EDUCATION POLICY INSTITUTE

Educational psychologists in England

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About the Education Policy Institute

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Executive summary

This report examines the workforce of educational psychologists (EPs) across England and estimates its adequacy for meeting the needs of children. Drawing on eight years of national administrative data (2016/17–2023/24) and case studies from six local authorities (LAs), we provide the first comprehensive national assessment of EP workforce adequacy since the Covid-19 pandemic.

Headline findings:

- We have estimated the size of the educational psychologist workforce, correcting for undercounting due to the limited scope of official statistics, which were designed in an era of predominantly LA employment and no longer reflect modern service structures.
- There are currently an estimated 3,400 EPs (full-time equivalent) working in England, including those not in LA services.
- This is equivalent to 2.3 EPs per 1,000 children with SEND, nationally, with extreme levels of variation across authorities that cannot plausibly be explained by differences in need.
- The absence of national service capacity benchmarks linked to need is a serious obstacle to effective service planning.
- We interviewed six principal educational psychologists (PEPs) a private EP employing others within their business, and an independent private EP.
- There was strong agreement in this small sample that narrow job roles caused by the dominance of statutory assessments for education, health and care plans (EHCPs) led to EPs leaving LA services to seek more holistic job roles, either in other LAs or privately.
- Existing workforce capacity clusters in areas of existing infrastructure and need. Service leaders agreed that hosting trainees was critical to their efforts to stabilise staffing, and that 'home grown' EPs were vital to service sustainability in less populous and rural areas.
- Some services had stabilised their EP retention by using traded services to fund enough EP posts that they could offer broader job roles with career development into specialist roles. Others were less able to trade sufficiently to do this.
- We identified 33 LAs that demonstrated sustained high outcomes across 2017-2024 using panel data analysis with fixed effects.
- These benchmark authorities had a median coverage of 2.5 EPs per 1,000 children with SEND, approximately 10 per cent above the national average.
- Bringing the 96 authorities with below-benchmark staffing up this level of staffing would require an extra 1,400 full-time equivalent EPs.
- This would represent a 40 per cent increase in the current EP workforce, at an estimated annual cost of £140 million. Note that this would not necessarily replicate the outcomes of the benchmark authorities across the country.
- While it may appear that low retention of EPs is a barrier to expanding the capacity of services, in fact, there is a real risk that if understaffed services are not expanded, then retention in LA services could worsen, further increasing the costs of meeting statutory duties through locum EPs.

The current educational psychologist workforce

Data challenges

The major barrier to understanding the adequacy and utilisation of the EP workforce is poor data quality. Official statistics undercount the workforce as the Department for Education's data measures LA-employed EPs only. These account for approximately 63 per cent of the practicing workforce meaning that over a third of EPs, working outside direct LA employment, are not captured. Many LAs also submit missing or implausible data, or are statistical outliers. Our analysis suggests that in the latest year, this affected 46 out of 151 LAs (31 per cent). Finally, there is no national data on the amount LAs spend on providing EP services to schools.

In the medium term, it is important that the Department for Education redesigns its school workforce collection or introduces an alternative data collection that addresses the shortcomings of the official data. However, to support policy analysis in the short term, we have developed estimates to fill this evidence gap. These estimates are inherently uncertain and imprecise, but enable an understanding of the broad picture of service capacity.

Estimates of the number of EPs

We estimate the national EP workforce at approximately 3,400 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff (4,100 headcount), comprising 2,200 FTE (63 per cent) employed directly by LAs and 1,300 FTE (37 per cent) working through other arrangements (rounded to 2sf). This is equivalent to just over 39 EPs per 100,000 pupils nationally.

But there is significant variation in this rate across the country. We estimate that at LA level, coverage ranges from 11 to 210 EPs per 100,000 pupils and this 20-fold difference cannot be explained by variation in pupil needs. EHCP timeliness (a partial proxy for service levels) also varies widely across LAs. In 2023/24, the proportion of new plans issued within the statutory 20-week timeframe ranged from 3 per cent to 100 per cent, with a median of 49 per cent. These geographic differences mean parents and schools in some areas can wait months for assessments that happen within weeks elsewhere (Hayes, 2025). Each LA has its own process for completing assessments and agreeing the content of EHCPs within the requirements set out in the SEND code of practice, and local processes can also contribute to differences in timescales in addition to the capacity of the educational psychology service to complete education health and care needs assessments (EHCNAs) that underpin the plans.

We find that areas with higher socio-economic disadvantage (as measured by eligibility for Free school meals (FSM)) do not necessarily have more EP provision. Authorities with the lowest deprivation (bottom quintile, median FSM rate 15.2 per cent) have median coverage of 38.6 EPs per 100,000 pupils, nearly identical to the 38.5 EPs per 100,000 in the most deprived authorities (top quintile, median FSM rate 36 per cent).

Note that all workforce, cost, and funding estimates in this report involve substantial uncertainty. Workforce totals combine multiple data sources with known quality issues, cost estimates extrapolate from six case study LAs, outcome measures capture only what can be measured nationally, and benchmarks reflect both service quality and unmeasured contextual advantages.

We present point estimates for clarity, but readers should interpret them as indicative magnitudes rather than precise quantities. Regional and LA-level estimates are particularly uncertain given small sample sizes and data limitations.

System challenges

Recruitment and retention

Multiple indicators show that the workforce is under acute retention pressure, and the PEPs we interviewed consistently told us that they face retention difficulties if the job role for EPs becomes too narrow or has insufficient career development opportunities for experienced EPs. We also spoke with two private EPs running their own practices who previously worked in LA services, and they named the same motivation to achieve a holistic service as a primary factor in their decision to leave LA service, and the decisions of staff to join private practice. Other motivations included greater flexibility around work patterns.

Our case study interviews with six PEPs revealed several patterns, though these findings may not be representative of all services:

- Some services report no applicants for advertised posts, even for senior specialist roles.
- In some services, up to 75 per cent of EHCP assessments are fulfilled by locum EPs.
- Locum costs are often 1.5–2 times in-house staff costs once on-costs and overheads are considered.
- In some services, 40-50 per cent of staff time is consumed by statutory work and administrative burden.

Around 200 newly qualified EPs annually receive government funded training through the educational psychology funded training (EPFT) scheme, which is equivalent to about 6 per cent of the workforce. That creates limited capacity for workforce expansion while retention challenges persist.

There is potential to expand this programme because educational psychology remains a highly sought-after profession despite workforce challenges. Data from the EPFT scheme show approximately 1,100-1,500 applications annually for around 200 government-funded doctoral training places. In 2024 there were 1,463 applications for 204 places in 2024, a success rate of only 14 per cent.[1]

Retention challenges can be a barrier to rapid expansion of the EP workforce. However, the Principal EPs we interviewed believed that carefully planned expansion could unlock better retention of EPs in the future. Qualitative findings from our interviews strongly suggest that the main barriers to retention are themselves linked to low staffing levels, which result in a limited job role dominated by statutory work and few opportunities for professional advancement. Given this position, without expansion of the EP workforce, retention may worsen, creating a vicious cycle.

[1] EPFT Scheme - Data Report | Association of Educational Psychologists

Service delivery pressures

Interviewees also described service-level pressures that compound staffing challenges. Some principal EPs report needing 20-50 per cent more posts to run a balanced service that retains staff. They also reported some services operating in statutory-only modes; such services may experience long-term cost pressures due to retention failure and permanent agency reliance. Specialist roles appear important for staff retention, functioning as career development while keeping services current with evolving needs.

Local authorities that achieve high outcomes for pupils with special educational needs

We examine the LAs that, having controlled for their circumstances, achieve sustained high outcomes for pupils with special educational needs and hence provide some indicative evidence on effective provision levels. We identified 33 LAs that demonstrated sustained high outcomes across 2017-2024 using panel data analysis with fixed effects. These authorities had a median coverage of 2.5 EPs per 1,000 SEN pupils, approximately 10 per cent above the national average rate of 2.3 EPs per 1,000 SEN pupils.

Using the provision level observed among high-performing authorities as a benchmark, we provide an estimate of the funding required to bring all LAs up to this standard of staffing. Our analysis does not imply that equivalent outcomes would be achieved in all local areas should this staffing benchmark be achieved consistently across England; what it does do is establish a level of staffing that is compatible with higher outcomes and extrapolate the workforce size and steady-state cost associated with meeting that benchmark. Estimates are illustrative, reflecting the high degree of uncertainty in workforce data. The analysis highlights associations between EP workforce levels and performance indicators but does not demonstrate causation. Estimates of additional EP staffing required to match “high-performing” authorities are provided for comparative context. These estimates are descriptive benchmarks, as other contextual, systemic, and organisational factors may contribute to the differences observed.

