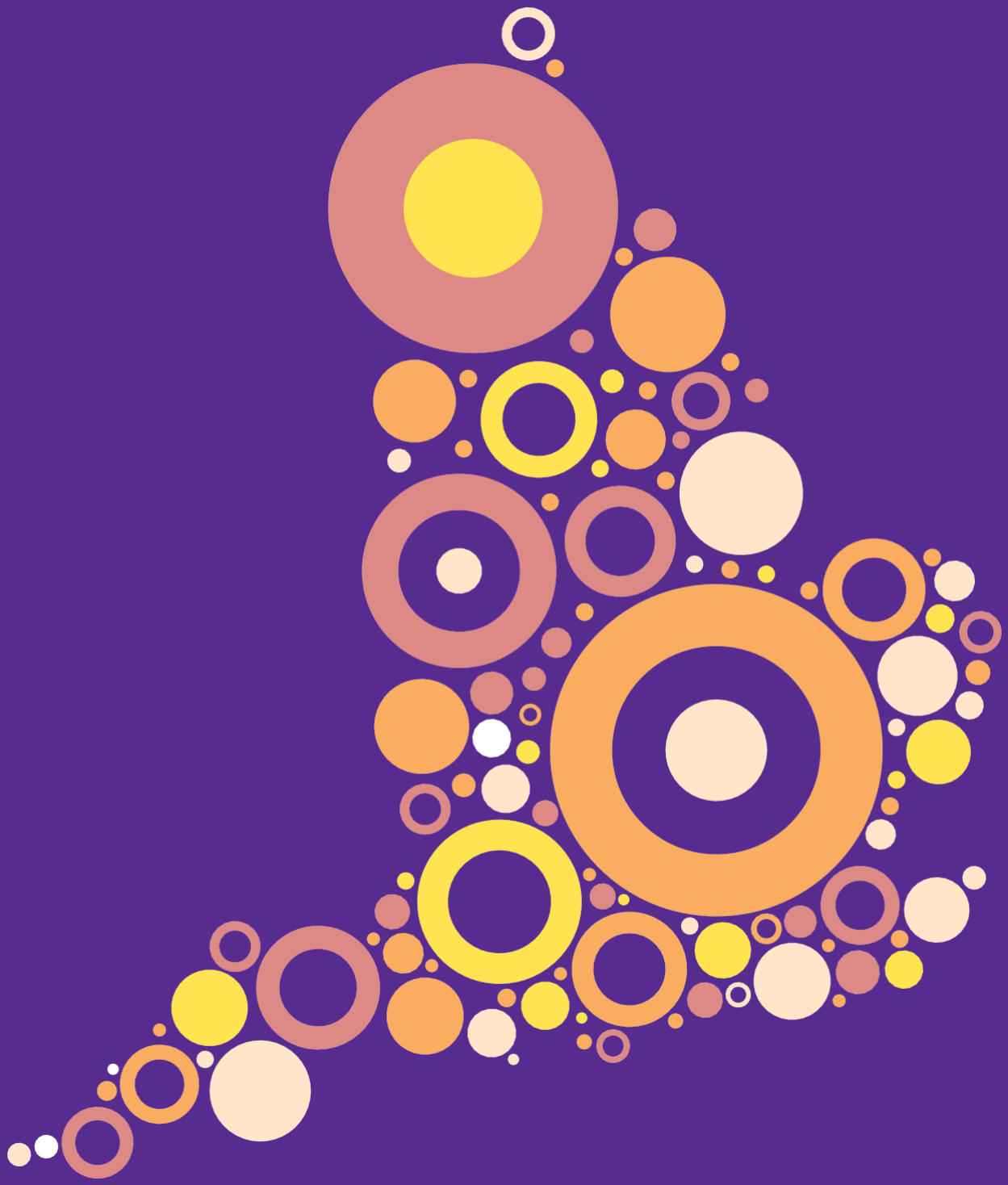


Setting young people up for success

College sector report: *The Children's Commissioner's School and College Census*

March 2026

CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER

CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER

Contents

Foreword from Dame Rachel de Souza 3

Executive summary 6

1. Introduction 9

2. The concerns of college leaders 11

2.1. Concerns facing their pupils 11

2.2. Concerns in the local area 16

3. How colleges are supporting students 21

3.1. Student context 21

3.2. Provision of support 23

3.3. A focus on preparing young people for work 25

4. What are the barriers to providing support to students 28

4.1. Barriers to providing additional support 28

4.2. Supporting students with SEND 29

4.3. Young people's transition from school to college 32

5. What needs to change 36

5.1. Targeted funding for colleges and local services to support the additional needs of students aged 16 to 18 36

5.2. Transport must be affordable for all young people travelling to college across the country 37

5.3. The school to college transition must be improved for young people through better information sharing and accountability 37

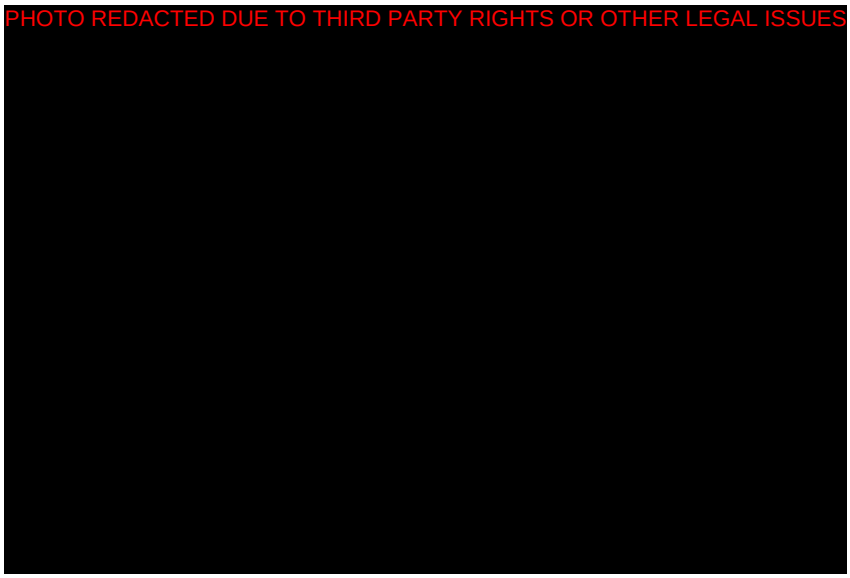
5.4. Renewed focus on national data, evidence and what works to help all young people in colleges succeed 38

Annex A – Methodology 39

Annex B – Data tables and graphs 42

References 47

Foreword from Dame Rachel de Souza



In 2024, I used my data powers on schools and colleges for the first time, conducting a census to better understand the support that educational establishments offer children. This report is the third in this series. The first, *The Children's Plan,* examines what whole system reform could and should look like. The second, *The Children's Commissioner's School Census: Special and Alternative Provision* examines how non-mainstream providers, like special schools and alternative provision, offer support for their pupils. This report focuses on England's colleges, with a particular interest in how colleges support their students.

Colleges are very different institutions to schools, but share many of the challenges. Like schools, colleges are carrying growing responsibilities and student need. Like schools, colleges operate in the context of local services stretched beyond their capacity. Colleges are supporting a third of our young people, including many students with complex needs, while working hard to prepare students for a changing employment landscape and world of work.

Across the country, the barriers young people face outside the education and training environment need to be addressed so young people can access learning and training on equal footing, no matter where they live. The challenges look different, certainly – rural colleges in particular told my office about their struggles with transport, while I heard from some urban colleges about the difficulties caused by

growing needs. The solutions, too, may well look different regionally, but must be united by a national ambition to break down the barriers to education.

One of the crucial reforms across the entire education system is that the places that educate children should know more about them. It is crucially important for post-16 institutions to know their young people to be aware of their barriers to education and help prepare them for life after education. My office heard from colleges time and again about the difficulties caused by delays in information sharing between other institutions and colleges, with colleges left to pick up the pieces afterwards.

As I called for in *The Children's Plan,* better data and joined-up services are essential to stop young people "falling through the gaps". Especially important in the transition from school to college where information sharing can help young people get the best start to the next phase of their education. Strong cross-system collaboration between schools, colleges, universities, employers, health services and local authorities is crucial. This is why in the Children's Plan I called for a unique identifier and digital platform to facilitate this collaboration.

We must always listen to young people about their experiences of post-16 pathways, and what young people say they need for a successful move into adulthood and work. Colleges are one crucial part of this journey, and they need to be properly funded to meet this challenge.

There is so much we can learn from colleges. Young people in college may be caring for family members, working long and unsociable hours to support themselves and their families. They may be newly arrived to the country. They may be navigating the care system. They may just want to get in, get their A-Levels, T-Levels, or BTECs or soon to be V levels, and get on with their lives. Regardless of who walks through their door, my office heard about how colleges build strong relationships with their young people and provide the flexibility, safety and opportunity for many to thrive.

The too narrow focus on schools in education policy has meant the needs of young people in post-16 education across the country have often been neglected. Data, policy and programmes must give more attention to those aged 16 to 18 in further education and training institutions. It is a diverse sector and government needs to do better to capture, publish, and disseminate attendance, outcomes and what works evidence for young people aged 16 to 18 in an accessible way.

As the government implements its post-16 skills and education White Paper reforms, we must remember these can only succeed if the needs of all young people are accounted for, to ensure all young people can access and navigate post-16 pathways and get the support they need to succeed.

I know that young people care deeply about getting a good job. In many of my surveys and listening exercises with young people, going on to secure good quality employment has been their biggest concern. This report has been written and published at a time of profound concern about their ability to do just that, with attention paid to youth unemployment and the NEET rate of under-25s.

