools' policies to deal with bullying were ineffective.

While most of the parents the office spoke to did not feel like they had freely chosen to home educate, many said that they thought it was working better for their child than the school system. They said that they were relieved that home education existed because it provided an alternative for their child.

Some parents said that because home education had not been their first choice, they did not feel like they were properly resourced to home educate and would have appreciated greater support with things like resource costs or finding an exam centre. Some said that if they could find a better school or alternative educational route, they would return to the school system.

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In a minority of cases, parents told the office that they had chosen to home educate by choice. Some of these parents had initially tried the school system and then decided to withdraw for philosophical reasons. The office also spoke to families who had home educated their children without ever sending them to school (a group outside the scope of the quantitative analysis in this report). These parents either had strong philosophical preferences for home education or had another child already in home education.

## 4.2 Pupil characteristics

Our analysis found that children in our study sample who went into home education were more likely to have an identified special educational need or to come from a more deprived neighbourhood compared to their peers in state-funded schools.

### 4.2.1 Age

Children in our sample who left the state education system for home education were most likely to be secondary school age. 64% of children in our sample who moved to home education were aged 11 to 14 (Figure 15). This compares with 36% of all state-funded pupils who were this age.

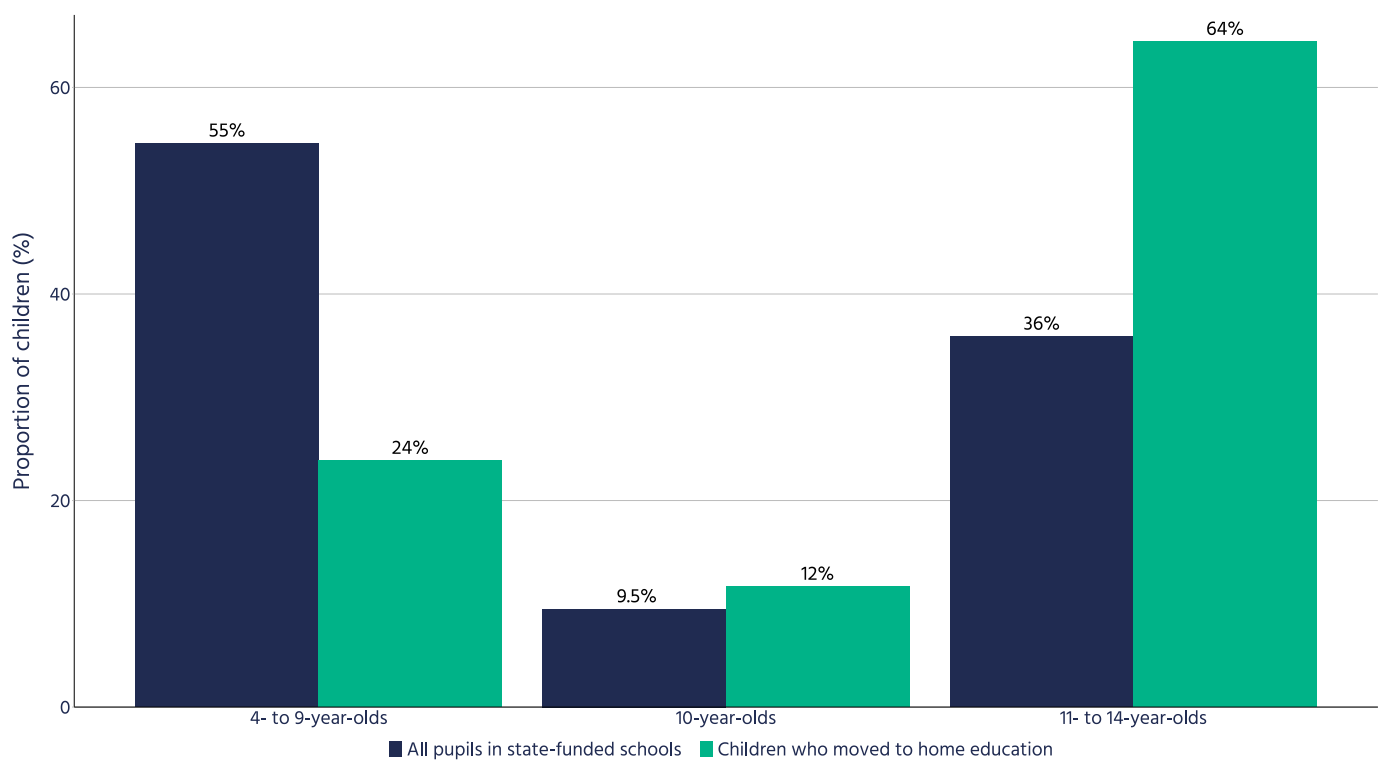
This pattern was mirrored in our conversations with local authorities, where we heard that children who left school for home education were more likely to leave secondary schools than primary schools. We heard that this was often because secondary schools were larger and provided less individualised support for children. Local authorities said that in some instances, children who moved into home education in secondary school had enjoyed primary school and developed strong relationships with teachers and other children.

The office spoke to parents with children of all ages in home education. Parents said that the decision to home educate could come at any stage in a child's education, and the decision to move into home education was related largely to their child's needs or the quality of support from school. However, parents agreed that secondary schools tended to be less nurturing and child-centred when compared to primary schools. Some children struggled with the bigger class sizes, different teachers, and stricter behaviour systems. Parents of children with diagnosed neurodivergence said it was more difficult to get the support their child needed in a secondary school setting.

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A slightly greater proportion of children in our sample who went into home education were aged 10 at the start of the academic year, relative to the proportion of children who were the same age in the population of all state-funded pupils. 12% of children who went into home education were aged 10, compared to 9.5% of all state-funded pupils.

**Figure 15: Age at the start of 2021/22 academic year of children who left the state education system and went into home education**



## 4.2.2 Ethnicity

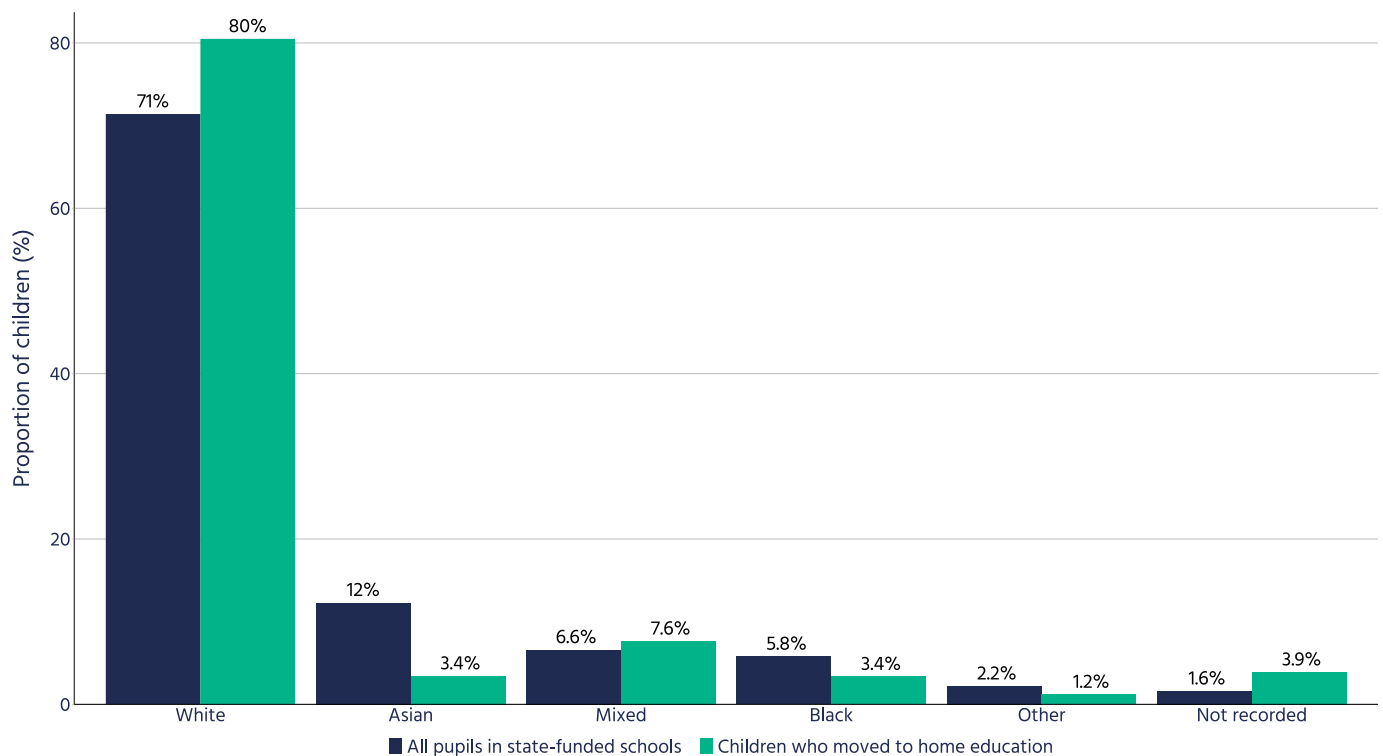
Children in our sample who went into home education were much more likely to be white, relative to all state-funded pupils (Figure 16). 80% of children in our sample who went into home education were White, compared to 71% of all state-funded pupils.

Within this group, children who were Gypsy, Roma or Traveller of Irish heritage were overrepresented. 3.5% of children who left the state education system and went into home education were Gypsy/Roma and a further 1.6% were Traveller of Irish heritage. For comparison, 0.3% of children in state-funded schools were Gypsy/Roma and 0.1% were Traveller of Irish heritage. The office heard that these children sometimes had poor experiences in school or were the subject of bullying and discrimination.

A smaller proportion of children who were black, Asian, or other ethnicities moved into home education, relative to their respective proportions among all state-funded pupils.

3.9% of children who moved into home education in our sample did not have a recorded ethnicity, according to the 2021/22 Spring censuses. For comparison, 1.6% of pupils in state-funded schools had no recorded ethnicity. Their ethnicity may have been unrecorded because they refused to share this information with their school, or because their school's data administrator had not yet obtained this information by the time of the censuses.

**Figure 16: Ethnicity of children who left the state education system and went into home education**

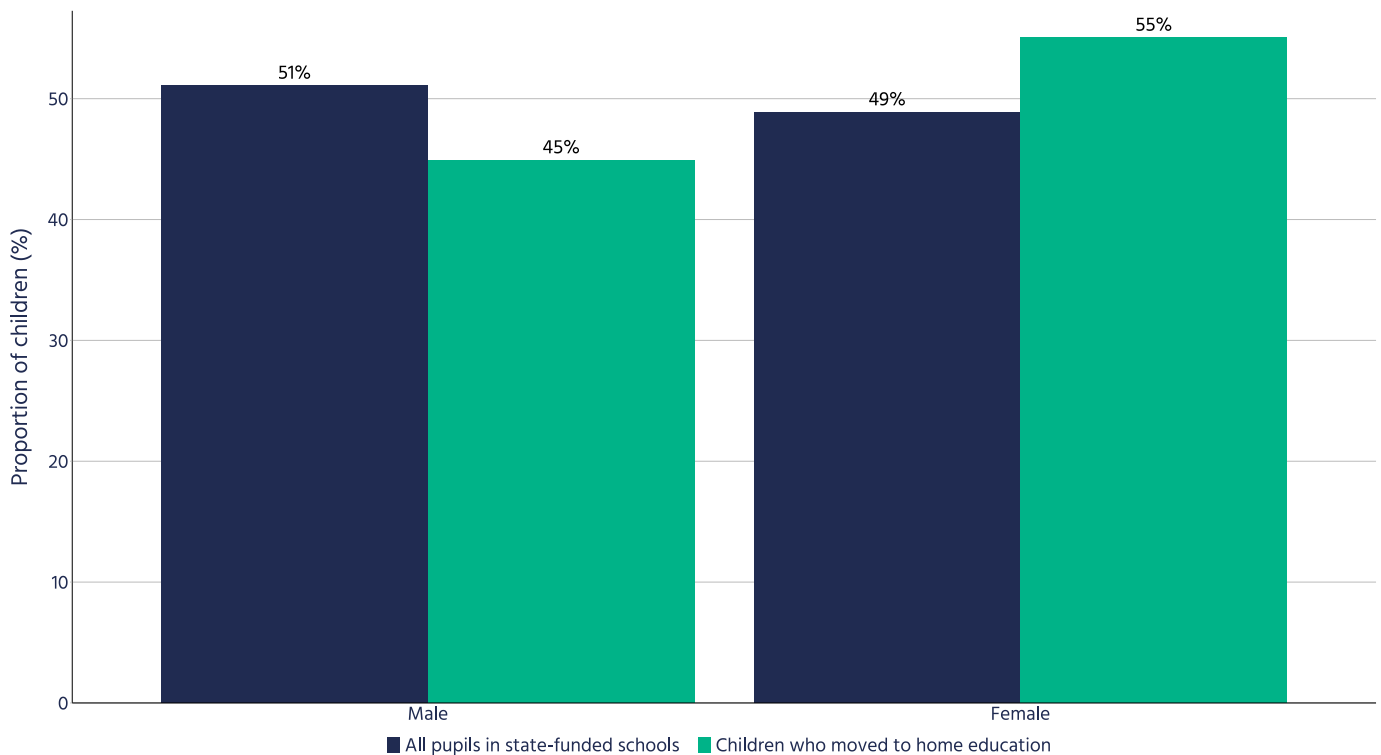


### 4.2.3 Gender

Slightly more children in our sample who went into home education were female, relative to all state-funded pupils (Figure 17). 55% of children who left the state education system and went into home education were female, compared to 49% of all state-funded pupils.

Local authorities told the office that they had seen an increase in mental health concerns for teenage girls which had led to disengagement with education. Some said that school shutdowns and increased time spent on social media had led to an increased in poor mental health. They said they had noticed some girls disengaging from school because of the impact this had on their mental health and wellbeing.

**Figure 17: Gender of children who left the state education system and went into home education**



#### 4.2.4 Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index

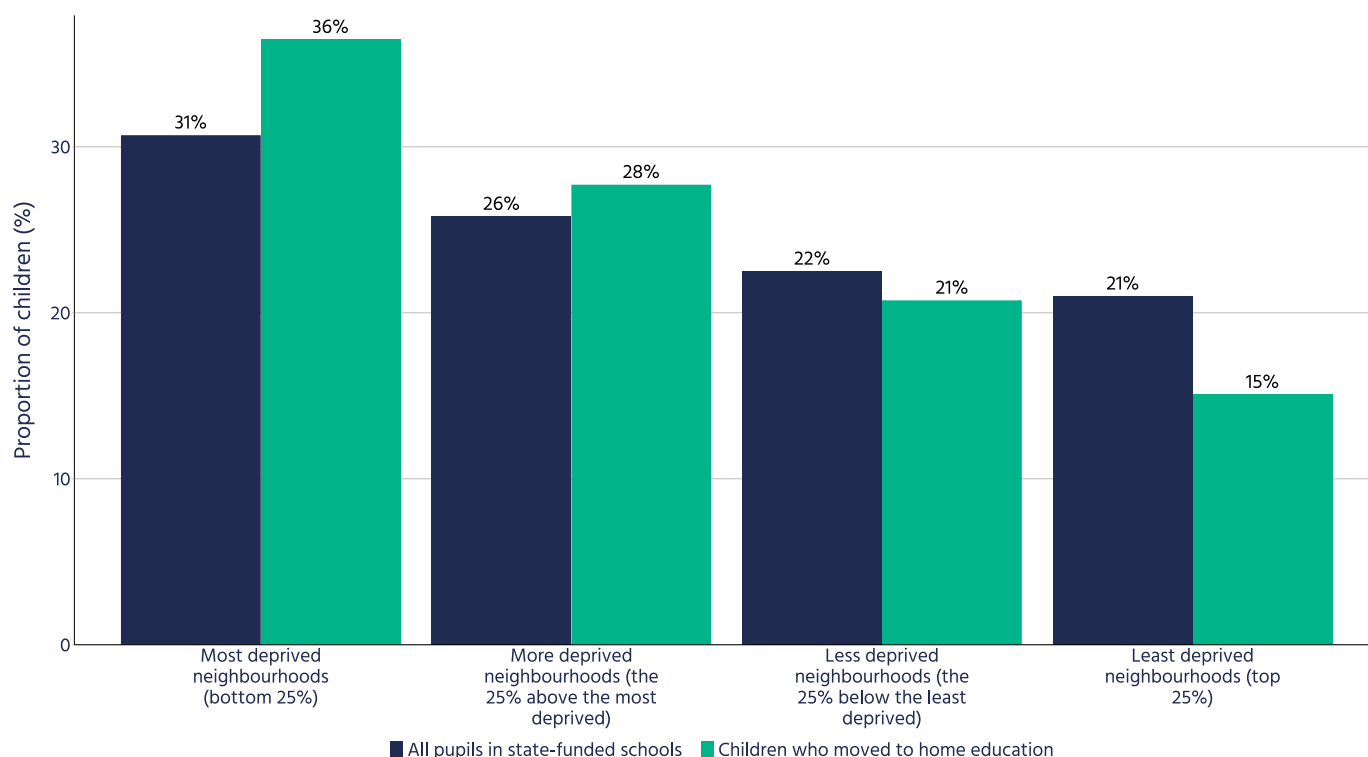
Children who left the state education system to go into home education were more likely to be living in disadvantaged areas, relative to pupils in state-funded schools (Figure 18). Over half (64%) of children in our sample who went into home education lived in the more deprived half of neighbourhoods. 36% lived in the most deprived quarter of neighbourhoods, this compares with 31% of pupils in state-funded schools.

Children in our sample who went into home education were less likely to live in the least disadvantaged areas. 15% of children who went into home education came from the least deprived quarter of neighbourhoods. This is 21% for all state-funded pupils.

In our conversations with parents and local authorities, we heard that often children moved into home education due to an inability to get the support they needed to engage in education. Local authorities said that this could be especially hard for children living in more disadvantaged areas where demand for services was higher or where the complexity of need was greater.

Parents told the office that home educating often entailed high costs for families. Local authorities do not have a duty to help with funding or resources and any help that they do provide is down to their own discretion. In many instances, parents have to pay for textbooks, tutors, or any educational packages their child needs. Parents detailed the difficulties they faced in paying for exam fees and in finding an exam centre for their child. In one instance, a parent had to pay for a hotel for several weeks while their child sat exams in a centre in another part of the country to where they lived.

**Figure 18: Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index of children who left the state education system and went into home education**



## 4.2.5 Special educational needs

A disproportionate number of children in our sample who went into home education had some form of special educational needs (SEN). 30% of children who moved into home education had some form of identified SEN as recorded in the 2021/22 Spring censuses (Figure 19).

25% of children in our sample who went into home education had SEN Support. This is more than double the proportion of children in state-funded schools in receipt of SEN Support. Among all state-funded pupils, 12% of children had SEN Support.

A slightly greater proportion of children who went into home education had an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), relative to the proportion of all state-funded pupils with EHCPs. 4.9% of children who went into home education had an EHCP, while 3.9% of all state-funded pupils had an EHCP.



Local authorities and parents said that an increasing number of children were leaving the school system for home education due to insufficient support for SEND in schools. A lot of the parents we spoke to said that their child had either an EHCP or a private diagnosis but still did not receive the support they needed to engage in school.

Parents told the office that when their children received SEN Support at school, the quality of that support was variable. They said that they did not feel like parents' or children's views were considered when designing SEN Support and there was little scrutiny about the outcomes for children with SEND. Sometimes the support offered made children feel more isolated and anxious about going into school. Even when the support outlined appeared to be suitable, parents said that teachers were often not informed about the reasonable adjustments their child needed and so the support offered in practice was variable.

Most parents recognised that schools and teachers were trying to do all they could to support their children. However, they said that schools often lacked the resource, capacity, and training to create a whole-school approach to SEND.

Some parents said that their children started to disengage or not behave in class, as a result of not being given the support they needed. They said that this could lead to a worse relationship with the school, the teachers, and other children.

