"We have the most vulnerable children, but less support"

Special and alternative provision sector report: *The Children's Commissioner's School Census*

December 2025

CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER

CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER

Table of contents

Foreword from Dame Rachel de Souza 4

Executive summary 8

Introduction 13

Part 1. Special schools 15

1.1. The importance of special schools for children who need them 15

1.2. What do special schools know about their pupils? 16

1.3 Special schools are providing staffing and resources for the health and wellbeing of their pupils 17

1.4. What are the concerns of special schools? 19

1.5. Specific concerns for special schools: staffing 21

1.6. Special schools view challenges with local services and their own physical premises as barriers to providing support 23

Part 2. Alternative Provision 25

2.1. The importance of alternative provision settings for pupils who need them 25

2.2. What do alternative provision settings know about their pupils? 26

2.3. Barriers to support in alternative provision 28

2.4. The priorities and concerns of alternative provision settings 30

2.5. Specific concerns for alternative provision: poverty and safety 31

2.6. Roles and resources in alternative provision 33

Part 3. What needs to change 36

3.1. A system with clear expectations and accountability 36

3.2. Ensuring a core offer of specialist support 38

3.3. Embedding poverty and social care support within school communities 38

3.4. Strengthening careers guidance and support for post-16 38

3.5. Expanding enrichment and outdoor opportunities in AP settings 39

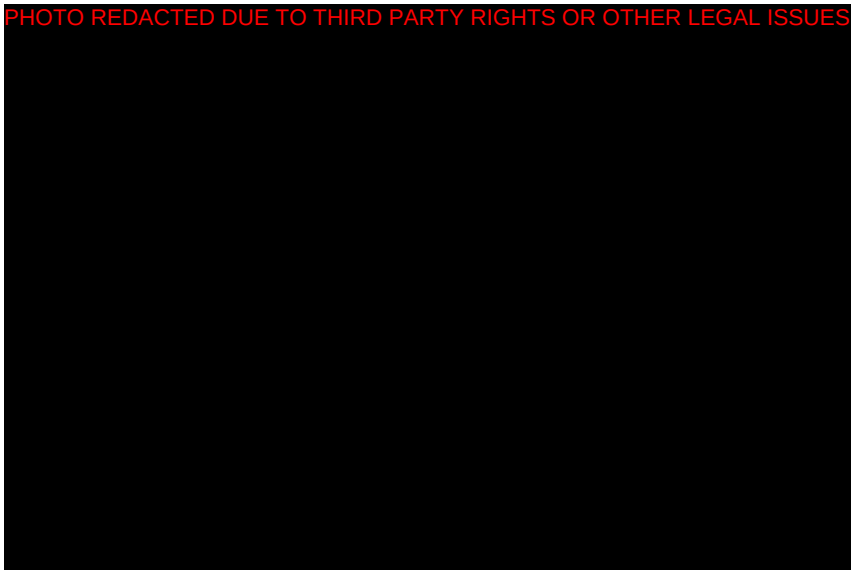
3.6. Strengthening knowledge of pupils and local services 39

3.7. Workforce and infrastructure 40

3.8. *The Children's Plan* 40

Annex A – Methodology 41
Annex B – Data tables and graphs 43
References 57

Foreword from Dame Rachel de Souza



Recently, my office published *The Children's Plan: The Children's Commissioner's School Census*. For the first time, I used my data powers on schools, conducting a census to better understand how leaders and staff are supporting the children in our school system in ways far beyond teaching.

For most children in England, education reforms have transformed outcomes. Since the reform movement more than two decades ago – a movement I was at the heart of as a teacher, headteacher and MAT leader - schools in England have been the beneficiaries of huge amounts of energy and attention relative to other public services. They represent a genuine success story of national public policy.

But those reforms haven't worked for all children – that was the clear message of *The Children's Plan*. At times, they have even come at the expense of some children, who still don't get the education they deserve.

That first report explored the responses from leaders in mainstream schools. Today, I'm publishing analysis of the responses from special schools and alternative provision settings. It's here, in these settings, that some of the most important work in education can happen. I want to make my appreciation and respect for staff in these settings explicit – they are doing some of the most vital, and most under-valued, roles in English education. They are superheroes, often doing amazing work with

little reward. There is so much good happening in these settings, and so much of that good is driven by a dedicated and highly capable workforce.

This is true of special schools, which provide and education for children with learning disabilities, children with complex health needs, hospital schools for children who are unwell, and it is true of alternative provision where children are given a second shot at their education. In my visits to these settings, I have seen staff working tirelessly to turn around children's interactions with education and provide – in some cases – the first positive experience a child has had with education.

I wanted my office to examine the data from my school census from these settings, because my concern is that children's voices – especially those with disabilities – are not listened to, or brushed under the carpet. I have seen this throughout my time as Children's Commissioner; too often it is easy to simply claim that children aren't impacted by policy change, or to ignore their voices where it is expedient to do so, which I have seen this year in the debate around assisted dying.

I wanted to understand what these settings know, and indeed don't know, about their pupils. I worry that for these settings, we care too little and expect too much. They are not necessarily the solution to their pupils' problems, and often it appears that there is a belief that they are going to solve long-standing, systemic, and deep-rooted issues. For all the excellent work that staff do, these settings are not a panacea.

If we are to create an education system that is inclusive by definition and by design, it is not enough to simply cover the basics. Accessibility is not a tick box exercise, it must be something that meaningfully engages with the reality of a disabled child's experience – an experience which is so often, even when basic legal requirements are met, is much poorer than it is for other children.

For a truly inclusive education system that meets children's needs, we need a more inclusive society – and that goal, lofty as it may be, begins in mainstream education. That is why, in *The Children's Plan*, I called for a more inclusive mainstream education system, and a presumption of mainstream for most pupils. This won't be every pupil, of course, nor will it be all the time, but we should have a system that encourages all pupils to interact with each other. That's what children tell me they want: to go to their local school, with their friends, and have their needs met.

At all levels, this more inclusive system must be based on those who work with children having the relevant information about their lives. In special and alternative provision settings, knowing the details of pupils' lives can make such a difference. It can allow schools to address the wider challenges and barriers that children in these settings may face.

Despite this, as in mainstream, what schools know about their pupils is sadly lacking. Take special schools, where, despite many pupils having an Education, Health and Care Plan that should deliver multi-agency working: just 28% were able to estimate how many of their pupils were absent from school due to treatment for serious or complex illness. Two-thirds (66%) could only provide an estimate of the number of their pupils on waiting lists for mental health support.

Or alternative provision settings, where despite the prevalence of poverty in the areas they serve, just over two-thirds (67%) could only provide an estimate of the number of their pupils living in unsuitable accommodation. Fewer than half (47%) were only able to estimate the number of their pupils receiving Free School Meals.

Let me be absolutely and unequivocally clear: this is not the fault of school leaders. It is the consequence of a system that is not set up to give those working with children the full picture of their lives. It is the consequence of fragmented systems working in siloes, even for some of the most vulnerable children. It is the consequence of a hollowing out of children's services and exacerbated by the fact that special schools and alternative provision settings are, in many ways, fighting an uphill battle – they are more likely to be situated in deprived areas, with all the challenges that can bring.

We must have a system that works for children with complex needs and difficult lives. Many of them will be educated in the schools examined in this report. Many of them, regrettably, will fall out of the system, and find themselves in children's homes or Young Offender Institutions. One of my greatest worries for our most vulnerable children under our current system is that their lives might be left to chance – a roll of the dice as to where those we deem 'complex' will be educated.

The solution to many of these problems is upstream. It is, I believe, the vision for children's services set out in *The Children's Plan*, the report based on my recent census of mainstream schools.

We need a system that gives schools the information that they require to support children more thoroughly, as most say they want to do.

We need a knowledge base of this work for schools to draw on, as so many of them have already done for pedagogy.

We need a system that respects childhood, treating every child as a whole person – not a diagnosis to be managed.

I was so proud to be part of the school reform movement a decade and a half ago. But it is time to once again embrace a reforming zeal in education. We must equip schools with what they need to deliver for the pupils they serve.

Executive summary

This report builds on *The Children's Plan*[1] to provide a comprehensive national picture of the resources, staffing, and challenges in special schools and alternative provision (AP) in England. These settings educate around 180,000 young people – 2% of pupils nationally – but serve some of the country's most vulnerable children; those whose needs cannot be met in mainstream education.[2] The findings highlight the essential contribution these schools make in supporting pupils' learning, wellbeing, and inclusion, while identifying significant gaps in capacity, funding, and coordination with wider services. Although both special and AP schools operate in a more varied market than mainstream schools, this report only covers those which are state-funded and does not cover independent schools.

Context

Despite national efforts to improve educational outcomes, inequality remains entrenched. Just under a third of children still fail to achieve grade 4 or better in English and maths, and the GCSE attainment gap between pupils eligible for Free School Meals and their peers has persisted at around 26 to 29 percentage points for nearly 20 years.[3] Beyond academic results, many children report negative experiences of school life: only 47% of AP pupils in *The Big Ambition* agreed they enjoyed school or college.

For children in special schools and AP, these challenges are often compounded. Both groups experience lower attainment.[4] There is evidence that children with special educational needs and disabilities experience increased barriers to wellbeing, while many children in AP are there because they have been excluded.[5] Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in mainstream schools are less likely to enjoy school.[6] This highlights the importance of creating a more inclusive education system by both improving mainstream schools to better support children with additional needs, and creating opportunities for the wider education system to work with, learn from, and more closely integrate with specialist settings.

This report on the Children's Commissioner's School Census provides unique insights into how special schools and APs operate, the resources they deploy, and the challenges they face.

Findings on special schools

Special schools play a critical role in an inclusive education system by providing tailored teaching and specialist support for pupils with complex needs. Across the entire special school system there are capacity difficulties, with two-thirds of the over 1,000 schools now at or above capacity.[7]

The Commissioner's Census found:

- **Most special schools provide extensive wraparound services that focus on health and wellbeing.** They are the most likely of all school types to employ speech and language therapists (81%), family liaison officers (78%), and school nurses (67%). However, there remains unmet demand for key roles, particularly for in-school social workers (wanted by 63% of schools without one) and family support staff.

- **Staffing and workforce pressures are one of the most significant concerns for over half of special schools (54%).** Many report difficulties recruiting qualified teachers and allied health professionals, limiting their ability to deliver Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) effectively. Funding constraints compound these pressures, with 67% citing the funding of wider children's services as a top concern and 58% highlighting their own school funding challenges.

- **Post-16 support is another major area of concern for special schools.** 20% of special schools identify post-16 pathways as a top concern, far higher than mainstream schools (0.5%).

- **Systemic barriers also hinder support delivery.** While most pupils have multi-agency EHCPs, around two-thirds of schools can only estimate how many pupils are on mental health waiting lists or live in unsuitable housing, indicating data and coordination gaps between education, health, and social care, even where there is a plan in place for agencies to work together.

Findings on alternative provision

Alternative provision (AP) schools educate children who cannot attend mainstream school due to exclusion, illness, or other challenges. There are 334 APs in England, which can act as a vital safety net, helping children re-engage with education or providing quality teaching where mainstream provision has failed.[8] Previous work from the Children's Commissioner's office has clearly shown the importance

of APs as, for some children, they represent the first time they have ever fully engaged with education.[9] Despite this, the data reveals significant challenges in the sector.

The Commissioner's Census found:

- **Understanding of pupils' needs remains limited.** Almost a third of APs can only estimate the number of pupils on their rolls, and large proportions lack full insight into pupils' mental health, housing, or care status. This lack of information hampers schools' ability to provide targeted support and reflects the transient nature of many placements.

- **Resource constraints are acute and engagement is deeply worrying.** 84% of APs identify funding shortages as their top barrier, followed by staff capacity (66%). Perhaps more worryingly, over half (54%) report pupil engagement as a barrier to delivering support – more than double the rate in special schools. Parent and carer engagement is also a clear challenge and cited by 63% of AP leaders. This cycle of disengagement risks entrenching poor educational outcomes.

- **Poverty and local deprivation are defining concerns of AP.** Two-thirds of AP settings (67%) list poverty as a top concern, and a third operate in the most deprived school areas in England. These schools are more likely to provide food provision and mental health counselling to their pupils. but have fewer enrichment activities, outdoor spaces, or childcare facilities than mainstream schools.

- **Safety and aspirations are also key concerns**. 44% of APs identify local area safety as a top issue, and 36% are concerned about the aspirations of children in their area, far higher than mainstream or special schools. This aligns with evidence showing poorer post-16 outcomes, with around one in four AP pupils becoming NEET after leaving education.[10]

Issues impacting both sectors

There are some 'crossover issues' that are clearly impacting both special schools and APs:

- High poverty and unmet social care needs among pupils and families

- Significant workforce shortages in qualified teachers and allied professionals

- Weak coordination between schools and local services, including Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), housing, and children's social care
- Inadequate facilities that restrict the delivery of EHCPs and additional support
- Limited data about pupils' wider circumstances, hindering targeted interventions

Both special schools and APs also highlighted the importance of careers and post-16 support, recognising that preparing pupils for adulthood requires more than academic attainment.