The ambition to reduce NEET rates across the country will require us to tackle the structural and wellbeing barriers our young people face – and colleges are rightly recognised as part of the solution. Yet too often, rather than the wider system learning from them, colleges are asked to mop up after systemic failures elsewhere. When thinking about supporting young people's needs, there is now rightful pushback to the simplistic idea of 'put it on the school curriculum' as a policy lever, but too little attention is paid to the burdens placed upon the FE sector and skills policy. In the future, the pressures placed on colleges must be met with support, policy attention, and funding. Across the entirety of a child's life, in every interaction they have with state services, we must continue to strive for a coordinated and joined up system across all of education, health and social care. Nothing less is sufficient to meet the needs and aspirations of the nation's children.

A note of thanks: Thank you to the college leaders and staff who completed the survey and those who spent time with my office to discuss the challenges they are facing and the support they are offering their young people.

Executive summary

This report builds on the Children's Commissioner's *The Children's Plan* to provide a national picture of further education and sixth-form colleges: their concerns for their communities, and the support they are providing to young people in England. Drawing on responses from 77% of colleges (238 colleges), it shows they are providing support to meet the additional needs of their students including at pivotal times in their lives, from the transition from school to the move into further education or employment. Colleges are seeing the needs of young people and stepping up to meet them.

The Children's Commissioner's College Census found:

- **Most colleges are stepping in to provide mental health and wellbeing support as young people face difficulties accessing support from local services.** Leaders reported significant concerns about access to CAMHS (79% citing this among their top concerns) and the wider funding of children's services (60%). Despite limited resources, 81% colleges provide a mental health counsellor and 51% have access to an Education Mental Health Practitioner.

- **Student attendance was reported as a major challenge for colleges, with 67% of college leaders identifying it as a top concern, and 44% reporting that low student engagement limits their ability to provide additional support.**

- Colleges educate a diverse cohort, with many students balancing complex home-life pressures, disadvantage and responsibilities such as part-time work. Colleges are responding to this by providing a wide range of services such as a staff member for supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (41%) and a staff member for supporting young carers (68%).

- **Colleges are managing to provide this wide range of support to their students despite substantial funding concerns.** Seventy per cent of college leaders listed their own funding as a top concern, compared to 51% of secondary school leaders, and almost all college leaders reported that insufficient funding limits their ability to provide additional support. One in three colleges stated that funding constraints prevent them from fully meeting the requirements of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). Leaders also described significant regional variation in the cost of providing support and outlined instances where bursary funds must stretch further for certain young people to cover basic costs such as transport.

- **Colleges are concerned about the affordability and availability of transport for college students, and it is not a level playing field across the country.** Almost a third of colleges (31%) rated transport as a top concern for children in their local area, substantially higher than secondary schools (10%). Leaders highlighted the regional variation in transport subsidies creates an uneven playing field across the country. Poverty in the local area was a top concern for 72% of colleges compared to 51% of schools, which also acts as a financial barrier to young people's ability to travel to college consistently.

- **The transition of information from school to college is not good enough, and needs to be improved to ensure support for all students, including those with additional needs.** College leaders reported challenges with delayed or incomplete information sharing, and students arriving with outdated EHCPs that do not reflect their current needs. Colleges generally reported being able to make reasonable adjustments for students with additional needs, but improvement is needed to ensure all young people receive appropriate support. The most common reason colleges could not meet EHCP requirements was a lack of specialist staff (41%).

Colleges told the Children's Commissioner that young people are facing challenges with poverty, mental health, transport and getting the timely support they need. Colleges are doing what they can but the help they can give is hindered by their funding, and by student absence, shortcomings in wider services for children, and staffing problems. Building on the ambitions of *The Children's Plan* to build a truly inclusive education system, this report identifies four priorities for action:

- Providing the additional funding colleges need to support young people with additional needs aged 16 to 18 through an extension of the pupil premium to young people in post-16 education.

- Ensuring affordable transport for all young people travelling to college across the country through free bus travel.

- Improving the school to college transition for young people, including through timely and high-quality data sharing to enable colleges to provide the support their students need as efficiently as possible.

- Young people aged 16 to 18 in further education and training institutions to be included in data, policy and programmes focused on young people's education. Government needs to better

capture, publish and disseminate attendance data, outcomes data and what works evidence for these young people.

The Department for Education and local authorities should ensure a level playing field for children and young people in post-16 education and training across the country. These recommendations aim to ensure young people can access, participate and thrive in further education colleges as part of a successful transition to adulthood.

1. Introduction

The Children's Commissioner's School and College Census provides a national picture of children's experiences of education and how education institutions are supporting children and young people. Two previously published reports have focused on mainstream schools, and special schools and alternative provision settings.[1]

This report is focused on the college sector, an essential stage in many young people's educational journeys and preparation for adulthood. The report highlights the concerns raised by the college sector and provides a national snapshot of the resources and support available to children and young people in colleges. Taken together, these reports set out the challenges they encounter and the support they receive on their journey through the education system.

Colleges are a diverse sector, delivering a range of qualifications and support depending on their type, location and local community need. In the 2024/25 academic year, 644,000 young people aged 16 to 18 studied in colleges in England, and an additional 49,000 undertook an apprenticeship through colleges. This corresponds to 33% of the age group who are in further education and sixth form colleges. The remainder were mostly in school, employment, or higher education: 24% were in state-funded schools, 8% were in employment, 12% were in higher education institutions and 9% were not in education employment or training (NEET) and the remainder were in independent schools, apprenticeships, special schools, or other education and training.[2]

Colleges are a vital part of many young people's educational journeys acting as the primary pathway for post-16 education, and a passage into higher education or employment. Colleges play an important role in helping students transition away from structured school environments as many students start to foster self-study skills and self-agency necessary for their future in the labour market and in higher education.

Colleges have a central role to play in a number of government priorities including reducing the number of young people who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET). As well as supporting economic growth more generally. Despite this, colleges have faced some of the deepest spending cuts of all phases of education in the decade following 2010.[3]

At the same time, the college sector will be required to meet growing demand in the coming years. The number of 16- to 18-year-olds in England has grown substantially, increasing by 300,000 (around 16%) between 2018 and 2025[4] with numbers projected to peak in 2028.[5] In that context, colleges are likely to face further difficult decisions on where to prioritise their spending.

The data in this report comes from the Children's Commissioner's school and college census which launched in September 2024. The census reached 238 colleges, 77% of the 309 colleges that were listed in the Get Information about Schools dataset when the office was designing the survey.[6] The coverage included both further education colleges and sixth form colleges. School sixth forms were not specifically asked to respond to the survey but may have responded through secondary schools. Case studies and quotes are from free-text responses, a series of roundtables with sector stakeholders and college visits.

2. The concerns of college leaders

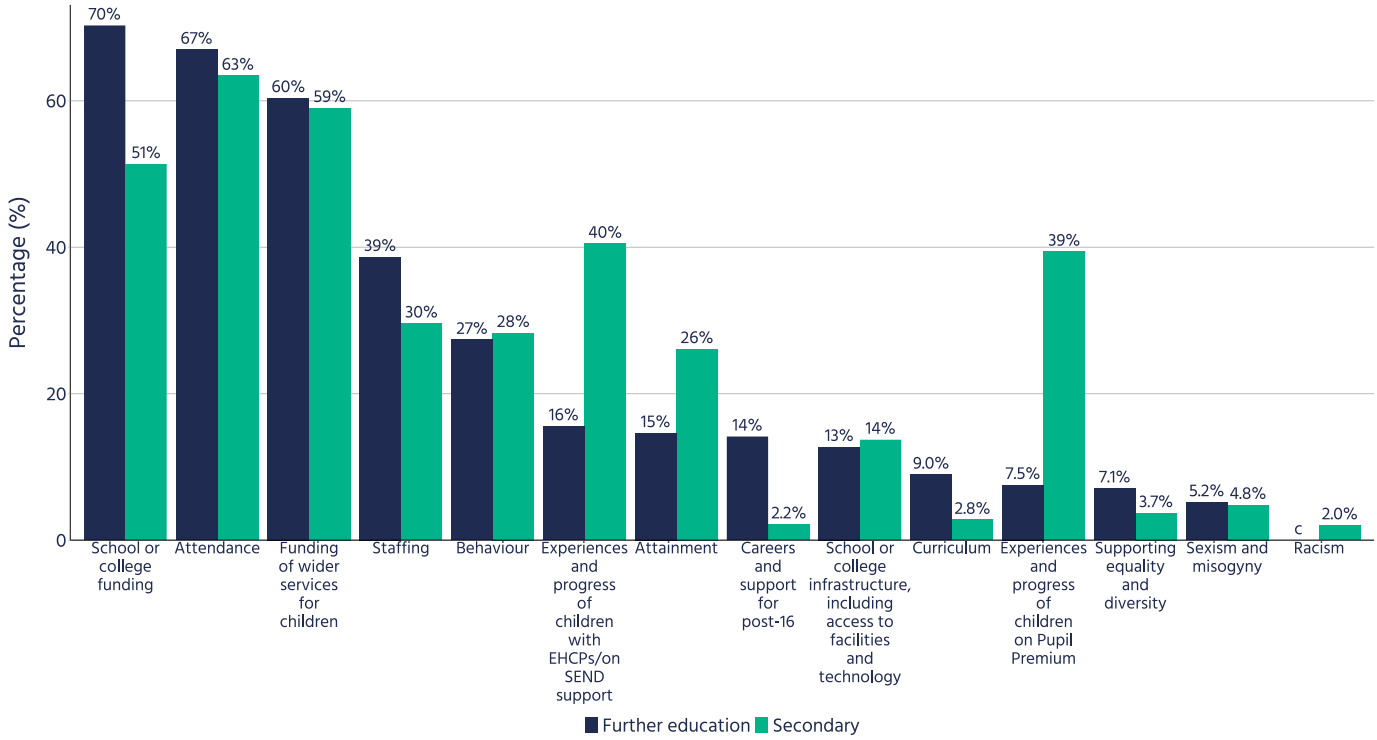
For children aged 16 to 18, colleges provide education and offer support at important life transitions. Firstly, moving from their school environment into a new further education environment, and secondly out of college to further study, employment and adulthood. Compared to schools and alternative provision settings, colleges are more acutely focused on preparing young people for employment and college leaders told the office that their students often bring with them additional responsibilities such as home, caring and/or work obligations.