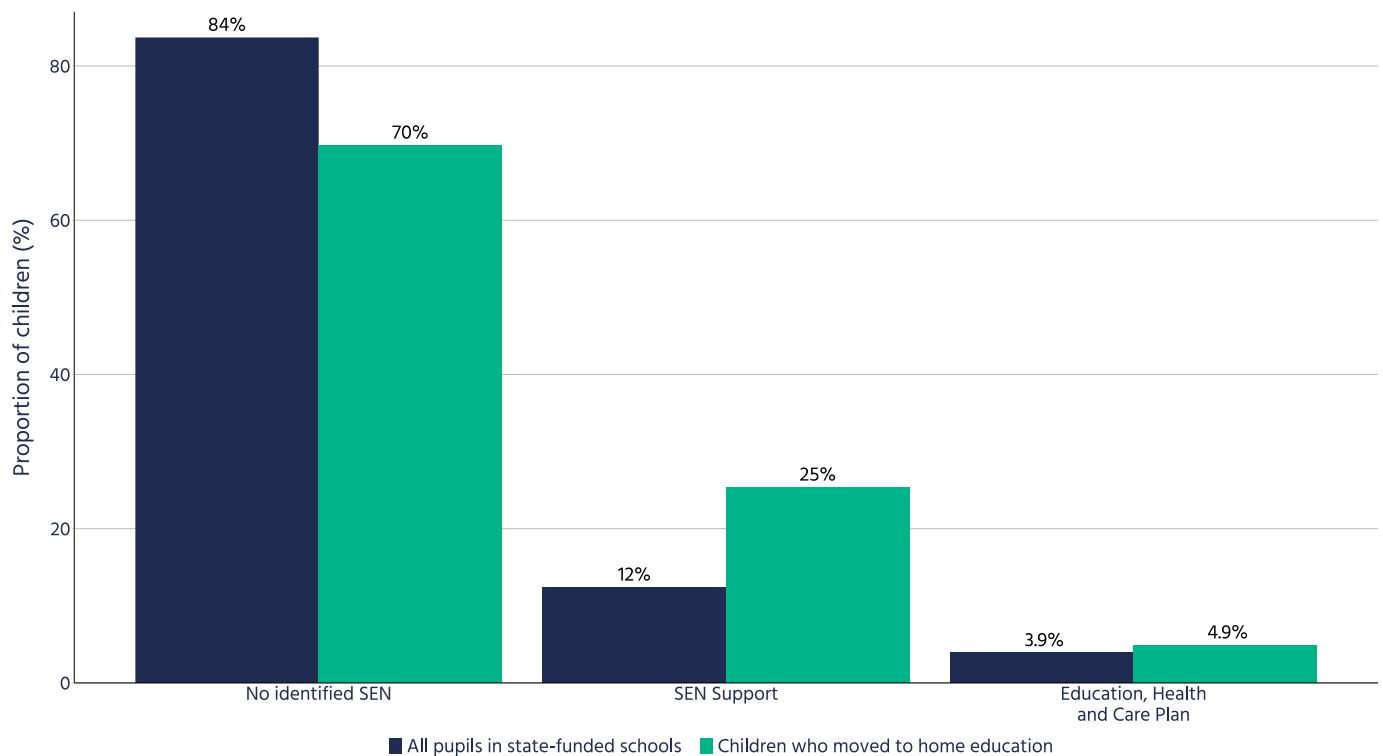
Many parents concluded that they would need to get an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) if they wanted to get the necessary support for their child's special educational needs. However, the office was told that this was a difficult pathway. Often, children experience long waiting times for assessment. The office also heard of instances where requests for an assessment were refused, without any meeting with the child. In the absence of a suitable route for assessment, some parents told us that they had to use personal savings to pay for a private diagnosis.

Even when children had an EHCP, the office heard of instances where the recommendations from occupational therapists and educational psychologist were not taken into account. Parents said that provision outlined in EHCPs was not always delivered.

Many of the parents the office spoke to said that they wanted their child to stay in mainstream education. They stated that their child's needs were not so acute that they needed a high degree of support or specialist facilities. They also said that they wanted their children to access the national curriculum. Those who did consider an alternative education route often looked at Education Other Than At School, as a bridge to support their children to reengage in learning.

Some parents had decided to home educate after seeing their children learn at home during the pandemic. They observed that their children preferred learning online and that they were less anxious when their schools returned under social distancing because they were working in smaller groups under the Covid bubble system.

**Figure 19: Special educational needs provision of children who left the state education system and went into home education**

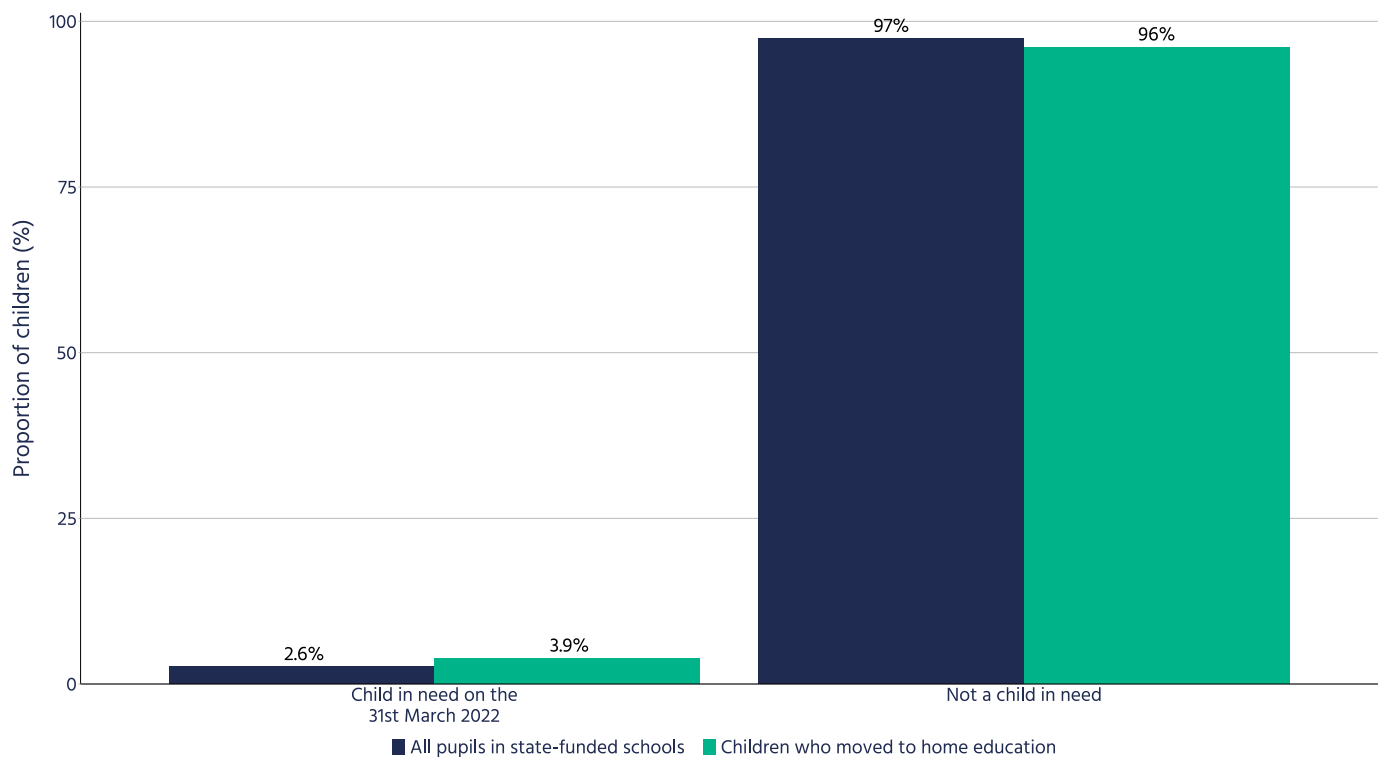


### 4.2.6 Social care involvement

A higher proportion of children in our sample who went into home education were recorded as a child in need on the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022, relative to the proportion of all state-funded pupils recorded as a child in need (Figure 20). 3.9% of children who left state-funded education and went into home education were recorded as a child in need, compared to 2.6% of all state-funded pupils.

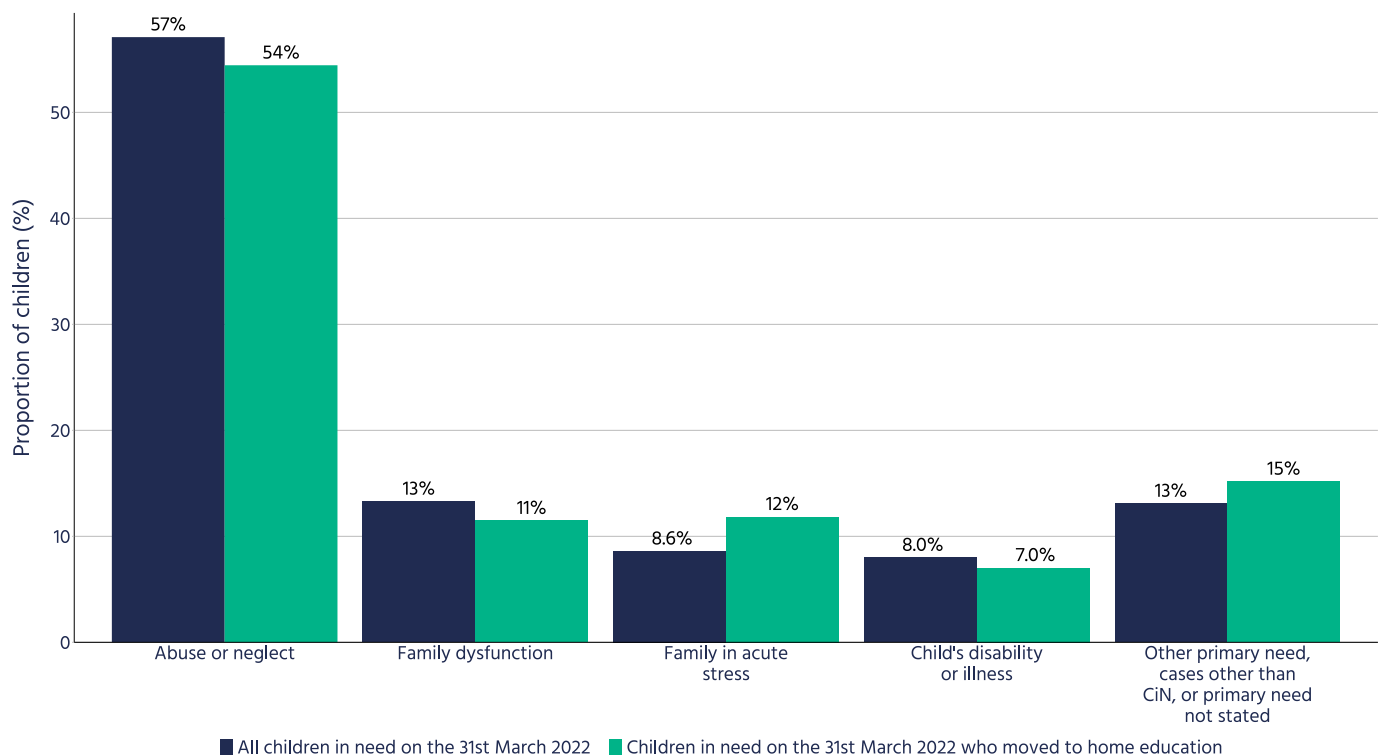
A move into home education may precede or follow a child becoming a child in need, and the patterns are an area for future research to explore.

**Figure 20: Child in need status of children who left the state education system and went into home education**



A higher proportion of children in need in home education had family in acute stress recorded as their primary need, compared to the respective proportion in state-funded schools (Figure 21). 12% of children in need who went into home education had family in acute stress identified as their primary need, compared to 8.6% of all children in need.

**Figure 21: Primary need of children in need who left the state education system and moved into home education**



Local authorities told us that they were concerned about the number of children in their area who were known to social care and pulled out of school for home education. One said that they had seen an increasing number of children with a social worker moving to home education. They stated that they had no official powers to stop children with a child in need plan leaving school, however, they had developed a process in their local authority where they would automatically inform social workers if any child who was an open case to social care was known to be moving into home education. In all these instances, they would work with the social worker to triage the case appropriately. If the social worker deemed that home education was unsuitable, the request to home educate would be denied.

Almost no children who went into home education were in care (i.e. looked after by their local authority), much fewer than the 0.6% of pupils in state-funded schools who were recorded as looked after on the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022.

While it is legally possible for a looked after child to be home educated, this decision must be made in consultation with the child's carers. Virtual School Heads have helped to ensure that fewer looked after children leave the school system. Virtual School Heads can advocate for looked after children and children in need and help to hold schools to account for their outcomes.

## 4.3 Educational history

Our analysis found that children in our study sample who went into home education had had much higher levels of absence than their peers in state-funded schools. Most children who moved into home education came from mainstream schools. While schools rated 'Inadequate' or 'Requires Improvement' were overrepresented in the sample of children who moved into home education, most children who left for home education had left schools rated 'Good'.

### 4.3.1 Attendance pattern

Children who left school for home education were much more likely to have had poor attendance in the year prior to leaving their school roll (Figure 22). 82% of children in our sample who left the state education system for home education had been either persistently or severely absent in the previous academic year.

More than half (55%) of children in our sample who went into home education were previously persistently absent. This compares with 22% of children in the state-school population.

A further 26% were severely absent, relative to 1.7% of all state-funded pupils. The proportion of children who were severely absent was 15-fold higher in the home education sample.

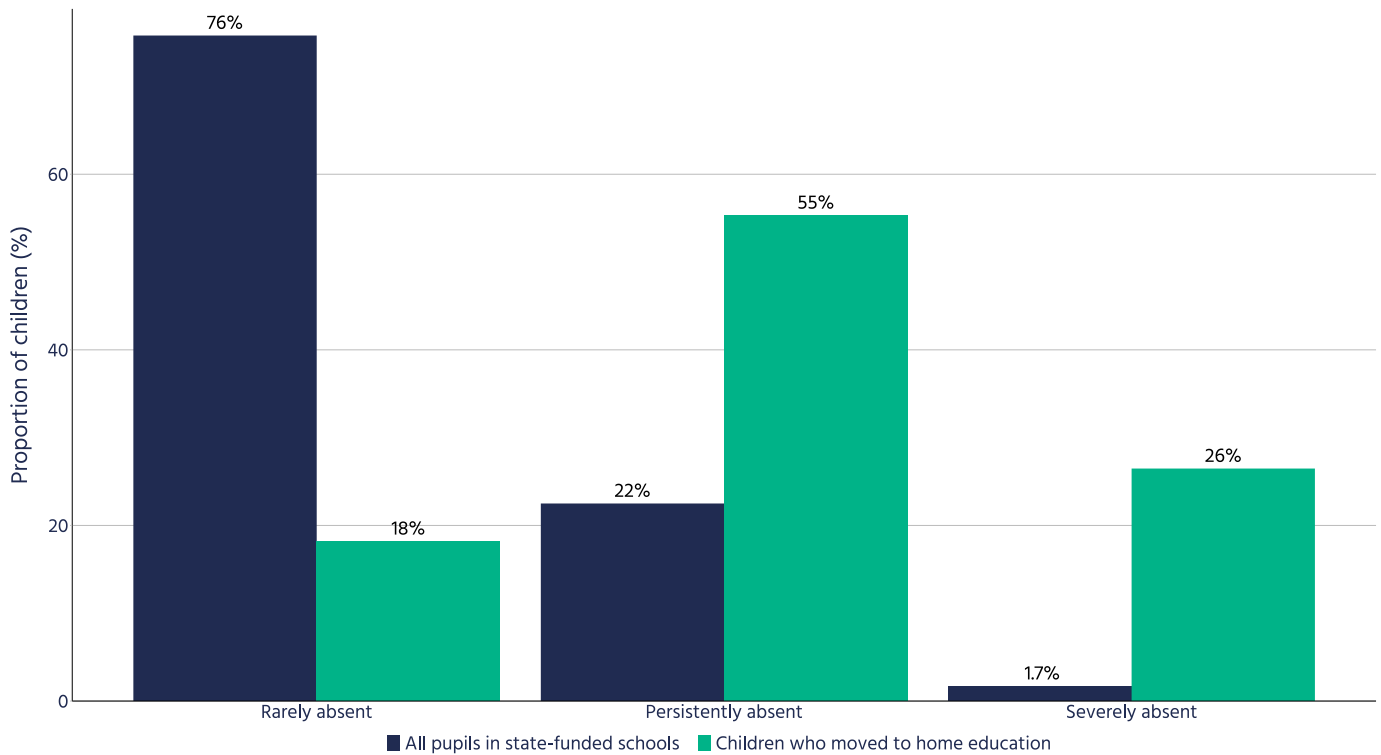
Parents and local authorities told us that a lot of children who had moved into home education in recent years had patterns of poor attendance in schools. Parents said that they had tried to talk to schools about strategies they could implement to help their child to return to education. Parents told us that their children wanted to learn and were often desperate to be in school like their friends. However, they said that schools did not often have the resource or expertise to create graduated return to school plans.

In our interview with local authorities, there was clear confusion around the roles and responsibilities of schools and local authorities in securing appropriate alternative provision for children who were absent or who left the school system after a period of disengagement. Local authorities said that there had been an increase in Section 19 requests for alternative provision. They stated that it was often better to secure alternative provision when a child is on the roll of a mainstream school, to help them to reengage with education and return to their school more quickly.

The office heard of some schools that had taken an innovative and flexible approach to supporting children to reengage after long periods of absence. One school had created remote provision for children to attend on the school site. Another had developed their own nurture room which children could access if they needed additional support throughout the school day.

Local authorities said that it was often difficult for schools to put in place the support that children might need. School staff were not adequately trained in mental health or special educational needs, and schools themselves were often not resourced to deal with the demand for this type of provision. Schools could sometimes find it hard to signpost or refer on to other agencies where needed.

Figure 22: Attendance pattern in 2021/22 of children who left the state education system and moved into home education

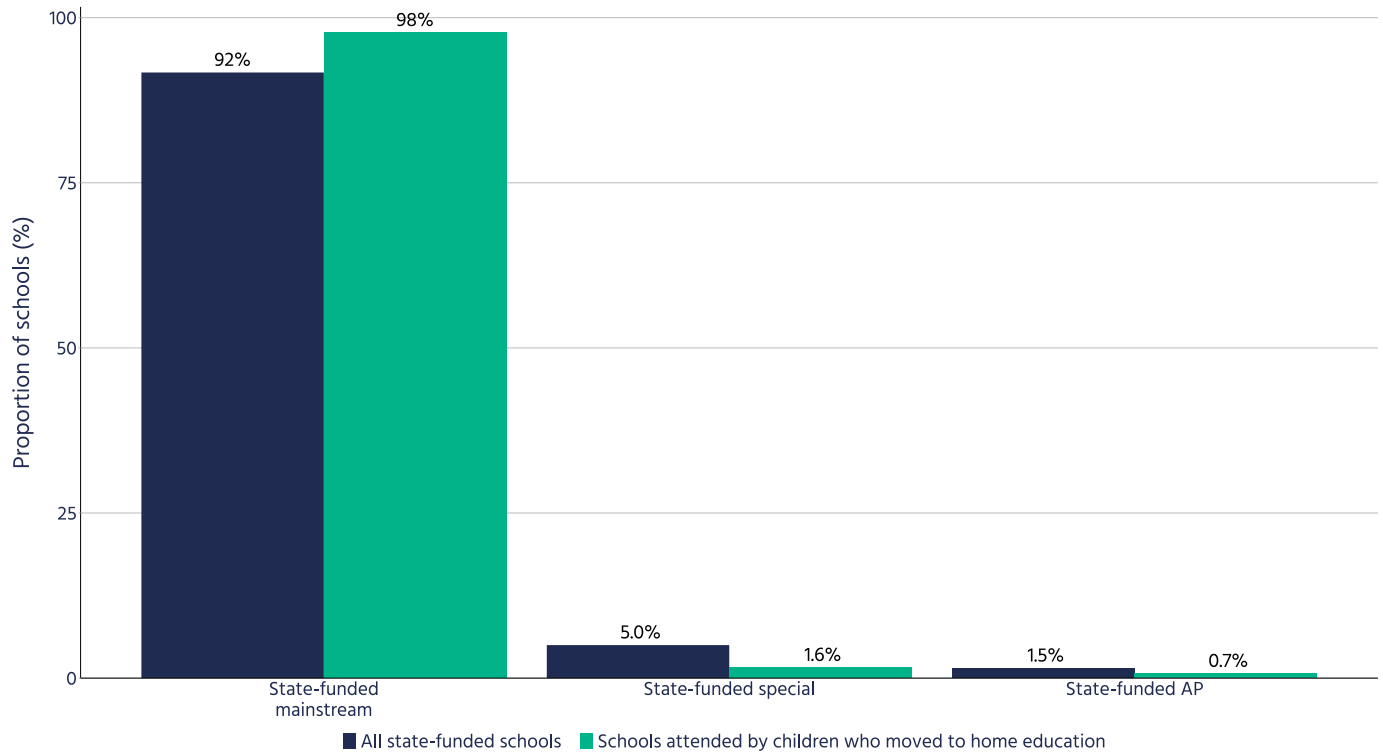


### 4.3.2 Previous school type

The vast majority of children in our sample who went into home education had previously been educated in a state-funded mainstream school, rather than a special school or an alternative provision school (Figure 23). 98% of schools attended by children who went into home education were state-funded mainstream schools. This is a slightly higher proportion relative to all state-funded schools, where 92% of schools are state-funded mainstream schools.

Parents who want to withdraw their children from special schools for home education have to meet with the local authority before doing so, to assess whether such a move is suitable.<sup>29</sup>

Figure 23: Types of schools attended by children who left the state education system and moved into home education



### 4.3.3 Previous school Ofsted rating

While most children who went into home education had left schools rated ‘Good’, a disproportionate number of children who went into home education had previously been in a school with an Ofsted rating of ‘Requires Improvement’ or ‘Inadequate’ (Figure 24).