Recommendations

To deliver the ambitions of *The Children's Plan* and build a truly inclusive education system, the report identifies several priorities:

- Establish a clear national framework for special and alternative provision, setting expectations, accountability, and reintegration pathways.
- Guarantee a core offer of specialist support; including speech and language therapy, educational psychology, family liaison, and mental health teams - and this must be available to every school.
- Embed poverty and social care support within AP and special school communities through in-school social workers, breakfast provision, and family food support.
- Strengthen post-16 and careers guidance, ensuring all pupils in special and AP settings have access to meaningful transition planning, work experience, and local partnerships.
- Expand enrichment and outdoor opportunities in APs, ensuring equal access to extracurricular and youth provision.
- Improve data and service integration, through a pupil Unique ID system to support cross-agency understanding of children's needs.
- Invest in workforce and infrastructure, addressing shortages and modernising facilities to meet rising demand.

Conclusion

Special schools and APs are indispensable to an inclusive education system. They deliver tailored, compassionate support that allows children with the most complex needs to thrive. Yet these settings have told us they face mounting pressures: limited funding, operating over capacity, and fragmented local services.

The findings underscore that education reform cannot rest with schools alone. Delivering on *The Children's Plan* requires a coordinated national effort to deliver a working and high-quality unique ID system for children, to ensure that every child, regardless of background, need, or circumstance, has the opportunity to enjoy school, achieve their potential, and succeed beyond it.

Introduction

In *The Children's Plan,* the Children's Commissioner set out a comprehensive picture of what schools know about their pupils, and a vision for a more inclusive education system in England. This is necessary as far too many children still don't access the education they deserve. More than a third of children don't achieve grade 4 or above in English and maths and there is a persistent and long-term attainment gap.[11]

Children's experience of school is as important as their exam results, if not more, but *The Big Ambition* found that just 64% of children agreed with the statement "you enjoy school or college" and 76% with the statement "you have great teachers who support you".[12] In special schools these figures were 76% and 86%, but in alternative provision (AP) they were 47% and 78%.

Both future employment and enjoyment of school are concerns for the two setting types explored here. The GCSE results and long-term outcomes for children in APs are far below the national average.[13] Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in mainstream schools were less likely to say they enjoy school than those without SEND.

The children outside of mainstream education are relatively small in number: there are 16,643 children in state-funded AP schools, and 165,232 in state-funded special schools, so pupils in these settings make up roughly 2% of the population in state-funded schools.[14] There are also 29,244 children in unregistered AP settings[i] – more than in state-funded AP schools – but data on these children was not included in this Census owing to the unregistered nature of the provision.[15] But children in these settings are some of the most vulnerable in our education system. Children in special schools are there because they have additional needs related to disabilities and health conditions that cannot be met in mainstream schools. Children in APs can be there for a variety of reasons, but school exclusion is a consistent one.[16]

[i] These are AP settings with so few pupils that they do not meet the legal requirement to register as a school and become subject to national standards and Ofsted inspections.

It is, therefore, particularly important to understand what these settings are able to offer the children who are educated there. After all, AP and special schools exist to deliver education to children for whom mainstream education is not able to meet their needs.

This report sets out the existing provision of resources in these settings, offering a national picture of the resources available, the concerns of the sector, and the deprivation levels of the communities that these schools serve.

Part 1. Special schools

What is a special school?

Special schools in England are specifically for pupils with SEND that would benefit from support other than the support in a mainstream education. Independent special schools are run by private providers and were not included in the Children's Commissioner's Census.

Special schools cater for a wide variety of children's special educational needs and circumstances.

1.1. The importance of special schools for children who need them

"Since moving to a special school, my child has finally started to enjoy learning. The staff are patient and know how to support his needs." – Parent of a child in a special school, The Big Ambition

"I like that my school is quiet and calm. It helps me concentrate." – Child in a special school, The Big Ambition

The Children's Plan recognised that while inclusion in mainstream schools is essential, special schools provide tailored support for pupils with the most complex needs and are a critical part of an inclusive education system.[17]

There is clear demand for places in special schools in England and local provision of tailored support matters. Children enjoy going to state-funded special schools, with 76% of children in these settings agreeing with the statement they enjoy school compared to 56% of children with SEND across all school settings.[18] The number of pupils in state-funded and non-maintained special schools is increasing and in 2024/25 increased by 5.3% to 170,000 pupils.[19] However, around two-thirds of state-funded special schools reported being at or over capacity in the 2023/24 academic year.[20] Additionally, nationally in January 2025, special school pupils were the most likely to be educated outside the local authority

where they live (9.0%), followed closely by mainstream secondary pupils (8.7%). Very few primary school pupils (4.1%) travel outside their home area for school.[21]

Children want to go to their local school with their friends. This is why *The Children's Plan* recommended that wherever possible, all families of schools should have both special and alternative provision capacity. Special school staff are experts on inclusion for pupils with complex needs and should be central to efforts to build a truly inclusive education system.

1.2. What do special schools know about their pupils?

Similarly to mainstream schools, the Children's Commissioner's School Census showed special schools often lack full insight into pupils' circumstances outside of school.

- 66% of special schools could only provide an estimate of the number of their pupils on waiting lists for mental health support.
- 63% could only provide an estimate of the number of their pupils living in unsuitable accommodation.
- 28% of special schools were only able to provide an estimate of the number of their pupils unable to attend due to treatment for serious or complex illness.

This knowledge gap exists despite the almost universal presence of multi-agency EHCPs in special schools. In addition, special schools told us they are facing challenges implementing EHCPs, indicating the current system is not working well.

- Funding, while a less common barrier than for mainstream schools, was still a barrier to implementation of EHCPs for half of special schools.
- For over a quarter of special schools, the lack of specialist staffing and the lack of suitable or accessible facilities act as barriers to fulfilling EHCP requirements.

1.3 Special schools are providing staffing and resources for the health and wellbeing of their pupils

The Children's Commissioner's School Census provides a national picture of the resources and staffing in, and used by, special schools to provide wraparound support for pupils. The Census showed that special schools had the highest average number of roles per school (a mean of 2.2) compared to mainstream and alternative provision.

Looking at the specific staff roles, special schools were more likely than other schools to have any provision of speech and language therapists (81%), family liaison officers (78%) and school nurses (67%). Most without these roles responded to the Census saying that they wanted them.

"As a special school, our pupils require extensive support from external agencies. Alongside teaching, staff must manage personal care, physiotherapy, hydrotherapy, SALT [Speech and Language Therapy], gastronomy feeding, medication management, and more. However, commissioned services are declining while expectations on schools continue to rise. We currently fund private SALT, two physiotherapists, a hydrotherapist, and are now considering the need for an in-house nurse." – Special school, School and College Census.

More than half of special schools (53%) have three separate staff members acting as Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo), Designated Safeguarding Lead and Mental Health lead, compared to 43% of mainstream schools. However, 4.1% of special schools do not have one or more of the SENCO, DSL and Mental Health lead roles.

While it was not common for special schools to have a social worker role in school (only 3.4%), 63% of special schools without this wanted one.

"Specialist schools need additional support to deal with the complexity of issues manifest[ing] in the most vulnerable families. Education is no longer the main focus of schools and we are being asked to deliver services that once sat in health and social care." – Special school, School and College Census.

Beyond staffing, special schools also use resources to meet pupil's additional needs. In special schools there is high provision of social and emotional wellbeing interventions (95%) and enrichment activities (93%). Special schools were most likely, compared to other school settings, to have access to an outdoor space (98%) and a vaccination clinic (48%). Special schools were the least likely to provide breakfast provision (57%) and to offer free food provision (39%).

The Census showed there is regional variation in staffing roles and provision. Analysis shows London has the highest average number of roles per school (a mean of 2.7), and Yorkshire has the lowest average number of roles per school (with a mean of 1.8).

Overall, these findings indicate special schools are providing access to a range of support and resources ultimately focused on the health and wellbeing of their pupils. However, while special schools had a higher average number of roles per school, they often are not providing a radically different service in terms of roles and resources than mainstream schools and often face similar barriers to meeting children needs that are faced by mainstream schools.

For example, responses showed there may be further need for targeted support for care experienced and disadvantaged pupils. Special schools serve school communities and pupils across deprivation levels, however 26% of special schools who responded to the Children's Commissioner's Census are located in the most deprived 20% of school areas. For special schools without the roles and resources in school, there is demand from schools for social worker provision (63%), breakfast provision (46%), and free food provision for families (61%).

"Staff turnover and capacity in social care has a huge impact on school. We are the only consistent factor in many children/families' lives. Our school charity end[ed] up providing financial support to families, e.g. items for their

homes, beds, washers, dryer, fridge etc. We also provide vouchers for weekly access to the food bank." – Special school, School and College Census.

1.4. What are the concerns of special schools?

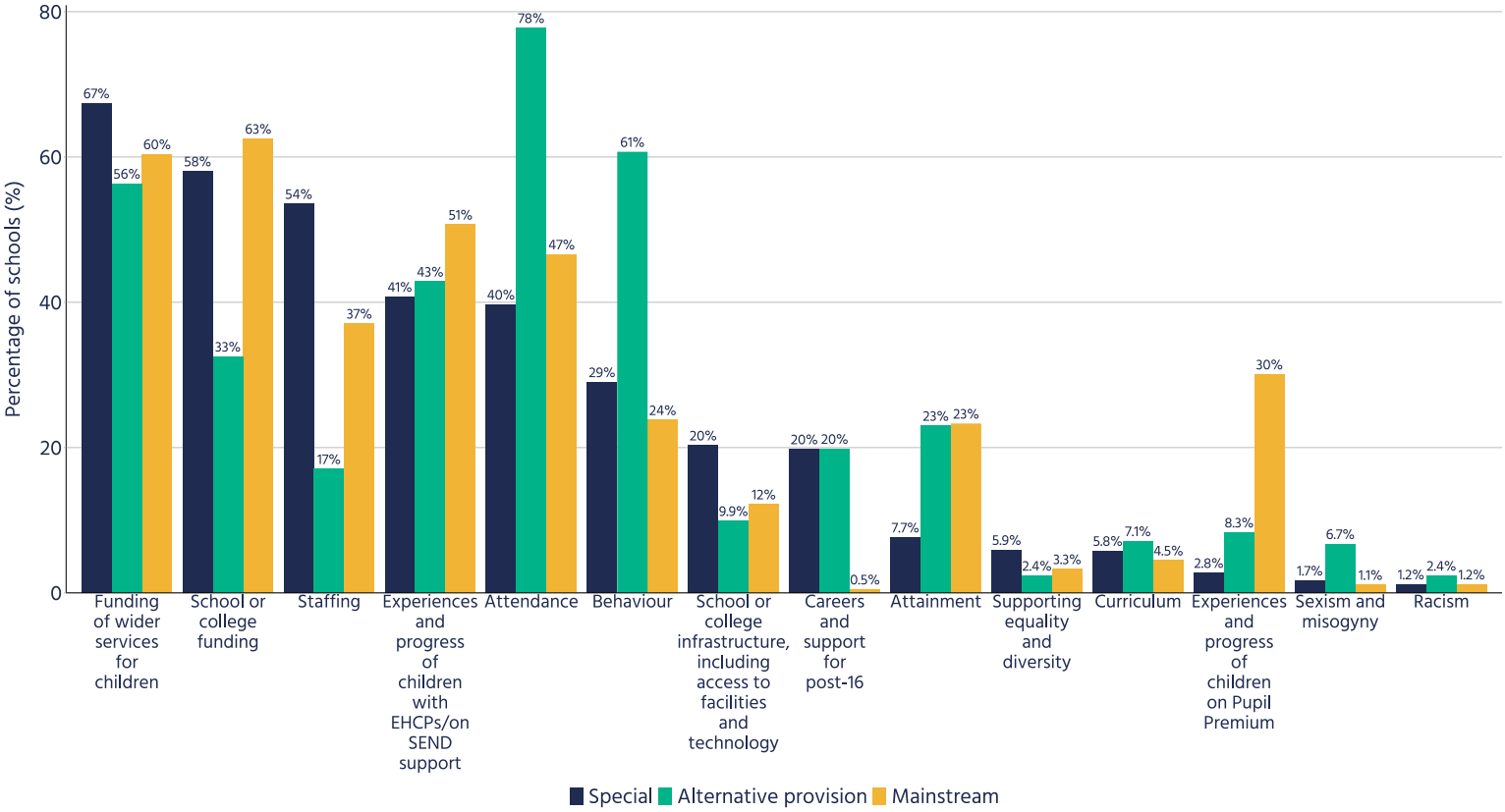
The Children's Commissioner's School Census asked special schools about their top four concerns facing their pupils and the local community.

Special schools are concerned about the experiences and progress of their pupils with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), with attainment a lower concern (see Figure 1 below).

- 41% special schools were concerned about the progress and experiences of children with EHCPs.
- Attainment was rated as a top four concern by only 7.7% of special schools, compared to 23% of alternative provision and 23% of mainstream schools.
- Careers and support for post-16 is a top concern for 20% of special schools (compared to 0.5% of mainstream schools).

Together these concerns show a focus on a pupil's journey during and beyond school.

Figure 1: what schools say are among their top concerning issues in their school or college



"I wish people understood that just because I go to a special school doesn't mean I can't do things. I want the same chances as everyone else." – Young person with SEND, The Big Ambition

Preparing all children and young people for success beyond school is critical, particularly for pupils with SEND. In *The Big Ambition*, only 31% of pupils in state-funded special schools agreed with the statement 'you know about money and life skills'. Additionally, a recent Impetus report highlighted the compounding effect of disadvantage and SEND, finding that young people with SEND who were eligible for free school meals in Year 11 were 140% more likely than average to be not in education, employment or training.[22] This highlights the importance of special schools considering the needs of pupils beyond the classroom, to provide the support their pupils need to thrive and achieve their goals.