The Children's Commissioner's College Census asked college leaders their top concerns for their students and for the children in their local area. College leader concerns reflected the intersecting challenges young people are navigating, particularly mental health and poverty.

2.1. Concerns facing their pupils

The Children's Commissioner's College Census asked colleges about their top four concerns facing their pupils. The top concern was college funding, which was cited by 70% of colleges. This was considerably higher than the 51% of secondary schools who saw funding as a top concern. Close behind was attendance; two thirds of colleges were concerned about attendance. Funding of wider services for children was also a concern for colleges. Staffing is a concern for 39% of colleges, compared to 30% of secondary schools.

Figure 1: What colleges and secondary schools say are the top concerning issues within the college or school



Note: Respondents could select up to four options. Small numbers have been replaced with a 'c' to prevent the identification of individual colleges.

Funding

In 2025–26, spending per student aged 16-18 in further education colleges is £8,000, and £6,000 in sixth form colleges.[7] Across both establishments, this funding is around 8% lower in real terms than it was in 2010–11. The office heard from college leaders that a mismatch between funding and need may be creating an environment where college leaders are forced to make trade-offs as part of difficult decisions regarding prioritisation.

"College funding remains significantly behind schools when inflation and other financial considerations are taken into account. Waiting lists and capacity challenges of external services such as CAMHS and social care mean

more and more college funding is having to be directed to support services to help students attend and progress at college. This limits our ability to invest in infrastructure and resources to support quality and experience improvements. Funding for SEND provision also needs to significantly increase across the sector to mitigate young people not having access to appropriate curriculum pathways, facilities and resources." – Academy 16-19 Converter, South East

In free-text responses, college leaders further highlighted how lower funding for colleges compared to schools has an impact on the support their young people receive.

"Stable funding is crucial. Colleges need to receive comparative funding to schools so that the same or similar provision can be resourced in similar ways." – FE College, East of England

Additionally, college leaders highlighted how funding concerns are arising from challenges with wider services for children, particularly mental health services. The funding of wider children's services was the third most common concern for college leaders, with 60% citing this as a top four concern.

"Funding for colleges is woefully inadequate to enable us to support young people given that external services are so limited. Young people's mental health is one of the biggest factors concerning us and we simply are not funded adequately to be able to provide support." – FE College, South West

Funding concerns also appeared to intersect with staffing concerns. Staffing was cited as a top four concern by 39% of college leaders. Research has shown that college teachers can earn higher salaries in industry and are paid nearly a quarter less than school teachers leading to issues with staff recruitment and retention.[8] Additionally, issues with student behaviour and mental health can be a challenge for

retaining new teachers in further education, which some say has been exacerbated by the pandemic.[9] Staff recruitment, retention and wellbeing needs to remain a priority across all education settings.

"Massive increase in mental health and behavioural issues with our students. Funding not sufficient to meet the support needs e.g. staff need to be upskilled to cope with the influx." – FE College, West Midlands

Attendance

The office found attendance is a high concern for college leaders. Responses from college leaders demonstrate how broader challenges young people face impacts their attendance, such as mental health, loneliness and circumstances at home.

"One of the biggest barriers for learners in achieving good attendance is a scarcity of mental health support, ever higher thresholds and longer waiting lists." – FE College, South East

"Many issues remain a consequence of the covid pandemic. Students are less sociable and more likely to have issues within their friendship groups. High levels of anxiety in students relate to social interaction, academic pressure and emotional regulation. Attendance has not returned to pre-covid numbers." – FE college, West Midlands

While colleges often offer greater flexibility for students to best meet their needs, the office heard attendance issues that arose in school can persist into college. The office heard this can be difficult to address in the short number of years young people have at college, with the opportunity for timely support impacted by poor data sharing in some cases. College leaders told the office that colleges and schools can work together to make sure young people are engaged in something that motivates them, and that colleges could play an important role for young people who are not motivated in school.

"Attendance is an issue in all education settings in our region. Students arrive at college having often not attended school and therefore with all the wrong learned behaviours and mindsets." – FE College, South East

"Parental support in student engagement (i.e. attendance and behaviour) is challenging in post-16 education." – FE College, Yorkshire and the Humber

In discussion with college sector stakeholders, the office heard an individualised approach to attendance progress can be more useful than simply increasing formal attendance expectations. Leaders told the office this is partly because colleges have fewer teaching hours compared to schools and prioritise a focus on young people's course progress. The office heard how colleges provide flexibility, support and personalised pathways for students. College leaders told the office young people's engagement with learning and the college community are the priority.

However, college leader concerns about attendance show it needs greater attention. In particular, concerns about attendance are significant in the context of broader community concern about young people's participation in post-16 education and training. In 2024, 8.9% of 16 to 18-year-olds in England were not in education, employment or training (NEET), despite the legal requirement for young people to continue in education or training until they are 18.[10] That figure may be an underestimate if there are large numbers of children who are registered as in education, but who have very poor attendance. The office also heard about the difficulties for young people who need to keep resitting their English and Maths GCSEs, alongside their vocational study, and the impacts this can have on engagement and attendance.

The government's post-16 education and skills white paper includes a commitment to work with 16 to 19 education providers to track attendance by students and intervene early when attendance starts to decline, while acknowledging the different context for further education providers where young people are not expected to be present at a certain time every day.[11]

It is crucial that the sector is supported to track attendance and participation and to intervene effectively to ensure all children and young people are able to access and engage in education.

Data-led work to reduce NEET through working in partnership

Sunderland College has established a data sharing partnership with Sunderland City Council with the aim of reducing the number of young people who become NEET. Through this collaboration, the college receives detailed, individual level information on Electively Home Educated (EHE) young people aged 12–16, as well as 16 to 18 year olds in Year 12 and 13 at risk of disengagement (including those that didn't progress to post-16 provision at the end of Year 11).

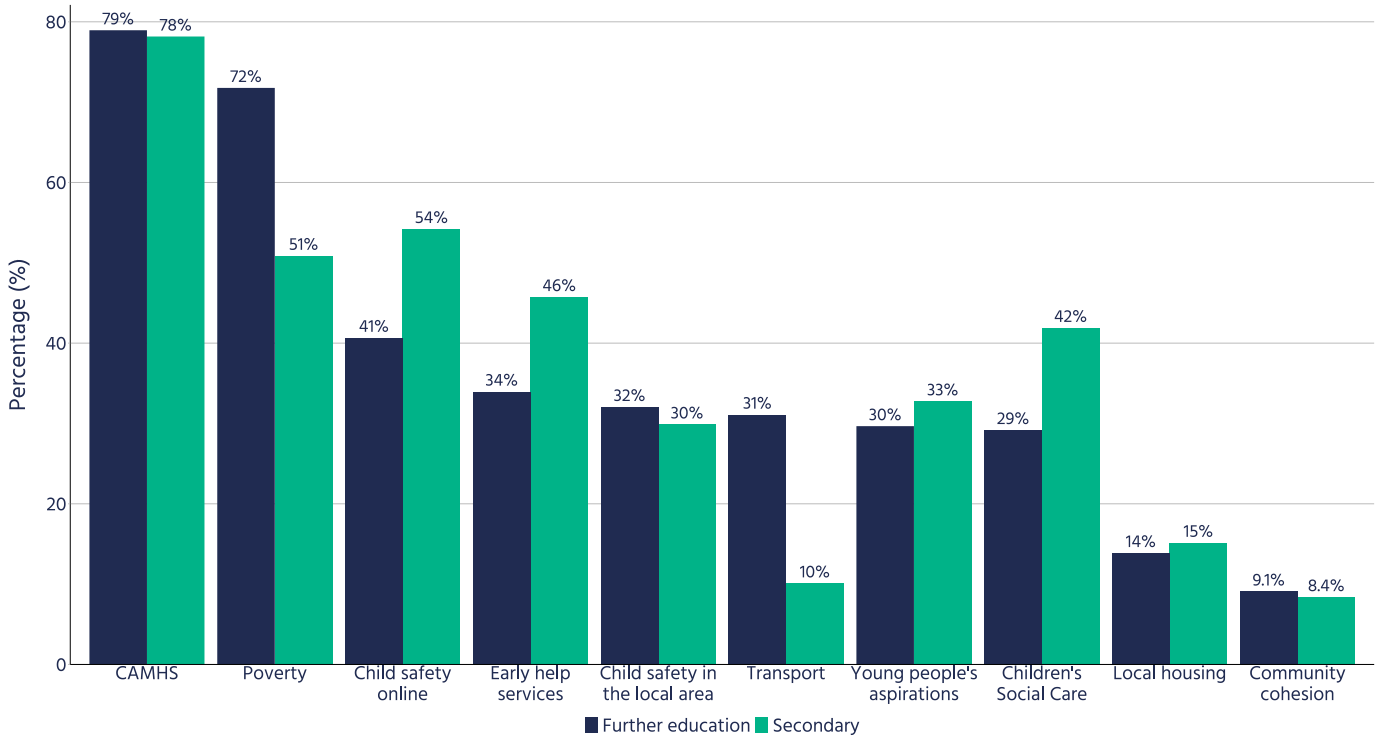
In 2024/25, 716 children and young people in Sunderland were registered as EHE, including 88 Year 9 learners, a figure that has risen substantially to 133 Year 9 learners in 2025/26. This data sits alongside information on school history, postcode, attendance, any suspensions or exclusions, SEND status, young carer status, and involvement with Youth Justice or Children's Services, enabling the college to identify risk factors intervene early and in a targeted way.