Having accounted for local need, there are 96 LAs that are below the benchmark. Bringing all LAs up to the coverage levels observed among authorities with sustained high outcomes would require 1,400 additional EPs nationally (accounting for both LA-employed and non-LA EPs). This would represent a 40 per cent increase in the current EP workforce, at an annual revenue cost of £140 million in in-house employment costs (including salary and overheads, excluding locum spending). These represent ongoing costs and do not include extra training, bursaries, and associated recruitment costs to increase the size of the qualified workforce.

Individual LAs vary widely in required funding. Among the lowest-provisioned quarter of authorities, some would need to increase their workforce by up to 88 per cent to reach this standard. LAs have flexibility in how they meet these targets: through direct LA employment, supporting academy contracts, traded services, or commissioned provision. The analysis accounts for total EP capacity regardless of employment model.

Conclusion

This report sets out the challenges in the EP workforce in England. Our interviews with PEPs and two private EPs revealed that educational psychology can play a broad and varied role in supporting children's development in school, including but not limited to those with SEND. A balance of statutory and non-statutory work, combined with career development opportunities to lead work specialising in particular areas of need, were the shared objectives of all the EPs we spoke with. The government must now plan for careful expansion of the workforce, targeting geographical inequalities in services that are currently understaffed.

Expanding the workforce will clearly come at a cost. However, our interviews with service leaders strongly suggest that it is only possible to secure sustainable staffing by planning for sufficient capacity to provide a holistic service including more preventative non-statutory provision. Protection of the wider role and responsibilities of LA educational psychology services across all levels of the system (NAPEP, 2025) promotes sustainability of services. The counterfactual is skeleton staffing that results in greater need to use locum EPs to meet statutory duties, which is not a cost neutral choice.

Report

Introduction

Educational psychologists (EPs) play a critical role in England's education system, supporting children and young people with special educational needs, including mental health challenges, learning difficulties, and neurodiversity. In sufficiently staffed services, they also fulfil wider roles supporting school improvement in strategically important areas such as pupil attendance, behaviour management, anti-bullying, and inclusion. EPs work with children, families, educational & community settings and at a strategic level (local, regional, and national) applying psychological expertise, using consultation, assessment, intervention, training, and research at all levels of the system so that children are included, achieve and have good lives.

Yet despite their importance, we know remarkably little about whether EP provision is adequate to meet demand, how it varies across the country, or what funding would be required to ensure all children have fair access to these specialist services.

This knowledge gap has consequences. Local authorities (LAs) make decisions about EP staffing with limited evidence about what constitutes adequate provision. The Department for Education (DfE) lacks reliable national workforce data, with official statistics undercounting EPs by approximately one-third. Parents and schools in some parts of England wait months for EP assessments that happen within weeks elsewhere, yet there is no systematic analysis of this geographic inequity. Differences in timescales can result from different local processes for assessment since each LA is responsible for determining and managing these within the limits of the SEND code of practice; staffing levels and trends in requests for assessment may also influence the timescales experienced.

Recent developments make this evidence gap more pressing. The 2014 Children and Families Act expanded EP responsibilities through education, health and care plans (EHCPs), increasing statutory workload. Government commitment to mainstream inclusion will further increase demand for EP consultation, training, and supervision beyond current assessment-focused work. The 2026 schools white paper proposes further reforms to SEND provision and school accountability that would fundamentally reshape EP roles and workload demands. Meanwhile 26 per cent of EPs report considering leaving or changing their employment model within the next year, which suggests that the pressure on the existing workforce is becoming unsustainable (BPS 2024).

Prior research on EP workforce planning

A clear pattern emerges from reviewing a decade of workforce research: the EP workforce challenges documented in 2013 persist substantially unchanged today. Data quality remains a problem, geographic inequalities persist, service delivery remains fragmented between preventative and statutory work, and retention pressures have intensified. This consistency across multiple independent studies, from DfE-commissioned research to professional membership surveys, suggests that the responses so far have been insufficient.

The DfE has commissioned three major workforce studies over the past decade, each providing snapshots of EP employment. The 2013 “Educational psychology workforce survey” (DfE 2013) established workforce estimates using LA returns, finding approximately 1,800 LA-employed EPs. However, this study acknowledged significant data quality issues: incomplete LA responses, and no systematic capture of non-LA employed practitioners. The survey also identified recruitment challenges in over 40 per cent of LAs.

The 2019 “Research on the educational psychologist workforce” (DfE 2019) surveyed approximately 95 Principal EPs across 152 LAs alongside newly qualified EPs, supplemented by focus groups and interviews. The study found wide variation in service delivery models: some LAs focused almost exclusively on statutory EHCP assessments while others maintained significant preventative services. A key finding was that statutory workload had increased markedly after the 2014 reforms, with 93 per cent of PEPs reporting more demand than could be met. The report could not give a precise workforce count, noting that available data did "not provide comprehensive information about the type of employer which would permit a full assessment of the size of the EP workforce in LAs."

The 2023 “Educational psychology services – workforce insights and school perspectives” (DfE 2023) provided the most comprehensive recent assessment, combining workforce data with qualitative case studies across nine LA areas. The report found EP services "generally held in high regard" by schools and other service users, but demand consistently exceeded supply: 88 per cent of PEPs reported current recruitment difficulties. A growing proportion of EPs were moving into private practice, attracted by better pay, more varied work, and fewer statutory pressures; the DfE 2023 report found that 73 per cent of LA-employed EPs were considering leaving LA employment or reducing hours to work privately. The report estimated that about an eighth of EPs worked outside local authorities, though this included academy and MAT employment alongside independent practice.

The British Psychological Society's 2024 workforce survey (BPS 2024) documented similar concerns through a survey of 249 EPs. Seventy per cent of respondents felt children lacked fair access to EP services in their local authority. On the balance between types of work, 63 per cent of respondents reported spending up to half their time on administration rather than direct support, and a third spent more than half. Retention risks were concerning, too: 26 per cent were considering leaving within the year, with another 20 per cent undecided. The study particularly emphasised unsustainable EHCP demand, recommending that every school have a named EP and holistic SEND review to enable early intervention.

This report

This report builds on the existing evidence base to provide a comprehensive assessment of the EP workforce in England, and estimates the resources required to meet current demand.

We focus on England due to substantial policy and data differences across UK nations. The Children and Families Act 2014 and SEND code of practice apply only to England. Training funding operates through separate schemes in each nation, with different place numbers and commissioning arrangements. The DfE's school workforce census covers English LAs only, whilst

devolved governments maintain separate workforce data. These practical constraints mean findings are specific to the English context.

The report examines three research questions:

- How reliable are public data sources on EP workforce numbers? We evaluate School Workforce in England (SWE), the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) registration, and AEP membership data, developing a multi-source estimation approach.
- What is the relationship between EP provision and pupil outcomes? We find LAs that achieve the best outcomes given their resources and context.
- What additional funding is required to bring other LA's EP staffing up to the level of the best performers? We calculate national, regional, and LA-level estimates.

To answer these questions, we analyse nine years of national administrative data (2016/17–2024/25) from multiple sources, including the DfE SWE, HCPC registration data, and pupil outcomes datasets. We address data quality issues by using multiple sources to estimate the size of the full EP workforce, including non-LA employed practitioners.

Administrative datasets provide national coverage but lack operational detail about how EP services function, and what drives variation in provision. To complement the quantitative analysis presented in later chapters, we conducted interviews with principal educational psychologists (PEPs) from six LAs, plus two private EPs, between August and October 2025. PEPs lead the service in each LA and are responsible for workforce planning, service delivery, and budget management.

The case study authorities were selected to represent diversity in geography, settlement patterns (urban, rural, mixed), service size (ranging from small to large), and levels of need in their LA. Interview topics included staffing structures and costs, funding arrangements, the balance between statutory and preventative work, contemporary workforce challenges, and local drivers of need for EP services.

The report begins by setting out those qualitative findings from the PEP and EP interviews before presenting our quantitative analysis of workforce adequacy and funding needs.

Service organisation and funding

This chapter presents the qualitative findings from these interviews. While the small sample size of six LAs limits generalisation, the interviews provide essential context for interpreting the quantitative patterns documented later.

The five-tier staffing model

EP services operate hierarchical staffing structures comprising up to five tiers, though not all authorities employ all tiers. The PEPs we interviewed described the following structure:

- A PEP (or job share by two co-PEPs) who leads the service and manages the budget, staffing, service level agreements, and wider governance while also doing some front-line work to keep their practice and professional registration up to date.
- Senior or specialist qualified EPs who provide consultancy and supervise other EPs, and may have a geographical area lead role or a specialist role (examples of 'Lead for' roles included neurodivergent children; virtual school children; early years; social, emotional and mental health; speech, language and communication needs; cognition and learning).
- Main grade qualified EPs whose core role is delivery of education health and care needs assessments (EHCNAs) and school support, but in some services are also attached to a particular specialist area of support.
- Trainees undertaking a doctorate in educational psychology and placement under supervision of qualified EPs, receiving bursaries provided by central government in their first year and by the placement LA, or alternatively salaried by the LA in their second and third year.
- Pre-training assistant EPs, sometimes on fixed-term contracts, sometimes with a background in teaching, who undertake limited tasks while shadowing qualified EPs, to help to meet demand for assessments and consultative work, with a career pathway to undertake training to become qualified EPs.