While under the *Children and Families Act 2014*[23] there is a single system of EHCPs to cover all pupils aged 0 to 25, special schools' concerns for their pupils support post-16 may reflect differences and challenges across post-16 settings. Furthermore, under the Act, support for young people aged 19 to 25 with SEND is not an automatic entitlement.

"While we can provide a wonderful and supportive experience for our students we are only an 11-16 provision and many of our students do not succeed in larger post-16 settings. They need smaller nurturing provisions." – Special school, School and College Census.

1.5. Specific concerns for special schools: staffing

Staffing is a top concern for over half of special schools (54%), more common than in alternative provision (17%) and mainstream schools (37%). The recruitment and retention of appropriate staff was a concern raised by many respondents in qualitative responses.

"Finding good staff/teachers is a real concern and makes an environment like [School Name] dangerous to work in, due to the nature of our pupils." – Special school, School and College Census.

"As a special school we face significant issues with a lack of funding, difficulty in staff recruitment/retention due to low wages for support staff, overcrowded classes due to a lack of special school places and the high workload caused by limited resources both human and physical." – Special school, School and College Census.

Additionally, some written responses highlighted the specialist skills needed for some types of schools.

"The education of Deaf pupils and their access to resources and opportunities equal to their hearing peers is woefully neglected. From the curriculum offer

to enrichment opportunities, Deaf pupils are disadvantaged. Further work needs to be done to close the gap and this cannot be done by specialist staff in our schools alone." – Special school, School and College Census.

Analysis has found that state-funded special schools employ substantially more teachers without qualified teaching status than mainstream settings, which demonstrates the staffing pressures facing the sector.[24] Additionally, the Education Select Committee recently reported that shortages of educational psychologists and allied health professionals are significantly undermining the availability and quality of support for SEND and call for a joint workforce plan across education and health.[25]

However, despite their staffing concerns, special schools were on average more likely to have a higher number of staff roles providing support for pupils compared to mainstream schools and alternative provision.

The funding of wider services for children is a top concern for 67% of special schools, and their own funding is the next most common concern (58%).

Special schools' top concerns in their local community reflect this focus on wider services for children such as mental health, transport and social care.

- CAMHS was the most common concern (76% of special schools).
- 61% of special schools rated children's social care as a top concern compared to 41% of mainstream schools.
- Over half of special schools rated poverty among their top four concerns (55%).
- Local housing was a top concern for 26% of special schools.
- Furthermore, transport was a top concern for 19% of special schools (compared to 9.1% of AP and 7.6% of mainstream).

"Often [the] local authority finds it hard to meet its legal responsibility to transport children to our school." – Special school, School and College Census.

The government has recognised the pressure facing its home-to-school travel policy, in which local authorities must arrange free home-to-school travel for eligible children.[26] Ensuring there are specialist school placements available in children and young people's local area where they live is the only sustainable way to tackle these pressures.

"Children are now presenting with increasingly complex health and medical needs. There is an urgent need for agreed national strategy and policy around health/joint commissioning to meet these needs both in schools and on home-school transport. This is a significant barrier to access to education." – Special school, School and College Census.

"In Birmingham, home to school transport for post-16 children with SEND has been withdrawn causing exceptionally high rates of school absence for pupils with EHCPs who are unable to access local schools due to their need for specialist support." – Special school, School and College Census.

1.6. Special schools view challenges with local services and their own physical premises as barriers to providing support

Special schools are embedded within their communities and form part of a network of support for children. *The Children's Plan* noted that when mental health, social care and community services are under strain, it acts as a barrier to supporting pupils.

- The availability of local services was the second most common barrier to providing additional support. This was a barrier reported by 72% of special schools.
- Around a fifth of special schools viewed insufficient information about local services (22%) and the quality of relationships with local services (18%) as barriers to providing additional support. These were both more common barriers for special schools than for mainstream schools.

These barriers faced by special schools demonstrate there is a need to boost children's services as a whole and further support collaborative relationships and information sharing between local children's services and special schools.

School facilities and premises were barriers for a higher proportion of special schools than mainstream schools. Suitability of premises and size of premises were a barrier to providing additional support to pupils for almost half of special schools (49% and 47%, compared to 35% and 37% of mainstream schools). This finding aligns with the recent Education Select Committee recommendation for capital investment to expand and improve special school infrastructure.

"*We are a specialist school for students aged two to 19. Our current building is inadequate to support the evolving needs of our student population. We are at full capacity and continue to lose tribunal cases, putting both the safety and education of our pupils at risk.*" – Special school, School and College Census.

"*Our ageing Victorian buildings are not fit for purpose, complicating the task of meeting our learners' needs.*" – Special school, School and College Census.

Part 2. Alternative Provision

What is alternative provision?

Existing statutory guidance defines alternative provision as: 'education arranged by local authorities for children of compulsory school age who, because of exclusion, illness or other reasons, would not otherwise receive suitable education; alternative provision can also be used by schools for children on a suspension (fixed period exclusion); and for children being directed by schools to offsite provision to receive education intended to improve their behaviour'.[27]

2.1. The importance of alternative provision settings for pupils who need them

Most children in alternative provision (AP) are there because something has gone wrong in their prior mainstream school; they have been excluded, or are ill, or otherwise cannot have their needs met by mainstream education.

As a result, APs should be spaces where children are either helped to reintegrate into mainstream education, or where quality education is provided to children who could not have their needs met elsewhere.

The Children's Commissioner has previously made recommendations on both registered and unregistered alternative provision,[ii] including a system of regulation for unregistered APs that would preserve the flexibility in the existing market while allowing for much-needed oversight of where England's children actually are.

[ii] Registered APs are schools. Unregistered APs are settings with so few pupils that they do not meet the legal requirement to register as a school and become subject to national standards and Ofsted inspections.

For some, it is a lifeline. It is clear that for some children, AP is the first setting where they have felt happy and engaged in school.

"More needs to be done to support and provide an alternative provision for children that need it." – Parent of girl, 13, The Big Ambition

But for others, AP is not working. This is clear from both the office's qualitative and quantitative work in previous reports. In *The Big Ambition,* only 55% of children in AP agreed they felt safe and protected in their local area, more comparable to the 48% of children who were not in education who agreed that they felt safe, than the 74% in state-funded mainstream schools.

Given the high numbers of excluded pupils in APs, the case for greater systemic understanding and knowledge of pupils' lives is, if anything, strongest in AP.

2.2. What do alternative provision settings know about their pupils?

AP settings do not know their pupils well – and know them less well than special and mainstream school settings.

This could be a feature of the structure of AP – by their nature, many pupils in AP are there on a short term or temporary basis. Regardless of this, given the crucial role of AP in helping children re-engage with education, they need to know their children and share information to provide the support they need to achieve this.

This begins with the basics – 29% of AP settings could only provide an estimate of the number of pupils on their school roll, the largest percentage of any school type. Clearly, this should not be the case, even taking into account the more transient nature of AP enrolment.

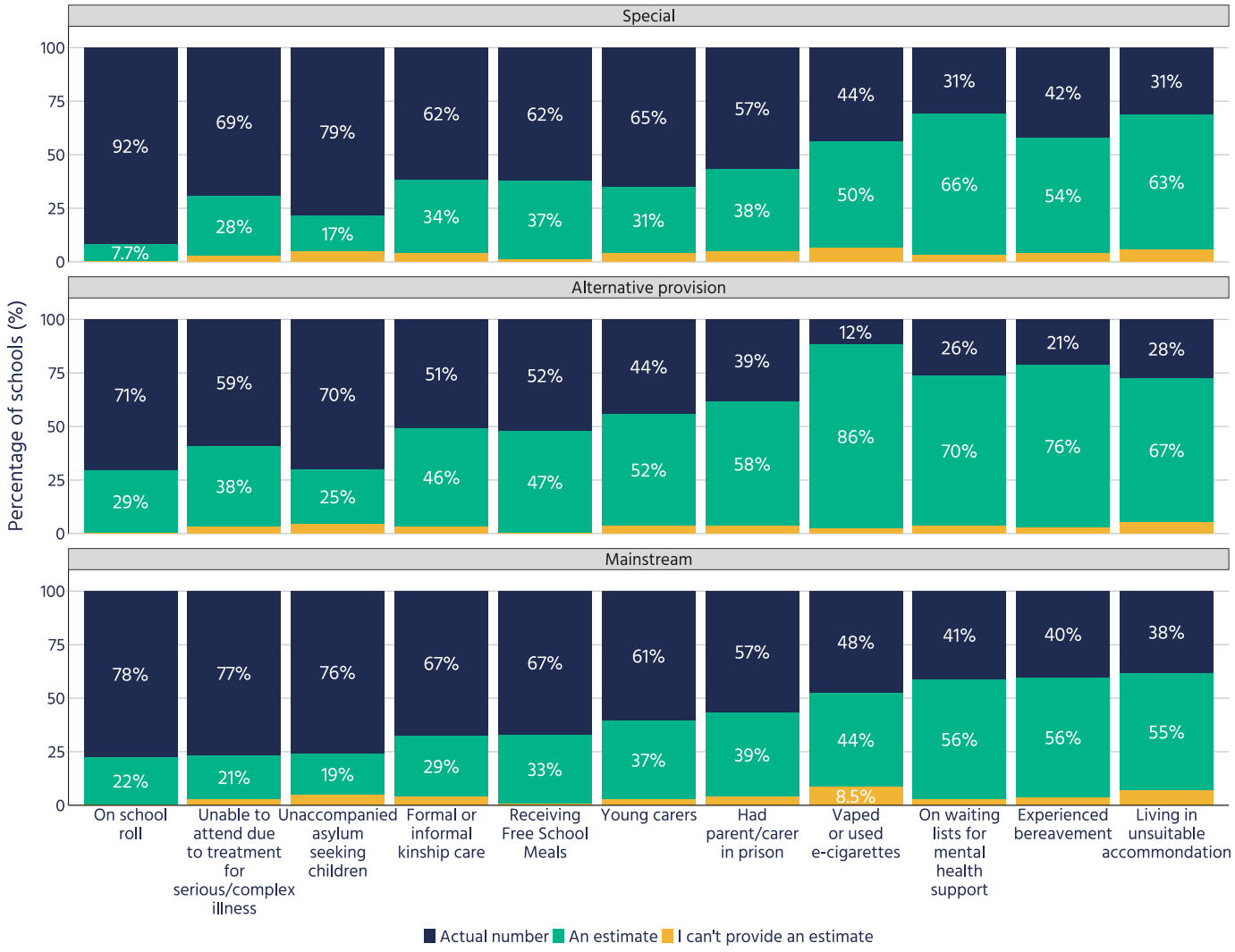
Across other barriers to fully engaging with education, the same story is seen:

- 70% of APs can only provide an estimate – rather than the exact number – of the number of their pupils on waiting lists for mental health support.
- 67% could only provide an estimate of the number of their pupils living in unsuitable accommodation.

- 46% of APs could only provide an estimate of the number of their pupils who were in formal or informal kinship care, and 52% for young carers.

All of the above factors are things that will impact young people's ability to engage with education – being a young carer, living in unsuitable accommodation, and so on. As set out in *The Children's Plan*, these factors should be considered as part of a new and wider definition of additional needs in education.

Figure 2: Ability to provide numbers of pupils with given characteristics, by school type.



The Children's Plan calls for a comprehensive rethinking of how the education system understands pupils, underpinned by a new unique ID for pupils. Given the existing data on their understanding of their pupils, this would be of particular use for APs, as they both know their pupils less well and deal with pupils who often have complex lives out of school.

"Domestic abuse is another huge factor not mentioned anywhere in this survey affecting about 90% of my cohort." – Alternative provision, School and College Census.

2.3. Barriers to support in alternative provision

"SEND and AP school (in particular PRUs) need more finance support. They are often left in old buildings not fit for purpose. This needs to chance and they need to be a priority - they are our most vulnerable children." – Alternative provision, School and College Census.

Similar to mainstream schools, APs are facing resource constraints impacting their ability to provide support for all pupils.

Overall staff capacity was the second most common barrier to providing support for AP schools (66%). Top was availability of funding (84%), which is similar to trends seen in mainstream schools.

For AP settings, infrastructure limitations are acting as barriers to providing additional support to pupils, including fulfilling EHCP requirements:

- 56% of AP rated the size of their premises and 53% rated the suitability of their premises as barriers to providing additional support. 35% of APs cited a lack of suitable/accessible facilities as a barrier to fulfilling pupils' EHCP requirements.

Most serious, however, was the role that engagement played as a limiting factor to APs feeling able to provide children with additional support.