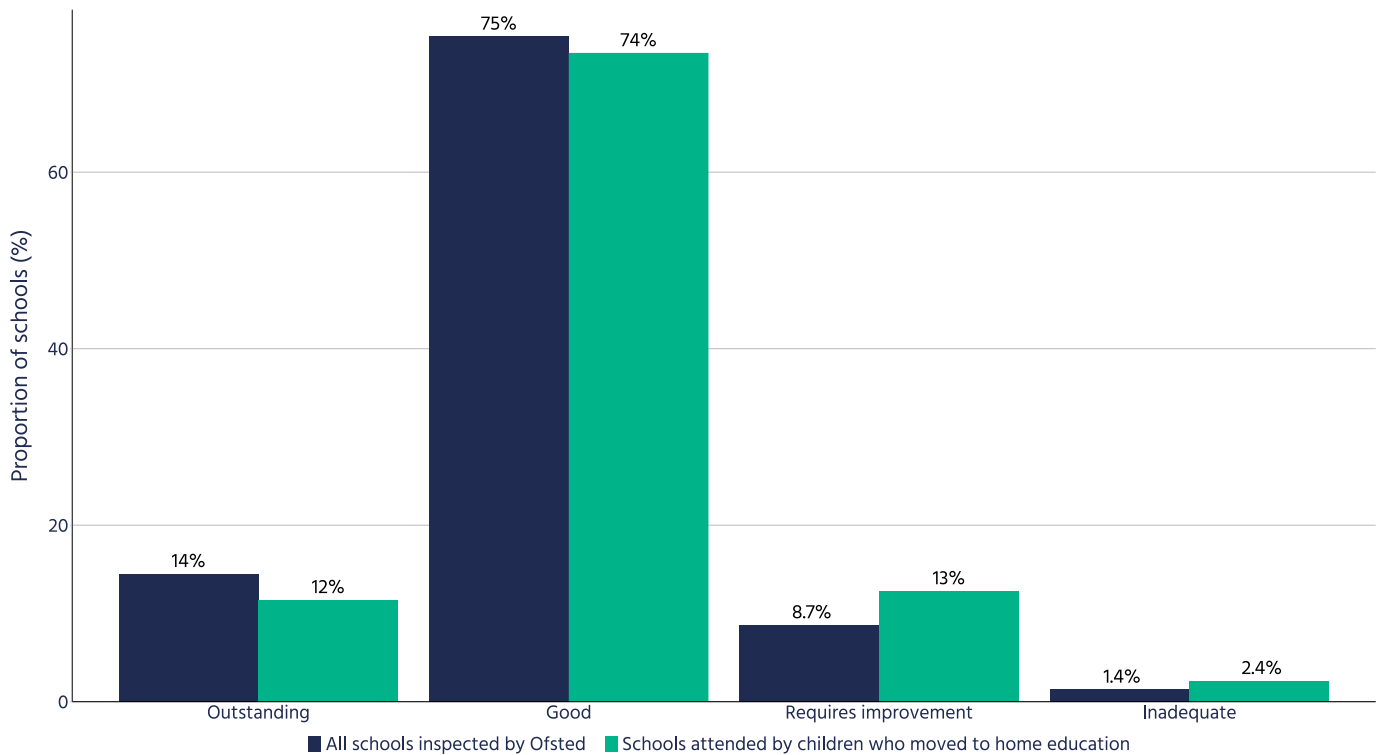
13% of the schools attended by children in our sample who went into home education were rated by Ofsted as ‘Requires Improvement’. For comparison, 8.7% of all schools inspected by Ofsted had this rating.

The proportion of children from ‘Inadequate’ schools was almost double in the sample of children who went into home education, relative to the state-school population. 2.4% of schools attended by children who went into home education had rated ‘Inadequate’, compared to 1.4% of all schools inspected by Ofsted.



Local authorities told the office that it was relatively common for parents to opt for home education if they had been admitted to a school with a low Ofsted rating. When children moved into area late in the year or had to be readmitted, often the only school with available school places had a low Ofsted rating. While these children may be put onto the school roll, the office heard that parents would sometimes decide to home educate rather than take the only available school place in the local authority.

**Figure 24: Ofsted ratings of schools attended by children who left the state education system and moved into home education**



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## 5. Children who leave to unknown destinations

In total 24% of children in our study sample of children who remained in England but moved to destinations outside the scope of the Department for Education's Spring censuses, and 13% of the total sample, had unknown destinations. This was 5,571 children in our sample, or an estimated 10,181 weighted up to the whole of England.

Most often, children were unknown because they were known to the local authority but information on their destination was not available (Table 2).

**Table 2: Unknown destinations**

Category	Proportion	Number
Unknown because the child was known to the local authority but information on their destination was not available	70%	3,878
Unknown because the child was not known to the local authority	30%	1,675
Unknown because the data was not routinely collected or had been lost	0.3%	18

### 5.1 Reasons for leaving

Children missing education teams told us that they often did not know of the child at all prior to our data collection. In some cases, there was a professional in the local authority who did know of the child, but information about their destination had not been passed on. In other instances, the child was entirely unknown to the local authority because the child had left school and the school had not informed the local authority's Children Missing Education team.

We heard of some instances where the child had been referred to the local authority but they were classified as unknown because the school had no information on the child. This commonly happened when children were admitted to a school but never took up the school place. In these instances, the schools and local authorities often did not have sufficient information to identify the child or to conduct relevant searches, so they became 'unknown'.

In all instances where the child was recorded as 'unknown' the local authorities could not confirm if these children had moved to another school, were educated otherwise, or were missing education.

Some local authorities told us that, if they could not find a child after database checks and other enquiries, they would retain the child on a list, to enable periodic checking, for example against new School Censuses. Other local authorities told us that they closed these cases.

## 5.2 Pupil characteristics

The office's analysis found that children aged 10 were disproportionately likely to leave the school system and become unknown to the local authorities. The office also found that children who were looked after were more likely to leave the school and be unknown.

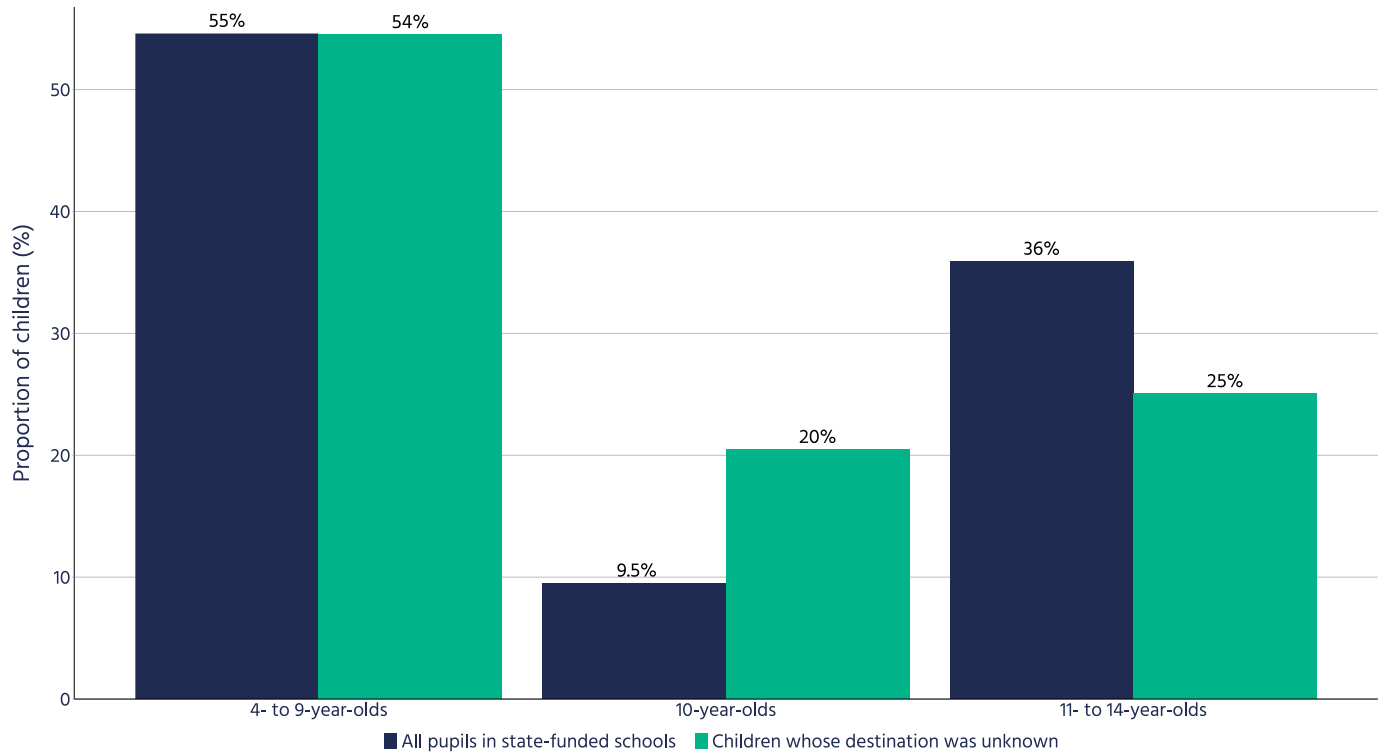
### 5.2.1 Age

A greater proportion of children who were recorded as 'unknown' in our sample were aged 10 at the start of the academic year, relative to the proportion of all state-funded pupils the same age (Figure 25). 20% of children who left school to unknown destinations were aged 10, compared to 9.5% of children who were aged 10 among all state-funded pupils.

Local authorities said that this was a common age for children to become unknown because this was the standard transition age to secondary school. Local authorities are the admissions authorities for all local authority maintained schools but academy trusts are the admissions authorities for their own schools. This division means that sometimes local authorities are not fully informed about admissions decisions.

The office heard of instances where parents declined the offer of a secondary school place but did not then secure a place at a different school. These cases were not always visible to local authorities. The guidance currently states that schools do not need to tell local authorities about children leaving their rolls at standard transition points. Local authorities can request this information however we heard that this was relatively uncommon. Poor data sharing meant that it was possible for children to fall through the gaps.

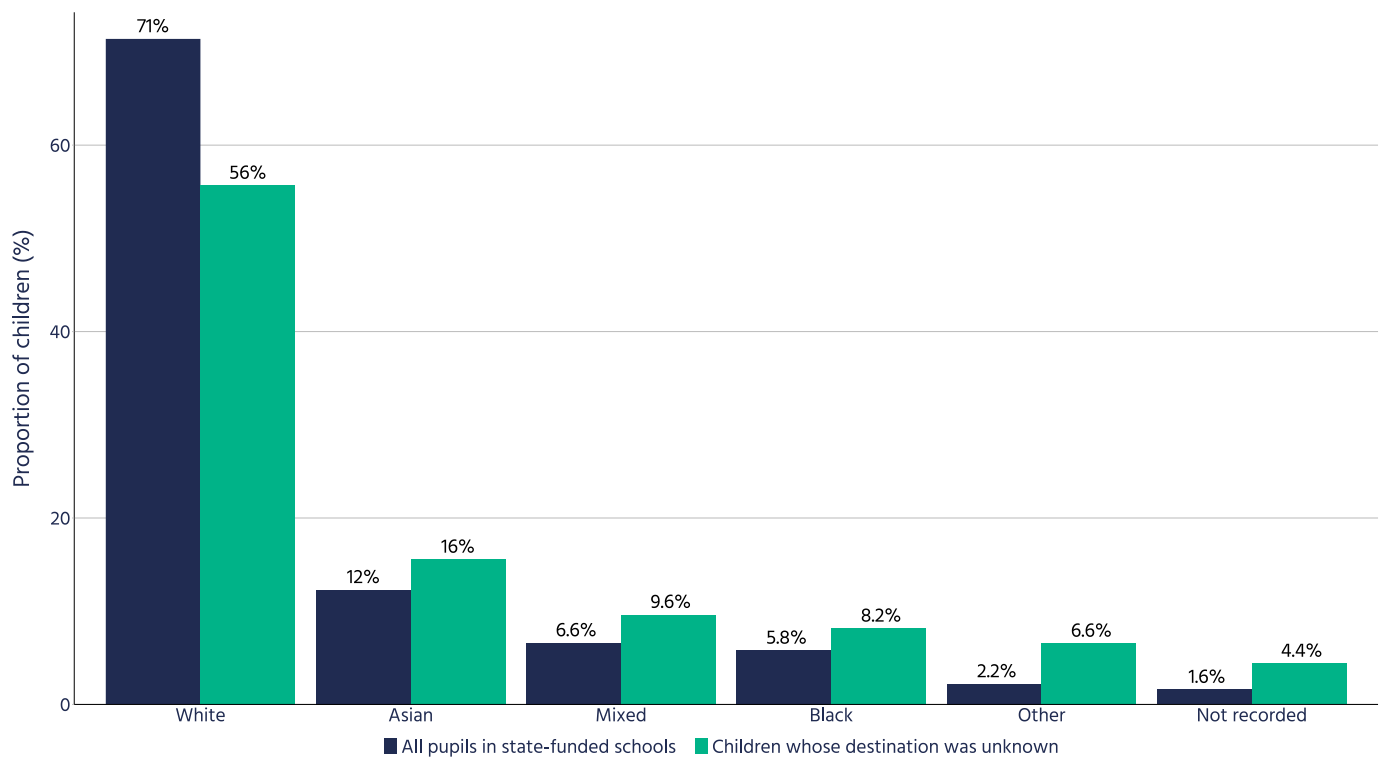
Figure 25: Age at the start of 2021/22 academic year of children who left the state education system to unknown destinations



## 5.2.2 Ethnicity

Children in our sample whose destinations were unknown were much more likely to be from ethnic groups other than white (Figure 26). In all ethnic groups bar white, these children were overrepresented. 56% of children in our sample whose destinations were unknown were white, compared to 71% of all state-funded pupils. Local authorities speculated to us that some of these children had left England to return to a country of origin, but often could not substantiate this.

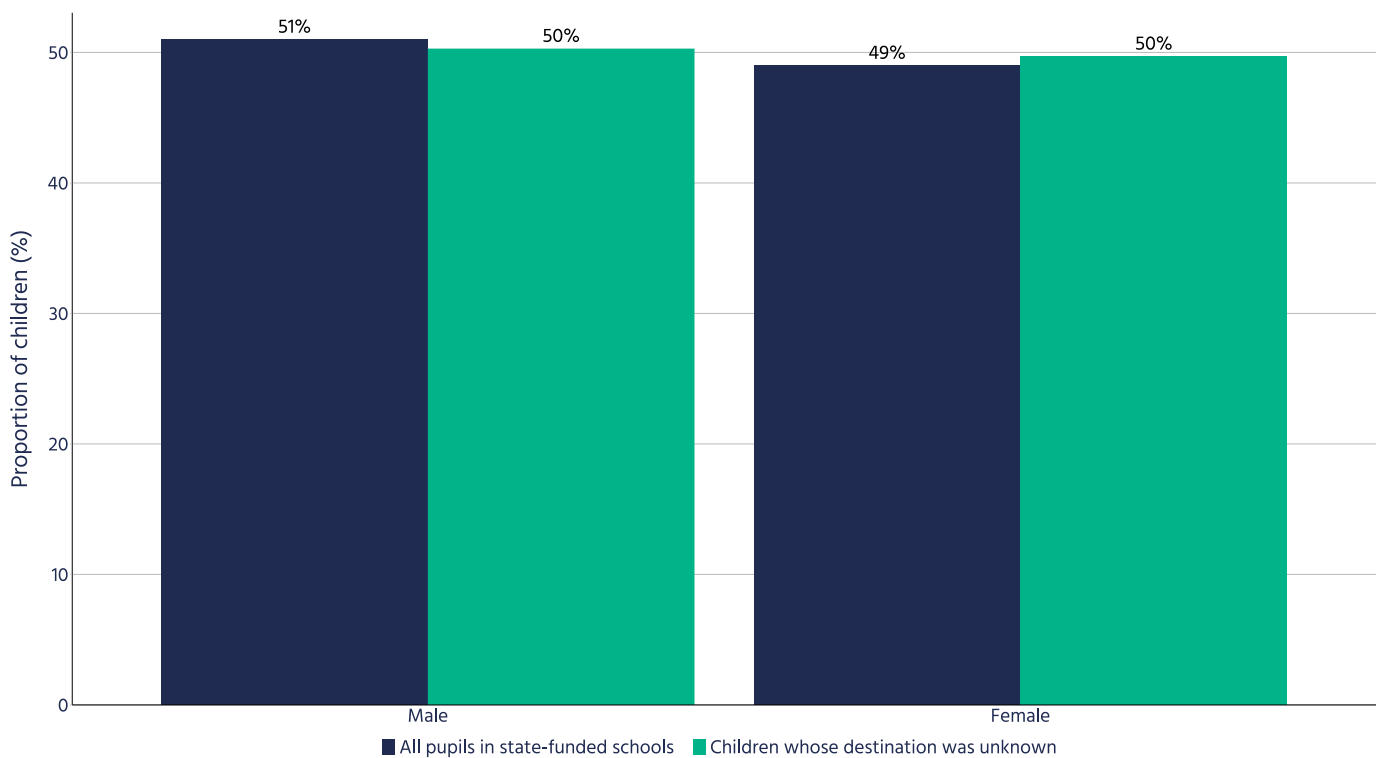
**Figure 26: Ethnicity of children who left the state education system to unknown destinations**



### 5.2.3 Gender

The proportions of males and females in our sample of children whose destinations were unknown were similar to all state-funded pupils (Figure 27). 50% of the unknown sample were male and 50% were female.

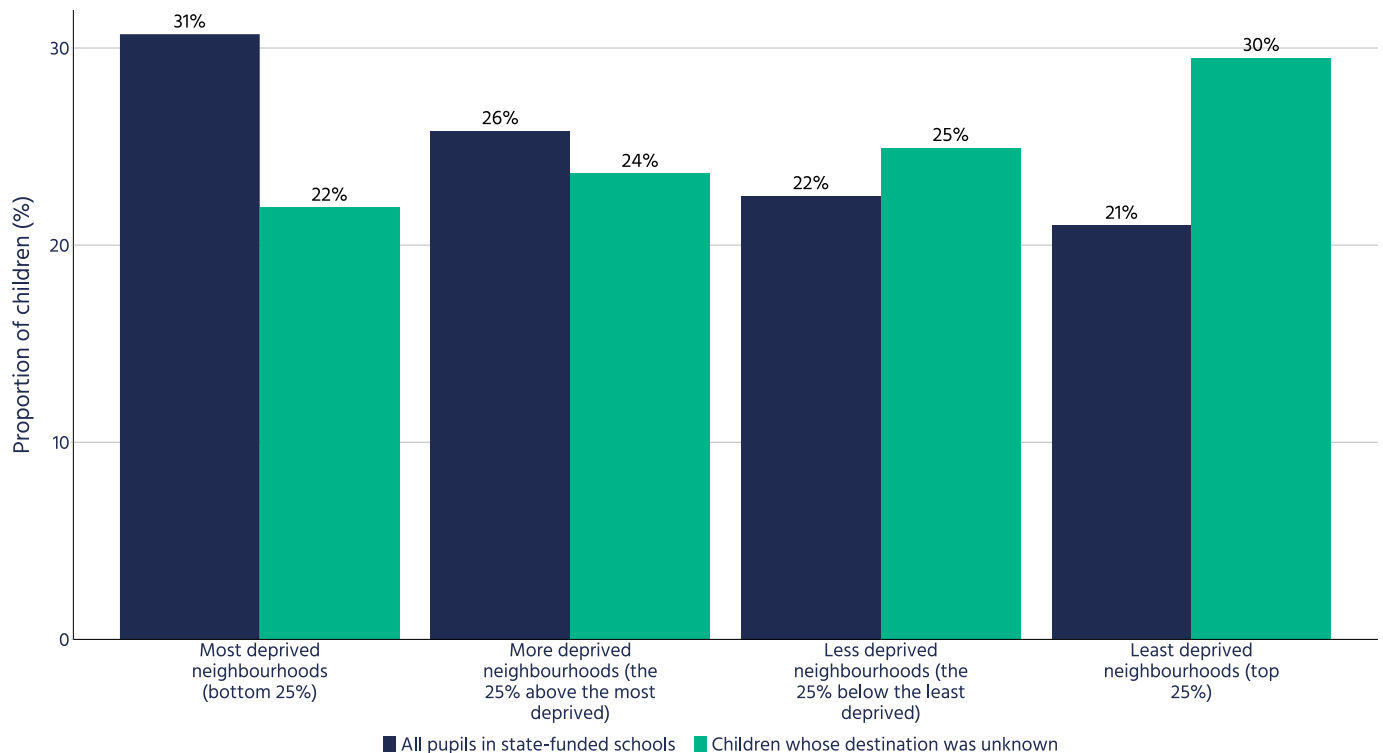
Figure 27: Gender of children who left the state education system to unknown destinations



### 5.2.4 Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index

Children whose destinations were unknown were more likely to live in less deprived areas, relative to the population of children in state-funded schools (Figure 28). 30% of children in our sample who left the state education system to unknown destinations lived in the least deprived quarter of neighbourhoods. For comparison, 21% of all pupils in state-funded schools lived in the least deprived quarter of neighbourhoods.

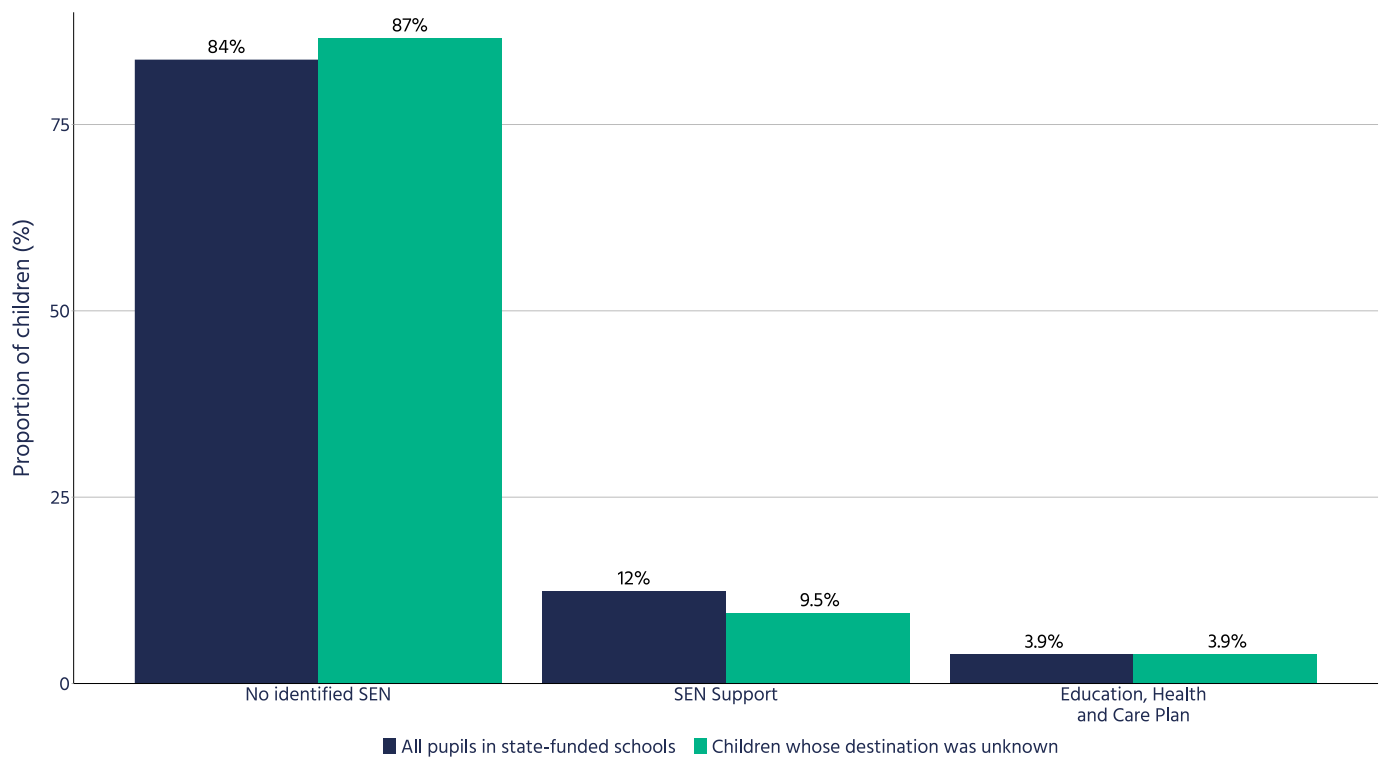
**Figure 28: Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index of children who left the state education system to unknown destinations**



### 5.2.5 Special educational needs

The special educational needs of children whose destinations were unknown largely mirrored the special educational needs of all state-funded pupils, however children on SEN Support were underrepresented in the unknown population (Figure 29). 9.5% of children whose destinations were unknown had SEN Support while 12% of all pupils in state-funded schools had SEN Support.