The role of specialist positions in retention

Several PEPs reported that specialist roles (tier 2) are critical for staff retention, functioning as career development opportunities for more experienced EPs whilst keeping services up to date with evolving needs and challenges. Without these positions, services risk becoming solely assessment-focused, which may reduce job satisfaction and increase turnover.

Training pipelines and rural challenges

Trainee placements (tier 4) were viewed as essential to ensure the sustainability of local services by providing a pipeline of candidates for qualified roles. Several PEPs, including those in rural contexts, emphasised the importance of "home-grown" pipelines of locally trained EPs to maintain staffing levels for statutory duties and reduce reliance on expensive locum EPs.

One rural LA described how losing trainee placements would be "catastrophic" for workforce sustainability. Local universities provide the only realistic recruitment pipeline, as newly qualified

EPs from elsewhere rarely move to the area. The LA invests heavily in supporting trainee placements despite tight budgets, viewing this as essential infrastructure rather than discretionary spending. Without this pipeline, the LA estimates it would need to rely on locum EPs for 40-50 per cent of statutory work within five years.

Not every service employed assistant EPs (tier 5), with some preferring trainees as the entry point. However, LAs using this role reported that assistant EPs (often former teachers) brought valuable classroom insight whilst generating a sustainable pipeline of future trainees. The additional capacity also helped manage assessment backlogs.

The locum and agency workforce

Most services used additional agency locum EPs or affiliated individual associate EPs working under contract, to manage the case load of EHCNAs, fluctuations in the size of the employed team, and difficulties recruiting permanent staff to vacancies. These were either private EPs, employed by a different LA and taking on additional work, or stepping down towards retirement through part-time employment supplemented by contract work

Across the six case study authorities, the proportion of EHCNAs delivered by contractors ranged from under 5 per cent to roughly three-quarters, with half of services outsourcing at least 40 per cent of statutory work in 2024/25. Several reported commissioning more than 500 agency days (about 250 assessments at two days each) simply to keep pace with statutory timelines, indicating that agency capacity has become a structural feature rather than an emergency measure. Even the best-staffed services retained a small (about 5 per cent) locum buffer for sickness, tribunal surges, and specialist assessments.

Locum fee structures reflected this leverage: daily rates sat between £500 and £700, and statutory advice packages purchased externally commonly cost £1,200–£1,300 for the two days of work typically allocated per assessment. Those prices represent roughly 1.5–2 times the full economic cost of salaried EP time once employer on-costs are included, and they purchase assessment hours only. Since locums do not contribute to supervision, traded training programmes, or trainee support, heavy reliance on agencies displaces the preventative work that interviewees most wanted to grow.

One service mentioned that their EHCNA caseload was pushing the service into budget deficit because increased numbers of assessments could only be met through substantial use of contracted workers at twice the cost of in-house EPs. Some services mentioned having no applicants for advertised in-house posts, even to senior specialist roles, due to national shortages of EPs and cost of living pressures incentivising private work to make ends meet. Up to three quarters of EHCNAs are being fulfilled by contracted EPs. Some services also have other roles such as a clinical psychologist.

Funding models

EP services are funded through varying combinations of LA central funds, Dedicated Schools Grant allocations, and income from traded services. The balance between these sources has implications for service breadth and equity of access.

PEPs reported both advantages and disadvantages of traded service models. On the positive side, traded income enabled fuller services with more preventative and school improvement support than core funding alone would permit. However, trading also created engagement barriers. Schools with limited budgets (particularly private and voluntary early years providers and childminders) could not afford to purchase support, creating potential differences in access to preventative services.

One service operated as fully traded except for statutory work, receiving no core funding for non-statutory school support. Most services occupied a middle ground with core-funded statutory work and limited core-funded preventative services, supplemented by traded offerings. One long-established service offered funded support to all children's services in the local area, having built strong multi-agency integration over decades. Treatment of academies varied: one service provided funded support to maintained schools but required academies to purchase services, whilst others treated all schools equivalently.

The interaction between traded services and locum costs created financial complexity. Some PEPs reported using income from traded services to pay for locum EP time during peaks in statutory caseloads. One service reported that some trading income was transferred by the LA to other services unrelated to educational psychology, despite unmet priorities within the EP service. Other services used trading income to fund continuing professional development, trainee positions, recruitment campaigns, or licenses for assessment tools required for statutory work.

Activities and objectives of educational psychology services

Services provide a combination of activities with PEPs indicating that a 'good' service that remains able to retain staff and contribute strategically to the prevention of needs escalation involves a holistic combination of work.

The types of work undertaken by EP services described to us included:

- Preventative and early intervention case work, including work with parents/carers, sometimes focused on embedding a graduated response and plan-do-review expectations from the SEND code of practice (this existed only in some services, and was often described as under-resourced, or had to give way to rising statutory caseloads).
- Statutory EHCNAs (all services undertook these, often allocating two days per assessment, and some better-staffed services additionally attended EHCP annual reviews, either routinely or in targeted complex cases).
- Time allocated to individual schools for systemic work to support whole-school SEND through ordinarily available provision, and to support school attendance, inclusion, and other school improvement priorities through consultative work and training for school

staff (all services provided this in some form, sometimes only as a traded service, sometimes as an allocation of time from the funded service, and sometimes on a needs-led flexible basis rather than a guaranteed allocation).

- Consultative, training, and supervisory support to new or existing resourced provisions in mainstream schools (mentioned as a current priority in some services).
- Traded service-level agreements to support other services such as CAMHS therapeutic teams, mental health support teams in schools and colleges, children's social care services and the virtual school for children looked after by the LA, family hubs, autism advisory services, LA school improvement teams or exclusion teams, youth offending teams, community paediatric services, and multi-agency safeguarding panels (services typically had several examples of this with only one exception).
- Critical incident response (some services mentioned this, when schools or other services require emergency support, e.g. when there has been a violent incident or serious accident/disaster affecting local children, such as the sudden death of a pupil or staff member).

Statutory work was often underpinned with supplementary locum EPs to support peaks and troughs in assessment numbers and staffing. Most PEPs reported that EHCNAs need to be undertaken face-to-face to ensure the child's needs are properly understood, and some said that this makes the task more time consuming, particularly in rural areas. One service that had developed video-based assessment out of necessity during the pandemic continued to use this to secure adequate staffing to tackle their ECHNA backlog and found it satisfactory.

PEPs frequently told us they required additional budget for several new EP posts to properly meet local needs, especially for early intervention, and systemic preventative support for schools. Some were using traded services for schools as the sole source of funding to staff non-statutory work, and it was frequently reported to be under-resourced and limited in scope and scale as a consequence.

Examples of systemic and strategic non-statutory work undertaken by services whose PEP we interviewed included providing training for school staff to undertake specialist roles such as emotional literacy support assistants and mediated learning support approach practitioners, consulting on relational practice work in schools and underpinning this with attachment theory, advocating for psychologically-informed school behaviour support that accommodates additional needs, supporting the design of particular school policies such as anti-bullying, or embedding student voice in school information systems, work with targeted at-risk groups and families, and embedding preparation for adulthood in SEND provision.

Research and evaluation into intervention work, traded therapeutic interventions, support to the virtual school, and working with PINS partnerships to support neurodivergent children in mainstream schools were all mentioned as functions that some services were not able to resource either because they lacked funding or had staff shortages, despite believing these were important work for them to undertake.

Variations in service models

We asked each PEP what proportion of staff time was absorbed by statutory work (primarily undertaking EHCNAs) with individual children. Of the five responses we received to this question, three services reported this was approximately 50 per cent of staff time, one reported it was 40 per cent and one reported it was 23 per cent.

We also heard from PEPs that non-statutory work to support schools reached a varying proportion of schools in the local area. Broadly this was lower where there was a greater reliance on traded services that schools had to fund from their budgets, but PEPs also reported that some schools had less understanding of the benefits of such preventative and early intervention work and were more focused on securing EHCPs for children with SEND.

Two services reported that they routinely worked with all schools in their local area on non-statutory work, and a third reported that all schools had a link EP available but time in the school depended on purchasing traded services; others reported engagement with two-thirds, one-third, or fewer schools. All had the objective of working with all schools, and some were either recovering from staffing shortages or building up newly developed traded services as the level of funding available from the LA's general grant decreased over time.

Most services reported a mixed model of non-statutory support provided from LA funds and from traded services. Often in those with a core offer funded by the LA this provided some support but frequently required traded top-ups to secure a holistic service that had adequate strategic and preventative work to meet the needs of the school.

One service offered some funded support to all children's services in the local area, having been established as a valued highly integrated community service for many decades. One service provided funded support to mainstream schools but traded support to academies, whereas others reported treating all local schools on the same basis. One service was fully traded apart from statutory work, receiving no funding for non-statutory support to schools, whereas most had limited funded offers.