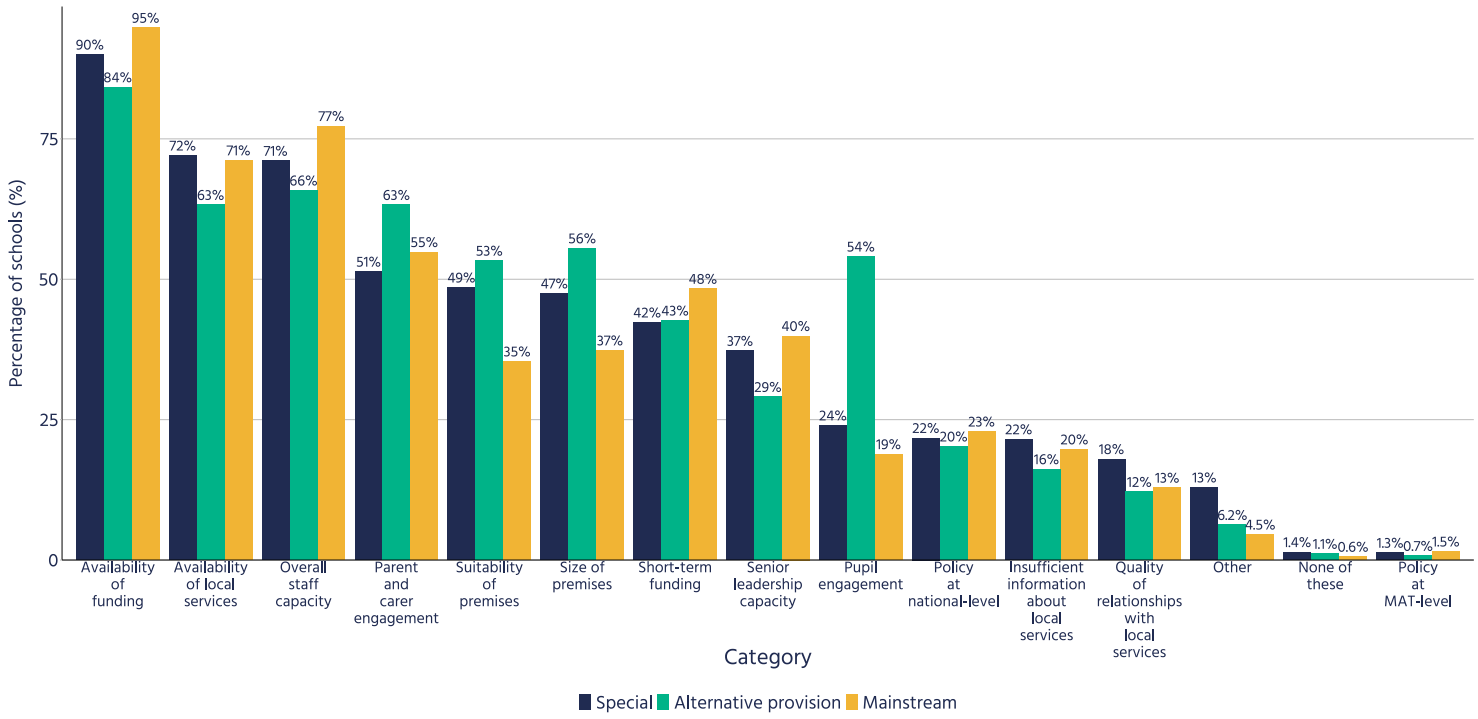
- 63% of APs viewed parent and carer engagement as a barrier to providing additional support.

- 54% of APs viewed pupil engagement as a barrier to providing additional support.

That over half view pupil engagement as a barrier to providing additional support is alarming (see figure below). This is much higher than in other school types: over double the rate of special schools (24%), and approaching treble that of mainstream (19%).

Given the role of AP, this suggests a vicious cycle may be in play. If pupil engagement is low and limits the level of support that settings feel that they can provide, this can in turn limit the interventions that settings can deploy to re-engage pupils.

Figure 3: Top barriers to providing additional support.



2.4. The priorities and concerns of alternative provision settings

"We have the most vulnerable children but feel we have less support than if they were in mainstream. Our young people have been excluded, are EBSA [Emotionally Based School Avoidant] or are without a school place." – Alternative provision, School and College Census.

Attendance and behaviour stand out as top concerns for AP settings, with 78% of AP settings listing attendance among their top four concerns, and 61% doing the same about behaviour.

This is not unexpected given their purpose, and the high proportion of children in AP who are there because they have been excluded.

In some ways, AP settings are very similar to mainstream and special schools – with serious concerns about funding of wider services for children being a top 4 concern for over half of AP settings (56%), a finding commensurate with the rates seen for other types of educational establishments. Most (70%) had concerns about CAMHS, which is similar to levels of concern seen in other school types. A clear conclusion from the Census is that both of these areas need to be addressed and school leaders reassured about the efficacy of local services – mental health in particular.

"There is a massive increase in children's poor mental health as well as the impact of poor parental mental health. The lack of support at tier 2 as well as the lack of capacity of mental health support teams to manage the demand in schools... We have also observed an increase in disordered eating." – Alternative provision, School and College Census.

One of the most notable differences between APs and mainstream schools is the focus on post-16 careers and support. In *The Children's Plan,* the low level of concern mainstream school leaders had around career and post-16 support was in stark contrast to what the office has heard from children.

In *The Big Ask,* children's number one concern for the future was getting a good job.[28] The low levels of concern in the Census might be the result of schools feeling like those areas of delivery are under control, or that their performance is strong – but ultimately, children's concerns should be reflected by school leaders.

Aspiration in AP is just as high as in mainstream. Attainment was rated as a top four concern by only 7.7% of special schools, compared to 23% of alternative provision and 23% of mainstream schools. But employment and education prospects for children who have been in AP are far worse than those who have not, with Department for Education data indicating that one in four children who had attended an AP were NEET in 2013/14, making them one of the groups of children with the highest chance of becoming NEET.[29] More recent analysis by FFT Education Datalab indicates that negative outcomes for AP pupils post-16 are common.[30]

Perhaps for similar reasons, young people's aspirations are far more of a concern for AP settings than mainstream or special. Young people's aspirations were a top concern for 36% of AP compared to 25% mainstream and 17% of special schools.

Concerns around the curriculum were more common in AP settings than mainstream, as well as sexism and misogyny, which was a top four concern for 6.7% of AP schools – this is higher than in special schools (1.7%) and mainstream schools (1.1%).

2.5. Specific concerns for alternative provision: poverty and safety

"Where to start! A PRU in an area of underinvestment, extreme poverty, low social mobility, high SEND demand and system under strain, performance measure driven Education and CSC [Children's Social Care] under strain, massive levels of low mental health and in unfit buildings. We do very well to support our children and young people in such a toxic environment. Then there are the covert effects of criminal exploitation around ...cyber toxicity with misogyny and violence promoting content added to the mix. We all need

to do so much better for all children and young people." – Alternative provision, School and College Census.

Child safety in the local area and young people's aspirations are notably more often reported as concerns by AP settings compared to mainstream schools.

In particular, child safety in the local area was a top concern for 44% of AP compared to 19% mainstream and 13% special schools. There are various reasons that this could be the case – APs are also more concerned about poverty than mainstream schools, and there is a relationship between high poverty and higher crime rates in an area.[31] There is a relationship between attending AP and entering into the justice system.[32]

Both AP and special schools are less concerned about online safety than mainstream schools, despite some emerging research indicating that conspiracy theories and mis- and disinformation may manifest differently for young people with some forms of SEND.[33] Community cohesion was a top concern for 6.7% of AP settings, higher than both special and mainstream.

Poverty stands out as a top concern for 67% of AP settings (compared to 45% of mainstream schools and 55% of special schools). This is an important finding, and commensurate with the office's analysis of AP location and pupils: AP settings are far more likely to be located in communities of high deprivation and to serve pupils living in areas with high levels of deprivation.

One third of APs (33%) are in the most deprived fifth of neighbourhoods compared to 26% of special schools and 18% of mainstream schools. This is based on the latest 2019 IDACI quintile of the school area. At the other end of the spectrum, the picture is even more stark: only 7.6% of APs are located in the least deprived fifth of school areas (compared to 21% of mainstream and 17% of special schools).

This pattern holds when looking at deprivation deciles rather than quintiles. The percentage of APs with average pupil deprivation (based on home postcode) in the most deprived decile, and the second, third and fourth most deprived deciles, is higher than for mainstream and special schools. Again, the converse is stark: just 3.9% of AP settings had average pupil deprivation in the four least deprived deciles (seven to 10), compared to 36% for mainstream schools.

2.6. Roles and resources in alternative provision

"Too many schools are expecting to be social care. So please provide the funding around schools for the social services that they need - put school nursing, counsellors, Family Support Workers, Youth Support, mental health practitioners into schools. Provide an SEN system that works for the child, instead of the heinous bureaucratic administrative burden it has become." – Alternative provision, School and College Census.

The Census showed that APs are more likely to have certain resources. In many cases, these are commensurate with the overall purpose of these settings: mental health counsellors and youth workers, both of whom can serve as important diversionary roles for young people who may have difficulties engaging with mainstream educational settings.

Of note is the high level of police presence in AP settings. Approaching half of APs (47%) have a Police Community Support Officer or Safer Schools Officer (relative to 36% in mainstream and 33% in special). Perhaps due to media concerns regarding gang recruitment in APs and local authority concerns that some APs do not offer meaningful educational paths, their presence is unsurprising.[34] However, given there is limited evidence of the efficacy of police in schools, and the potential for criminalisation of pupils in AP, this practice is of concern.

More than half of AP schools (60%) have three separate staff members as their Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo), Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) and Mental Health leads, compared to 43% of mainstream schools. This demonstrates a clear allocation of capacity to these essential roles when it comes to supporting children with additional needs; needs that are generally more acute among children who have been expelled from mainstream provision.

A similar story is seen when looking at the number of roles available in APs relative to mainstream. APs have a mean of 2.0 roles, greater than the mean of 1.6 seen in mainstream schools but fewer than the mean of 2.2 in special schools. This makes sense, given the potential for pupils in special schools to have complex medical needs, but given reports that AP settings are taking on an increasing number of pupils with SEND, there may be future demand for more staff. On the type of roles commonly found in APs,

the most common are family liaison/support officers (68%), school nurses (60%) and educational psychologists (60%) – regardless of whether they are externally or internally provided.

"The AP sector feels overwhelmed. There are enough AP places, however there are not the special school places to meet demand. Therefore, APs are dealing with an increasing number of significant SEND pupils of all types who have been excluded from school because there is no special school place for them." – Alternative provision, School and College Census.

APs are the most likely of all settings to have food provision. Given the fact that many are in areas of high-income deprivation (see above), this is evidence that these settings are broadly responding to the areas in which they operate.

However, in some areas, APs were outliers in terms of lack of certain provision. They were the least likely school type to have:

- an outdoor space,
- enrichment/holiday activities, and
- childcare

Children in AP settings would benefit from greater provision in those areas. All children should have access to outdoor space, and most educational settings provide this, but 14% of responding APs reported that they did not have this but wanted it. Given the existing levels of concern around pupil engagement in APs, both outdoor space and enrichment activities could make AP more appealing to attend, as well as provide character and social development opportunities that can be useful post-education.

Most worrying is the provision of enrichment and holiday activities. Given the association between AP experience and negative outcomes (lower rates of positive destinations, lower attainment, and higher correlation with the justice system) and existing concerns from these settings (as reported by AP leaders, see above), enrichment and holiday activities could provide opportunities to benefit children in

AP settings, given the benefits of enrichment include superior employment and HE participation outcomes.[35]

AP settings tend to be in poorer areas (see above). Given this and given the fact that the National Youth Sector Census observed that "there is twice as much youth provision in the most affluent areas as opposed to the most deprived areas, alongside 50% more buildings purpose built for, or dedicated towards, young people in affluent areas", the use of AP settings as hubs for, or signposts towards, youth provision and enrichment activities could be genuinely additive to children's lives.[36]

Finally, the fact that there is a variety of roles and resources across areas and individual settings, with some APs providing some roles and others not presents both an opportunity and a challenge for the system. At some level, this could demonstrate AP settings responding to their community's needs, and choosing to allocate resources based on this. Given, however, the fact that many schools, APs included, do not fully understand their pupils needs (as shown above), then there could be scope for a single central offer that supports APs with their key objectives, while maintaining leeway and flexibility for them to remain responsive in some areas.

"We really need further support with our buildings to give our pupils and staff the environment they deserve." – Alternative provision, School and College Census.

"As an Alternative Provision school we have been well supported by our local authority who are committed to raising the quality of provision for young people. Our biggest challenges lie around accommodation and appropriate facilities e.g. sports/ outdoor space." – Alternative provision, School and College Census.

Part 3. What needs to change

This report has shown the critical role that special schools and APs play in supporting children and young people, both to engage in education and to meet their needs outside of the classroom. These schools provide tailored, wraparound support through specialist staff and resources to help pupils feel safe, well and engaged.

However, there is still more to be done to ensure all children and young people enjoy school and are supported to achieve their goals.

High-quality alternative provision and special schools are a critical part of an inclusive education system. They should be recognised for the support they provide, but also for the ambitions they hold for their pupils.

The Children's Plan set out a vision for a system that delivers opportunity locally, ensures no child is excluded to home, and provides clear pathways for reintegration and progress. To realise this vision, we must be clear about the purposes and goals of special schools and APs. We must be clear about the aspirations of the pupils they support. Every child regardless of their background or needs deserves to thrive in education and beyond.

Based on the findings of this report, areas for further attention for special schools and alternative provision are outlined below.

3.1. A system with clear expectations and accountability

A roundtable discussion on this report's findings with sector stakeholders in October 2025 provided valuable insight into the challenges facing special schools and APs, and the system level changes needed to better support them.