Using this intelligence, Sunderland College has developed heatmaps that integrate ward level NEET patterns with transport infrastructure information, enabling precise identification of communities where additional support is needed. This has informed the delivery of bespoke programmes such as *Bumps to Babies*, designed for young parents and other vulnerable groups. *Bumps to Babies* is delivered by the college staff in a community location working in partnership with Together for Children (Sunderland's Children's Services) and a local nursery. The data led approach also underpins the college's 14–16 EHE community provision, currently in February 2026 supporting 18 learners—78% with declared SEND—achieving an average attendance of 92.5%. Attendance is part-time provision, involving 12 hours a week in a community location with GCSE English and Maths L2 Digital qualification delivered by College staff as well as access to online learning at home.

2.2. Concerns in the local area

Colleges were also asked about concerns in the local area. The biggest concerns were mental health services for students (79%), followed closely by poverty (72%). Of the remaining concerns, colleges were relatively split with around one third of colleges citing early help services, child safety in the local area, transport, young people's aspirations and children's social care as top concerns, reflecting the diversity of colleges and their students across the country.

Figure 2: What colleges and secondary schools say are the top concerns in their local area for colleges



Note: Respondents could select up to four options

Mental health services

College leaders described difficulties for their young people accessing Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAHMS) and not being able to get the support they need. The office heard colleges are bridging and filling in gaps where other services are not able to meet need. Additionally, college leaders highlighted the difficulties young people in college face with the transition to adult services.

"CAMHS waiting lists too long, many we can't refer as they are 17 and would not get seen until they are 18 years (then in Adult care). Funding for MHST [Mental Health Support Teams] in post 16 should be directed to centrally fund

CAMHS workers/psychologists in post 16 providers, as this would have a huge positive impact on our young people." – FE College, East of England

"Working with post-16 students, one of the biggest barriers is the abrupt end to external support at their 18th birthday which will happen at some point in their final year. It would make much more sense for the transition to adult services to happen after they leave tertiary education." – FE College, East of England

College leaders' concerns about CAHMS reflect the demand they are seeing in their colleges. The Association of Colleges reports there is significant demand for mental health support with four in every five colleges surveyed reporting an increase in student disclosures of mental health issues for students aged 16 to 18. In 2025, colleges highlighted how difficulty with relationships/maturity is the most reported factor having a negative impact on student mental health. Colleges also cite generalized and social anxiety, and the influence of social media, as contributing issues.[12] It is clear that colleges are stepping in to provide support to meet the mental health and wellbeing needs of their students against a backdrop of challenges with local services.

Poverty and transport

The office found poverty was a large concern for college leaders (72%) compared to secondary schools (51%) indicating colleges are grappling with the impact poverty is having on young people and their families and across the communities they serve. Outside the use of the 16 to 19 Bursary Fund, there are no national schemes targeted at getting young people to college. The statutory responsibility for transport for 16 to 19 year olds receiving education or training rests with local authorities, and they are required to publish an annual transport policy statement specifying the arrangements the authority considers necessary.[13]

Students in colleges are more likely than other children to be from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Just under a quarter (23%) of 16 to 18 year-olds in colleges claimed free school meals at age 15, compared to 13% of maintained school and academy sixth forms.[14] The Children's Commissioner's

College Census showed 72% of colleges are providing breakfast provision and 48% are providing free food provision for families to meet this need.

There are some funding mechanisms in place to support young people in college facing disadvantage. The 16-19 Bursary Fund includes funding for defined vulnerable groups and discretionary bursaries.[15] The Bursary Fund replaced the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) which ceased in England in 2011.[16] In an evaluation of the Bursary Fund, a majority of providers reported that the fund effectively targets young people who face the greatest disadvantage, however it also found about a quarter of non-recipients stated they were struggling to cope financially.[17] In addition, there have been calls for further targeted funding for disadvantaged students, through extending the Pupil Premium – additional funding given to pupils in publicly funded schools in recognition of the attainment gap for disadvantaged students – to colleges.[18]

"They have changed the regulations around vulnerable bursary payments for looked after children and care leavers. We used to be able to pay them £1200 to help these learners that are our most vulnerable children/young adults. So as DSL I am aware some of these learners have no phone, wear old clothes, they have no access to funds themselves as the foster carers do not give them any money, when they are already so different to their peers, it is having a big impact on them." – FE College, West Midlands

The office heard that in some regions, Bursary Grants are increasingly required to mostly cover transport rather than other needs of learners. Given the fiscal constraints of colleges, many spending decisions are effectively zero-sum, meaning that the uneven picture of transport support introduces a postcode lottery into provision.

Transport was a concern for 31% of college leaders, much higher than the 10% of secondary school leaders. In free-text responses concerns about transport were raised and included affordability, the intersection with disadvantage, and the experiences of young people living in rural areas getting to the college where they want to study. Roundtable discussions highlighted concerns about the regional inequalities in how students get to college. Urban centres like London and Greater Manchester offer

free travel to 16 to 18 year olds, where rural areas do not benefit from this as well as students having further to travel. When colleges that benefit from free transport in the local area (London and Greater Manchester) are removed from analysis, 36% of colleges reported transport was a top concern (higher than the 31% for all colleges).

"Cost of living pressures cannot be underrated, it is tangibly affecting the family unit and has wider implications such as parental ability to fund transport for access to post 16 provision and aspiration beyond (HE)." – Academy 16-19 converter, North East

"Transport in rural areas is a real problem, particularly for post 16 settings where the LA [local authority] only funds travel to the nearest Sixth Form, not the right Sixth Form." – FE College, East of England

Access to affordable transport should be the reality for young people across the country. The office has repeatedly heard it is not a level playing field, with the transport costs for young people in college varying depending on where they live.

As previously highlighted by the Commissioner, the office is clear that children in low-income households must be prioritised for free travel, and they should not be disadvantaged due to the area of the country they live in. The view of the Children's Commissioner is that regular attendance and engagement at school or college is the single most important thing for a young person's future success, and transport should not be a barrier to anyone accessing education.[19]

3. How colleges are supporting students

Colleges told the Children's Commissioner about the strong pastoral, personal, and practical support they offer their students to help them belong and thrive. The office has heard children have positive experiences of further education. In *The Big Ambition* 64% of children in further education agreed with the statement "you enjoy school or college" and 80% with the statement "you have great teachers who support you".[20] In response to the question 'what do you think the government should do to make children's lives better?', 1251 young people in 16+ education provided written comments in *The Big Ambition*. Among these, 363 mentioned 'college', with comments covering a wide range of topics including SEND support, more support and safety in colleges, work experience and support for a wide range of subjects in colleges. One 16 year old boy wrote of colleges *"make closer ones OR MAKE MORE BUSES"*.

3.1. Student context

The Commissioner's Census asked colleges what they know about their young people, to paint a picture of the diverse needs of young people at colleges across the country. College leaders reported 15% of their students were receiving free school meals, with 67% of colleges able to provide an actual number rather than an estimate (figure B1). This is below the 23% who claimed free school meals at age 15 reported by the Association of Colleges (AoC). This lower percentage may reflect lower take-up rates in college despite some students being eligible for free school meals at age 15 in school, and the fact that not all apprentices are eligible for free school meals.[21] Although data on free school meal eligibility for college students is available in the Individualised Learner Record (ILR) held by the Department for Education, current published data does not easily show which further education students are eligible for them.

College leaders told the office that 1% of students were living in unsuitable accommodation, but 25% of colleges were unable to provide an estimate, so may underestimate the true number of students given that 1 in 6 children were living in overcrowded conditions in 2020/21.[22] There could be several reasons why colleges struggled to provide estimates for the number of students with particular characteristics. Firstly, colleges often operate across several sites, and so it is unclear whether reporting

of this information has been at a site or group level. This may also hinder colleges' ability to provide an actual number rather than an estimate of the number of students.

"In a post-16 setting we are aware that much of our data about personal circumstances is based on what students chose to share" – Sixth Form College, North West

College leaders told the office about obstacles to understanding the support needs of students. These include poor and delayed information sharing from schools when students are transitioning, and a reliance on the student self-disclosing personal issues, which they may not be willing to share, or may believe will negatively impact their ability to be accepted or continue on a course.

Table 1: Student characteristics as reported by colleges

To the best of your knowledge, how many of your pupils in Summer Term 2024…	Number	% of students reported by college as being enrolled
…were receiving free school meals?	82,065	15%
…were living in unsuitable accommodation?	5,338	1%
…had experienced the bereavement of someone close to them?	8,670	2%
…were on waiting lists for mental health support (including CAMHS)?	13,197	2%
…were young carers?	7,126	1%
…had a parent or carer in prison?	1,204	0.2%
…were living in formal or informal kinship care?	3,019	0.6%
…were unable to attend school, or attend full-time, due to treatment for serious or complex illnesses?	2,746	0.5%

...were unaccompanied asylum-seeking children?	4,547	1%

3.2. Provision of support

The Children's Commissioner's Census asked schools and colleges about a list of support roles and resources. This survey used language most relevant to schools and therefore the picture for colleges may not be truly representative of the sector in the same way as the Commissioner's data from schools. Any use of this data should take this into account. In discussions, college leaders also noted groups of colleges may also share resources, so provision may go beyond college and regional boundaries. Some roles and resources are discussed below but the full list can be found in Tables B1 and B3 in the Appendix. This report provides a useful starting point to understand the provision of support in colleges, with further research needed to understand the full scope of provision.