Drivers of need

We asked each PEP to describe the local or national factors that influenced the need for services in their area, and in particular increases in statutory caseloads in recent years. A broad range of factors were reported as significant drivers across different local areas.

A notable increase in numbers of EHCNA requests was linked to fear and uncertainty about the nature of forthcoming national reforms to the SEND system according to some PEPs we spoke to, with schools and parents sometimes choosing to act now and not wait before requesting EHCNAs in case their availability is restricted in some way in future.

Examples of drivers of children's social care needs in the local community included the following:

- Increases in children looked after populations, particularly cross-LA-border placements.
- Violence against women and girls affecting children's wellbeing.
- Community deprivation levels.

- Care placement breakdowns due to unsuitable matches.
- Local child deaths prompting serious case reviews.
- Refugee and asylum-seeking children requiring adjustment support, housing advocacy, and trauma intervention.

School system pressures

The following pressures affected EP demand:

- Inflexible school behaviour policies, particularly in secondary schools, that do not accommodate additional needs.
- Mixed attitudes among school staff towards relational and trauma-informed practice.
- Lack of parental confidence in schools and positive relationships between schools and local communities.
- Increases in elective home education, sometimes linked to small schools having less flexibility and resources to deploy or shortages of school support staff, and shortages of local alternative provision and special school capacity.
- Shortages of link EP time to spend in schools de-escalating needs before they reach a threshold for statutory assessment.

PEPs also reported several national trends that were influencing caseloads in their local services, including the following:

- Rising diagnosed autism prevalence and parental awareness of autistic spectrum disorder.
- Increasing emotionally based school avoidance and non-attendance.
- Broader school engagement and attendance challenges.
- Needs related to ethnic diversity, requiring anti-bullying and anti-discrimination work.
- Greater parental access to private assessments and legal representation in SEND processes.

These drivers interact. For example, inflexible school policies may contribute to school avoidance, which increases EHCNA requests, which reduces available link EP time for preventative work in schools, which may further increase needs escalation.

The educational psychologist workforce

Understanding the size and composition of the educational psychologist workforce in England is essential for assessing whether provision meets need and for planning future funding. However, quantifying the EP workforce is remarkably challenging, particularly at LA level where resource allocation decisions are made.

No single data source provides a complete or reliable picture. Official statistics from the DfE capture only EPs employed directly by LAs, missing those working through private practice, agencies, multi-academy trusts, and other arrangements. EP employment arrangements have diversified over the past decade, with an estimated 37 per cent of practicing EPs now working outside traditional LA employment.

Moreover, even the official statistics that should capture LA-employed EPs contain systematic errors and missing data. When we cross-validate the SWE against professional membership data, we find that many LAs either fail to report workforce data entirely or provide figures that are implausible.

This section presents comprehensive workforce estimates produced by integrating multiple independent data sources, applying statistical validation to identify and correct errors, and transparently flagging the quality and source of all estimates. These proportions are estimated by triangulating HCPC register data with DfE workforce surveys and AEP membership. Full details of our estimation methodology appear in Annex A.

Available data sources

Four independent data sources provide complementary perspectives on the EP workforce. Table 1 summarises their characteristics, coverage, and limitations.

Table 1: Comparison of EP workforce data sources

Data Source	What it measures	Geographic coverage	Latest national total	Key limitations	Our use
School Workforce in England (SWE)	LA-employed EPs (employment location)	LA-level time series (2010-2024)	2,726 headcount	Missing data for some LAs; excludes non-LA EPs	Estimating LA-employed workforce
HCPC Register	All registered EPs (home address)	Regional time series + LA snapshot (2024)	4,110 registered	Includes non-practicing registrants; uses home address	Total qualified workforce baseline
AEP Membership	Professional body members (voluntary)	LA-level time series (2016-2025)	1,959 members	Voluntary membership (under-coverage); no FTE data	Predictor for imputation
Interview Data	Direct LA reporting (qualitative)	6 LAs (2025)	6 LAs only	Small sample; validation only	Validation

School Workforce in England (SWE) provides LA-level data on directly employed EPs from 2010/11 to 2024/25, reporting between 1,478 and 2,726. This is the most detailed geographic data source but excludes EPs working through private practice, agencies, and multi-academy trusts. Additionally, as detailed below, it contains substantial data quality problems, particularly in earlier years.

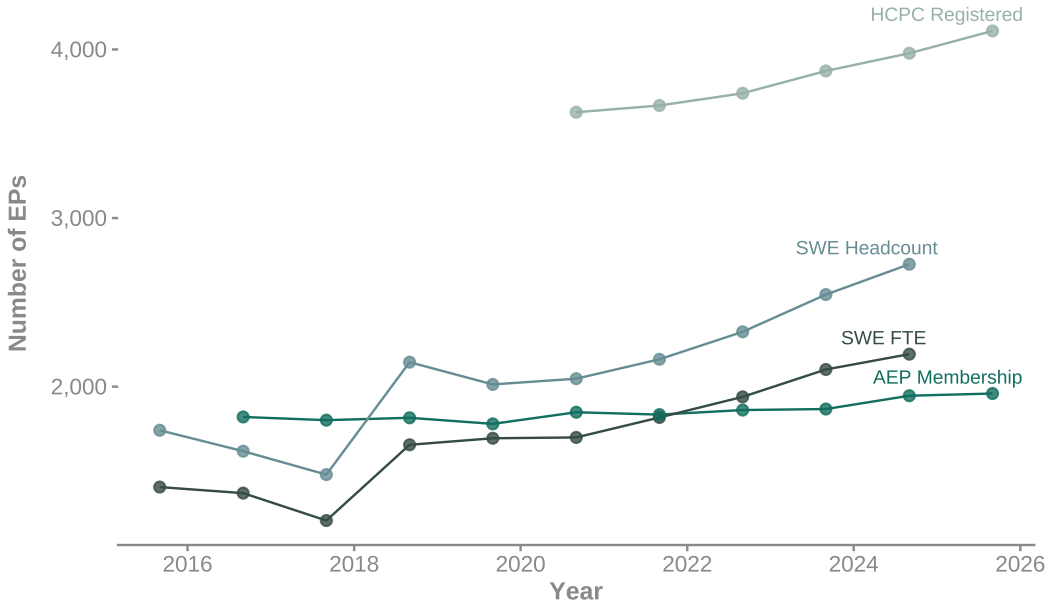
The HCPC professional register captures all registered EPs in England (4,110 registrants in 2024), including both practicing and non-practicing individuals. Geographic attribution uses practitioners' home addresses rather than employment locations, which creates discrepancies for LA-level estimates but provides robust upper bounds for validation.

AEP membership data shows voluntary professional body membership growing from approximately 1,800 to 2,000 over 2016-2025. This undercounts the workforce but provides useful predictive information for statistical modelling.

Interview data from our 2025 fieldwork with six LAs provides qualitative validation and enables out-of-sample testing of our statistical models.

Figure 1 shows how these sources track since 2016/17.

Figure 1: EP workforce in England: raw data



The gap between HCPC and SWE tells an important story: the EP workforce has diversified beyond traditional LA employment. This creates a fundamental measurement challenge because the official statistics were designed to capture LA employment, which no longer reflects reality for many EPs.

Data quality challenges

SWE is our primary source for measuring the LA-employed EP workforce, but there are several issues with the apparent data quality that must be addressed before using it for analysis. The SWE relies on self-reported data from LAs, which is not always accurately reported to DfE, or may not be reported at all.

We apply six validation rules to identify potential data quality issues in the SWE data. These rules flag observations that are replaced with model estimates in our analysis. None are conclusive evidence of errors, but all are highly suggestive. The rules identify the following types of issues:

- Missing LAs: Some authorities never appear in the SWE despite external evidence of EP employment from HCPC and AEP data.
- Temporal gaps: Many authorities report in some years but not others, creating holes in time series.
- Implausible zeros: Large authorities reporting zero EPs despite HCPC showing 25-55 registered practitioners in those areas (educational psychology is a statutory service under the 2014 Children and Families Act).
- Impossible ratios: Full-time equivalent exceeding headcount in some observations.
- Cross-source violations: SWE headcount exceeding HCPC registrations by more than 2.5 (the maximum rounding error from HCPC's disclosure control), which is unlikely but not impossible because of differences in geographic measurement.

- Temporal outliers: Year-on-year changes in LA EP headcount exceeding 100 per cent and moving by at least 5 FTE, indicating likely data entry errors. Eg 6 EPs in one year, but 13 in the following year.

The validation rules applied are not entirely consistent across years due to data source availability. Cross-source validation against HCPC registration data only becomes possible in 2024/25 when LA-level HCPC data became available. Similarly, AEP membership data (used for imputation) is only available from 2016 onwards. When interpreting temporal patterns in Figure 2, be aware that changes in flagging rates reflect both genuine data quality changes and methodological differences in what validation checks are possible.