A suggestion referenced multiple times was the idea that there was a real and pressing need for definition in the AP and special sector. This was needed, it was argued, for multiple reasons:

- To define what settings are for, with a clear statement of purpose and intent for each of these settings. The status quo is unclear – especially for alternative provision.

- To establish a clear offer of provision based on these definitions. There have been widespread concerns, including from the Children's Commissioner's office, about AP becoming a 'shadow SEND system' in some areas. It should be clear what the purpose of different settings are, what they should be expected to deliver as a result, and what the standard offer for pupils within these settings should be.

- To establish and maintain accountability on how high needs funding is spent and ensure that where interventions are particularly effective, best practice can be shared.

This is a particularly important issue in AP, which suffers from widespread lack of agreement regarding the purpose of the provision. This compounds existing issues in the sector, which by its very nature is more adaptable and flexible than many mainstream schools, making a 'what works' approach to teaching and learning more difficult. The Children's Commissioner has previously noted the need to preserve flexibility in the market for AP, and thus a clear statement of purpose of AP would help to shape the market while maintaining internal adaptability.[37]

As such, for AP, once the clear statement of purpose referenced above has been established, there should be two additional changes:

- A review undertaken to establish best practice and what works in terms of delivering on the established purpose of AP, considering a range of options and pathways.

- Alternative Provision, as a category, should be re-named to reflect a clarity of purpose and aid in public understanding of what these settings are and do.

These insights from stakeholders reinforce the need for a national framework about the role of special and AP schools within a broader vision for an inclusive education system for all children and young people, including those with additional needs. A national framework for special and alternative provision would set clear expectations, accountability and reintegration pathways.

To reach an inclusive education system for every child we need to both improve mainstream schools to better support children with additional needs, as well as provide the opportunity for the wider education system to work with, learn from, and more closely integrate with specialist settings.

3.2. Ensuring a core offer of specialist support

As recommended in *The Children's Plan*, schools should have access to a consistent core offer of specialist support. For special schools, while many already provide services such as speech and language therapists, family liaison officers, and school nurses, the demand for these roles remains high among those who do not. *The Children's Plan* recommended a core offer of specialist support could include an educational psychologist, school nurse, mental health support team, and a family liaison/support officer. This report supports the inclusion of speech and language therapists as part of that offer for special schools.

3.3. Embedding poverty and social care support within school communities

Poverty and children's social care are top concerns in the local area for special school and APs, more so than for mainstream schools. This reflects the complexity of needs for many pupils in these settings.

For example, social workers do not commonly work in special schools, but 63% of special schools without this role in school would like to introduce it. Social workers play a key role in supporting children with complex needs including those in poverty and care experienced pupils. Additionally, there is demand in special schools for practical support for pupils such as breakfast clubs and free food provision for families. These findings highlight the need for a more joined-up approach to supporting pupils in special schools and APs, taking in to account their broader needs outside of the classroom.

3.4. Strengthening careers guidance and support for post-16

Special schools and APs were more concerned about careers and support for post-16 than mainstream schools.

The Children's Commissioner believes there must be a national effort to listen to special schools and APs about what would help their pupils prepare for life beyond the education system. This should include recognising the limits of what schools alone can deliver and face up to the wider societal barriers young people leaving special and APs face in further education, training and employment. Every child should have access to ambitious career pathways and inclusive career and transition support.

The office has previously heard from AP leaders and pupils about the post-16 and careers support pupils can benefit from, including one-on-one support with teachers, careers advisors, work experience and working with local partners.[38] However, AP leaders report that building these relationships with local partners can be difficult, often due to a lack of understanding about AP and SEND. Given the compounding disadvantage pupils with SEND can face, every effort must be made to ensure these pupils have the tailored support they need.

3.5. Expanding enrichment and outdoor opportunities in AP settings

The Census showed that APs are less likely than mainstream schools to offer outdoor spaces and enrichment or holiday activities. As the Department for Education and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport develops a new Enrichment Framework, it is essential that all school types are considered to ensure every child has equal access to high-quality extracurricular activities and youth provision. Alternative provision should not be forgotten – APs and families of schools should ensure that every child has regular access to outdoor space.

3.6. Strengthening knowledge of pupils and local services

Both alternative provision and special schools must be supported to deepen their understanding of the children they serve and the local services they need.

This is particularly a concern in special schools, where most pupils have multi-agency EHCPs. Yet, barriers such as limited information about local services and relationships with local services were reported to impact the delivery of additional support. APs face the unique challenge of educating and supporting a mix of pupils who are there temporarily and pupils who are there more long-term. APs should know their pupils' wider needs to provide the necessary support to re-integrate into mainstream education or further education, training or employment, no matter how long they are in the setting. This improved data and service integration can be achieved through successful implementation of a pupil Unique ID system to support cross-agency understanding of children's needs.

3.7. Workforce and infrastructure

Given concerns around both workforce and infrastructure, the sector should receive additional funding to both address staff shortages, and to modernise facilities to meet rising demand and ensure a standard level of access to elements of infrastructure (for instance, outdoor space).

3.8. *The Children's Plan*

This report builds on The Children's Commissioner's Children's Plan and the series of recommendations already made for an inclusive school system. *The Children's Plan* recognised the importance of interaction and integration with mainstream schools for pupils in special schools and APs. It also recognised the need to boost children's services beyond the school gate, with a focus on children's social care, youth work, youth justice services and children and young people's mental health services. Specifically, *The Children's Plan* called for:

- Wherever possible, all families of schools should have both special and alternative provision capacity to facilitate better integration with mainstream schools.
- To deliver opportunity locally, a local specialist support fund which strategically commissions residential special school placements to enable local choice as a default.
- A day one right to alternative provision, such that no child is excluded to home.
- An overarching framework for alternative provision which outlines how every child will receive support during their time in AP and guidance on re-integrating back into mainstream or beyond.
- Internal alternative provision should be delivered by schools themselves wherever possible and not an external provider. No child should be placed in unregulated or unregistered alternative provision.

Annex A – Methodology

The Children's Commissioner for England has statutory powers under Section 2F of the Children Act 2004 to collect data relating to children. All public sector organisations in England are legally required to provide data the Commissioner requests. In 2024, the Commissioner launched her census of all state-funded schools and colleges in England. The Commissioner's school and college census asked about the support schools and colleges offer to pupils and their families, staff roles and responsibilities, and the characteristics and vulnerabilities of pupils, mostly in Summer Term 2024. The window of data collection was September 2024 to January 2025 and 18,869 schools and colleges responded. This response rate equated to 86% of schools and colleges in England. The data and questionnaire have been published.[39]

Table A1. Number of schools that responded

Type of school	Number of responding schools	Total number of pupils in responding schools	Response rate	Percentage of responding schools
Special	879	128,585	84%	4.7%
AP	280	12,972	84%	1.5%
Mainstream	17,472	7,059,799	87%	94%
Total	18,631	7,201,356	86%	100%

Table A2. Staff roles the Census asked schools about whether they provide to pupils

List of staff roles in school 2023/24	
Educational Psychologist	Speech language therapist (SLT)
School nurse	Education Mental Health Practitioner (part of MHST)
Mental health counsellor	Family liaison/support officer
Social worker	Police Community Support Officer or Safer Schools Police Officer
Staff member for supporting young carers	Youth worker
English as an Additional Language Coordinator	Staff member for supporting unaccompanied asylum seeking children

Table A3. Resources the census asked schools whether they provide to pupils

List of on-site resources in school 2023/24	
A room for children's wellbeing	A Family Hub or children's centre
An outdoor space for children to play or learn in	A nursery
Enrichment activities: art, drama, music	A sexual health clinic
Enrichment activities: sport	A vaccination clinic
Holiday activities provided free of charge	An internal alternative provision (AP)
Social and emotional wellbeing interventions	Breakfast provision
Student participation (e.g., student council)	Free food provision for families (e.g., a food bank)
Youth work	Wrap-around childcare

The Children's Commissioner's office also carried out a roundtable discussion with sector stakeholders in October 2025, to test this report's findings and increase the office's understanding of the sector.

Supplementary data on schools was taken from the Department for Education's Get Information about Schools service.[40] The deprivation analysis in this report looks at pupil deprivation and levels of deprivation in the school's local area to see whether and to what extent special and AP provision varies by deprivation. The deprivation data used comes from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's 2019 English indices of deprivation, which provides information on income deprivation affecting children by local area (IDACI).[41] However, it is important to note that this analysis does not look compare pupil deprivation to deprivation in the general population, and does not look into the issue of child poverty in general.

Annex B – Data tables and graphs

Table B1 – Staff roles by type of provision for special and AP schools

	Special schools			Alternative provision		
	Any provision total	Role in school	External provision	Any provision total	Role in school	External provision
A mental health counsellor	47% (398)	26% (223)	21% (176)	57% (154)	35% (95)	23% (62)
A staff member for supporting UASC	9.9% (83)	1.7% (14)	8.3% (70)	14% (38)	NA (NA)	11% (30)
A family liaison/support officer	78% (671)	73% (633)	4.5% (39)	68% (186)	59% (161)	9.9% (27)
A staff member for supporting young carers	27% (230)	17% (146)	10% (86)	41% (109)	28% (74)	13% (35)
A school nurse	67% (569)	19% (163)	48% (410)	60% (162)	8.6% (23)	53% (142)
A speech and language therapist	81% (698)	35% (303)	47% (410)	48% (130)	13% (35)	36% (98)
A Police Community Support Officer (PCSO) or Safer Schools Police Officer (SSO)	33% (283)	3.2% (27)	30% (257)	47% (127)	8.9% (24)	38% (103)
A social worker	35% (302)	3.4% (29)	32% (273)	33% (90)	4.1% (11)	29% (79)
A youth worker	15% (126)	2.6% (22)	12% (104)	39% (104)	13% (36)	26% (70)
An Educational Psychologist	65% (557)	11% (91)	55% (470)	60% (162)	8.6% (23)	52% (140)
An Education Mental Health Practitioner	51% (433)	28% (236)	23% (199)	49% (132)	24% (65)	25% (68)
An English as an Additional Language Coordinator	13% (107)	6.2% (53)	6.4% (54)	17% (45)	6.4% (17)	10% (28)

Table B2 - Schools who don't have a staff role in school and whether they want one

	Special schools			Alternative provision		
	Schools without a role	No, don't want role	No, we want role	Schools without a role	No, don't want role	No, we want role
A mental health counsellor	73% (619)	22% (62)	78% (215)	65% (176)	17% (12)	83% (58)
A staff member for supporting UASC	90% (762)	80% (419)	20% (106)	91% (242)	68% (91)	32% (42)
A family liaison/support officer	26% (227)	32% (51)	68% (107)	41% (111)	21% (12)	79% (44)
A staff member for supporting young carers (e.g. Young carers champion)	81% (686)	52% (223)	48% (207)	72% (192)	31% (30)	69% (68)
A school nurse	80% (686)	24% (51)	76% (166)	91% (245)	40% (27)	60% (40)
A speech and language therapist	65% (558)	11% (17)	89% (134)	86% (233)	NA (NA)	100% (70)
A Police Community Support Officer (PCSO) or Safer Schools Police Officer (SSO)	95% (814)	62% (240)	38% (148)	91% (245)	33% (28)	67% (56)
A social worker	96% (819)	37% (135)	63% (227)	96% (259)	22% (22)	78% (80)
A youth worker	95% (803)	61% (307)	39% (199)	86% (232)	31% (29)	69% (66)
An educational psychologist	89% (765)	16% (38)	84% (194)	91% (246)	NA (NA)	100% (58)
An Education Mental Health Practitioner (part of Mental Health Support Teams)	71% (603)	18% (51)	82% (236)	74% (200)	15% (12)	85% (66)
An English as an Additional Language Coordinator	90% (767)	68% (400)	32% (189)	91% (242)	57% (83)	43% (62)

Table B3 – Resources by type of provision for special and AP schools

	Special schools			Alternative provision		
	Any provision	Run by school/college	Run by external provider	Any provision	Run by school/college	Run by external provider
A family hub or children's centre	9.0% (77)	4.5% (38)	4.7% (40)	8.5% (23)	NA (NA)	7.8% (21)
A nursery	18% (149)	17% (144)	NA (NA)	NA (NA)	NA (NA)	NA (NA)
A room for children's wellbeing	81% (696)	80% (691)	NA (NA)	79% (216)	77% (212)	NA (NA)
A sexual health clinic	6.0% (51)	NA (NA)	5.5% (47)	19% (52)	NA (NA)	17% (47)
A vaccination clinic	48% (411)	4.4% (38)	44% (375)	33% (90)	NA (NA)	31% (84)
An internal Alternative Provision (AP)	15% (125)	11% (91)	4.7% (40)	61% (161)	58% (154)	NA (NA)
An outdoor space for children to play or learn in	98% (845)	98% (844)	NA (NA)	85% (232)	83% (227)	NA (NA)
Breakfast provision	57% (489)	55% (476)	2.3% (20)	91% (251)	88% (242)	4.0% (11)
Enrichment activities: art, drama, music	93% (801)	90% (775)	6.4% (55)	87% (238)	81% (221)	9.5% (26)
Enrichment activities: sport	93% (804)	90% (772)	6.9% (59)	89% (245)	82% (225)	11% (29)
Free food provision for families e.g., a food bank	39% (331)	25% (212)	15% (129)	45% (122)	29% (80)	16% (43)
Holiday activities provided free of charge	32% (270)	17% (142)	15% (132)	30% (82)	15% (40)	16% (43)
Social and emotional wellbeing interventions	95% (825)	94% (813)	5.2% (45)	95% (263)	92% (253)	9.4% (26)
Student participation (e.g. student council)	95% (825)	95% (824)	NA (NA)	85% (235)	84% (233)	NA (NA)
Wrap-around childcare	9.8% (84)	7.4% (63)	2.5% (21)	4.7% (13)	NA (NA)	NA (NA)
Youth work	23% (194)	11% (94)	12% (102)	48% (133)	19% (52)	31% (85)