Colleges are in a prime position to support well-being and good mental health among their students. Given college concerns about funding for wider services and CAMHS, it is unsurprising but welcome that most are offering their own mental health support. Taking care of student's well-being and mental health will have knock-on effects on other outcomes for young people such as attendance, engagement, and wellbeing in the long-term.[23] Young people at college told the Children's Commissioner in *The Big Ambition* they want support for their mental health.

"Start helping kids who have had anxiety and can't get out of bed to go to college." – Girl, 18, *The Big Ambition*

"I shouldn't be frowned upon because of my mental health, I should be catered for." – Girl, 17, *The Big Ambition*

The Children's Commissioner's College census found that 98% of colleges have social and emotional well-being interventions. This provision may look different across colleges, though 81% of colleges reported having a mental health counsellor and most of these colleges had a role in-house. Just 13% of colleges used external providers to access counsellors. A room for children's well-being as another resource was provided by 82% of colleges. On visits, the office saw examples of physical spaces where

learning support, mental health support and allied health support were co-located. One college leader told the office that while support was previously provided through external services, bringing roles in-house increased capacity and allowed more young people to get the support they needed.

In discussions, the office heard about the success of the NHS trailblazer project for some colleges. This project began in 2018 and has moved from pilot phase into a national rollout in schools and colleges by 2030. It embeds child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) within college student support services with the creation of mental health support teams (MHSTs), leaving behind the traditional model where a student is referred out of college to a CAMHs clinic. Education Mental Health Practitioners are part of MHSTs and provide early support and therapy to young people as well as advise education staff about how they can support young people.[24] Findings from the Children's Commissioner's College Census show that 51% of colleges have an Education Mental Health Practitioner and of colleges who do not have one, 76% report being in favour of having one in their college.

Educational psychologists are not commonly utilised by colleges, 23% of colleges reported having this role in the college and 18% of colleges used external provision. College leaders described several reasons for this: the alternative support that colleges are providing, lower percentage of pupils with EHCPs or the time it takes for students to be assessed and receive support in the limited time colleges have with students, a shortage and high cost of educational psychologists and schools being seen as priorities.

Colleges are also supporting students with a broader range of additional needs arising from circumstances outside of their education. For instance, 68% of colleges had a staff member for supporting young carers and 41% had a staff member for supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

Some of the other resources that colleges were providing included student participation e.g. student councils (97%), sexual health clinics (45%), breakfast provision (72%), free food provision for families (48%), and youth work (44%). The College Census found few colleges reported providing internal alternative provision (22%), vaccination clinics (18%), or holiday activities provided free of charge (12%).

Colleges were also given an opportunity in the survey to say whether they wanted the various staff roles and resources they did not have. Most colleges who lacked the roles did not wish they had social workers, nurses, Speech and Language Therapists, or family liaison officers (see Table B2). In contrast most of the mainstream primary, mainstream secondary, special, and AP settings that lacked these roles

reported that they wanted them.[25] [26] This may mean that colleges are providing the support that young people would receive from these staff roles through different partnerships and programmes, or that colleges do not see this as within their remit either due to student needs or practical barriers to staffing these roles.

3.3. A focus on preparing young people for work

Colleges are operating in a unique context at the intersection of the education and skills system and play a critical role preparing young people for work and adulthood. Colleges provide varied academic and vocational provision for 16 to 19 year olds, careers guidance and workplace experiences and training. Colleges are acutely focused on preparing their young people for what comes next after their education.

The College Census found careers and post-16 support was a top concern for only 14% of colleges. This is perhaps not surprising given over 90% of colleges are meeting the Gatsby Benchmarks for careers guidance.[27]

The Gatsby Benchmarks are a framework of eight benchmarks for good careers guidance in secondary schools and for young people in college and independent training providers last updated in 2024.[28] As part of the Gatsby Benchmarks, 72% of 270 colleges surveyed reported to the Careers and Enterprise Company that the majority of their students had an experience of a workplace (excluding part-time jobs) by the time they finish their programme of study, and 98% of colleges made interviews with a qualified careers adviser available for students whenever significant study or career choices are being made. This is similar for mainstream schools, where 77% reported to the Careers and Enterprise Company that by the end of year 11, the majority of students had an experience of a workplace and 90% have had an interview with a qualified careers adviser.[29]

The office heard colleges try to ensure young people's preparation for work is holistic and takes account of their broader needs. Colleges are delivering careers support in line with the Gatsby Benchmarks while also trying to meet mental health and wellbeing challenges of their students without the funding they need. One college told the office about the success of their guidance curriculum which focused on building young people's employability and soft skills through the use of guidance advisers to develop areas such as self-confidence, motivation to achieve and interpersonal effectiveness.

"The post 16 sector is trying to get a future generation work ready, but it cannot be all to everyone. The college managed over 2,000 individual wellbeing concerns for students in 23/24 with no identified or targeted funding." – FE College, West Midlands

Of course, a key part of supporting young people to transition to work rests on the availability of opportunities for young people in the local area. There are statutory requirements for general further education colleges and sixth-form colleges to regularly review how well their education and training provision meets local needs.[30] Statutory further education institutions are also required to develop a local skills improvement plan (LSIP) in collaboration with the designated employer representative body (ERB).[31] In *The Big Ambition* children and young people told the office they are ambitious about their futures and getting a job is a top priority, underscoring the importance of these statutory processes encouraging colleges to match education opportunities and qualifications to local employment needs.[32]

However, the transition out of college to further destinations may be harder for some young people who may require targeted support. College leaders acknowledged that young people with SEND face additional barriers completing their education and in their transition to work. For example, Department for Education statistics for the academic year 2023/24 show that 66% of 16- to 18-year-old students identified as having learning difficulties or disabilities[i] in state-funded mainstream colleges had a 'sustained destination'[ii] (in employment, education or apprenticeship), which was lower than the 75% of students with no identified learning difficulties or disabilities.[33]

Research shows while job coaches working in colleges, schools and local authorities are useful in aiding transitions into employment for young people with SEND, there are systemic barriers to helping young

[i] This data comes from the Individualised Learner Record (ILR). It uses the term Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities (LLDD). This term includes disabilities that may not be considered learning difficulties, such as visual impairment. This is self-defined by students. Colleges may also have their own preferences about the terms they use.

[ii] A 'sustained destination' as defined by the Department for Education refers to sustained participation for a 6 month period in the destination year. This means attending for all of the first two terms of the academic year at one or more education providers, spending 5 of the 6 months in employment or a combination of the two.

people find employment or training opportunities which still need to be addressed.[34] These barriers for young people with SEND include a limited number of employers that can provide appropriate support during a work placement, accessing supported internships, and concerns about EHCPs ending in employment following a supported internship. Supported internships are work-based study programmes for 16 to 24 year olds with SEND who have an EHCP which are facilitated by the support of an expert job coach.[35]

In the review of the Preparation for Adulthood arrangements in local areas conducted in 2024, stakeholders also highlighted that improvements are needed to curriculum pathways for young people with SEND that enable them to participate in meaningful local employment or training opportunities.[36] As part of discussions about the College Census, college leaders acknowledged that in some cases a college might not have a suitable place on the course that a young person wants to complete. On visits, the office heard how colleges are building strong partnerships with their local community, employers and local authorities to ensure young people's pathways will lead to an employment outcome that works for them.

4. What are the barriers to providing support to students

The College Census asked college leaders about the barriers they face to providing additional support to all students and the barriers they face meeting the requirements of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) for young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). This section also explores some barriers colleges are facing supporting young people at a key transition point, moving from school to college, and how they are building innovative partnerships to address gaps.

4.1. Barriers to providing additional support

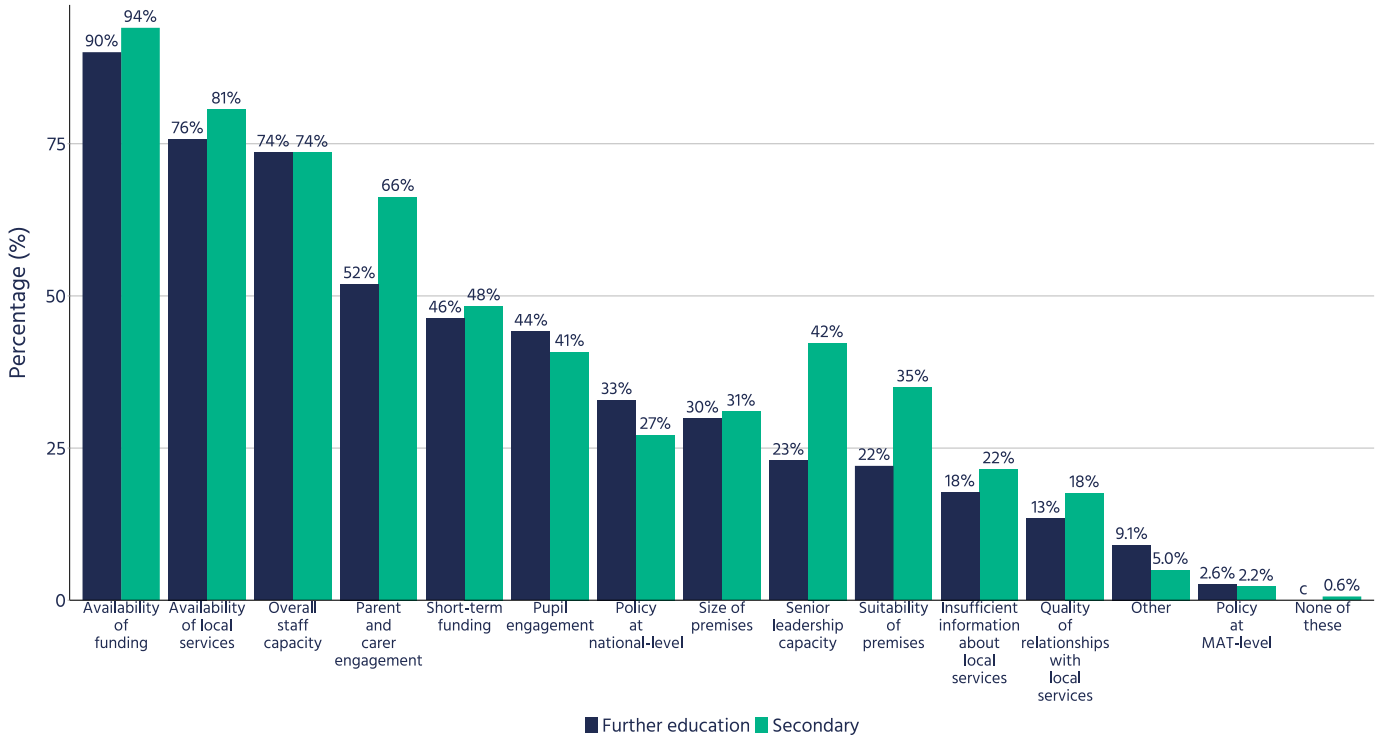
Colleges are providing additional support to young people with a variety of needs. This section explores the barriers colleges face providing general additional pastoral, personal, and practical support for all their students. Almost unanimously (90%), colleges say that the availability of funding is the top barrier to providing additional support to students. This was followed by three-quarters of colleges who reported the availability of local services and overall staff capacity as top barriers.