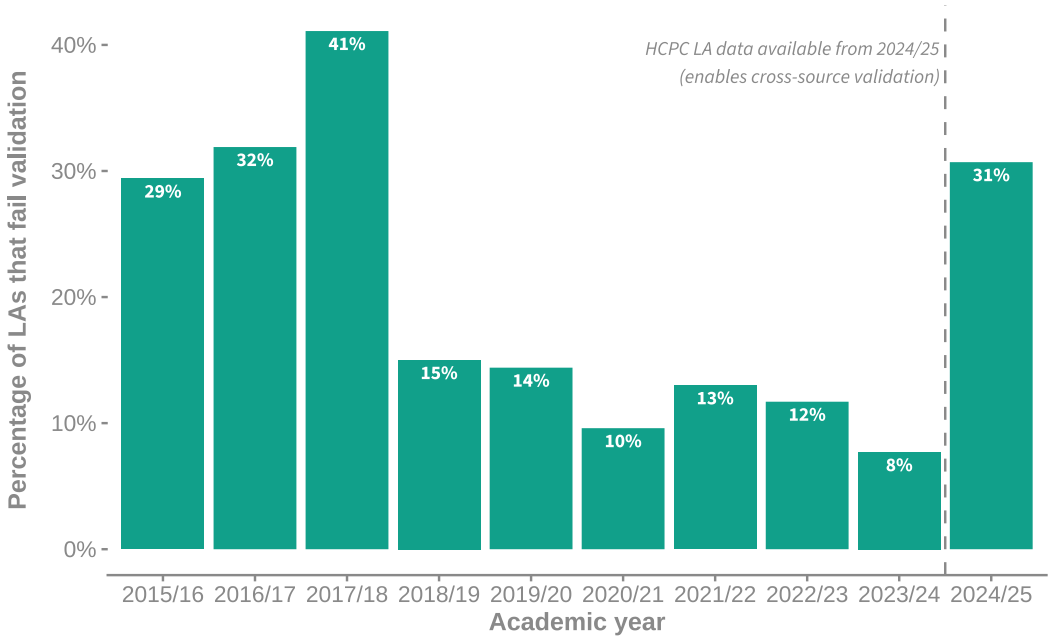
Cumulatively, approximately 31 per cent of LAs trigger at least one validation flag in the latest year of data. Table 2 shows which validation rules were triggered in the most recent year's SWE data. Five LAs in 2024/25 trigger multiple validation rules, so the counts do not sum to the total percentage flagged.

Table 2: Validation rules triggered in LA-level SWE workforce data (2024/25)

Issue	Number of LAs	Percentage
SWE exceeds HCPC registrations	23	15%
Missing data	12	8%
Zero EPs reported (but HCPC shows EPs exist)	8	5%
Year-on-year outliers (>100% change)	6	4%
Headcount:FTE ratio errors	2	1%

The temporal pattern reveals significant variation across the decade (Figure 2). Early years of the SWE collection (2015-2018) show high rates of validation flags, with 29 to 41 per cent of LAs triggering at least one rule. Data quality improved markedly between 2018 and 2021, dropping to single digits in 2023/24 when just 8 per cent of authorities had validation flags. However, the 2024/25 collection shows 31 per cent of authorities flagged. This increase is primarily methodological rather than reflecting genuine data quality deterioration: LA-level HCPC registration data became available for the first time in 2024/25, enabling cross-source validation (checking whether SWE exceeds HCPC registered EPs) that was not possible in earlier years. Of the 46 LAs flagged, 23 are due to this new cross-source check. When accounting for data source availability, the SWE data quality in 2024/25 seems comparable to 2023/24. Note that our pupils-per-EP coverage analysis presented later uses 2023/24 data (the latest year with pupil data).

Figure 2: Prevalence of data validation issues across SWE years



These data issues have important consequences. Workforce planning requires accurate baseline measurements; policy design depends on fair comparisons across authorities; and accountability for statutory duties relies on reliable monitoring. At present, the official statistics alone are not robust enough to support these functions.

To mitigate these problems in the short term, we treat the raw statistics as inputs to a broader estimation process rather than as definitive counts. Consequently, the numbers in this report should be treated as the best available estimates derived from imperfect data rather than precise measurements. They reflect what can be achieved by careful validation and modelling using existing data, not the level of accuracy that could be obtained from a redesigned collection. Ultimately, a better solution would be for the DfE and LAs to address the root causes of SWE quality problems.

Our estimation approach

The estimation approach then specifies how we construct these corrected figures in practice by combining three independent data sources and cross-checking them against each other. It has three key features:

- Validation: We apply statistical tests to flag implausible values in the SWE data, as detailed above.
- Statistical modelling: When SWE data are missing or flagged as implausible, we use statistical models to estimate the most likely workforce size based on the LA's pupil numbers, SEN prevalence, AEP membership, and regional patterns. This gives us complete coverage of all LAs with plausible estimates.
- Non-LA workforce estimation: We calculate the non-LA workforce by subtracting our validated LA-employed estimates from the total HCPC registrations. This is most likely an

overestimate of the non-LA workforce, as some registered EPs may not be practicing, but it provides an upper bound.

The correction process uses two-stage validation for headcount data. First, rule-based checks flag potential issues: missing data, impossible ratios, year-on-year outliers, and other anomalies. Approximately 36 per cent of LAs trigger at least one validation flag in 2024/25. Second, we apply statistical validation using a multi-source model that predicts SWE values from HCPC registrations and AEP membership, generating 95 per cent prediction intervals. Headcount data outside these intervals are replaced with model estimates, whilst data within the intervals are retained even if they triggered validation flags.

This means 36 per cent of LAs are flagged for review, but only 5 per cent have their headcount replaced or modelled: most flagged values remain plausible when cross-checked against the HCPC and AEP sources. Adjustments can be both upward and downward. Missing LAs have their counts imputed, while overreporting LAs are adjusted downward. At a national level, that means the numbers change little, but greater changes occur at an LA level, which is important for our later calculations of LA-level shortages.

After determining headcount sources, we calculate FTE from headcount using observed regional headcount:FTE ratios and apply temporal interpolation to fill short gaps in time series. Complete technical specifications of validation rules, regression models, and replacement methods appear in Annex A.

Note that all estimates are reported rounded to two significant figures to avoid giving a false sense of precision. However, the underlying calculations were made at full precision to avoid compounding rounding error.

National workforce estimates

Table 3 presents our final estimates of the EP workforce in England for 2024/25, combining LA-employed estimates with non-LA workforce calculations. We are unable to say how many EPs may work in both LA and private practice. Note that workforce figures reflect 2024/25 data, while pupil-based coverage metrics presented later combine this workforce data with 2023/24 pupil numbers.

Table 3: National EP workforce estimates (2024/25)

Category	Headcount	FTE	Percentage
LA-employed	2,600	2,200	63%
Non-LA arrangements	1,500	1,300	37%
Total practising workforce	4,100	3,400	100%

Note: all figures are rounded to 2sf and may not sum to the total.

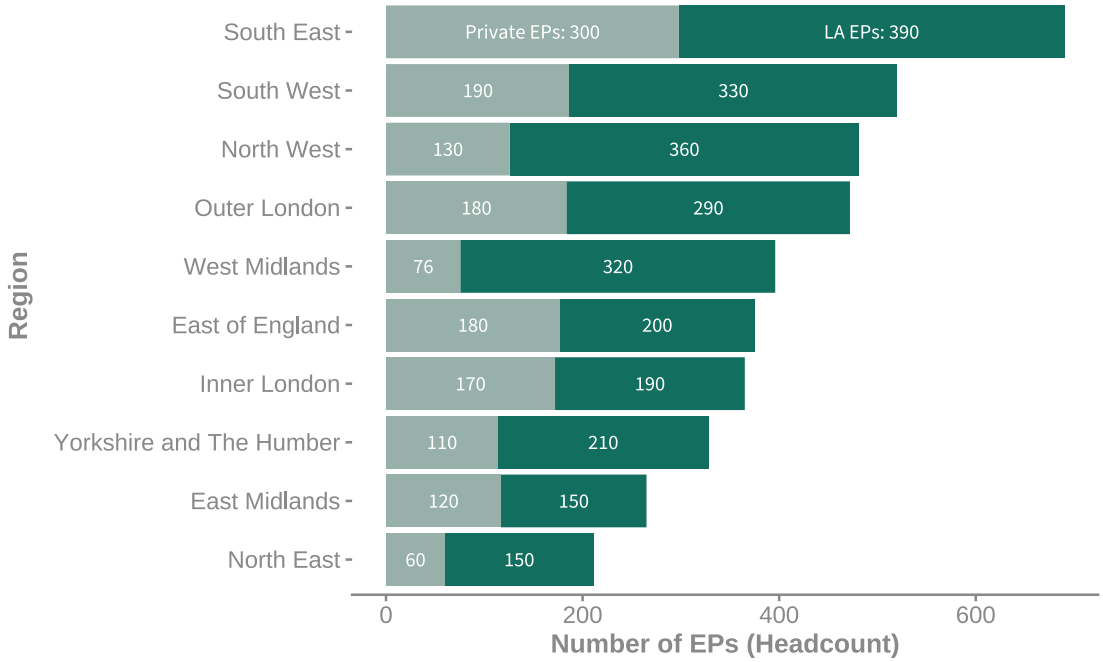
The national workforce totals approximately 3,400 FTE EPs. Approximately two-thirds (63 per cent) are employed directly by LAs, with the remaining third (37 per cent) working through private practice, agencies, and multi-academy trusts.