**Figure 29: Special educational needs provision of children who left the state education system to unknown destinations**

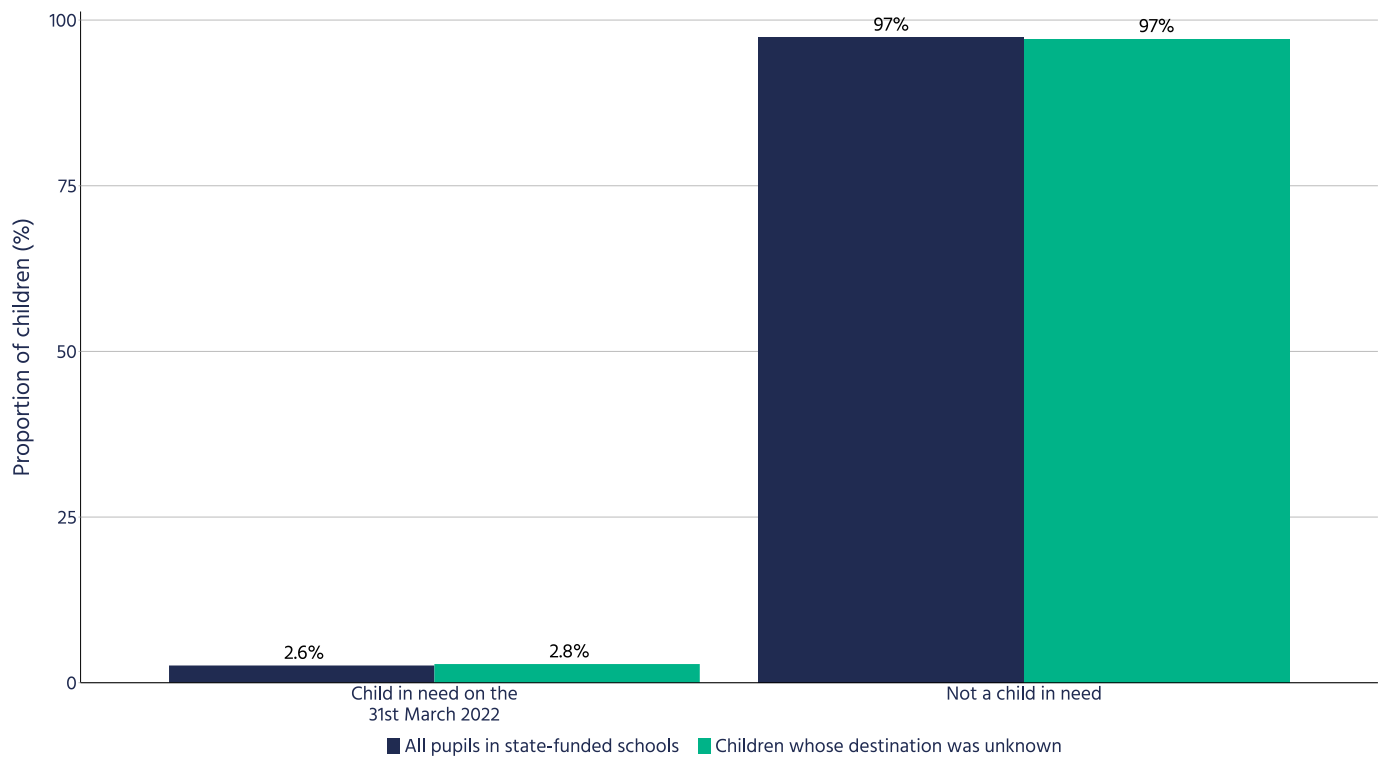




### 5.2.6 Social care involvement

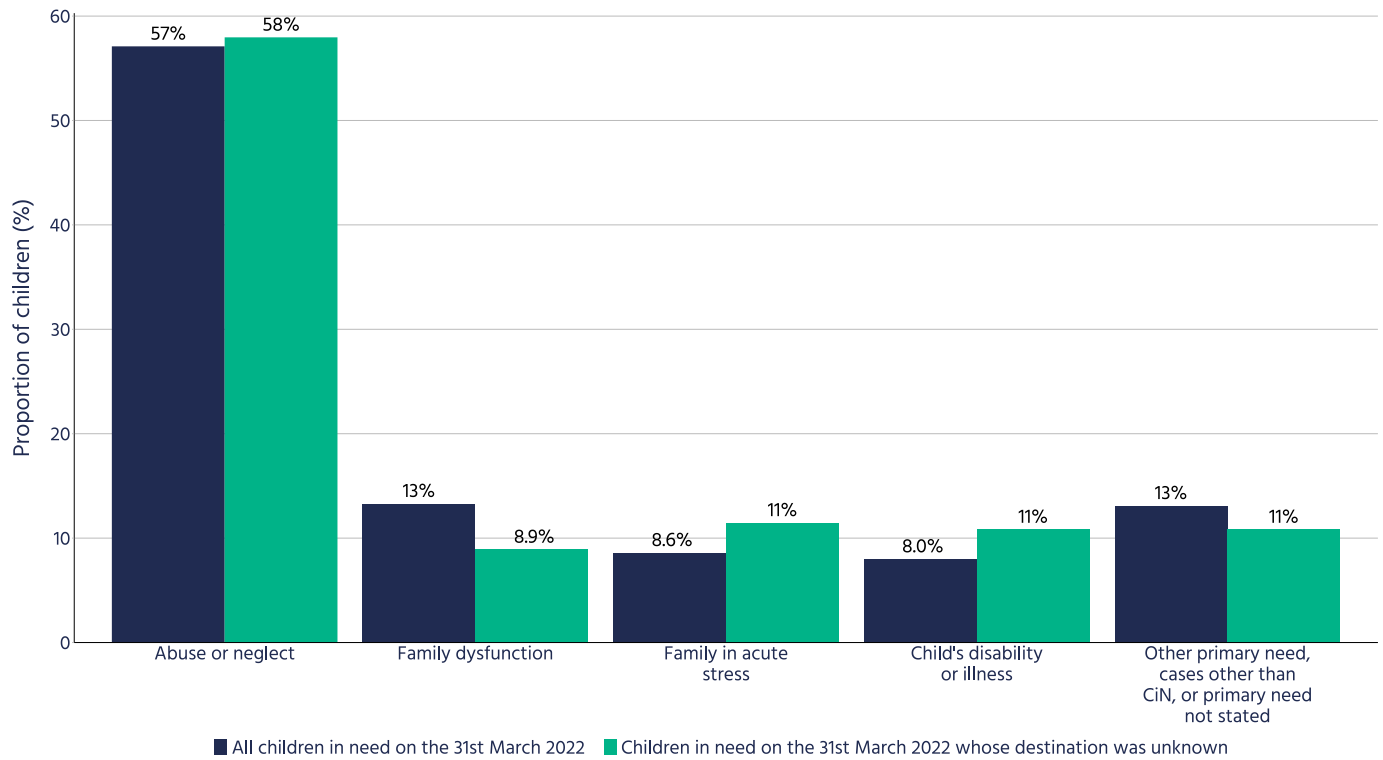
The proportion of children identified as children in need in the sample of children whose destinations were unknown was similar to the respective proportion among all pupils in state-funded schools (Figure 30). 2.8% of children whose destinations were unknown were recorded as a child in need on the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022. This compares with 2.6% of all state-funded pupils.

**Figure 30: Child in need status of children who left the state education system to unknown destinations**



A higher proportion of children in need whose destinations were unknown had family in acute distress, child’s disability or illness, or abuse or neglect recorded as their primary need, compared to the respective proportion across all children in need (Figure 31).

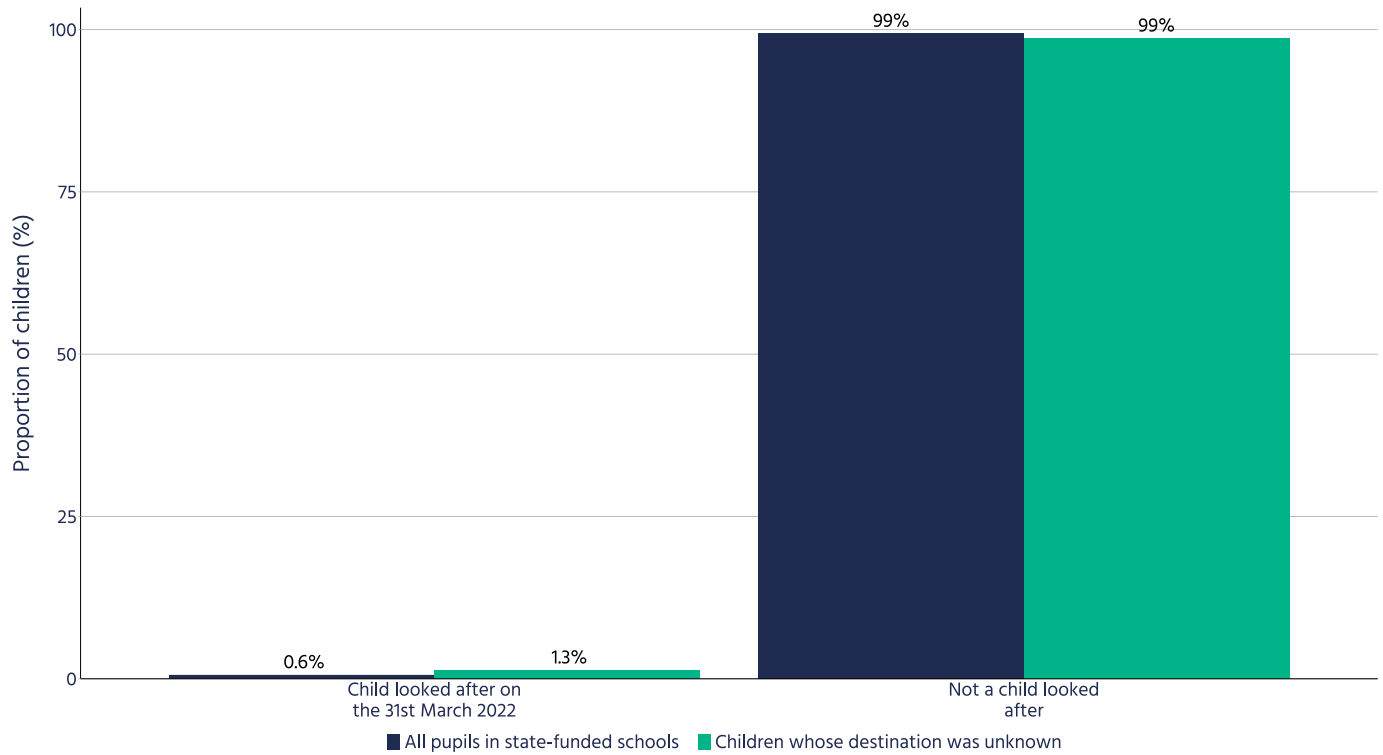
Figure 31: Primary need of children in need who left the state education system to unknown destinations



The proportion of children who were looked after and unknown to the local authority was higher than the rate of all pupils in state-funded schools who were looked after (Figure 32). 1.3% of children in our sample were unknown and a looked after child on the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022, compared with 0.6% of all state-funded pupils who were looked after.

The office heard that sometimes schools would report the departure of a looked after child known to the social care team, rather than to the child missing education team. Information about the change in school was not always shared across local authority teams, which could account, in part, for this disparity.

Figure 32: Child looked after status of children who left the state education system to unknown destinations



### 5.3 Educational history

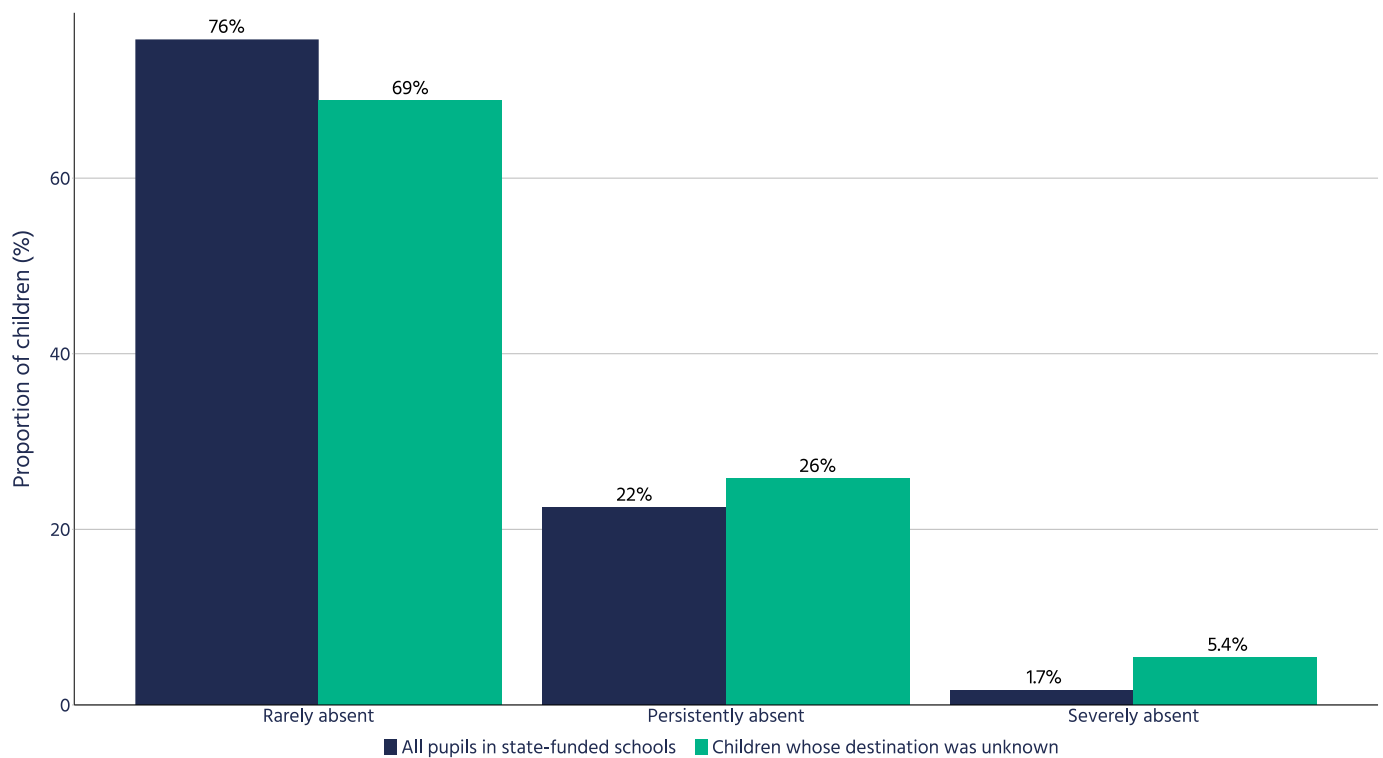
Children whose destinations were unknown had higher rates of persistent and severe absenteeism, compared to their peers in state-funded schools. Children in our sample whose destinations were unknown were also more likely to have previously attended an 'Outstanding' school.

### 5.3.1 Attendance pattern

Children whose destinations were unknown were more likely to have histories of poor attendance, relative to all state-funded pupils (Figure 33). 26% of children in our sample whose destinations were unknown were previously persistently absent, compared to 22% of pupils in state-funded schools. A further 5.4% were severely absent in the previous year, relative to the 1.7% of all pupils in state-funded schools who were severely absent.

Local authorities told the office that in some cases a child's educational history would have been recorded as severely absent, but actually the child never arrived at the school. In these instances, a child would have a 100% absence rate. We heard that sometimes schools admitted children but they never turned up. After twenty days, schools would deregister the child. Local authorities said that these children were unknown because they had never arrived at the school which had admitted them.

**Figure 33: Attendance pattern in 2021/22 of children who left the state education system to unknown destinations**

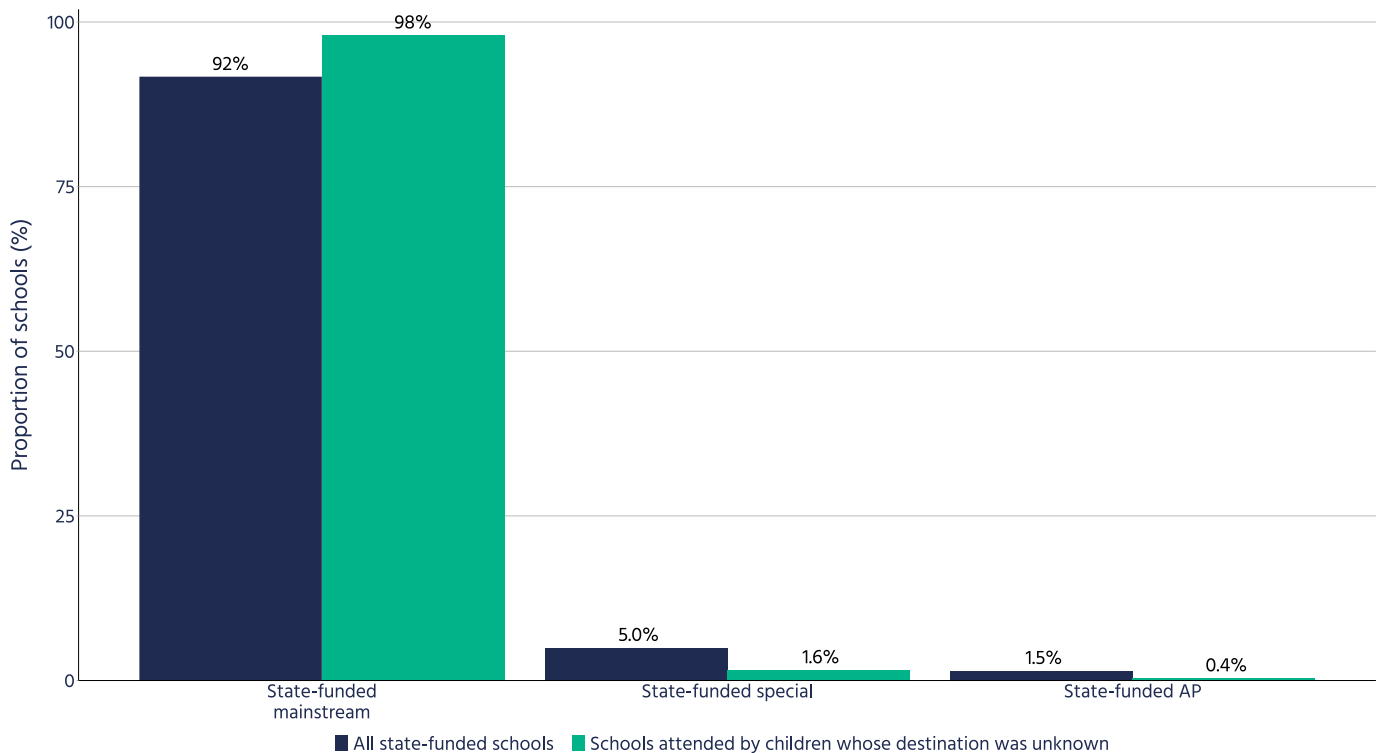


### 5.3.2 Previous school type

Almost all the children whose destinations were unknown in our sample had left a state-funded mainstream school rather than a special school or alternative provision school. 98% of the schools attended by children in our sample whose destinations were unknown were state-funded mainstream schools (Figure 34). This compares with the 92% of all state-funded schools which are mainstream.

We heard that it was less likely that a child who was in a special school or in alternative provision (AP) would become unknown because the local authority often paid for their place. Often, the team who was commissioning the provision worked closely alongside the team who tracked deregistration. This made it easier to track children who left these settings and to correctly identify their destination.