"Colleges are increasingly expected to fulfil the roles of external agencies (counselling, family liaison, social work, policing), without any of the funding necessary to ensure this is effective." – Free school 16-19, Yorkshire and the Humber

Parent and carer engagement was cited by half of colleges, whereas the quality of relationships with local services and insufficient information about local services were reported as barriers by fewer colleges (13% and 18% respectively).

The picture looks very similar to secondary schools, with three exceptions. A higher proportion of secondary schools saw parent/carer engagement (66% compared to 52% of colleges), senior leadership capacity (42% versus 23%) and suitability of premises as barriers (35% versus 22%).

Figure 3: What colleges and secondary schools say are the top barriers to providing additional support to students



4.2. Supporting students with SEND

Colleges are also facing barriers providing support to their students with SEND. The office heard from college leaders that SEND provision varies across general FE colleges and sixth-form colleges, including delivery through a mix of mainstream and discrete provision. Discrete provision is provision specifically designed to meet students' individual needs delivered in a more supported environment, for example with higher staff to student ratio. Around 99 specialist colleges across England and Wales provide post-16 education to young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, however specialist colleges were not within the scope of the Commissioner's College Census data collection.[37]

Discrete SEND provision in general FE colleges

While not all further education and sixth form colleges offer discrete SEND provision, the office saw examples of general FE colleges bridging gaps for students whose needs did not meet the threshold for specialist FE provision, but who needed more targeted support than in mainstream classrooms.

In one of these colleges, the office heard that numbers in discrete provision are growing every year with high needs students often coming to their college from specialist schools. As part of their discrete provision offer the college was offering supported internships, as well as a range of targeted qualifications from pre-entry to level 1. Young people attending discrete provision shared communal facilities with the broader college community, while also benefiting from more flexible classrooms, sensory spaces and a room built like an apartment, or room in a home, where young people can practice skills for independent living. The further education college also had a partnership programme working with specialist colleges, where students might spend 2 days a week in the FE college and the rest of their time in a specialist college.

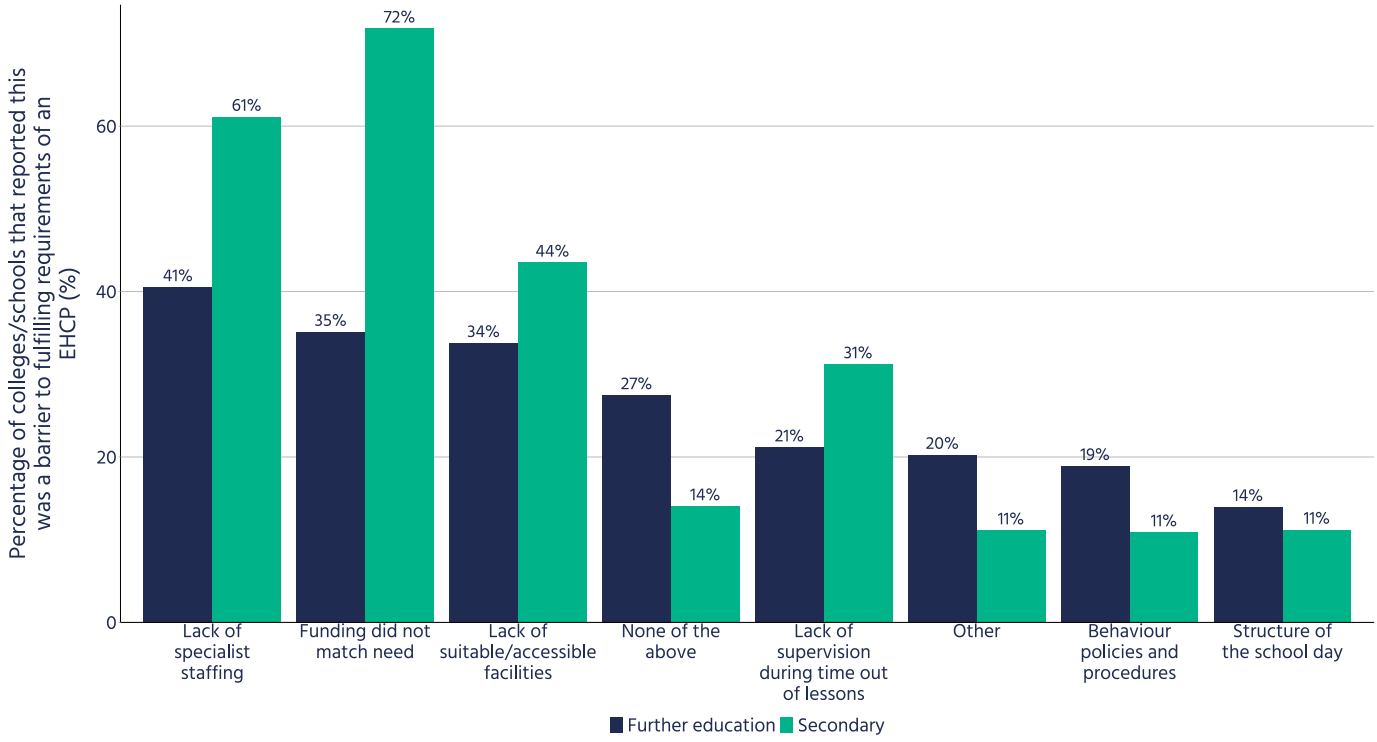
While not all young people with SEND in colleges will have an EHCP, fulfilling the requirements of an EHCP are one of the mechanisms colleges use to support their students with SEND. Based on Children's Commissioner's office's calculations of local authority SEN2 data and Department for Education participation data in 2024/25, in general further education and specialist colleges around 8.5% of the 597,909 students had an EHCP, compared to 1.2 percent of the 610,337 in other settings (i.e. schools). As the data did not break down general and specialist further education separately, the office assumed that the 20,600 young people with an EHCP in a specialist further education setting comprise the total population of young people in specialist further education. Removing them from the 579,909 shows that the percentage of students in a general further education college with an EHCP is 5%. This shows colleges have a higher proportion of SEND students than schools.

To explore the barriers colleges face to providing support, the Commissioner's College Census asked colleges about the reasons why they were unable to meet the requirements of an EHCP. Lack of specialist staffing was the top reason for not being able to fulfil the requirements of an EHCP, reported

by 41% of colleges. Funding not matching need and a lack of suitable/accessible facilities were also reported as top reasons by a third of colleges.

Just over a quarter of colleges reported none of the options were a reason that they couldn't fulfil the requirements of an EHCP nor did they give any other reasons. Almost one fifth of colleges said there were 'other' reasons for not being able to meet the EHCP requirements that were not listed as options. The themes of these written comments were around the unsuitability of a general further education college for the young person's needs, the size of the college being a challenge for the student who requires smaller class sizes, and behavioural issues and concerns of violence towards others or themselves.

Figure 4: What colleges and secondary schools say are the reasons for not being able to meet the requirements of an EHCP



Despite these barriers, most colleges were able to make reasonable adjustments for students on EHCPs. In the Commissioner's College Census, further education and sixth-form colleges were asked how, in the 2023/24 academic year, they had dealt with a list of reasonable adjustments for pupils with Special

Educational Needs and/or Disabilities (SEND).[iii] Almost all colleges were able to provide reasonable adjustments for exam/assessment support, safety and action plans and the adaptation of resources.

Access to mental health counselling was an adjustment that the vast majority of colleges were able to make. Around 10% of colleges were unable to make an adjustment for to physical therapies, mentoring and specific spaces outside of classrooms. Many of the adjustments such as uniform adaptations, access to physical therapies, alternative pathways and removal from specific subjects were not deemed a necessary adjustment for some colleges, probably due to being very specific to the students they have.

However, the office heard in discussions that addressing systemic barriers in the SEND system will enhance their ability to provide support. The office heard there are often issues with the quality of EHCPs as young people arrive in college. Additionally, colleges are navigating inconsistency across local authority processes for EHCPs, high needs funding and changes to Joint Council for Qualifications access arrangements process which is creating staffing pressures and delays in delivering support to students. Access arrangements are pre-examination adjustments allowing young people with specific needs such as SEND to access the assessment without changing the demands of the assessment, for example providing extra time.[38] Planned reforms to the SEND system recently announced will impact post-16 settings[39] and government must ensure the experiences of young people with SEND in FE are including in ongoing consultations.