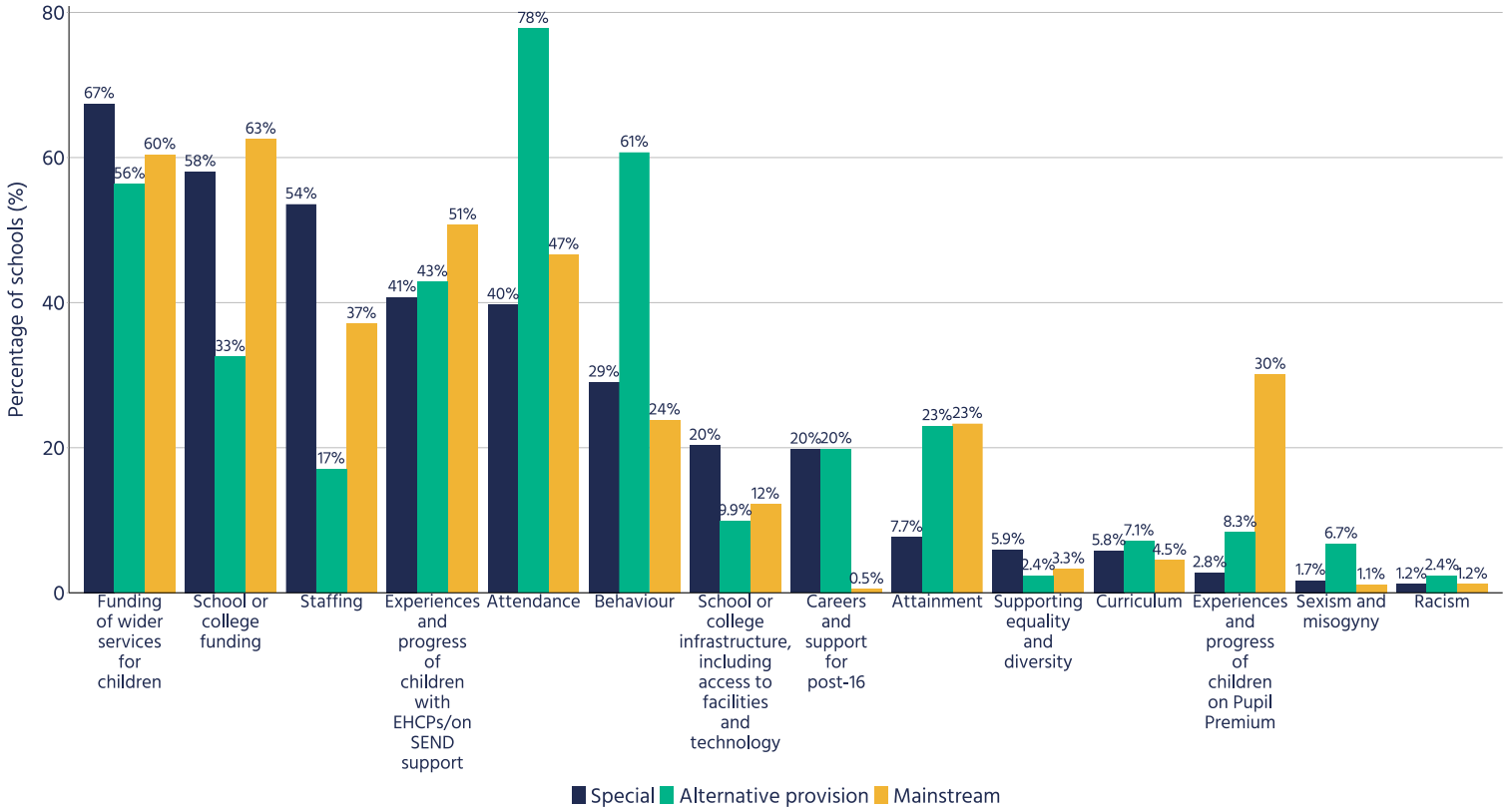
Table B4 - Schools who don't have a resource in school and whether they want it

	Special schools			Alternative provision		
	Schools without this resource	No, don't want resource	No, we want resource	Schools without this resource	No, don't want resource	No, we want resource
A family hub or children's centre	90% (764)	59% (450)	41% (314)	89% (241)	58% (139)	42% (102)
A nursery	82% (696)	78% (541)	22% (155)	96% (263)	94% (247)	6.1% (16)
A room for children's wellbeing	18% (157)	19% (30)	81% (127)	21% (59)	NA (NA)	100% (52)
A sexual health clinic	93% (789)	87% (688)	13% (101)	79% (214)	70% (150)	30% (64)
A vaccination clinic	52% (445)	86% (383)	14% (62)	66% (179)	84% (150)	16% (29)
An internal Alternative Provision (AP)	84% (711)	81% (578)	19% (133)	39% (103)	87% (90)	13% (13)
An outdoor space for children to play or learn in	2.3% (20)	NA (NA)	100% (18)	16% (43)	NA (NA)	100% (39)
Breakfast provision	42% (359)	54% (195)	46% (164)	8.4% (23)	48% (11)	52% (12)
Enrichment activities: art, drama, music	7.3% (63)	NA (NA)	100% (56)	15% (40)	NA (NA)	100% (35)
Enrichment activities: sport	6.5% (56)	NA (NA)	100% (49)	11% (31)	NA (NA)	100% (25)
Free food provision for families e.g., a food bank	60% (511)	39% (200)	61% (311)	54% (148)	27% (40)	73% (108)
Holiday activities provided free of charge	68% (576)	36% (207)	64% (369)	69% (187)	50% (93)	50% (94)
Social and emotional wellbeing interventions	4.3% (37)	NA (NA)	100% (32)	5.4% (15)	NA (NA)	100% (13)
Student participation (e.g. student council)	4.7% (41)	NA (NA)	100% (31)	14% (38)	29% (11)	71% (27)
Wrap-around childcare	89% (755)	66% (502)	34% (253)	93% (256)	87% (222)	13% (34)
Youth work	74% (621)	52% (321)	48% (300)	49% (136)	32% (43)	68% (93)

Table B5 – What schools know about their pupils.

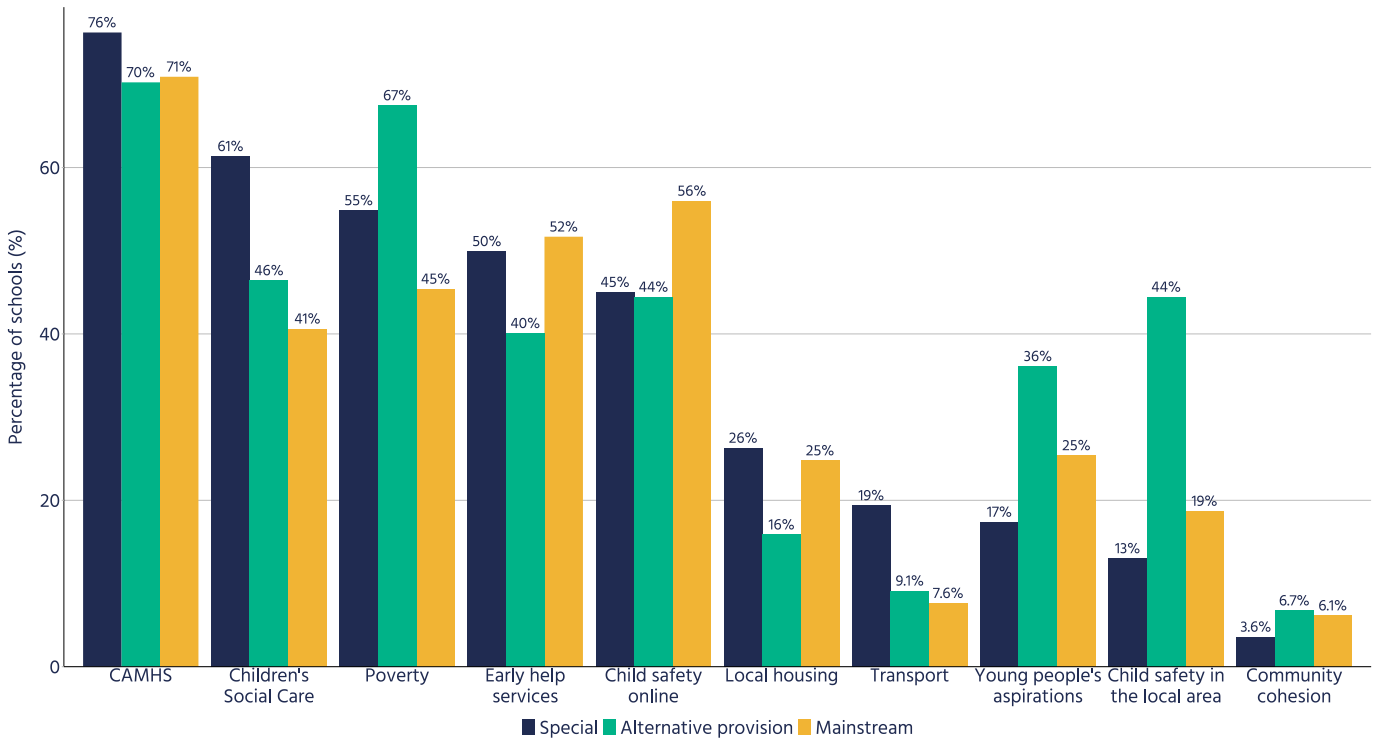
To the best of your knowledge, how many of your pupils in Summer Term 2024…	Schools say (special and AP schools)	Schools say (mainstream primary and secondary)	% pupils in schools that responded (special and AP)	% pupils in schools that responded (mainstream primary and secondary)
…were receiving free school meals?	65,721	1,501,899	48%	25%
…were living in unsuitable accommodation?	7,627	146,663	5.8%	2.6%
…had experienced the bereavement of someone close to them?	7,270	149,529	5.5%	2.6%
…were on waiting lists for mental health support (including CAMHS)?	9,782	130,850	7.4%	2.2%
…were young carers?	1,833	74,683	1.4%	1.3%
…had a parent or carer in prison?	2,039	30,903	1.5%	0.5%
…were living in formal or informal kinship care?	2,586	28,614	1.9%	0.5%
…were unable to attend school, or attend full-time, due to treatment for serious or complex illnesses?	5,660	17,057	4.2%	0.3%
…were unaccompanied asylum-seeking children?	155	2,971	0.1%	0.0%

Figure B1 – School leader concerns for pupils in school by school phase



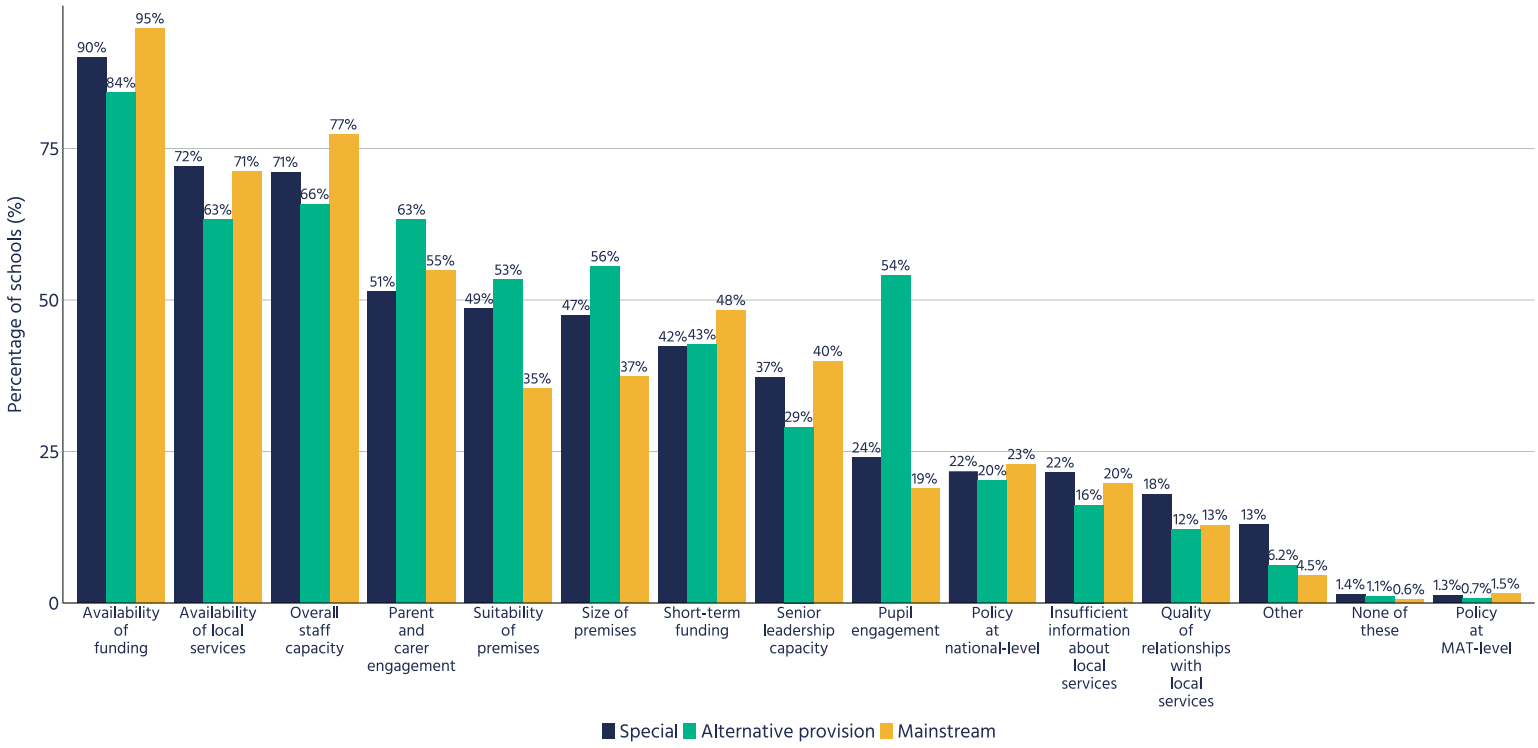
**Note: Schools were asked "Which of the following are the most concerning issues for children in your school or college? Select up to four".*