The growth of non-LA employment arrangements creates both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, it provides LAs with flexible capacity to manage demand peaks and access specialist

expertise. On the other, it complicates workforce planning and makes measurement more difficult, as evidenced by the fact that official statistics entirely miss this substantial segment of the profession. Without improvements to national data collection, it will remain difficult to gain a complete picture of the current state of the EP workforce.

Figure 3 shows how LA and non-LA employment are distributed across regions. While the national average is approximately 1.7:1, regional variation exists, with some areas appearing to rely more heavily on non-LA arrangements than others. Note the caveat that these estimates are subject to uncertainty, particularly for the non-LA workforce which is derived as a residual. It could also be that some regions have higher proportions of non-practicing registrants, which would bias our estimates.

Figure 3: Regional distribution of LA-employed vs non-LA EP workforce (2024/25)

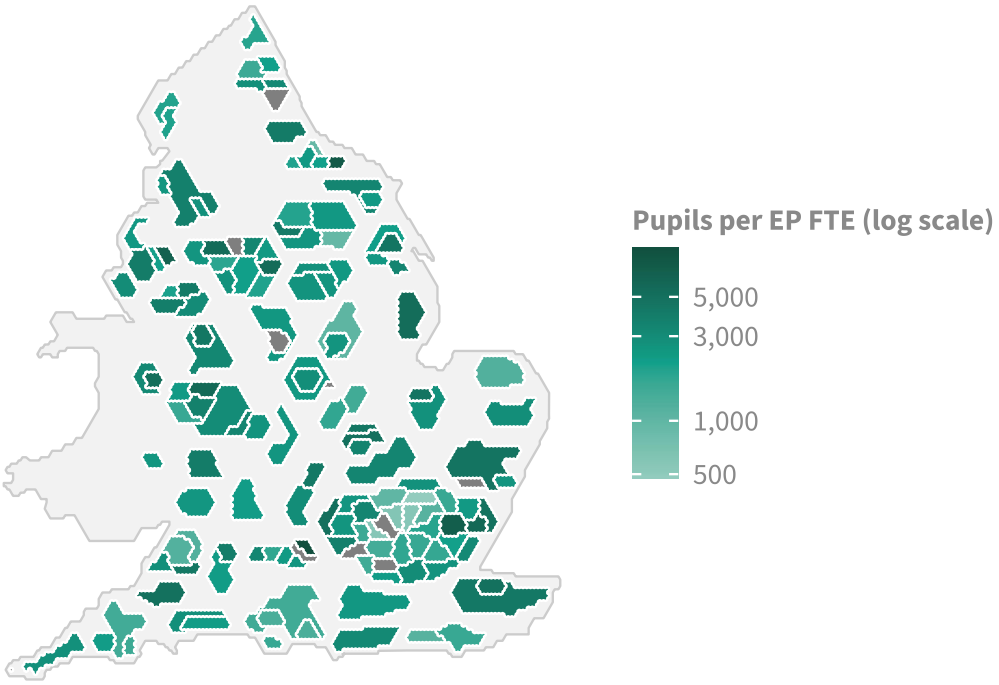


Note: all figures are rounded to 2sf and may not sum to the total.

Geographic variation in provision

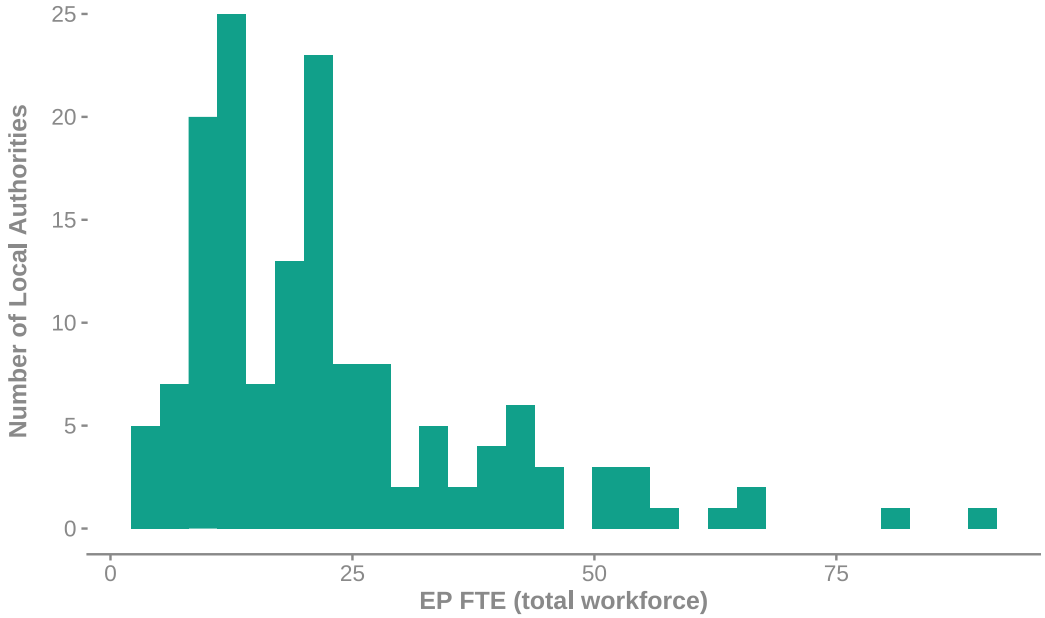
While national totals provide important context, LA-level variation reveals dramatic differences in access to EP services. Figure 4 shows pupils per EP FTE across England, with darker colours indicating poorer coverage (fewer pupils per EP). Note that some LAs are greyed out due to unavailable data in 2023/24.

Figure 4: Pupils per EP FTE across LAs (2023/24)



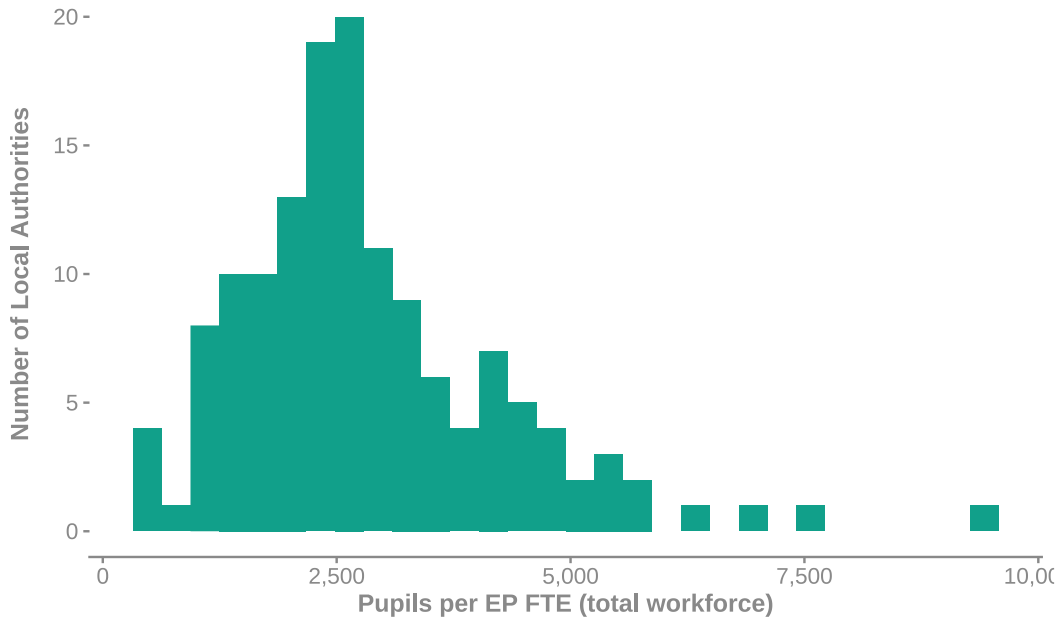
The absolute size of LA EP workforces varies widely (Figure 5). Most LAs employ between 10 and 40 EP FTE, but the distribution is right skewed with some large county councils employing over 100 EP FTE. The median LA has 20 EP FTE. However, remember that these figures reflect our corrected estimates rather than raw SWE data, so the outliers are less extreme than in the uncorrected statistics and the overall distribution is smoother. We hope it is a more accurate reflection of reality, but we cannot verify that without better data.