**Figure 34: Types of schools attended by children who left the state education system to unknown destinations**

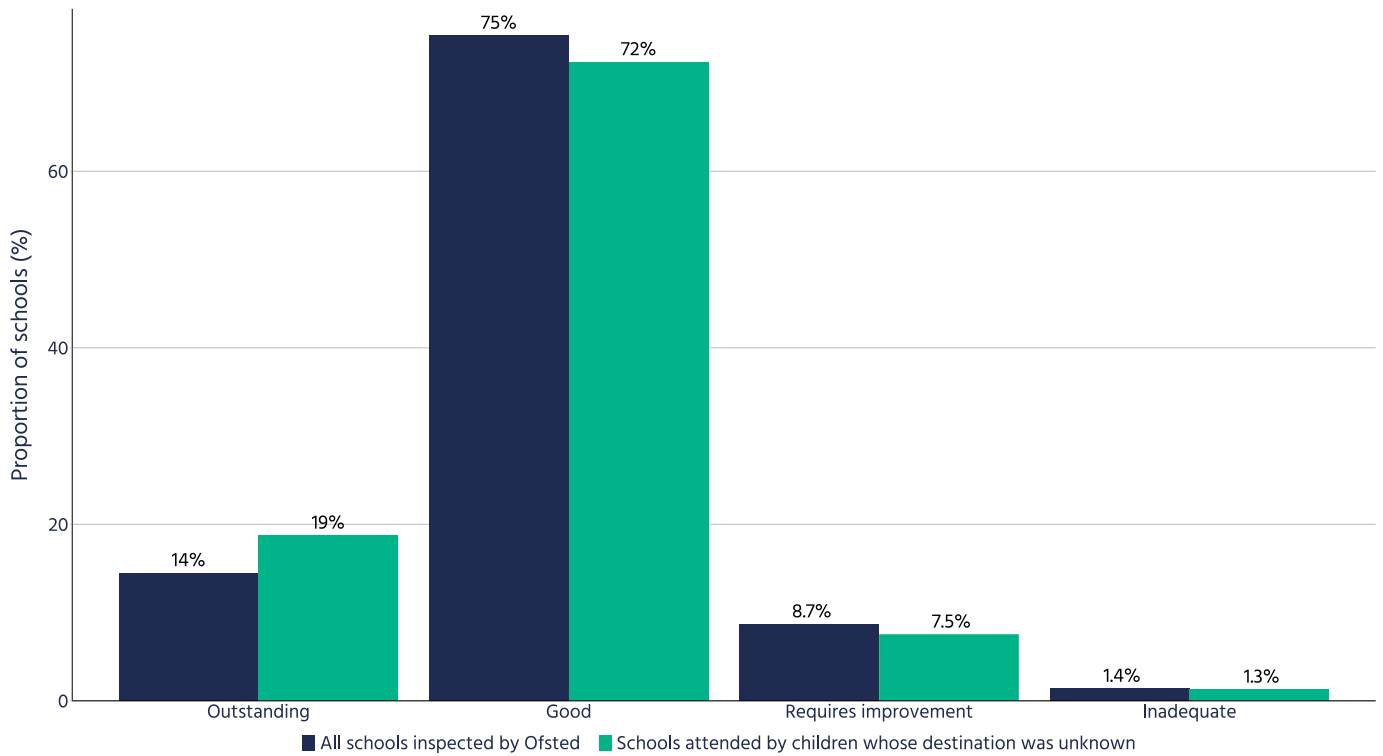


### 5.3.3 Previous school Ofsted rating

Children in our sample whose destinations were unknown were more likely to have previously attended an ‘Outstanding’ school (Figure 35). 19% of the schools attended by children in our sample whose destinations were unknown were rated ‘Outstanding’ by Ofsted, compared to 14% of all schools which Ofsted has inspected.

Local authorities stated that Ofsted did not often look at a school’s process for deregistration as part of inspections. Where local authorities struggled to get information from schools about children leaving their rolls, local authorities we spoke to stated that it would be helpful if these processes were taken into account in Ofsted inspections, as it would provide an incentive to share information with the local authority. They argued that a slight change in inspection would help to ensure that fewer children slip through the net in education.

**Figure 35: Ofsted ratings of schools attended by children who left the state education system to unknown destinations**



## 6. Children who leave and become a child missing education

Our report 'Voices of England's missing children' found that not all local authorities were able to provide an estimate of the number of Children Missing Education aged 11 to 15.<sup>30</sup> In total 6.7% of children in our study sample (who remained in England but moved to destinations outside the scope of the Department for Education's Spring censuses) and 3.5% of the whole sample were either known or suspected to be a child missing education (CME). This was 1,556 children in our sample, or an estimated 2,868 weighted up to the whole of England.

Around half of this group (49%) were known to be a CME. A further 16% were known to be a CME but awaiting provision. The final 36% were suspected to be a CME.

### 6.1 Reasons for leaving

We did not capture the main reasons why children became a child missing education in our data collection. However, in our conversations with local authorities several key themes came through.

Local authorities told the office that children who moved around often, either within the local authority or between local authorities, were at an increased risk of becoming a child missing education (CME). Local authorities said that it was relatively common for a child and their family to move home without having secured an alternative school place. Local authorities said that many schools are currently at capacity and therefore in-year admissions are very difficult. Sometimes children become a CME due to a shortage of school places.

Local authorities said that there was a clear link between absenteeism and children missing education. There is a difference between being chronically absent and being a child missing education. Schools have a legal duty to keep children who are chronically absent on their school rolls and to try to support them to reengage. However, if a child has been absent for 20 days, or has not returned from an authorised absence for 10 days, and the school cannot locate them and has no reason to think they are ill, they can remove them from the school roll. The office heard that there had been some instances where relationships between the school and families had broken down when a child stopped attending.

Local authorities also told the office that children with additional vulnerabilities which prevented them from attending school regularly were at greater risk of becoming a CME. Local authorities voiced concerns around children known to social services, with a history of involvement in the criminal justice system, and those who had to move often either as a result of temporary accommodation or because they were fleeing domestic violence. These groups of children had significant vulnerabilities which made engagement with school more difficult and could lead to them leaving the school system altogether.

The office heard about children who were identified as a CME either due to home education which was deemed unsuitable by the local authority or because they had newly arrived in the country and had not received a school place. These children were beyond the scope of our data collection.

## 6.2 Pupil characteristics

Nearly half of all children missing education came from the most deprived neighbourhoods. A greater proportion of children missing education were known to social care or had SEN Support relative to the population of state-funded pupils.

### 6.2.1 Age

Children who were missing education in our sample were more likely to be transitioning to secondary school, age 10 at the start of the academic year (Figure 36). While 9.5% of all pupils in state-funded schools were age 10, in our sample 22% of children were age 10.

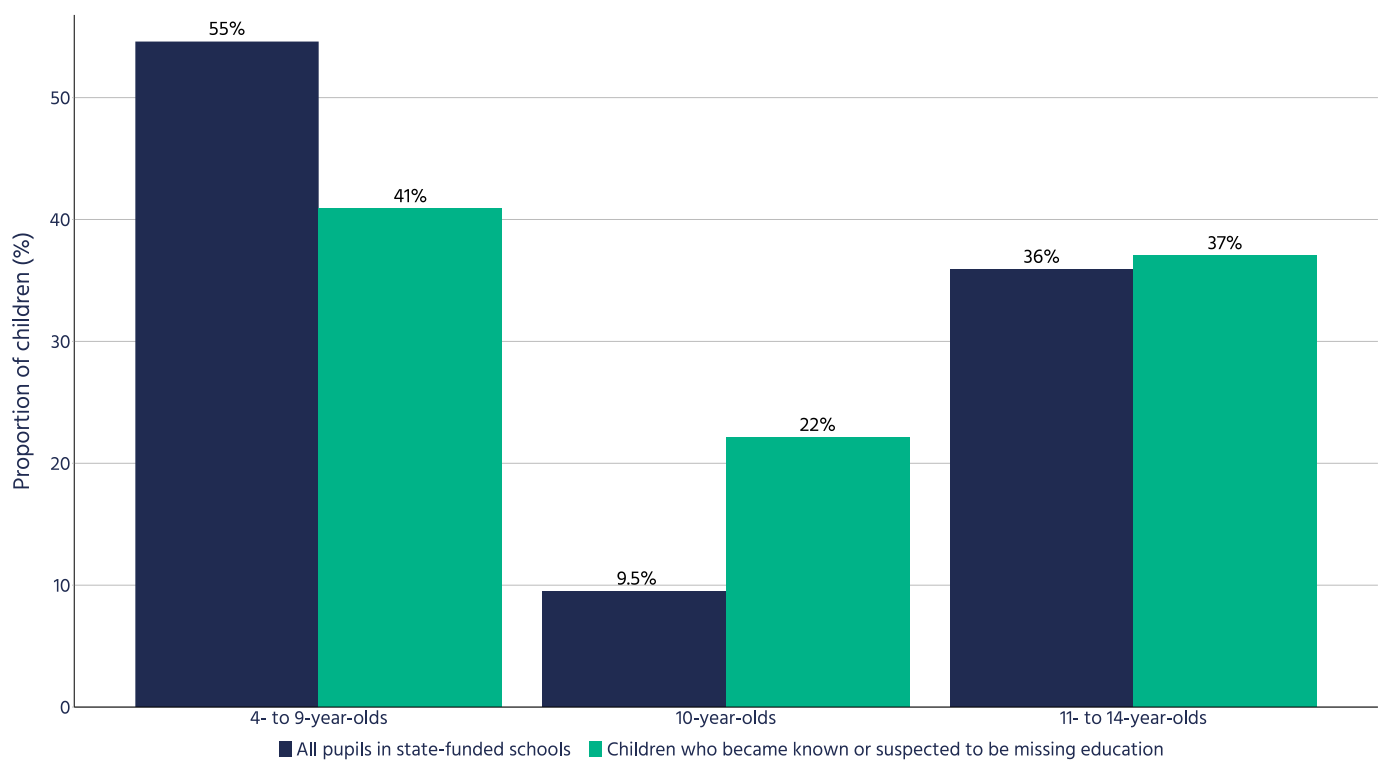
Local authorities told us that the transition to secondary school was a more common time for children to become a child missing education as sometimes children did not receive the secondary school placement they wanted, and this could lead to children missing out on suitable education.

Children who were missing education in our sample were slightly more likely to be secondary school age compared to the state school population, however the difference in rates was only one percentage point.



Local authorities told the office that it was particularly hard to support children who were missing education and identified in Year 6 or Key Stage 4. Local authorities said that schools were often reluctant to admit children who were in exam critical years who had a history of missing education, as it was often deemed too difficult to get them to catch up on lost learning.

**Figure 36: Age at the start of the 2021/22 academic year of children who left the state education system and were known or suspected to be a child missing education**



## 6.2.2 Ethnicity

Our analysis showed that children missing education in our sample were disproportionately likely to be children from ethnic backgrounds other than white (Figure 37). 63% of children who became known or suspected to be missing education were white, compared to 71% of all children in state-funded schools.

When we spoke to local authorities, they said that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children were more likely to become a child missing education. When we broke down the white ethnicity group, we found that children who were Gypsy/Roma or Travellers of Irish heritage were disproportionately likely to be a child missing education. 8.5% of children in our sample who were known or suspected to be missing education were Gypsy/Roma, compared to 0.3% in the state-funded schools' population. Similarly, 2.3% of children in our sample were Travellers of Irish heritage, compared to 0.1% in state-funded schools.

Local authorities said that regular moves from one area to another increased the likelihood of their children becoming a CME. We also heard that these children did not always feel included by schools and sometimes suffered bullying and racist discrimination.

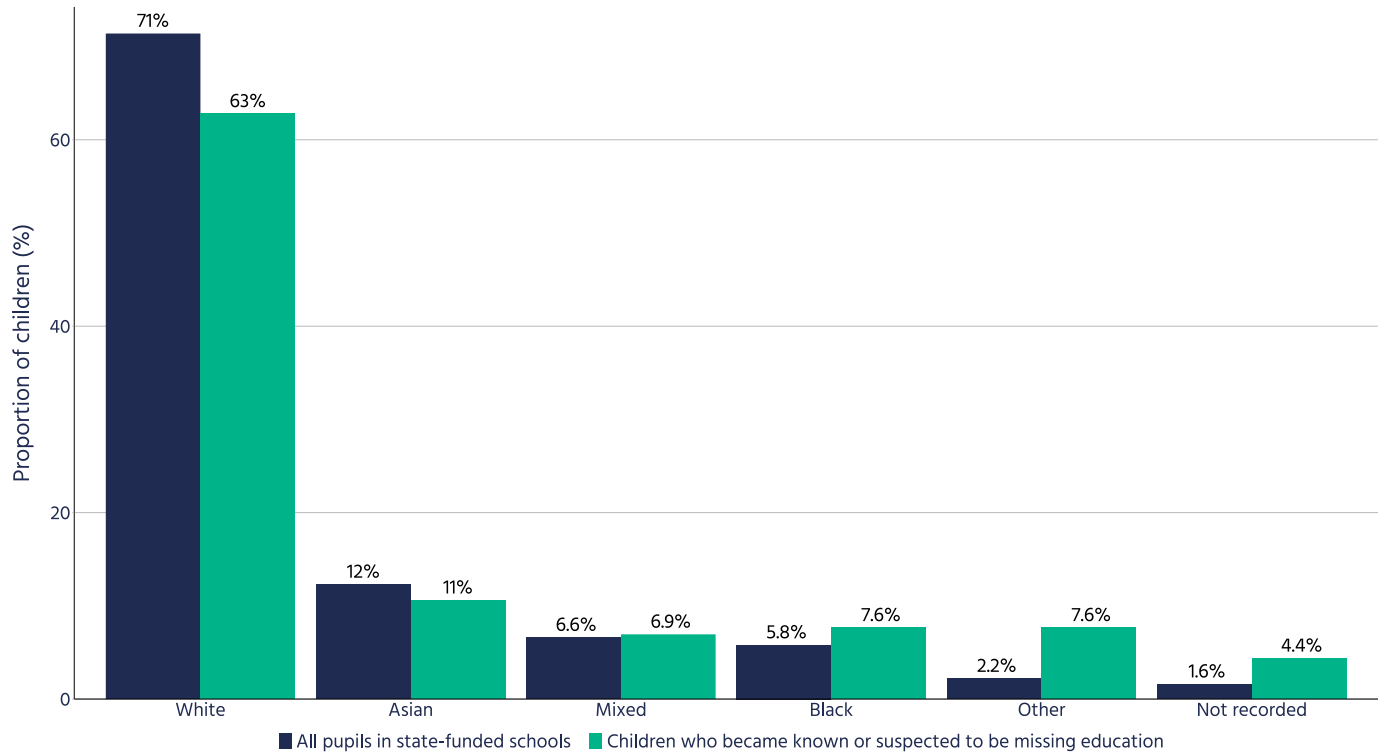
One local authority said that previously Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families had been supported by Traveller Support Services but these teams had dwindled in recent years and some areas no longer had anyone with appropriate expertise who could support the children to access suitable education.

Black children were also more likely than average to be a child missing education. 7.6% of children missing education were black, compared to 5.8% of all state-funded pupils.

Children from other ethnicity groups had a disproportionate rate of children missing education: 7.6% of children in our sample who were known or suspected to be missing education were from other ethnic backgrounds, compared to 2.2% of all state-funded pupils. Local authorities said that this might be attributed to the number of children visiting families in other countries.

Children's ethnicity might not be recorded for different reasons. Parents may not want to disclose their child's ethnicity to the school, or the data administrator filling in the School Census may not know what a child's ethnicity at the point of data entry. Around 4.4% of children in our sample did not have a recorded ethnicity. This compares to 1.6% of the pupil population.

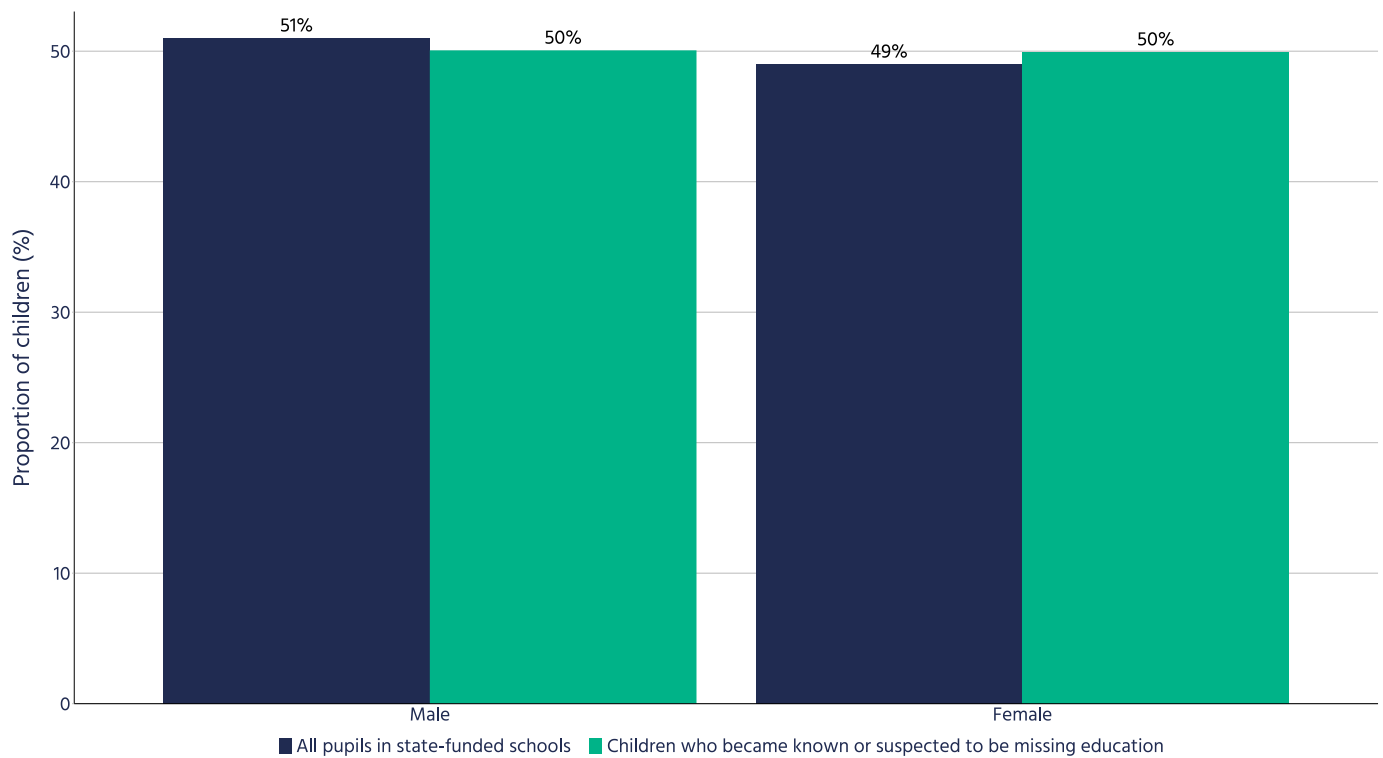
Figure 37: Ethnicity of children who left the state education system and were known or suspected to be a child missing education



### 6.2.3 Gender

The gender makeup of children who were missing education in our sample was very similar to the gender makeup of all pupils in state-funded schools (Figure 38). Half of children who left school and were missing education were male, and the other half were female.

**Figure 38: Gender of children who left the state education system and were known or suspected to be a child missing education**

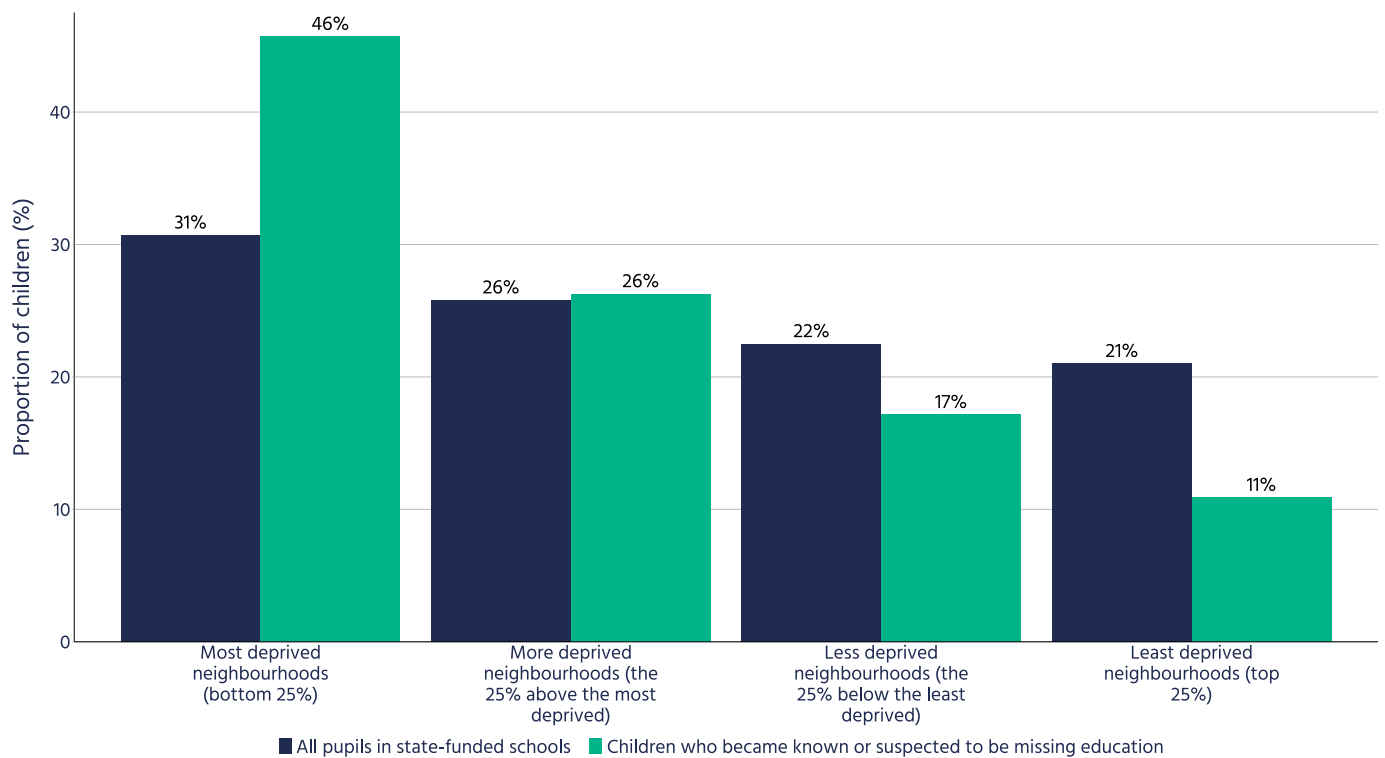


### 6.2.4 Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index

Our analysis found that children living in most disadvantaged quarter of areas were much more likely to be a child missing education than their peers in less disadvantaged areas (Figure 39). Nearly half (46%) of all children known or suspected to be missing education in our sample were from the most deprived neighbourhoods. This compares with 31% of children in state-funded schools who lived in the most deprived areas.