Figure B2 – School leader concerns for pupils in the local area by school phase



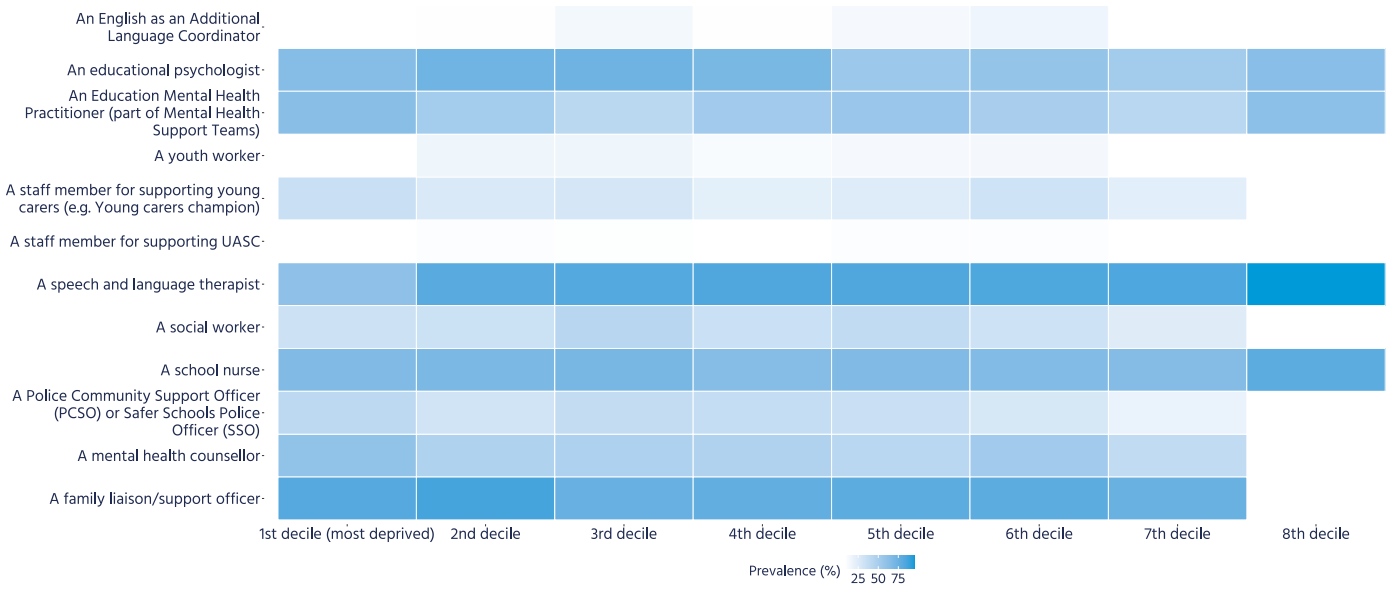
Note: Schools were asked "Which of the following are the most concerning issues for children in your local area? Select up to four". CAMHS refers to Children and Adolescent's Mental Health Services.

Figure B3 – Barriers to providing additional support to pupils by school phase



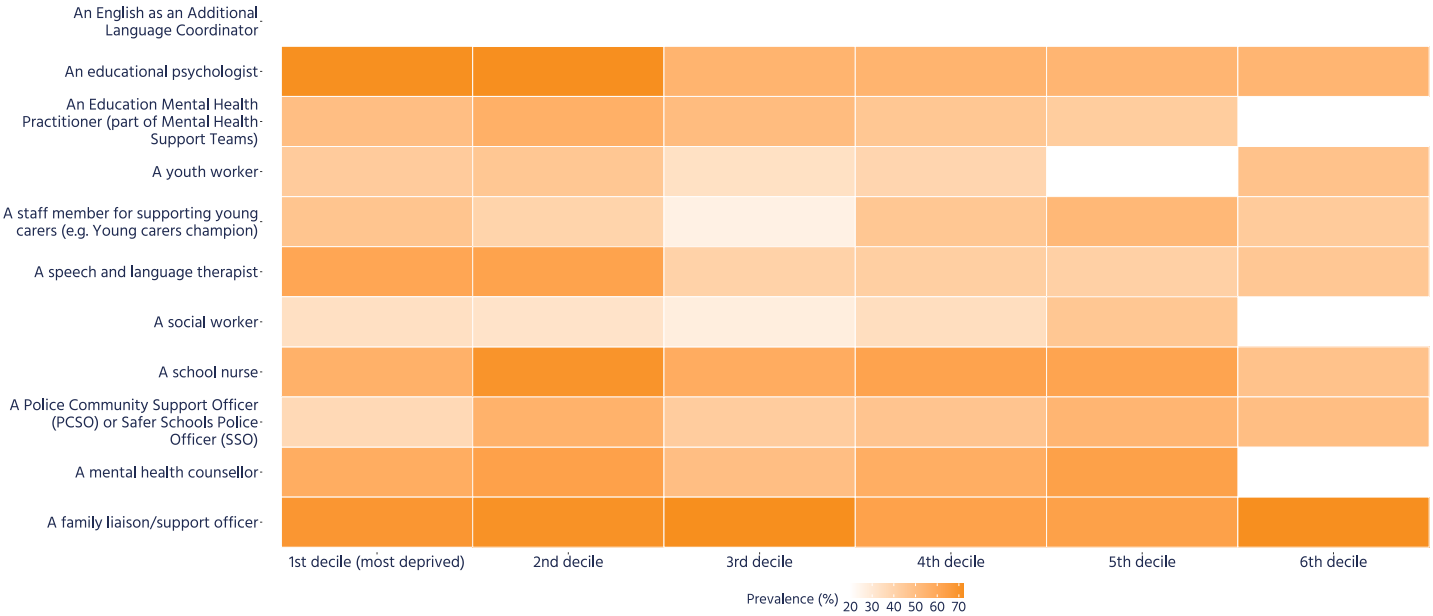
**Note: Schools were asked "Which of the following, if any, are barriers to providing additional support to pupils in your school or college? Select all that apply". MAT refers to multi-academy trusts.*

Figure B4 - Heatmap of provision of staff roles (regardless of whether roles are internally or externally sourced) in special schools by deprivation decile



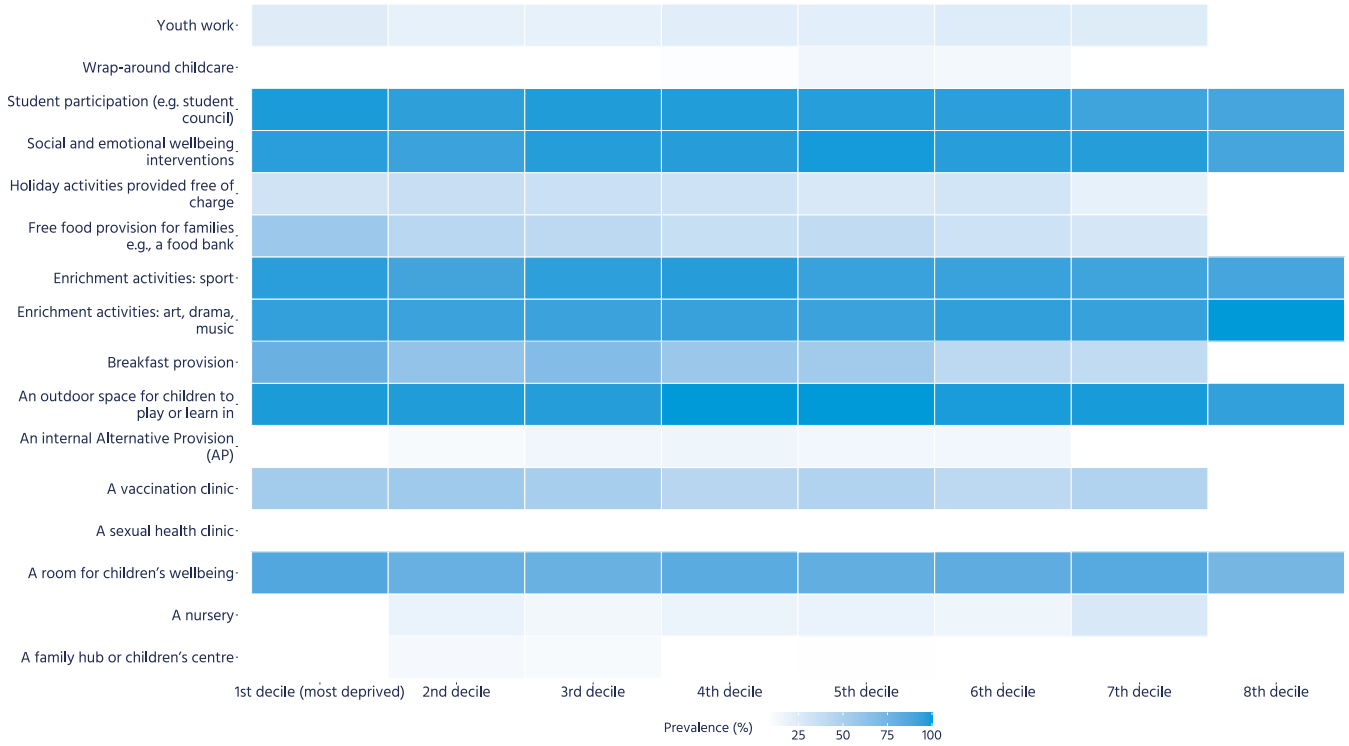
**Note: This chart shows the percentage of schools which say they have a particular role by their deprivation rank. Some deciles are missing due to them containing low or no schools in them, which risks disclosure.*

Figure B5 - Heatmap of provision of staff roles (regardless of whether roles are internally or externally sourced) in alternative provision by deprivation decile



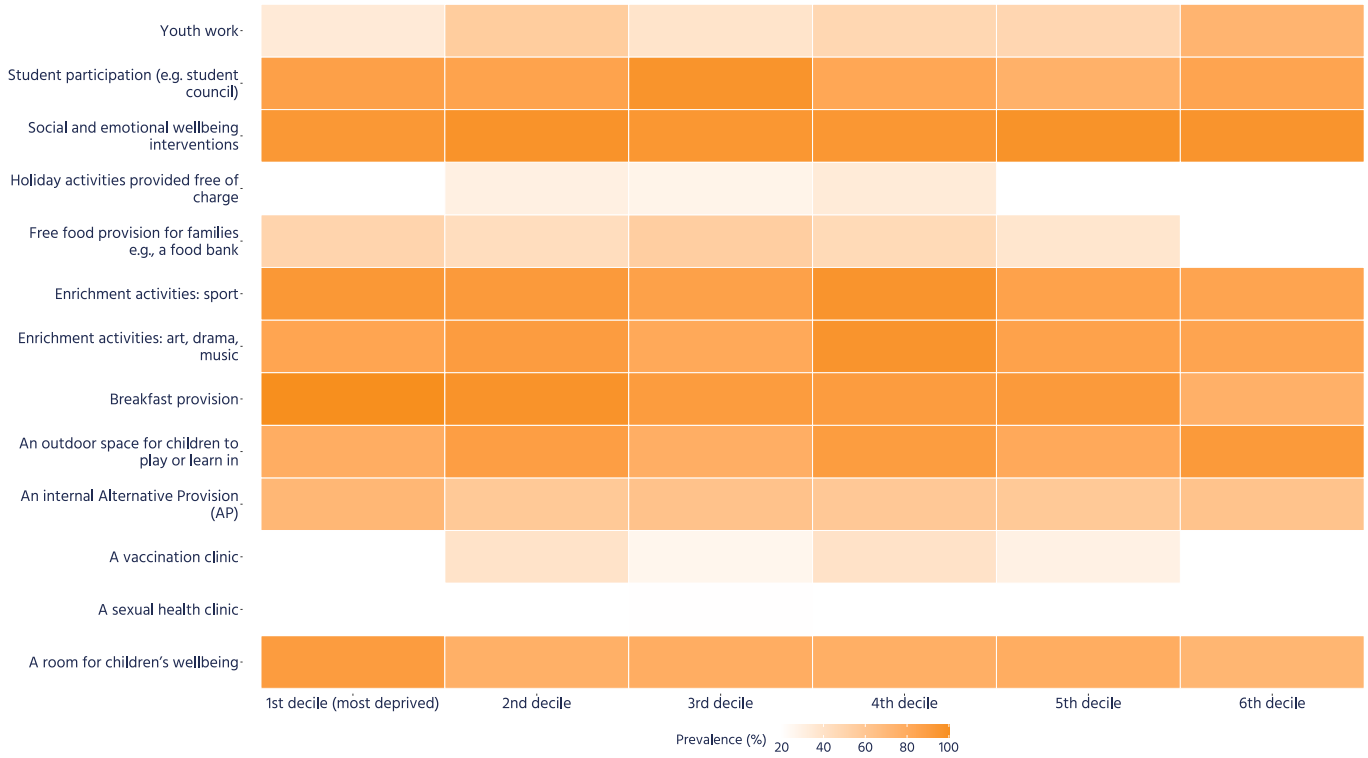
**Note: This chart shows the percentage of schools which say they have a particular role by their deprivation rank. The row for English as an additional language coordinators is not blank, it appears white as the percentage of AP schools that have them is very low. Some deciles are missing due to them containing low or no schools in them, which risks disclosure.*

Figure B6 - Heatmap of resources provided (either run by the school or by an external provider) in special schools by deprivation decile.