Figure 5: Distribution of EP FTE across LAs (2024/25)



However, absolute workforce size does not reveal adequacy of provision. In Figure 6 we adjust the EP numbers for pupil populations in each LA. Provision ranges from 480 pupils per EP in the best-covered LA to over 9,400 in the least-covered, which is a 20-fold difference. The median LA has approximately 2,600 pupils per EP FTE.

Figure 6: Distribution of pupils per EP FTE across LAs (2023/24)



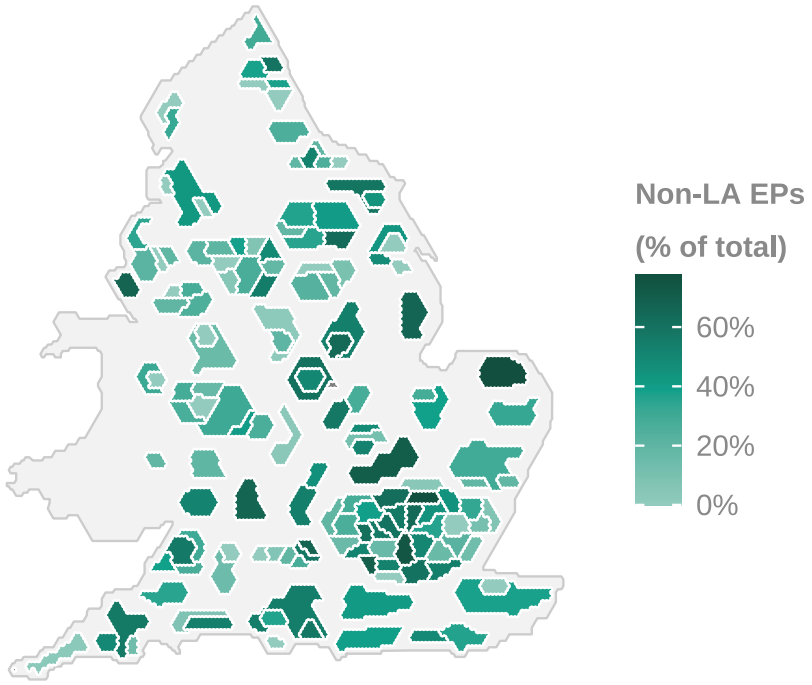
Even if these figures are affected by data errors, despite our efforts to clean and validate the figures, this variation far exceeds plausible differences in pupil needs, demographics, or SEN prevalence across areas. Instead, it reveals substantial geographic differences driven by LA funding decisions, recruitment success, and service delivery models. A pupil with special educational needs in one LA may have access to an order of magnitude more EP time than a similar pupil in another. However, this does not account for the degree of need in each LA, which we turn to in the next chapter.

Employment models

EPs work through diverse employment arrangements. Approximately 63 per cent are directly employed by LAs, while 36 per cent work through academy employment, MAT contracts, or private practice. Unfortunately, it is not possible to estimate how many are in each of these categories with the existing datasets. These proportions are estimated from HCPC register and DfE workforce data; LA-level breakdowns should be treated as illustrative due to data limitations, while national totals are more robust.

Figure 7 shows geographic variation in non-LA provision, ranging from approximately 20 to 80 per cent of total workforce across LAs. This diversity reflects local service delivery models and market structures. The later funding analysis examines how this variation affects workforce planning requirements and whether non-LA provision compensates for LA shortfalls.

Figure 7: Non-LA EP provision as percentage of total workforce by Local Authority (2024/25 estimates)



Implications

This analysis of the EP workforce produces three key findings. The workforce is larger and more diverse than official statistics suggest. The official SWE captures only the LA-employed segment, understating total capacity by missing approximately 1,300 FTE working outside LAs. Any funding planning or capacity assessment based solely on SWE figures will underestimate available resources by roughly one-third.

Geographic differences in provision are stark. The variation in pupils per EP across authorities (ranging from 500 to 9,400 with a median of 2,600) far exceeds plausible differences in pupil needs or demographics. This suggests no consistent national approach to adequate provision, with access to specialist support varying by an order of magnitude based solely on geography. This inequity demands attention from policymakers concerned with ensuring all children with special educational needs receive appropriate support.

Data quality problems plague workforce data. Even for the LA-employed workforce that the SWE is designed to measure, approximately one in five LA-level estimates across all years required statistical remediation due to missing data or implausible values. The DfE should prioritise improving SWE data quality through better reporting compliance, and validation at source.

These workforce estimates provide the foundation for the funding needs analysis presented in the following sections. By establishing comprehensive baseline measurements of current provision, we can better assess gaps between current and required workforce levels across different LAs.

Estimating workforce requirements

The previous section established that England has approximately 3,400 FTE EPs distributed very unequally across LAs, with provision varying by a factor of 20 between the best and least-covered authorities. However, it is unclear which parts of this variation represents inadequate provision, rather than reasonable responses to local circumstances. Answering this question requires linking workforce size to both local needs and educational outcomes to ask, "How many EPs does each LA need to staff a service level compatible with achieving good outcomes for pupils with special educational needs, given their specific context?"

This section explains our analytical approach for assessing workforce adequacy. We measure local need (deprivation, SEN prevalence, educational challenges), measure pupil outcomes (attainment and attendance), identify authorities achieving consistently high outcomes relative to their circumstances, and use their staffing levels as benchmarks. Since EP service staffing is not the only contributory factor to good outcomes, the benchmark staffing levels can be viewed as 'necessary if not sufficient' precursors. The following section then presents the estimated funding requirements that flow from this analysis.

Full technical specifications of statistical methods appear in Annex A. Here we focus on the logic of the approach and the data we use to implement it.

Our benchmarking approach

We identify which LAs achieve the best outcomes for SEN pupils, controlling for local need and context. We then use their staffing levels as benchmarks for others. This approach has five steps:

- Measure need. We quantify each LA's demand for EP services using indicators covering SEN prevalence (autism, social, emotional and mental health, speech-language-communication needs), socioeconomic deprivation (free school meals, income deprivation, disability living allowance recipients), and educational challenges (persistent absence, attainment gaps). Statistical methods identify underlying patterns in these correlated indicators to define a composite need score for each LA.
- Measure outcomes. We assess how well each LA's SEN pupils fare using attainment measures (percentage achieving Level 2 qualifications in English and maths by age 19) and attendance measures (school participation rates), tracked separately for different SEN types. These combine into a composite outcome score.
- Identify high-performing authorities. Using statistical methods that control for local need and unchangeable contextual factors (historical funding, demographics, geography), we identify authorities achieving consistently high outcomes year-after-year from 2021-2024. These define the "efficiency frontier" of LAs demonstrating what is achievable with strong provision and effective service delivery.
- Set staffing benchmark. The median EP coverage among high-performing authorities becomes our baseline benchmark, which we then adjust for each LA's need profile. This represents observed practice among authorities demonstrating sustained success, not an

aspirational or theoretical target, and ensures comparisons account for different local circumstances.

- Estimate costs. Using detailed cost data from six LA interviews, we calculate funding requirements to bring under-staffed authorities to benchmark levels. We use real employment costs (£100,000 per EP FTE including salaries, on-costs, and overheads) not theoretical models.

Measuring need for EP services

Demand for EP services varies across LAs based on pupil characteristics, socioeconomic factors, and educational challenges. Table 4 summarises the indicators we use to measure need.

Table 4: Indicators measuring need for EP services

Category	Specific Indicators	What it captures
SEN Prevalence	Overall SEN prevalence rates	Total volume of SEN casework
Socioeconomic Deprivation	Free school meals (FSM) eligibility rates	Families facing material hardship
	Income deprivation affecting children index (IDACI)	Neighborhood-level socioeconomic disadvantage
	Disability living allowance (DLA) recipient rates	Pupils with recognised disabilities
Educational Challenges	Persistent absence rates	School engagement challenges
	Attainment gaps between SEN and non-SEN pupils	Educational disadvantage severity
	Rate of EHCPs	Statutory assessment demand

These indicators are highly correlated, so authorities with high FSM eligibility typically also have elevated SEN prevalence, higher persistent absence, and greater income deprivation. Rather than treating each separately, we use principal component analysis to identify underlying patterns. The analysis reveals two distinct dimensions of need:

- General disadvantage captures broad socioeconomic disadvantage, combining high FSM rates, income deprivation, poor health, overall SEN prevalence, and lower attainment for SEN pupils. This dimension represents the baseline level of challenge facing schools and EP services. London, the North West, and parts of the Midlands show the highest levels of general deprivation.
- Absence patterns relative to deprivation distinguishes authorities by the level of SEN pupil absence relative to their socioeconomic context. Authorities where SEN pupils have relatively high absence despite lower income deprivation score high on this component, a pattern associated with complex disability profiles — such as autism and SEMH — in more affluent areas.
-

This two-dimensional framework allows us to control for need when assessing efficiency: authorities with high scores on both dimensions face greater demand and might reasonably employ more EPs per pupil than low-need areas.