One local authority said that children who became CME who were living in disadvantaged areas were more vulnerable to criminal and sexual abuse. Sometimes these children are living in poor quality housing and in overcrowded temporary accommodation. They told the office that they had seen an increase in the number of children being moved to other temporary accommodation, often at short notice. When this happens, often families keep children on their original school roll, in the hope of returning.

**Figure 39: Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index of children who left the state education system and were known or suspected to be a child missing education**



## 6.2.5 Special educational needs

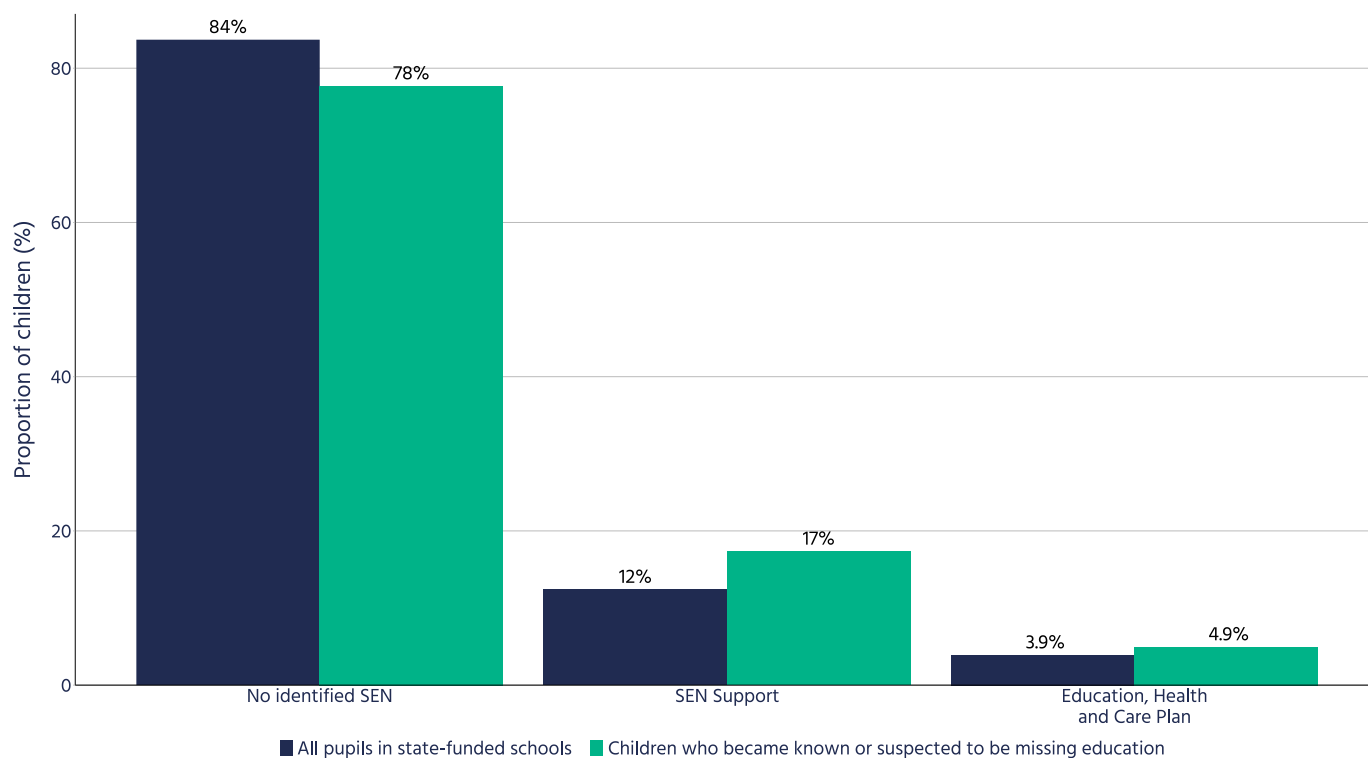
As with the state-funded school population at large, most children in our sample who were identified or suspected to be a CME had no identified SEN (Figure 40). 78% of children identified as known or suspected to be a child missing education had no identified SEN. However, we heard from local authorities that in some of these cases the children did have special educational needs which had just not been identified. Local authorities said that a lack of identification was especially likely when a child was highly mobile and had moved between different local authorities.

Our analysis showed that children with SEN were disproportionately likely to become a child missing education.

4.9% of children in our sample who were known or suspected to be a CME had an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), compared to 3.9% of pupils in state-funded schools. Local authorities told the team that children with EHCPs may not always receive the support outlined in their EHCP, this could lead to a breakdown in the placement and a child becoming a CME. We also heard that when children with an EHCP moved areas, they may become a CME due to a lack of suitable provision in the new area.

A further 17% had SEN Support, compared to 12% of pupils in state-funded schools. Local authorities said that children with SEN Support had to be supported through school budgets and sometimes the provision made for this group of children was not sufficient to meet their needs. We heard of instances where children withdrew from the education system due to poor quality SEN Support.

**Figure 40: Special educational needs provision of children who left the state education system and were known or suspected to be a child missing education**



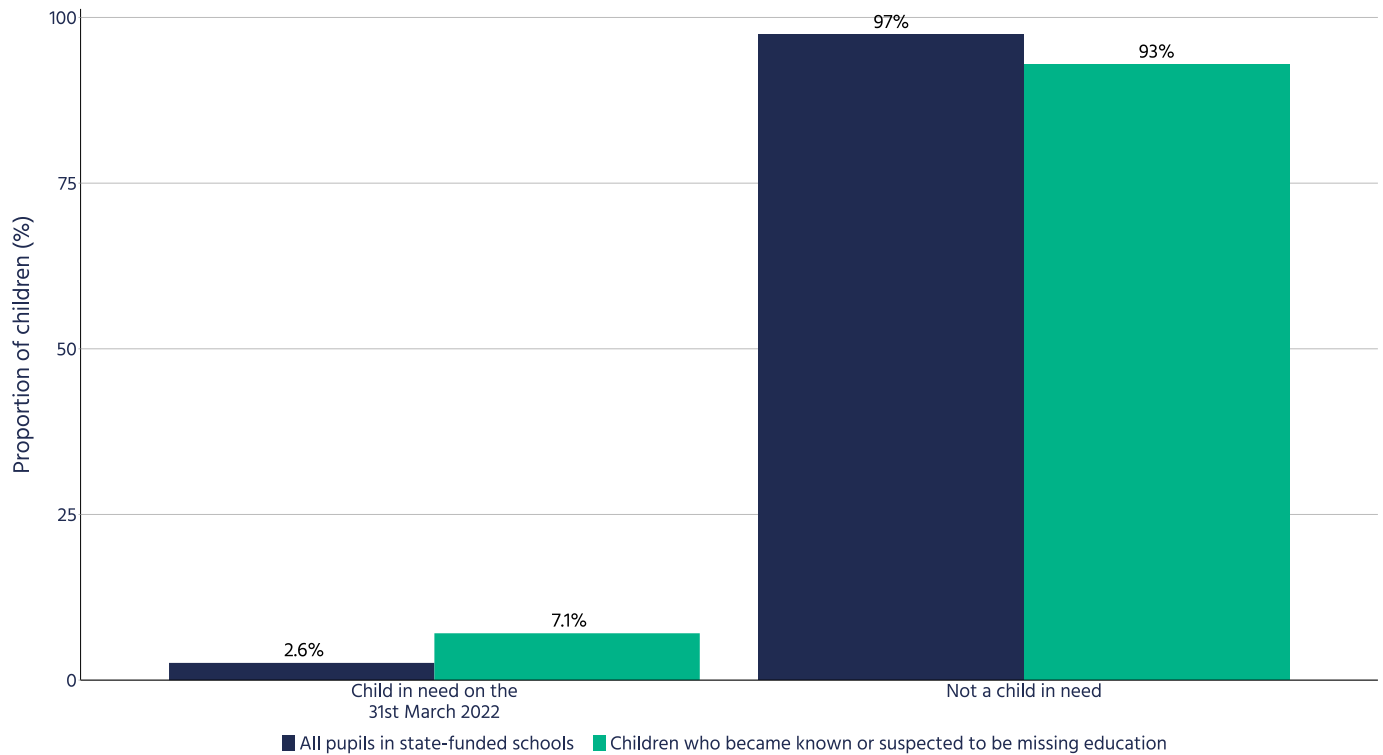
## 6.2.6 Social care involvement

Our analysis showed that children known to social care were much more likely to become a child missing education, compared to their peers (Figure 41). The proportion of children missing education recorded as a child in need was 2.7 times higher than the proportion of children recorded as a child in need in state-funded schools.

7.1% of all children known or suspected to be a child missing education were recorded as a child in need on the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022. This compares to 2.6% of all state-funded pupils.

Local authorities said they were especially worried when children in need became CME. Some but not all told us that when a child was known to social services they would automatically refer the deregistration to social workers and the search for the child would be handled through social care rather than through the CME team.

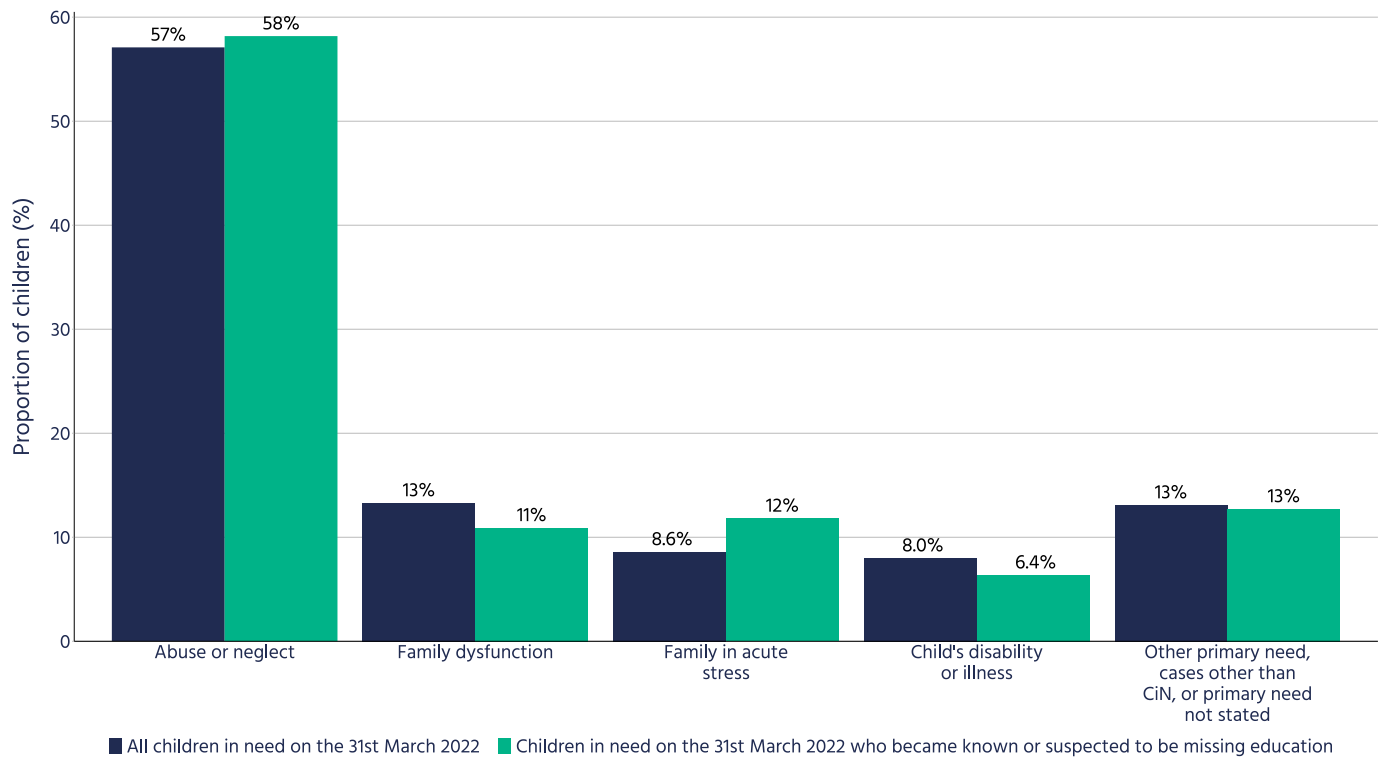
Figure 41: Child in need status of children who left the state education system and were known or suspected to be a child missing education



A higher proportion of children in need who were known or suspected to be a CME had family in acute distress recorded as their primary need, compared to the respective proportion across all children in need. 12% of children in need known or suspected to be a child missing education had family in acute distress recorded as their primary need, compared to 8.6% of all children in need.

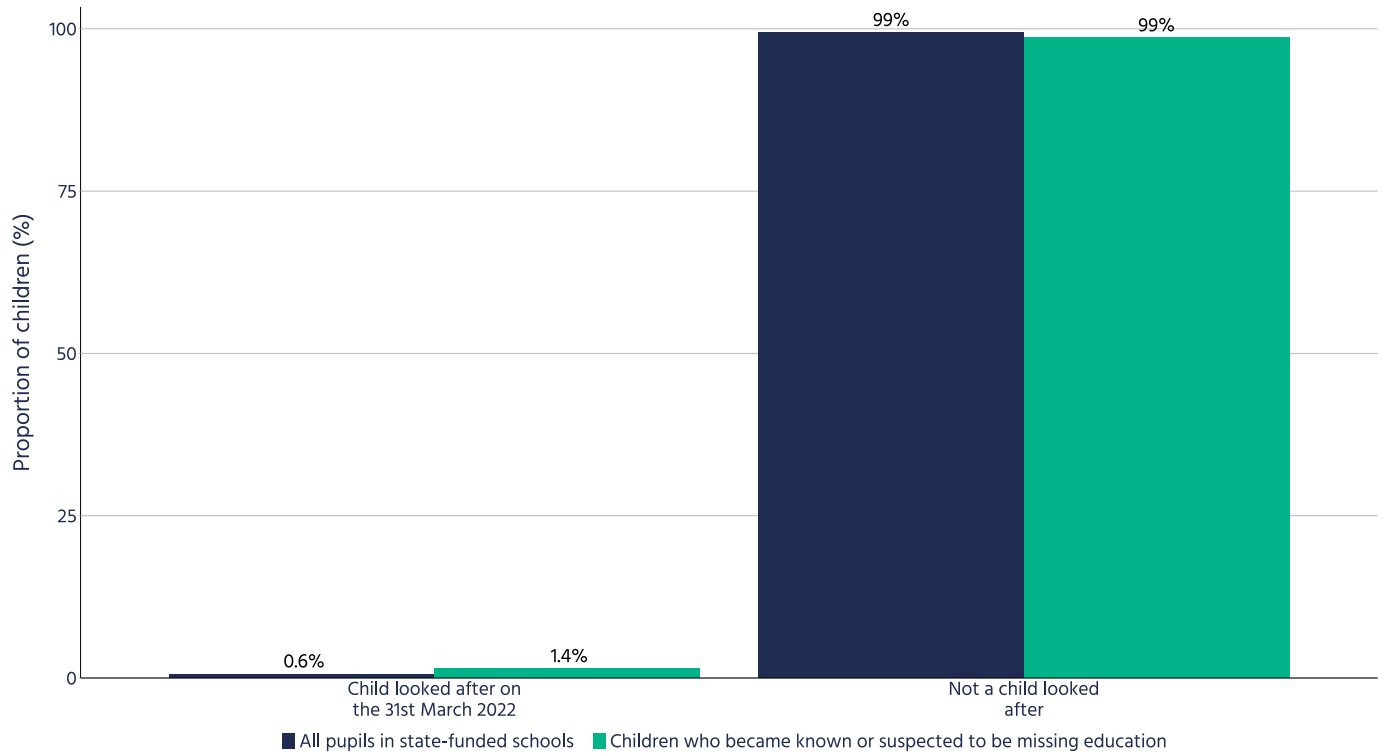


Figure 42: Primary need of children in need who left the state education system and were known or suspected to be a child missing education



The proportion of children known or suspected to be a CME who were looked after by their local authority was double the proportion of pupils in state-funded schools who were looked after (Figure 43). 1.4% of children in our sample who were known or suspected to be a CME were looked after on the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022, compared to 0.6% of pupils in state-funded schools and who were looked after.

**Figure 43: Child looked after status of children who left the state education system and were known or suspected to be a child missing education**



## 6.3 Educational history

Children who became a CME had higher levels of absenteeism, compared to all pupils in state-funded schools. They were also more likely to have previously been in a school rated 'Requires Improvement' or 'Inadequate' by Ofsted.

### 6.3.1 Attendance pattern

Children with a history of poor attendance were much more likely than other children to be known or suspected to be a child missing education (Figure 44). In total, 62% of children identified as known or suspected to be a child missing education were either persistently absent or severely absent in the previous year. For comparison, 24% of children in state-funded schools were persistently or severely absent over the same period.

The persistent absence rate for children known or suspected to be a CME in our sample was double the rate of persistent absentees in state-funded schools. 44% of children known or suspected to be a CME were persistently absent in the previous academic year. This compares with 22% of children in state-funded schools who were persistently absent over the same period.

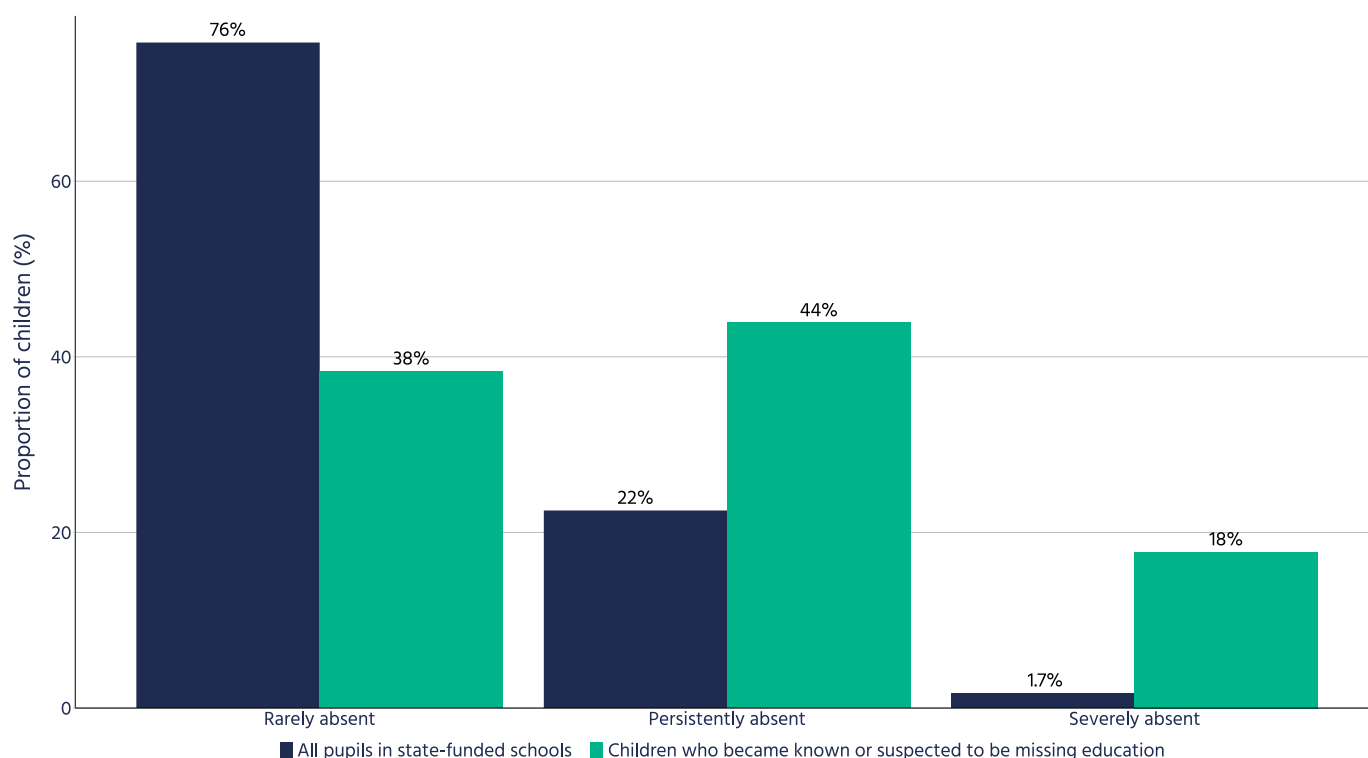
The rate of severe absenteeism was almost eleven times higher in the known or suspected CME sample compared to the rate of severe absence among state-funded pupils in general. 18% of children known or suspected to be a CME had a history of severe absenteeism. This compares with 1.7% of children in state-funded schools who had been severely absent over the same period.

Local authorities told the office that absenteeism was one of the main risk factors behind becoming a child missing education. They said that they had seen an increase in the number of children being withdrawn from school due to absenteeism. Many stated that a factor behind increased absenteeism was increased school anxiety.