**Note: This chart shows the percentage of schools which say they have a particular resource by their deprivation rank. Some deciles are missing due to them containing low or no schools in them, which risks disclosure. The row for sexual health clinics is not blank, it appears white as the percentage of special schools that have them is very low.*

Figure B7 - Heatmap of resources provided (run by the school or external provider) in Alternative Provision by deprivation decile



**Note: This chart shows the percentage of schools which say they have a particular resource by their deprivation rank. Some deciles are missing due to them containing low or no schools in them, which risks disclosure. As with the previous figure for special schools, the row for sexual health clinics is not blank, it appears white as the percentage of APs schools that have them is very low.*

Figure B8 - Schools by the deprivation of their local area

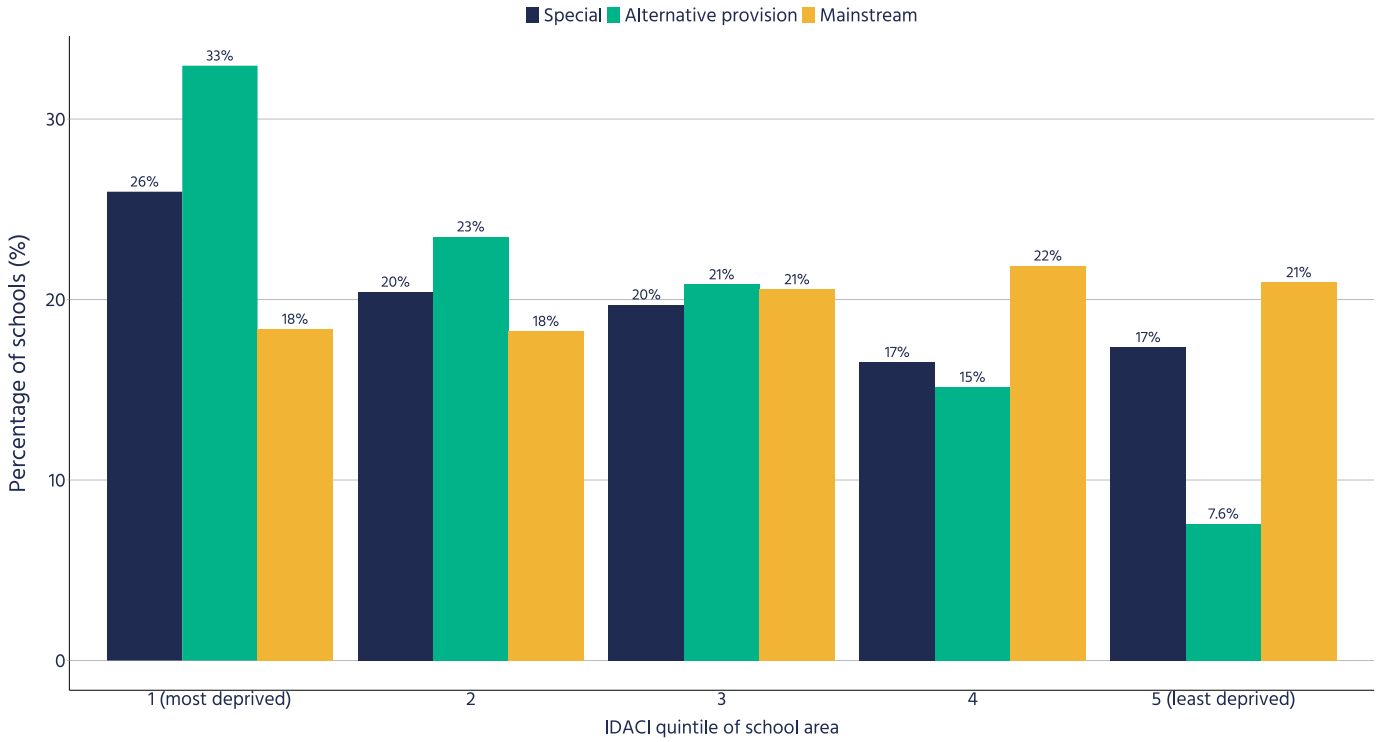
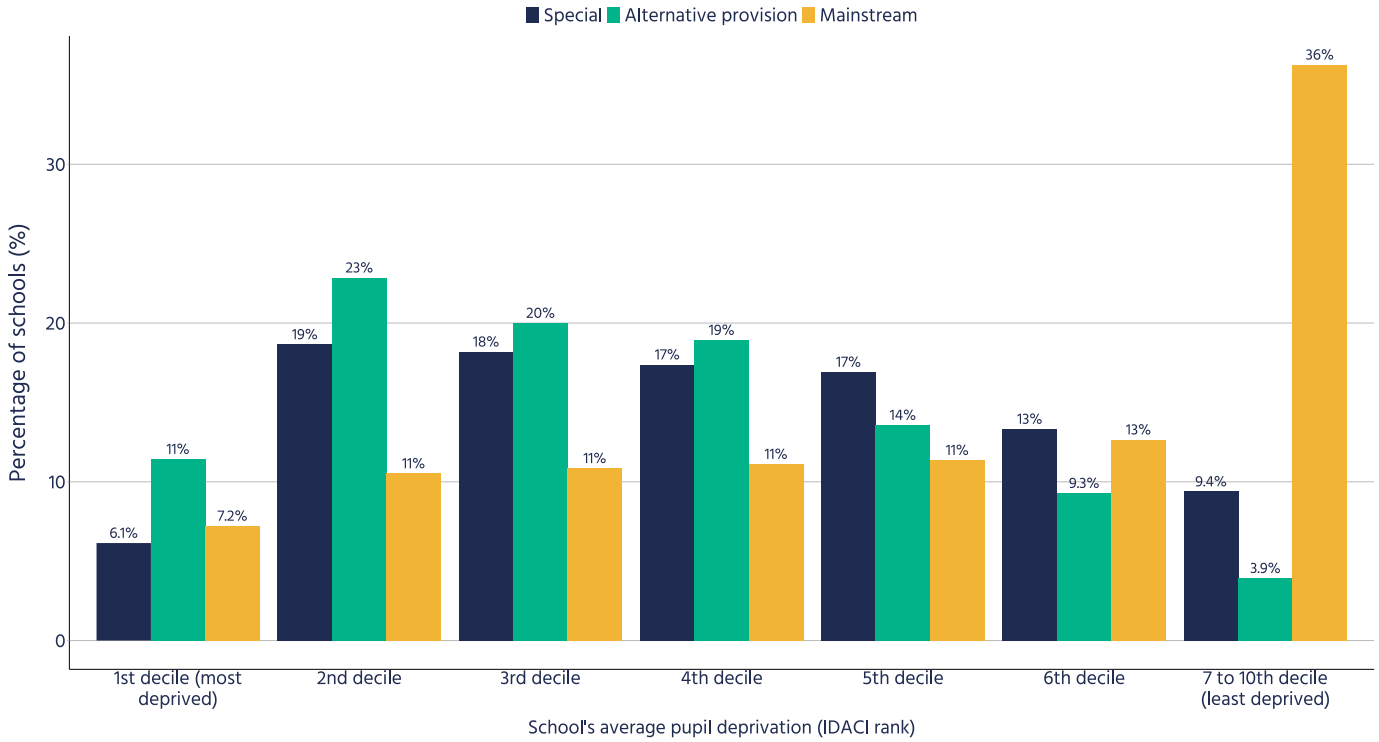


Figure B9 - School by the deprivation of their pupils



CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER

References

[1] *The Children's Plan: The Children's Commissioner's School Census,* Children's Commissioner for England (2025). Link.

[2] *Schools, pupils, and their characteristics, Academic year 2024/25,* Department for Education (2025). Link.

[3] *The state of education: what awaits the next Government?,* Institute for Fiscal Studies (2024). Link

[4] *Special schools, alternative provision, and the educational attainment of children with special educational needs in England*, Sinclair, Luke, and Daniels. Educational Review (2025), Link.

[5] *Educational experiences of young people with special educational needs and disabilities in England*, Office for National Statistics (2022). Link.

[6] *The Big Ambition, Research,* Children's Commissioner for England (2024). Link.

[7] *Schools, pupils, and their characteristics, Academic year 2024/25,* Department for Education (2025). Link and *Special Schools way over capacity in England,* BBC (2025). Link.

[8] *Schools, pupils and their characteristics. Academic year 2024/25.* Department for Education (2025). Link.

[9] *What Children Need from an Integrated Alternative Provision System,* Children's Commissioner for England (2022). Link.

[10] *Characteristics of young people who are long-term NEET*, Department for Education (2018). Link and *Alternative Provision Market Analysis,* Isos Partnership (2018). Link.

[11] *A third of students set to resit English or Maths GCSE,* TES (2024). Link and *Annual Report 2025,* Education Policy Institute (2025). Link.

[12] *The Big Ambition, Research,* Children's Commissioner for England (2024). Link.

[13] *Long-term outcomes of pupils who experience alternative provision,* FFT Education Datalab (2022). Link.

[14] *Schools, Pupils, and their Characteristics, Academic year 2024/25,* Department of Education (2025). Link.

[15] *Register, Regulate, and Raise Standards,* Children's Commissioner for England (2025). Link.

[16] *What happens to permanently excluded pupils?*, FFT Education Datalab (2023). Link.

[17] *The Children's Plan: The Children's Commissioner's School Census,* Children's Commissioner for England (2025). Link.

[18] *The Big Ambition for Education,* Children's Commissioner for England (2024). Link.

[19] *Schools, pupils, and their characteristics, Academic year 2024/25,* Department for Education (2025). Link.

[20] *School capacity, Academic year 2023/24,* Department for Education (2025). Link .

[21] *Schools, pupils, and their characteristics, Academic year 2024/25,* Department for Education (2025). Link.

[22] *Youth Jobs Gap: Exploring compound disadvantage,* Impetus (2025). Link.

[23] *Children and Families Act* (2014). Link.

[24] *Exploring the special schools workforce: What's the current picture?,* National Foundation for Educational Research (2025). Link.

[25] *Solving the SEND Crisis,* Education Committee, House of Commons (2025). Link.

[26] *Support for children and young people with special educational needs,* Public Accounts Committee, House of Commons (2025). Link.

[27] *Arranging Alternative Provision: a guide for local authorities and schools,* Department for Education (2025). Link.

[28] *The Big Ask – The Big Answer,* Children's Commissioner for England (2023). Link.

[29] *Characteristics of young people who are long-term NEET*, Department for Education (2018), Link.

[30] *Working Paper Four,* FFT Education Datalab, (2021). Link.

[31] *Inequalities in likelihood of living in high-crime neighbourhoods,* The Health Foundation (2024). Link.

[32] *Education, Children's Social Care, and Offending,* Department for Education (2023). Link

[33] *The Commission into Countering Online Conspiracies in Schools Report*, Dr Sally Burtonshaw and Pete Whitehead *et al* (2025). Link.

[34] *Young People at Risk Strategy 2019-29*, Haringey Council (2019). Link. For media concerns, see a variety of articles from 2019 onwards, including *More children sent to referral units where gang leaders can target them,* The Times (2019). Link.

[35] *Access to extra-curricular provision and the association with outcomes,* Education Policy Institute (2024). Link.

[36] *Initial Summary of Findings from the National Youth Sector Census*, National Youth Agency (2021). Link.

[37] *Register, Regulate, and Raise Standards,* Children's Commissioner for England (2025). Link.

[38] *An Alternative Route: Post-16 support for young people attending Alternative Provision,* The Children's Commissioners Office (2024). Link.

[39] *The Children's Plan: The Children's Commissioner's School Census,* Children's Commissioner for England (2025). Link.

[40] *Get Information about Schools*. Department for Education. Accessed 01/10/2025. Link.

[41] *English indices of deprivation.* Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2019). Link.

CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER

64 Victoria Street
London
SW1E 6QP

020 7783 8330

www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk
@childrenscommissioner
@ChildrensComm