4.3. Young people's transition from school to college

College leaders highlighted that the way children transition from school to college can often make providing additional support more difficult. In discussions and free-text survey responses college leaders reported challenges with delayed or incomplete information sharing, including students arriving with outdated EHCPs that do not reflect their current needs.

"A stronger focus on transition between secondary and further education, with regard to information sharing and preparing for the change in

[iii] Colleges were provided with a list of potential adaptions and could respond whether they were able to make the adjustment, unable to make the adjustment, the adjustment was not required or they didn't know.

environments between the phases, would be welcomed." – FE College, South East

College leaders told the office that colleges need enough time and information about a student's starting point to effectively plan their resources and deploy the right staff. Colleges have a shorter amount of time than schools to understand and meet their young people's needs due to the length of time young people study at the college, and therefore timely information sharing is crucial.

"The lack of information sharing as children transition from schools to the college impacts upon early support interventions." – FE College, East Midlands

In one example, the office heard how targeted data sharing between local authorities and colleges is helping colleges to think ahead and plan for the transition of future groups of students. The office heard a strong relationship with schools in the local area can help the transition. In addition to sharing of information to better target support, school student visits to colleges are used to prepare young people for their transition from a small setting to a large college and build relationships between staff in different settings. Strong information sharing in the transition from school to college could also help with managing any behaviour and safety concerns, assisting colleges to support students and address any red flags as needed. Behaviour was a top concern for 27% of colleges, and child safety in the local area a top concern for 32% of colleges.

The government's post-16 education and skills white paper proposed reforms to support the school-to-college transition.[40] Reforms include placing duties on schools to support young people who are transitioning into post-16 study and an automatic guaranteed college place for all 16-year-olds. In May 2025, the Department for Education launched a new Education Record app which will enable young people to share their education record with post-16 education providers such as colleges, however this does not include information about student's support needs and still requires a young person to share the information.[41] Colleges are building partnerships with local services and local authorities to help young people with their transition to college.

Supported transition from school to college for young people with mental health and wellbeing barriers

Sunderland College is working in partnership with Sunderland and South Tyneside NHS Foundation Trust to address the rising number of young people whose mental health problems create barriers to engaging in post 16 education. The college and NHS Trust have co located two Senior Mental Health and Wellbeing Practitioners on the college sites to provide early therapeutic support to both applicants and new starters, recognising that successful transition is underpinned not only by clinical help but also by fostering a sense of safety, belonging, and connectedness.

To support a confident, emotionally secure transition, the partners designed a programme of summer wellbeing focused transition events delivered in 2025 across two college campuses. The sessions, fully booked within 24 hours with 102 sign ups, offered structured opportunities for young people to familiarise themselves with staff, peers, routines, and college spaces, reducing anxiety around change. Crucially, the programme included guided activities that aimed to help students develop practical strategies for managing anxiety and maintaining wellbeing—for example, grounding techniques, personalised stress management plans, and peer supported confidence building exercises.

Following enrolment, all students who attended the summer events are supported through *Campus Connect*. This is a structured in-person group that helps them build friendships, strengthen their sense of belonging, and continue practicing the wellbeing strategies introduced during the summer, with the aim that they are emotionally equipped to thrive throughout their time at college. These weekly sessions are held in Future Ready Hubs, a 'one stop shop' approach where all support for students is located including common room social spaces.

Partnerships to support transitions for young people with SEND

Project Galaxy is an initiative by Elevare Civic Education Group between London South East Colleges (LSEC) and London South East Academies Trust (LSEAT). It is designed to improve the experience, transition and long-term outcomes of SEND learners across London and the South East.

While Project Galaxy considers the support and transition of all learners with SEND, it primarily uses data for transitioning learners in six of the family schools to the college across South East London; operating within our existing systems. Transition Leads monitor attendance, retention, predicted achievement rates, and weekly engagement.

It builds a strong systems level network, deepening collaboration between the College, Trust, local authorities and external partners to create coherent, cross-sector approaches to transition and support such as the School Link Programmes between the Specialist Schools and the Specialist College provision. The project also invests heavily in specialist staff training; utilising staff expertise across providers and using transition data e.g. rise in SEMH needs to tailor CPD and drive evidence-based practice. The corporate revenue funding the project covers a 16-19 Transition Lead role and a grant from the Laurel Trust funds continuing professional learning and development.

One learner joined college with a history of anxiety, inconsistent engagement, and difficulty settling into new environments. Early signs showed that transitions and changes in routine could lead to emotional dysregulation, withdrawal, or avoidance. Through Project Galaxy's strengthened transition-in processes and improved communication between the trust school and college teams, the learner entered the year with a clearer, more personalised support plan. The Transition Coordinator played a central role in this: leading communication between school and college through onsite school visits, 1:1 preparation sessions with the learner, regular contact with their family, and identifying a key person for continuity and trust. They worked closely with the College's Additional Learning Support team and curriculum staff to ensure everyone understood the learner's support needs from day one. This proactive, collaborative approach meant that support strategies were in place immediately, enabling the learner to feel safer, settle more quickly, and begin engaging with learning far more consistently than in previous settings. To date, their attendance is at 95% which has stayed consistent since transitioning from school and is 10 percentage points higher than the college's target for attendance.

5. What needs to change

This report has shown that colleges are concerned about the challenges facing young people in colleges around poverty, mental health, transport and getting the timely support they need. Colleges are building strong relationships, partnerships and providing a wide range of support while also being concerned about their own funding, student attendance, wider services for children, and staffing. This report shows colleges are providing support to meet the additional needs of their students including at pivotal times in a young person's life including the transition from school, and the transition from college to further study or employment.

Based on the findings of this report, areas for further attention for colleges are outlined below. Recommendations aim to ensure young people can access, participate and thrive in further education colleges as part of a successful transition to adulthood.

5.1. Targeted funding for colleges and local services to support the additional needs of students aged 16 to 18

The office heard there is a need for increased funding for colleges to support young people with additional needs including disadvantage, mental health conditions, and SEND. This need will increase as the numbers of 16 to 18 population is projected to rise.

One mechanism to do this is to extend the pupil premium to include young people in post-16 education, in addition to existing 16 to 19 funding. Additional funding should be targeted to provide evidence-based support for the young people who need it most.

The Schools White Paper, published February 2026, provides some welcome movement for colleges, such as proposed increases for maternity offers for staff. In terms of ensuring that Colleges are able to meet the needs of students with SEND, the proposed system focus – away from individual plans and towards wider, deeper capacity in colleges to meet the needs of all students, is welcome, and has been welcomed by the sector.[42]

5.2. Transport must be affordable for all young people travelling to college across the country

"I think the price of transport to get to college needs to be considered as they are extortionate and just simply unavailable to many people. This also has a massive impact on young peoples future as they can't afford to get to college or other places of education. " – Girl, 16, The Big Ambition

The affordability and availability of transport for young people in college is not an even playing field across the country. In her report *Growing up in a low-income family*, the Children's Commissioner called for children in low-income households to be prioritised for free travel, and that they should not be disadvantaged due to the area of the country they live in.[43] The Commissioner called for as many children as possible to have access to free bus travel. The College Census demonstrates the need to extend this ask to young people studying in colleges across England.

5.3. The school to college transition must be improved for young people through better information sharing and accountability

A smooth and supportive transition to college for young people will help prevent disengagement or young people becoming NEET, it will set them up for success.

The automatic backstop of a place in college as outlined in the post-16 white paper needs to be supported by timely information sharing from schools and local authorities so colleges can meet their young people's needs. In addition, local authorities should ensure adequate review of EHCPs in preparation for transition out of school, ensuring it is up to date, relevant and shared with colleges.

This College Census finding builds on The Children's Commissioner's Children's Plan and the series of recommendations already made for an inclusive school system.[44]

The Children's Plan called for successful implementation of a unique ID to open the door for a new era of data sharing where the data impacts children, to equip all parts of the education system to support children with a range of additional needs. Alongside this, the report called for a Children's Plan platform

to establish children's needs and set out the support they are entitled to. Implementation of these recommendations would support improved data sharing in the school to college transition, to better support young people.

5.4. Renewed focus on national data, evidence and what works to help all young people in colleges succeed

The College Census findings showed that colleges are concerned about students' mental health and the difficulties they are facing accessing support from external services. These concerns are also intertwined with worries about attendance and participation in college. Addressing these concerns are crucial to help prevent young people from becoming NEET and to transition successfully to life after college.

While College Census findings showed the large range of support colleges are providing to address these challenges, *The Children's Plan* recommended a stronger evidence base to understand if support approaches are having positive outcomes for children.

At a time when we are concerned about rising NEET levels, and supporting young people to thrive in the future, if education policy takes a too narrow focus on schools, it risks us ignoring the needs of young people in post-16 education across the country. Young people aged 16 to 18 in further education and training institutions to be included in data, policy and programmes focused on young people's education. It is a diverse sector and Government needs to national data collections better capture, publish and disseminate attendance data, outcomes data and what works for these young people.

With the recent publication of the Schools White Paper, this learning should be two ways. Officials should work with the colleges sector, and individual colleges where there is outstanding practice, to understand the existing high-quality inclusive practice that occurs in England's colleges every day, and engage thoroughly on implementation of how to spend additional and more stable core funding.

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 February 2025 and among the 18,869 schools and colleges that responded were 238 colleges. This overall response rate equated to 86% of schools and colleges in England, and 77% of colleges. The data and questionnaire have been published on the Children's Commissioner's website.[45]

Supplementary data on schools and colleges was taken from the Department for Education's Get Information about Schools service (GIAS).[46] This data was used as the school and college selector when the survey was sent out and has been used to calculate the response rate. Data in GIAS is recorded at the college group level, despite many college groups having multiple sites across which students attend. However, from a young person's point of view, they attend a particular college site, and the pastoral offering in that college may be different from other colleges in the group. Equally, sites may be able to share resources. Because the number of college sites is not captured in national statistics or GIAS, the total number of 'colleges' is not in the public domain. As a result of not being able to identify colleges sites, data in this report reflects responses by the college group rather than individual sites.