In some instances, local authorities said that schools tried to refer cases of absenteeism to the children missing education team. They said that this was either done as an error or sometimes was due to schools not having the resources or capability to reengage a child who had become severely absent.

Some local authorities set strict guidelines around when schools could refer a child who a history of severe absenteeism and about the checks they had to take before classifying them as a child missing education. Under the current regulations, schools can remove children from their rolls if they have been continuously unauthorised absent for a period of 20 school days or have not returned within 10 days from a leave of absence if the school does not have reasonable grounds to think the child is unable to attend due to sickness or any other unavoidable cause and if the school and local authority have been unable to ascertain where the child is, after making reasonable enquiries.

Figure 44: Attendance pattern in 2021/22 of children who left the state education system and were known or suspected to be a child missing education

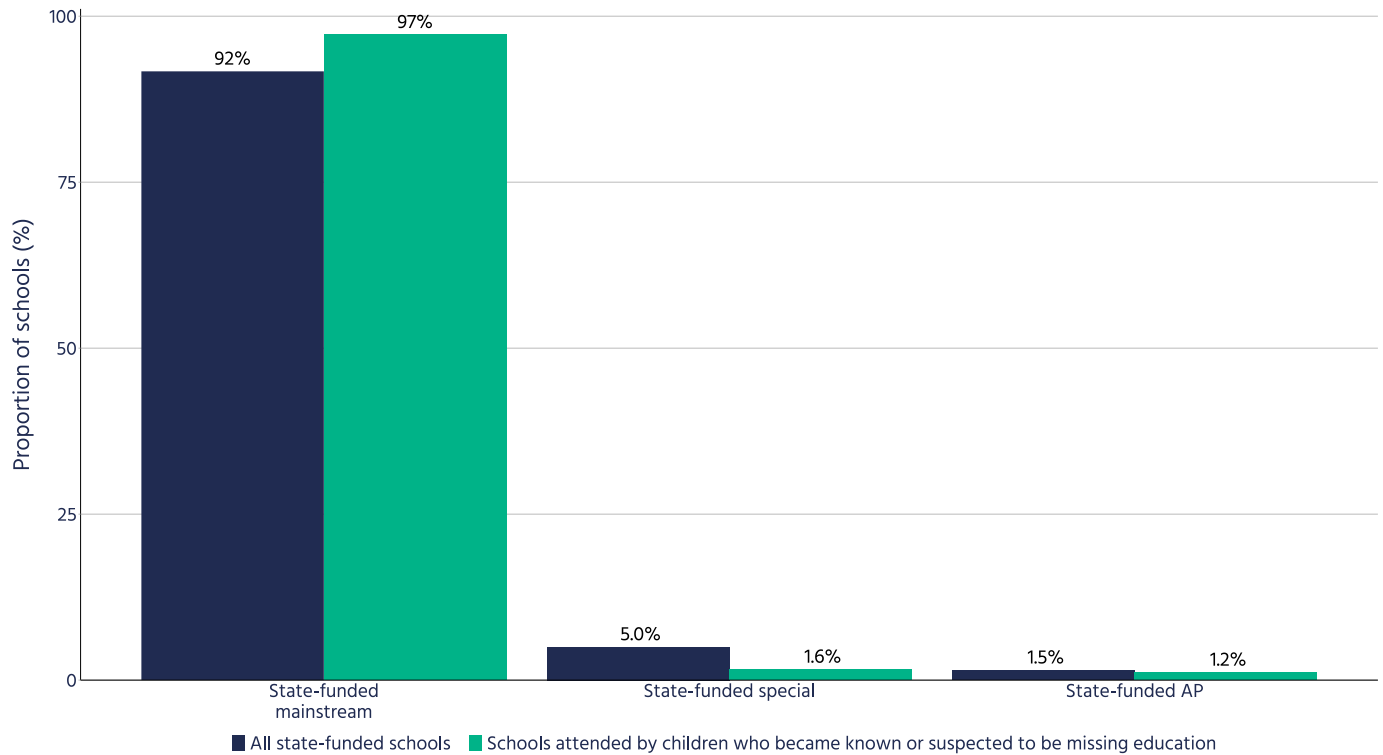


### 6.3.2 Previous school type

All the children in our sample who were identified as known or suspected to be a child missing education had previously been recorded as attending a state-funded school or a local authority commissioned alternative provider. Where applicable, we looked at the school they were last enrolled in, to examine any common trends in the type and quality of schools of children who identified as a CME.

Our analysis showed that children in special schools and alternative provision (AP) schools were less likely than other children to become a child missing education. 1.6% of schools attended by children known or suspected to be a child missing education were state-funded special schools (Figure 45). For comparison, 5.0% of all state-funded schools are special schools. Similarly, 1.2% of schools attended by children in our sample identified as a CME were last educated in a state-funded AP. This compares with 1.5% of all state-funded schools which are APs.

Figure 45: Types of schools attended by children who left the state education system and were known or suspected to be a child missing education



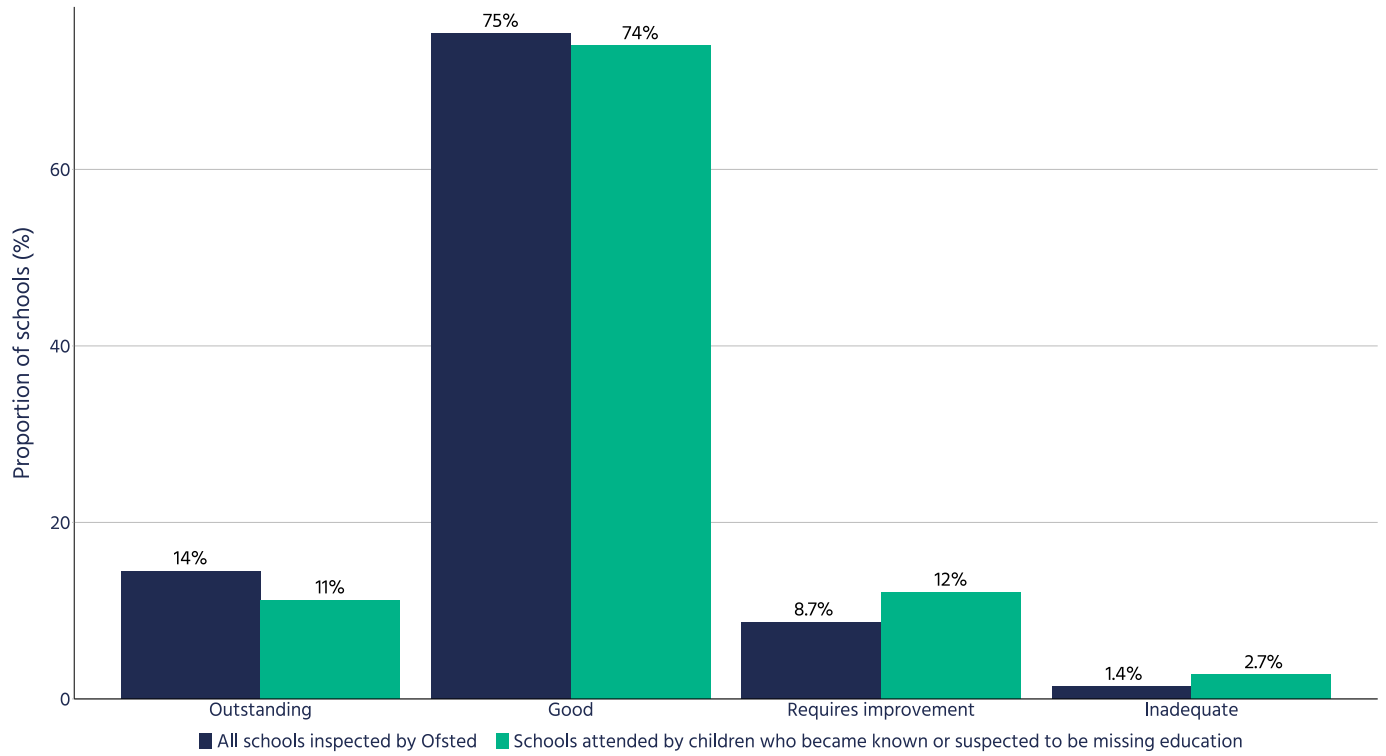
### 6.3.3 Previous school Ofsted rating

Our analysis showed that children in our sample identified as a known or suspected CME were much more likely to have come from ‘Requires Improvement’ or ‘Inadequate’ schools.

12% of the schools attended by children identified as a CME in our sample were rated by Ofsted as ‘Requires Improvement’ (Figure 46). For comparison, 8.7% of all schools inspected by Ofsted were rated as ‘Requires Improvement’.

Similarly, 2.7% of schools attended by children in our sample of known or suspected CME were rated ‘Inadequate’ by Ofsted, compared to 1.4% of all schools inspected by Ofsted.

Figure 46: Ofsted ratings of schools attended by children who left the state education system and were known or suspected to be a child missing education



## 7. The Way Forward

### 7.1 A more inclusive school system

In our conversations with parents and local authorities, the office heard that an increasing number of children are leaving the school system after a history of poor attendance and disengagement from school. We heard that these children often desperately wanted to be in school but did not receive the support they needed to access education.

#### 7.1.1 Supporting the improvement of school attendance

Thousands of children who left the state education system had a history of poor attendance prior to leaving the school roll. The office was deeply concerned that 62% of children who became a child missing education and 82% of children who moved into home education had a history of being persistently or severely absent. Children who left school to destinations unknown to the local authority also had higher rates of absenteeism relative to all state-funded pupils.

Parents told the office that they found it hard to speak to schools about the challenges they faced getting their children to attend regularly. They said that by the time their child had started to disengage from school and stop attending, they had often been struggling to support them at home for months beforehand.

In our interviews, we heard that it was often difficult for schools to develop strong and consistent relationships with families. This was more difficult in secondary schools where there was not a clear single contact for families to talk to.

**Recommendation:** The government should introduce family liaison officers for all schools and roll out national training for existing family liaison officers. These officers should develop relationships with families and help children to access the support they need to engage with education.

The office heard that many of the children who left the school system had histories of severe absenteeism. These children had already missed at least half of all available sessions in school, prior to leaving the school roll. 18% of children who became a CME and 26% of children who went into home education were severely absent.

The reasons for severe absenteeism are complex and multi-faceted. Often, the barriers to attendance lie outside of the school gate. This makes tackling severe absenteeism a greater challenge for schools. In some areas, we heard of local authorities who had set up multi-agency forums to discuss severe absenteeism cases. These boards would review the support offered to a child who was severely absent and look to fast track them for additional support, if needed. These boards were seen as particularly effective for tackling entrenched issues which acted as a barrier to attendance.

**Recommendation:** Every local authority should develop a multi-agency forum to review severe absenteeism cases. The membership of the forum should include representatives from education, health, social care, police, housing, and third sector organisations. The forums should meet regularly and should create and monitor plans for improving the attendance of children with a history of severe absenteeism.

## 7.1.2 Securing high quality alternative provision

Many of the children we heard about did not receive suitable education for a significant period, even while they were still on the roll of their school. In cases where children were anxious and did not attend regularly, the office heard that suitable alternative provision was not consistently offered.

In our interviews, there was clear confusion around the roles and responsibilities of schools and local authorities in securing appropriate alternative provision for children who were absent or who left the school system after a period of disengagement.

Section 19 of the Education Act states that local authorities have a duty to 'make arrangements for the provision of suitable... education at school or otherwise than at school for those children of compulsory school age who, by reason of illness, exclusion from school or otherwise, may not for any period receive suitable education unless such arrangements are made for them'.



The guidance on alternative provision, which provides further detail on this issue, states that this duty applies to all children in the local authority's area who are of compulsory school age, whether or not they are on the roll of a school.<sup>31</sup>

Local authorities told the office that they were facing an increase in Section 19 requests for children with anxiety or with unmet mental health needs. Many local authority teams told the office that there had been an increase in the number of children who needed alternative provision of this kind but that they often did not know about their attendance difficulties until they left the school system. They stated that it was the responsibility of the school to provide appropriate alternative provision for any child who needed support to reengage with education.

Local authorities also said that there was not enough suitable alternative provision to meet the increasing demand.

**Recommendation:** The government should introduce updated guidance on alternative provision which details clear expectations around how schools and local authorities should proactively commission alternative provision to help children to reengage in education. This guidance should make clear who should pay for alternative provision and how safeguarding duties will be met when a child remains on the school roll. The guidance should also make clear what steps the commissioner should follow to assess the suitability of alternative provision. The government should ensure that local authorities have sufficient funds to meet their Section 19 duties.

**Recommendation:** The government should introduce a register of all unregistered alternative provision with clear minimum standards and mechanisms for quality assurance.

No child should have to leave the school system or disengage from education to access suitable alternative provision (AP) which meets their social, emotional or mental health needs. Local authorities and parents agreed that children should be able to access alternative provision while remaining on their school roll.

Access to high quality in-school AP is patchy. Local authorities said that there are few incentives for a school to develop and resource their own AP. There is no guidance about what good looks like and very little research about how to create a successful internal AP. There is also very little recognition of the value of internal AP in the existing accountability structures. The office heard of some examples where local authorities had started to offer capital funding to schools to develop their own AP, as an incentive to develop such provision.

**Recommendation:** The government should issue guidance for schools about how to create internal alternative provision. This guidance should provide best practice examples about how internal AP can be used and how its success can be monitored. A place in internal AP should be reviewed regularly (at least every half term) and should have evidenced outcomes. Schools should ensure that children are in internal AP for a short period and there are plans in place to reintegrate children as soon as possible.

### 7.1.3 Managing transitions

Secondary school was seen as a key transition moment for children in our data collection. Children aged 10, about to enter Year 7, were most likely year group to leave the school system and many moved into home education or became a child missing education at this age.

Transitions can prove to be very difficult periods for children who already struggle to engage in education. The parents that we spoke to said their children struggled with acclimatising to the demands of secondary school. Children often feared making new friends and adjusting to a bigger and busier school. Parents of children with a recognised SEND who did not qualify for an EHCP said it was particularly difficult to find a school which would offer adequate SEN Support.

**Recommendation:** The government should introduce a national transition protocol with recommendations on how to support children with additional needs to adjust to a new school.

## 7.1.4 Supporting young people's mental health

Local authorities and parents agreed that one of the key factors behind the increased numbers of children leaving the school system was worsening mental health. Annual mental health briefings by the Children's Commissioner show that children's mental health has worsened since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic<sup>32</sup> and there is a perception of a growing reluctance from parents to send children into school during an episode of poor mental health.

Parents told the office that sometimes their children had been struggling with poor mental health for months or years before they told the school. Schools are increasingly playing a role in supporting children with poor mental health, but do not always feel equipped to respond to their pupil's needs.

**Recommendation:** All schools should publish a mental health and wellbeing policy online. This policy should be accessible for children and parents. The policy should be designed in consultation with young people and parents. It should outline the graduated approach schools will take to supporting mental health and the avenues available for accessing support.

**Recommendation:** The government should provide mental health first training for all teachers to spot the early signs of common mental health issues.

Mental Health Support Teams are currently being rolled out across England. They provide support and extra capacity for mild to moderate mental health issues and also help schools to create a whole-school approach to mental health.

While the roll out of mental health support teams is welcome, it has not been done at sufficient pace to meet need. In 2022-23, a total 28% of schools and colleges and 35% of pupils had access to a mental health support teams.<sup>33</sup>

**Recommendation:** The roll out of mental health support teams should be expedited to reach all children by 2025.

The office heard that there was a lack of suitable provision for children with more acute mental health difficulties. Parents told us that their children often faced lengthy waits for CAMHS and may not meet the threshold for support, even when exhibiting signs of suicidal ideation.

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Parents said that schools were often not set up to support children with mental health needs. Often, a focus on attendance would take priority over ensuring a child's health needs were responded to. Parents told the office that they wanted schools to have access to expert mental health practitioners who could support children with acute mental health difficulties.

**Recommendation:** The government should build on the Mental Health Support Teams by making counsellors available to every school. These counsellors should help to bridge the gap between health and school.

**Recommendation:** Where a child is on a CAMHS waiting list or in receipt of CAMHS support and starting to disengage from school, they should be assigned a key worker who can help to triage multi-agency services to address any underlying issues which may be causing poor mental health. These children should be automatically referred to the multi-agency attendance forums.

The office heard of the difficulties children faced when they experienced bullying at school. Parents remarked that they felt like they went around in circles, trying to put an end to bullying. They told the office that bullying incidents were often minimised or accepted, despite the impact this had on the victim's mental health. Parents remarked that it was harder for schools to manage bullying or to create an anti-bullying climate at school when so much of bullying now takes place online.

**Recommendation:** All schools should be equipped to respond to bullying both on-site and off-site. The government should rollout national anti-bullying training for school pastoral leads.

### 7.1.5 Creating a needs-led SEND system

Local authorities told the office that one of the biggest problems they faced in meeting the needs of children with special educational needs was the recruitment and retention of specialists such as education psychologists and speech and language therapists.

While the government has outlined plans to train and recruit more educational psychologists, there remain significant workforce challenges. Special and mainstream schools have told the office about the challenges they face in recruiting teaching assistants. Due to demands on budgets, it's often difficult for schools to offer anything more than fixed term contracts with low rates of pay.

**Recommendation:** The government should outline a comprehensive multiagency workforce plan for occupations which are key to delivering special educational needs provision. This should include forecasts and recruitment and retention plans for educational psychologists, speech and language therapists, SENCOs, and specialist teaching assistants. The plan should make provisions for professionals, such as education psychologists and speech and language therapists, to be located within schools or families of schools. As part of this plan, the government should also conduct a feasibility review to assess the costs and benefits of requiring all schools and colleges to have a full-time SENCO with no teaching responsibilities.

Children with special educational needs should be able to remain on the roll of mainstream school and access special educational provision where required. Many of the parents the office spoke to said that they wanted their child to remain on a mainstream school roll and access the national curriculum. They said that often schools were not resourced to meet their children's needs and that too few staff were trained in special educational needs.

**Recommendation:** The government should update the Early Careers Framework to provide training for teachers on special educational needs. SENCOs should develop a programme of CPD for all staff on the special educational needs of children in their school.

**Recommendation:** The government should evaluate existing resourced provision and SEN units to learn about what works. Additional capital funding should be made available for families of schools to develop resourced provision and SEN units.

In some instances, the office heard of children who had an EHCP but who could not access an appropriate school due to a lack of special school places. Local authorities told the office that an increasing amount of their budget was being spent on independent special school places for children with EHCPS, due to a lack of places in state-funded special schools.

While the government has outlined plans to introduce special free schools, many areas said that the demand for special school places continued to outstrip supply.

**Recommendation:** Local authorities and multi-academy trusts should be given powers to open special schools in addition to the existing special free school wave.

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Too many children missed out on education as they were waiting for judgements on Education, Health and Care Plans. The most recent statistics show that less than half of all applications for EHCPs are issued within the 20-week timeframe.<sup>34</sup>

**Recommendation:** Every local authority where the average wait for an EHCP is longer than 20 weeks should have to publish what their plan is to reduce this.

**Recommendation:** Local authorities should produce an expected wait time at the start of every needs assessment, where this expected wait is longer than 20 weeks and the child has a history of persistent absenteeism, local authorities should set out an interim plan to support pupils to access suitable education during their wait.

## 7.2 Powers to identify children wherever they are educated

Local authorities told the office about the difficulties they face tracking children and how this impacts their ability to identify and support children not receiving a suitable education. Information sharing when a child leaves a school roll does not happen automatically. Schools must submit forms to the local authority and complete data returns to pass on information to relevant stakeholders. All too often, these steps are missed, and children fall through the gaps.

### 7.2.1 Improving existing information sharing systems

22% of the children identified in our data collection (9,765 in our sample) appeared to have left the state education system yet were later identified as being in state-funded mainstream schools. These children lost their Unique Pupil Numbers, identifiers which are supposed to stay with children throughout their school years. Local authorities told the office that they knew of some of these children but not all. In many instances, these children lost their Unique Pupil Number because of a breakdown in information sharing between the previous school and the destination school. Poor information sharing means that these children may not have had information on their educational history and additional needs shared with the destination school.

A further 5,571 children in our sample had destinations unknown to local authorities at the time of our data collection. These children had left their school rolls and could not be identified in the databases to which local authorities currently have access. Local authorities could not confirm where these children had gone to, whether they were had moved to another school, left the state education system, or become a child missing education. The office had serious concerns around how these children fell through the cracks in our education system.

In every interview, local authorities told the office that they relied upon relationships with individuals in schools to get the information they needed on children's whereabouts. This proved to be very difficult in local authorities with hundreds of schools or in areas where school staff turnover was a challenge. In one area with over three hundred schools, the local authority team told the office that they believed only half of their schools followed the correct processes around deregistration.

Local authorities told the office that they found it hard to get schools to accurately report pupils who were deregistered. They said that there was little scrutiny of this issue and that they were working in a system of unknown unknowns. While they could encourage schools to share information, they did not have the ability to monitor school rolls directly.

**Recommendation:** Ofsted should look at how schools deregister children as part of their inspection on safeguarding. Schools should have to evidence that they followed the statutory guidance around sharing information with the local authority and, where applicable, with the destination school.

We need to build a system for data sharing which can cope with the demands of tracking pupil movement. Local authorities told the office that the existing software used by schools and local authorities to track children as they move through the school system, School2School, was not fit for purpose. The office heard how some local authorities did not use the system either due to confusion about how it worked or a belief that the School2School system was out of date and unreliable. The office heard that schools were unfamiliar with School2School and some found using the software to be a challenge.

**Recommendation:** School2School should be reformed, with clear guidance and training for all school and local authorities.

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## 7.2.2 Giving local authorities greater oversight

The office heard that the transition phase between Year 6 and 7 was a particular challenge for local authorities tracking pupil movement. While local authorities can make a request to collect data on children who leave school rolls at transition periods, this is not a statutory requirement and would be an additional request on schools. The office heard that such requests were rare.