Table A1. Number of schools and colleges that responded

Type of establishment	Number of respondents	Response rate	Percentage of respondents
Further education colleges*	238	77%	1.3%
Special schools	879	84%	4.7%
Alternative Provision	280	84%	1.5%
Mainstream schools	17,472	87%	92.6%
Total	**18,631**	**86%**	**100%**

*excludes school sixth forms

Table A2. Staff roles the Census asked schools and colleges about whether they employ

List of staff roles in school or college in 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 and colleges whether they provide

List of on-site resources in school or college in 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 survey asked about the number of students in the school or college with certain characteristics e.g. young carers, those who have suffered bereavement, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children etc. This was followed by a question about whether colleges were able to provide an actual number, estimate, or unable to provide an estimate of the number of students in their college with each characteristic (see Figure B1 Annex B). There are reasons to believe that colleges may find this particularly difficult to answer given their large cohorts over numerous sites and it was unclear whether colleges were responding on

behalf of their site or wider group. Thus, the results should be treated with more caution than the school or alternative provision and special school findings.

The Children's Commissioner's office also used publicly available data from 2024/25 to calculate the percentage of students with an EHCP across different types of further education institutions. This data on participation can be found here and education health and care plan data (based on SEN2 data collection) can be found here.

The Children's Commissioner's office also carried out two roundtable discussions with sector stakeholders in January and February 2026, to test this report's findings and increase the office's understanding of the sector. Quotes from colleges included in the report are from free-text responses to the question "Is there anything else you would like to tell the Children's Commissioner?" and quotes from young people are taken from the Children's Commissioner's 2024 survey *The Big Ambition*[47].

Annex B – Data tables and graphs

Figure B1: Could colleges provide an actual number or estimate the number of students with certain characteristics

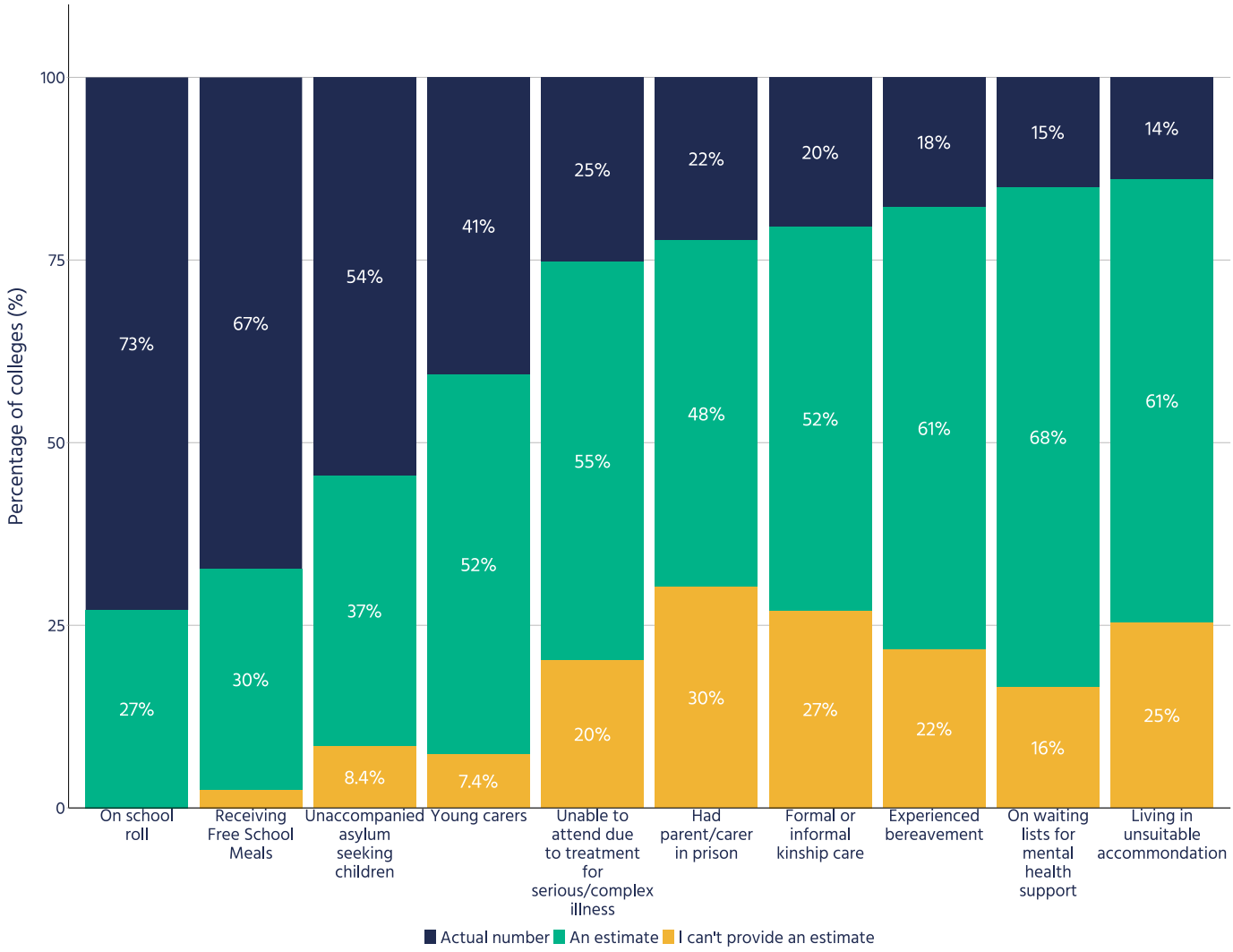


Table B1 – Staff roles by type of provision for further education provider

	Any provision	Role in college	External provision
Many colleges have:			
A mental health counsellor	81% (187)	69% (159)	13% (31)
A staff member for supporting young carers	68% (156)	64% (148)	4% (8)
An Education Mental Health Practitioner	51% (116)	35% (79)	16% (37)
An English as an Additional Language Coordinator	46% (106)	45% (103)	x
A staff member for supporting UASC	41% (93)	35% (78)	7% (16)
But many colleges don't have:			
A Police Community Support Officer (PCSO) or Safer Schools Police Officer (SSO)	35% (80)	10% (23)	25% (57)
A speech and language therapist	33% (74)	12% (28)	20% (46)
A youth worker	32% (73)	22% (51)	10% (23)
A school nurse	29% (68)	17% (40)	12% (28)
A family liaison/support officer	20% (45)	13% (29)	7% (16)
An Educational Psychologist	23% (52)	5% (11)	18% (41)
A social worker	19% (43)	x	16% (36)

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

	Colleges without a role	No, don't want role	No, but we want role
A mental health counsellor	31% (73)	37% (7)	63% (12)
A staff member for supporting UASC	62% (141)	76% (52)	24% (16)
A school nurse	82% (190)	54% (58)	46% (50)
A speech and language therapist	87% (195)	70% (57)	30% (24)
A staff member for supporting young carers	35% (81)	44% (19)	56% (24)
A family liaison/support officer	86% (195)	61% (66)	39% (42)
A Police Community Support Officer (PCSO) or Safer Schools Police Officer (SSO)	90% (205)	54% (43)	46% (36)
A youth worker	77% (177)	44% (42)	56% (53)
An Educational Psychologist	95% (216)	50% (41)	50% (41)
A social worker	96% (219)	72% (63)	28% (24)
An English as an Additional Language Coordinator	54% (124)	54% (52)	46% (44)
An Education Mental Health Practitioner	63% (144)	24% (15)	76% (47)

Table B3 – Resources by type of provision for further education providers

	Any provision	Run by the college	Run by external provider on-site
Many colleges have:			
Social and emotional wellbeing interventions	98% (226)	96% (221)	12% (27)
Student participation (e.g. student council)	97% (225)	97% (225)	x
Enrichment activities: sport	93% (213)	90% (207)	6% (13)
Enrichment activities: art, drama, music	89% (205)	87% (200)	6% (14)
A room for children's wellbeing	82% (187)	81% (186)	x
An outdoor space for children to play or learn in	72% (165)	72% (165)	x
Breakfast provision	72% (165)	72% (164)	x
Free food provision for families	48% (108)	37% (84)	13% (29)
A sexual health clinic	45% (102)	6.6% (15)	39% (88)
Youth work	44% (100)	30% (67)	17% (38)
Many colleges don't have:			
An internal Alternative Provision (AP)	22% (51)	20% (46)	x
A vaccination clinic	18% (40)	x	17% (39)

Holiday activities provided free of charge	12% (28)	8% (18)	5% (11)

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

	Colleges without resource	No, we don't want resource	No, but we want resource
A room for children's wellbeing	18% (41)	32% (13)	68% (28)
An internal Alternative Provision (AP)	75% (170)	91% (155)	8.8% (15)
An outdoor space for children to play or learn in	26% (60)	55% (33)	45% (27)
Breakfast provision	27% (62)	61% (38)	39% (24)
Enrichment activities: art, drama, music	11% (26)	42% (11)	58% (15)
Enrichment activities: sport	7% (15)	47% (7)	53% (8)
Free food provision for families	52% (118)	56% (66)	44% (52)
Holiday activities provided free of charge	85% (193)	73% (140)	27% (53)
Social and emotional wellbeing interventions	x	x	x
Student participation (e.g. student council)	x	x	x
Youth work	54% (123)	45% (55)	55% (68)
A sexual health clinic	55% (124)	67% (83)	33% (41)
A vaccination clinic	81% (182)	85% (154)	15% (28)

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