Academies act as their own admissions authority which means that local authorities often do not know about the decisions made to admit pupils in Year 7. There was strong consensus, reflected in the office's analysis, that the move to secondary was a key time for pupil movement and a common point in time for children to become lost in the school system.

**Recommendation:** Local authorities should become the admissions authority for all schools. This would simplify the process for children and families and provide greater oversight of pupil movement at the local authority level.

Local authorities told the office that they made use of the School Census and other data sources to try to identify any children who moved without their knowledge. While this helped to identify children moving to other destinations in the state-funded school system, local authorities conceded that this method did not allow them to identify children who moved to settings outside of statutory data collection.

Local authorities voiced concerns around the increasing number of children whom they do not know about. They said that a patchy approach to data collection made it difficult to discharge their duty to identify children not in receipt of a suitable education.

**Recommendation:** The government should introduce the Children not in School register and should outline plans for individual level data collection for children in independent schools.

There is an information asymmetry between schools and local authorities and, far too often, local authorities only find out about a child who is struggling after they have made the decision to exit the school system. While the new daily attendance data is a step forward, local authorities said they remained concerned about the schools who were not sharing their attendance data.



**Recommendation:** The government should make the daily attendance data collection mandatory. Local authorities should use this data to identify children who are persistently and severely absent and those who meet thresholds for local authority support.

### 7.2.3 Creating a comprehensive approach to children's data

Our review of local authority data showed how difficult it was to track children as they moved through the education system. Local authorities do not receive data automatically from schools or when children move into area, which makes it difficult for local authorities to identify children who are living in their area and are not receiving a suitable education.

Public services assign children a myriad of identifiers and it is often difficult to share information across different services. This was a particular issue for identifying children missing education. Local authorities rely on ad hoc access to other services' databases to identify children missing education. Their access is conditional on relationships and local level data sharing agreements. Children missing education teams cannot conduct searches themselves, as they are not allowed to access other services' databases. They instead rely on other professionals conducting searches. This process is time inefficient and wasteful and can lead to vulnerable children falling through the gaps.

**Recommendation:** The government should introduce a consistent unique identifier for all children, based on the existing NHS number. This unique identifier would better enable services to share information on a child, identify children missing education, and make an assessment of the support needed need to reengage in education.

## 7.3 Protections for children with additional vulnerabilities

### 7.3.1 Protecting children known to social care

Schools are an essential form of early help for many children. For children with an identified vulnerability, school provides ongoing support and a safeguarding structure. The office was therefore deeply concerned that a disproportionate number of children who became a child missing education were identified as a child in need. In our interviews we heard that children missing education were often at increased risk of harm.

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Local authorities told the office that sometimes social services closed cases prematurely when children were still severely or persistently absent. They said that social workers did not always prioritise educational neglect or see their role in supporting children to attend regularly.

**Recommendation:** Social workers should be trained in educational neglect and should treat regular school attendance as a key outcome for children with a history of persistent or severe absenteeism. The government's children's social care outcomes framework and the proposed social care dashboard must ensure that the indicators used for attendance allow genuine tracking of how a child's attendance has changed over the duration of a child's plan.

Virtual School Heads play an immensely important role promoting the education of children and young people in care and previously in care. In our analysis, a lower proportion of children who were looked after were known or suspected to be a child missing education, relative to the proportion in state-funded schools. The office believes that this is testament to the power of Virtual School Heads.

Virtual School Heads have powers to direct admissions and to allocate Pupil Premium Plus funding to schools and education settings to improve the educational outcomes of looked after children. Since 2021, their role has been extended on a non-statutory basis to encompass all children with a social worker. Virtual School Heads are responsible for working collaboratively with local agencies to address the barriers to engagement and attainment for this group of young people, however, they do not have the power to direct admissions or access to Pupil Premium Plus for these children.

Children in need were overrepresented in the children missing education cohort. If we want to intervene earlier and protect children at risk of harm, we must step in earlier with proactive support for children in need. Many looked after children will have previously been on a child in need or child protection plan. To better protect this group, we must extend Virtual School Heads' powers.

**Recommendation:** The government should give Virtual School Heads powers to direct admissions for children in need. These children should also be prioritised for admission to 'Good' or 'Outstanding' schools.

**Recommendation:** Pupil Premium Plus should be extended to all children in need.

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When children have an identified vulnerability, schools play a key role in keeping them safe. When children have been identified as a child in need due to risks of harm in their home environment, additional protections must be put in place to ensure they can access school and get the education they need to thrive. Without daily access to school, vulnerable children are at risk of slipping through the gaps in the system.

Home education is not, in and of itself, a safeguarding risk. Many families the Children's Commissioner's office spoke to reflected on the benefits of home education for their child's wellbeing and development. However, the Children's Commissioner's Office believes that home education is unsuitable in cases where children have been identified to be at risk of harm from their home environment. Currently, there are no restrictions on children with a social worker being home educated.

**Recommendation:** The Government should introduce a ban on the use of home education for any child with a social worker where the child has been identified as being at risk of harm from the home environment or where home education would expose them to additional harms. The Department for Education's guidance on home education should then be updated to clearly outline these children should not be home educated unless in exceptional circumstances and it is agreed with the child's social worker. These cases should be reviewed on a case-by-case basis.

### 7.3.2 Protecting access to Education, Health and Care provision

In our interviews with parents, we heard of instances where children who moved into home education were denied access to education, health and care provision outlined in their EHCP. Parents said that sometimes access to therapists or education support was withdrawn when the local authority was notified that they had started home educating.

Children with an identified special educational need should be given the support they need to access education, no matter where they are educated. If a child with an EHCP is assessed as needing additional health or social care support, that should be accessible in school or at home.

**Recommendation:** The home education guidance should be updated to recommend that when parents wish to withdraw children with EHCPs, they should meet with the school and local authority to discuss how they can work together to deliver the health and care arrangements in the EHCP going forward. The guidance should be clear that children in home education with EHCPs are still entitled to the health and care provision, as detailed in their EHCP.

## 7.4 An accountability system which enshrines every child's right to education

### 7.4.1 Shining a light on children's access to education

Our analysis has shown, for the first time ever, the number of children who leave school rolls and move to other education destinations. The Department does not currently publish children-level analysis on the number of children missing education or the number of children unknown to local authorities. Our interviews found that there were many children who were registered at a school but were not regularly attending and that this often preceded a move out of the state education system.

No child should miss out on their right to education. This should be an issue which is given national level scrutiny. Research shows that children who are absent from school often leave school without the qualifications they need<sup>35</sup> and some are vulnerable to criminal exploitation.<sup>36</sup>

**Recommendation:** Ofsted should revise their SEND and social care inspection frameworks to include attendance as an evaluation criterion in every inspection. Ofsted should also conduct a thematic deep dive into school attendance in the worst performing local authorities.

### 7.4.2 Making access to education everyone's priority

In our interviews with local authorities and parents, the office heard that in many instances children were unable to access education because they could not secure the support they needed from other services. The office heard of long waiting times for special educational needs provision and mental health support which acted as a barrier to attendance.

The office also heard that it was difficult to get the necessary multi-agency support to identify children missing education. In some areas, there were effective multi-agency forums established to identify and support these children, but this was not common.

To ensure that local government departments are held accountable for their efforts to reduce absenteeism, the government should seek to integrate performance on attendance into their existing accountability structures.

Ofsted has recently conducted a thematic inspection with the Care Quality Commission on alternative provision. They should build on this work to examine the routes out of state education.

**Recommendation:** Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission should conduct a Joint Targeted Area Inspection on school attendance and children missing education.

## Methodology

### Overview

This report is based on analysis of data gathered by the Children's Commissioner's Office from local authorities in England, administrative data held by the Department for Education, and discussions with local authorities and home educating parents.

### Quantitative data collection and analysis

Local authorities have a duty to identify all children in their area who are not in school, and who are not attending suitable education otherwise. However, no child is required to make themselves known to local authorities. Local authorities rely on reports from schools, other local authorities, or third parties to make them aware of children who are new to area or who move out of the school system. The Department for Education itself has minimal participation in the data sharing between local authorities and other bodies which this duty necessitates, and until recently did not routinely gather any data from local authorities on children in home education or missing education, inhibiting the understanding of the scale and nature of the issue at a national level.

In 2023 the Department for Education launched two data collections from local authorities. The 'Children missing education'<sup>37</sup> and 'Elective home education'<sup>38</sup> data collections make available for the first time an estimate of the number of children missing education and home educated children in each local authority and England overall. However, as these collections are aggregate, they do not contain child-level data. This limits our understanding of the characteristics or journeys of these children. To fill this gap, the CCo conducted a data collection to learn more about these children.

Using the Department for Education's child-level administrative education data, the CCo identified which children were present in the data at one point in time, but not present at a later time. These children, from the point of view of the centrally held data, appeared to have dropped off schools rolls to unknown destinations.

### Inclusion criteria

Children in scope of this collection were:

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- **Aged 4 to 14 at the start of the 2021/22 academic year<sup>iv</sup>** (equivalent to Reception to Year 10). Children aged 3 and below were excluded as they were below compulsory school age so had no obligation to remain on school rolls. Children in Year 11 and above were excluded as they may reasonably move in the next year to destinations outside the scope of the administrative data, such as apprenticeships.
- **Present in the 2021/22 administrative data** and recorded as living in an English local authority.
- **Not present in the 2022/23 administrative data**, and therefore appeared to have dropped off school rolls.

The administrative data used was the Spring School Census and the AP Census.<sup>v</sup> The census date of both of these collections is the third Thursday of each year, and so the coverage of this collection was children who were present in these censuses in January 2022, but were not present in January 2023. The School Census covers all pupils in state-funded schools and nurseries, and pupils in non-maintained special schools. The AP Census covers all children in placements commissioned and wholly funded by a local authority, and which are not already in scope of the School Census (for example, unregistered alternative provision and independent schools where a local authority is wholly paying the tuition fees).

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<sup>iv</sup> This is the child's age as at midnight of 31/08/2021.

<sup>v</sup> The Individualised Learner Record (ILR), which covers colleges and other providers of further education, could also have been used to identify children who fall off school rolls. This would have allowed the collection to extend up to children in Years 11 and 12. However, the ILR does not collect the same IDs as the School and AP Censuses, which would have complicated the data request CCo sent to local authorities. Additionally, older children were not the primary concern of this project.

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This left a total cohort of 81,940 children.<sup>vi</sup> To reduce the burden on local authorities, the cohort was randomly sampled to reduce its size.

### Sampling approach

Stratified sampling was performed by age, gender and ethnicity on the cohort in each local authority.<sup>vii</sup> The sampling was designed so that the size of the sampled cohort in each local authority would be the greater of: half of the size of their unsampled cohort; or 50 children. Local authorities with less than 50 children in their unsampled cohort were sent the full list with no children removed.

The quality of the sampling was tested using Pearson's chi-squared test. The test checked that the distribution of each characteristic individually was statistically similar in both the unsampled and sampled cohorts in each local authority. Although special educational need (SEN) status was not used in the sampling itself, it was used in the tests, to ensure that its distribution had also been preserved through sampling. Across the 608 tests conducted (152 local authorities with 4 characteristics each), the average p-value – the probability that the output from the test could have occurred under the null hypothesis, that the distribution observed after sampling is the same as the original population distribution – was 0.78, and was never less than 0.05. After analysis of the p-values, 132 tests would be expected to be false positives, or less than 1 per local authority. These were interpreted as strong results, indicative that the sampling was sufficiently representative.

This led to a final sample size of 44,839 children sent to local authorities.

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<sup>vi</sup> The only pupils removed at this stage were 75 pupils with no unique pupil number (UPN), as that was the ID the CCo sent to local authority to identify children. While all pupils should have a UPN, these pupils were perhaps missing theirs because of administrative or data errors.

<sup>vii</sup> Sampling by special educational needs (SEN) provision was also tested. However, this substantially reduced the measures of sampling quality. This was because special education needs are correlated with age, gender and ethnicity. As such, SEN was not used in the sampling.



## Data fields collected from local authorities

For each child, the CCo asked local authorities the following 4 questions:

- Question 1a: What was the child's latest known destination in the period 21/01/2022 (the day after the 2021/22 Spring censuses, the earliest they could have possibly left school rolls) to 19/01/2023 (the day of the 2022/23 Spring censuses, the latest date they were known to have left school rolls)? If you have multiple records for a child, return the most recent, so long as that record falls within the period 21/01/2022 to 19/01/2023.
- Question 1b: If the child's latest known destination was in a registered school, what was the URN or LAESTAB<sup>viii</sup> of that school?
- Question 1c: If you selected 'other' to question 1a, please specify here (free text).
- Question 2: Was the child ever suspected or known to be a CME at any point in the period 21/01/2022 to 19/01/2023? Unlike questions 1a, 1b and 1c, which ask about the latest known destination of a child, question 2 instead asks if the child was known or suspected to be a CME at any point between the 2021/22 Censuses and the 2022/23 Censuses. The options were:
  - Known to be a CME
  - Suspected to be a CME
  - Neither known nor suspected to be a CME
  - Unknown

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<sup>viii</sup> LAESTAB (or LA Establishment number) is a concatenation of the 3-digit code of the school's local authority and the school's 4-digit Department for Education number.

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Local authorities were given the following list of 21 options for question 1a. If multiple options applied, local authorities were instructed to select the first numerically. This is a limitation, as it hid children enrolled at an unregistered provider – a population of concern for the CCo – if they were also enrolled at a registered school.

- Enrolment at a registered school:
    1. Registered mainstream independent school
    2. Registered special independent school
    3. State-funded mainstream school (maintained, academy or free school)
    4. State-funded special school (maintained, academy or free school)
    5. State-funded alternative provision (pupil referral unit, academy alternative provision, or free school alternative provision)
  - Unregistered education and training:
    6. Unregistered education setting
    7. Unregistered online provider
    8. Unregistered 1:1 or small group private tuition
    9. Work based placement, including apprenticeships
    10. Elective home education
  - Missing education:
    11. Not enrolled at any education setting and not receiving education otherwise (i.e. fits the statutory definition of CME)
    12. Not receiving any education but awaiting provision (i.e. currently CME but will soon receive an education)
-

13. Child is suspected to be a CME (e.g. they have been referred to the local authority's CME team) but investigations are ongoing

- Other destinations:

14. Medical care

15. Youth offender's institute

16. Moved home, or moved to a school, outside of England

17. Deceased

18. Other

- Unknown destinations:

19. Unknown because the child is known to the local authority but information on their destination is not available

20. Unknown because this child is not known to the local authority

21. Unknown because this data is not routinely collected or has been lost

The CCo received 100% of the data requested from all 152 local authorities.<sup>ix</sup>

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<sup>ix</sup> Cumbria split into two local authorities between 2021/22 and 2022/23: Cumberland; and Westmorland and Furness. The 2021/22 data only contains Cumbria. This made it impossible for the CCo to know, for each child who had lived in Cumbria, which of the two new local authorities should be asked for their destination. As such, the two new local authorities were sent a joint data request.

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## Free text responses

All free text responses to question 1c were manually reviewed, and either categorised into one of the 21 options provided in question 1a or to a new category created through manual review. As these categories were not present in the original collection, they were not used in the analysis as local authorities may not have described them under question 1c consistently. However, it is interesting to note them:

- Further education provider or other 14+ provider (mapped to 'state-funded mainstream school')
  - Special post-16 institution (mapped to 'independent special school')
  - Support through a personal budget (mapped to 'unregistered education setting')
  - Education other than at a school (EOTAS) (mapped to 'unregistered education setting')
  - Education from care provider (mapped to 'unregistered education setting')
  - Relocated refugee (mapped to 'other')
  - Police or witness protection (mapped to 'other')
  - The local authority believes that the child is past compulsory school age (mapped to 'other')
  - The local authority believes that the child is below compulsory school age (mapped to 'other')
  - The child has moved to another local authority and has been referred to their CME team (mapped to 'suspected to be a CME')
  - Unknown because the child has moved to another local authority (mapped to 'unknown because the child is known to the local authority but information on their destination is not available')
  - Unknown because the child's school has not shared data with the local authority (mapped to 'unknown because the child is known to the local authority but information on their destination is not available')
-

- Unknown, but the local authority is aware that the child has left school (mapped to 'unknown because the child is known to the local authority but information on their destination is not available')

### Data cleaning

The School and AP Censuses primarily use two different IDs to identify children: a Unique Pupil Number (UPN), an ID issued by schools to all children who enrol, and recognised by local authorities; and a Pupil Matching Reference (PMR), an ID used internally by the Department for Education for matching datasets together, but not recognised by local authorities. As such, the CCo used PMR to construct the initial population of in-scope children, and then provided the UPNs attached to those PMRs to local authorities as part of the data collection. However, it was noted during analysis that there were 550 PMRs which had disappeared between 2021/22 and 2022/23, but their corresponding UPNs appeared in both years. This error was assumed to have occurred where the Department for Education had erroneously assigned a new PMR to an existing UPN which already had a PMR. Under this assumption, these children should never have been in the collection, and so were removed from the analysis.

**Table 3: The number of children at each stage**

Whole population: all children who left the state education system in 2021/22	81,940
Full sample: the children sent to local authorities as part of the office's data collection, for whom all data requested was received	44,839
Full sample, minus the children removed during cleaning, because their UPNs reappear in the 2022/23 Spring censuses	44,289
Study sample: the four groups of children predominantly used in this report's analysis	23,257

During cleaning, the following assumptions were applied: if a child was recorded as known or suspected to be a CME in question 1a, then the local authority's response to question 2 was replaced with either known or suspected to be a CME (i.e. children whose latest known destination was to be a CME were also a CME at some point during the year); and if a child was unknown to the local authority in question 1a, then the local authority's response to question 2 was replaced with unknown (i.e. the local authority cannot claim to know if a child has been a CME during the year if they also claim to not know the child). These assumptions prefer responses from the local authority to questions which required greater specificity from them.

### **Joining to administrative data**

The data returned by local authorities was joined to the following data sources:

- Get Information About Schools (GIAS), for the type and Ofsted rating of the school given in response to question 1b, as well as the type and Ofsted rating of the school the child attended in Spring 2021/22. Each school's most recent Ofsted rating was used, and no limits were placed on how old that rating may be. If the school's type in GIAS disagreed with the type of school the local authority reported in response to question 1a, then the local authority's response to question 1a was ignored and replaced by the GIAS information on school type.
- The School Census and AP Census pupil data, for the age, gender, ethnicity and special educational needs status of each child, as well as the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) of their home neighbourhood (lower layer super output area), based on home postcode.
- The School Census attendance data, for whether the child had been rarely absent, persistently absent, or severely absent in 2021/22.
- The Children in Need Census, for whether the children been a child in need on the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022, and if so their primary reason, identified by social workers, for being in need.
- The Children Looked After Census, for whether the children had been looked after by their local authority on the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022.

## Weighting

Children in the sampled data returned by local authorities were weighted by age, gender and ethnicity (the same characteristics used in the stratified sampling) so that their distribution by these three characteristics matched the distribution in the whole population of children in England who left the state education system.

This was done so that estimates could be made about the total number of children who left the state education system between Spring 2021/22 and Spring 2022/23, for example the number who went into elective home education. This was carried out because, as described, the stratified sampling was not perfectly representative. Weighted numbers have been used to report estimates of the total number of children in a destination. Unweighted numbers have been used for proportions.

## Qualitative data collection and analysis

We conducted seven group interviews with 22 officials across eight local authorities, representing London, Yorkshire and the Humber, the North West, the South West, the South East, and the West Midlands. All interviews were conducted online between November 2023 and January 2024. The choice of local authorities took region into account but was primarily informed by the data returns local authorities provided. These showed, for three of the local authorities interviewed, high numbers of children leaving to unknown destinations, CME and home education respectively, and in two cases, written comments that the office wished to explore further. The purpose of these interviews was to understand local authority processes when children leave school rolls.

In January 2024 the office conducted three online focus groups with three groups containing 17 home educating parents. The parents were recruited by Education Otherwise, a charity for families whose children are being educated outside school. Two representatives of the charity attended and contributed to the discussions. The primary purpose of these discussions was to understand the reasons these parents' children left school for home education. We did not speak directly to any children who have left school rolls for this report, but the report was informed by relevant previous research by the Children's Commissioner and others.

Notes of the interviews were analysed thematically by grouping similar quotes and responses across interviews into related themes.

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## Annex 1: Full breakdown of children's destinations

Destinations of children who were recorded in the state education system in Spring 2021/22 but not in Spring 2022/23. As described in the Methodology, the right-hand column has been weighted up (by age, gender and ethnicity) to describe the whole population.

Destination	Number (sample)	Proportion (sample)	Number (whole population)
Independent mainstream school	8,733	20%	16,519
Independent special school (including specialist post-16 institutions)	445	1.0%	828
State-funded mainstream school (including colleges)	9,765	22%	18,129
State-funded special school	168	0.4%	315
State-funded alternative provision	74	0.2%	136
Unregistered education setting	91	0.2%	168
Unregistered online provider	<11		
Unregistered 1:1 or small group private tuition	36	0.1%	65
Work based placement, including apprenticeships	<11		
Elective home education	6,953	16%	13,120
Known to be a CME	756	1.7%	1,405
Known to be a CME but awaiting education	243	0.5%	445
Suspected to be a CME	557	1.3%	1,018
Medical care	<11		
Youth offender's institute	<11		
Moved to a home or school outside of England	10,569	24%	19,013
Other	183	0.4%	333
Deceased	129	0.3%	236
Unknown because the child is known to the local authority but information on their destination is not available	3,878	8.8%	7,113
Unknown because this child is not known to the local authority	1,675	3.8%	3,036
Unknown because this data is not routinely collected or has been lost	18	0.0%	32
<i>Total</i>	<i>44,289</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>81,940</i>



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