This compression from multiple indicators to two components involves deliberate simplification. Need for EP services is inherently multidimensional, encompassing not just measurable deprivation and SEN prevalence, but also trauma, family circumstances, and local service capacity that vary across authorities and cannot be easily captured in national datasets. Our PCA approach identifies systematic patterns in what we can measure consistently across all 151 LAs, providing a measure for modelling, where including all correlated indicators separately would create multicollinearity. This reduction serves our analytical purpose but does not claim to capture the full complexity of need. We complement these quantitative scores with qualitative evidence from LA interviews to understand dimensions that defy national measurement.

Measuring outcomes for SEN pupils

Assessing workforce adequacy requires understanding pupil outcomes: how well are children with SEN faring in different LAs? Table 5 shows the components of our outcome measure.

Table 5: Components of SEN pupil outcome measure

Domain	Specific Measures	Why it matters
Attainment	% SEN pupils with ASD achieving Level 2 English & Maths by age 19	Long-term life chances and employment prospects
	% SEN pupils with SEMH achieving Level 2 English & Maths by age 19	Educational progression despite behavioural challenges
	% SEN pupils with SLCN achieving Level 2 English & Maths by age 19	Academic success with communication support
	% SEN pupils (other types) achieving Level 2 English & Maths by age 19	Outcomes for broader SEN population
Attendance	School participation rate for SEN pupils with ASD	Engagement with education (proxy for wellbeing)
	School participation rate for SEN pupils with SEMH	Behavioural inclusion and support effectiveness
	School participation rate for SEN pupils with SLCN	Access to learning with speech/language needs
	School participation rate for SEN pupils (other types)	Engagement across SEN categories

We measure outcomes separately for different SEN types because each presents distinct challenges. Autism, SEMH, and speech-language-communication needs require different EP interventions and support strategies.

Reducing eight indicators to a single score loses information about outcome patterns: an LA might excel in supporting pupils with autism whilst struggling with SEMH attendance. However, our benchmarking analysis requires an operational metric that allows comparison across authorities. The composite score captures substantial variation whilst acknowledging much remains

unmeasured, including softer outcomes like pupil wellbeing, family satisfaction, and long-term progression. The compression serves analytical tractability but is not a claim to have measured everything that matters about EP service quality.

Again, we use principal component analysis to combine these eight indicators into a single composite outcome score that explains 48 per cent of total variation. Higher scores indicate better overall outcomes: both stronger attainment and higher attendance across SEN categories. This composite score allows us to rank authorities by their success in supporting SEN pupils whilst accounting for the multidimensional nature of educational outcomes.

Figure 8: Distribution of pupil outcomes for SEN children across LAs

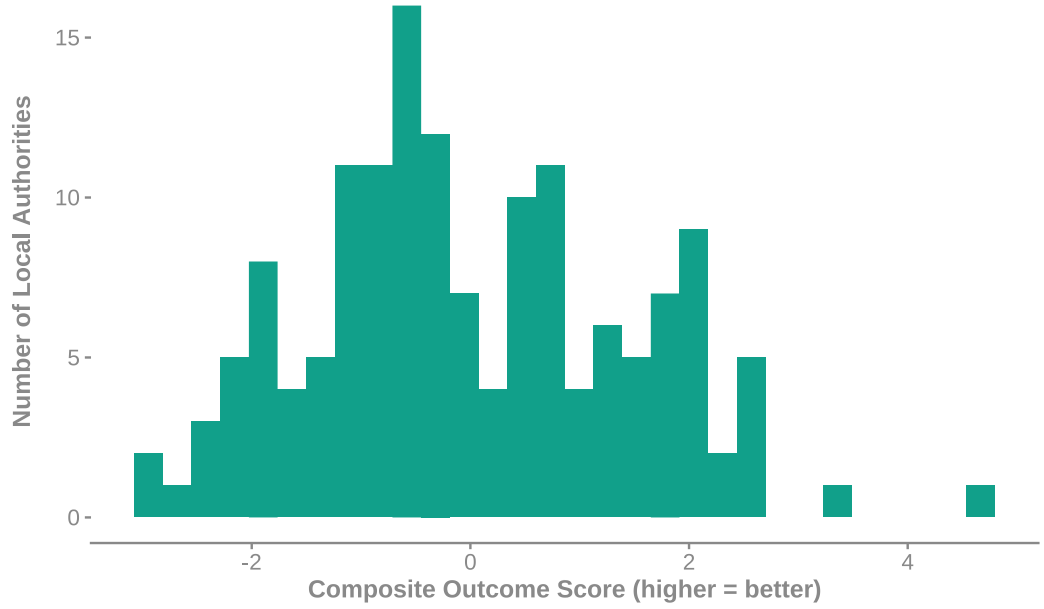


Figure 8 shows the substantial variation in SEN pupil outcomes across LAs. Approximately one-quarter of authorities achieve results more than 0.5 standard deviations below the national mean, whilst 15 per cent exceed 0.5 SD above the mean.

Crucially, this variation persists even after controlling for deprivation. When we account for FSM rates, income deprivation, and SEN prevalence, 69 per cent of outcome variation remains unexplained. This suggests that modifiable factors matter, including EP service quality and coverage, school effectiveness, LA support systems, and service delivery models. The unexplained variation provides the opportunity to learn from high-performing authorities.

Estimating costs of EP employment

Estimating the cost of increasing the provision of EPs requires realistic cost estimates grounded in actual LA expenditure. We gathered detailed cost data through interviews with six LAs between August-October 2025, collecting information on salaries by grade, employer on-costs, and overhead allocations.

Table 6 shows an illustrative breakdown of the benchmark cost derived from these interviews, using public employer contribution rates and residual overhead allocations. The table aggregates information from multiple LAs and our calculations.

This cost estimate carries substantial uncertainty. It averages data from only six LAs, which reported costs with a wide spread, reflecting genuine variation in salary scales, overhead allocation methods, and local labour market conditions. Moreover, these figures exclude locum and agency spending, which many LAs use to manage short-term capacity pressures at considerably higher daily rates (£500-700 per day). They should be interpreted as indicative estimates only.

Table 6: Components of EP employment cost (benchmark)

Cost Component	Amount	Notes
Salary (mid-career EP)	£55,000	Based on typical LA salary scales for established EPs
Employer National Insurance	£7,600	~13.8% employer NI on salaries above threshold
Employer Pension Contributions	£7,500	~13.7% employer pension contribution (LGPS)
Overheads	£32,000	Total overhead allocation:
		• Office space and facilities
		• IT systems and equipment
		• Professional development and training
		• Supervision and administrative support
Total per EP FTE	£100,000	Excludes agency/locum costs (£500-700 per day)

Note: all figures are rounded to 2sf and may not sum to the total.

These component values use standard assumptions (e.g., HMRC employer national insurance rates, LGPS pension contributions) and a residual overhead figure informed by interview evidence; they are not itemised figures reported by any single LA. Cost per EP FTE ranges from approximately £79,000 to £132,000 across the five interview authorities with complete cost data, reflecting different salary scales, overhead structures, and local labour market conditions. For funding calculations, we continue to use £100,000, which is the average across the five LAs that provided a complete dataset. There is no way to know if this is representative of the national cost, which is an unavoidable limitation of this analysis.

These costs reflect in-house employment only (permanent posts with salary and overheads). They exclude agency and locum spending, which is substantially higher (often £500-700 per day).

Identifying high-performing authorities

With measures of need, outcomes, and costs in hand, we can now identify which LAs achieve the best outcomes relative to their circumstances and use their staffing levels as benchmarks.

The challenge is distinguishing genuine service quality from favourable circumstances. Simply identifying authorities with the best raw outcomes would favour affluent areas with low SEN prevalence. Instead, we use panel regression with LA and year fixed effects to identify authorities

achieving persistently high outcomes. The model controls for time-varying need through two principal components capturing need, as described earlier.

LA fixed effects capture persistent outcome differences after controlling for changing need and national trends. High fixed effects reflect a combination of service quality (effective EP provision, strong practices) and favourable unchangeable context (school quality, local partnerships, historical advantages related to local factors such as funding levels that have become hard-coded into funding formulae over time, or labour market conditions linked to geographical location). We interpret high fixed effects as indicating superior performance, while acknowledging they may partly reflect unmeasured contextual advantages.

This analysis produces our benchmark. Using 729 LA-year observations spanning 2017-2024, we estimate LA fixed effects separately for two periods: 2017-2020, and 2021-2024. Two period are used because LA-level effects are likely to be moderately persistent but not constant over time, and the Covid-19 pandemic is likely to have disrupted service provision, having resulted in large discontinuities in pupil attainment and attendance levels as observed in official statistics and a body of recent research (Education Endowment Foundation, 2020). We identify 33 authorities with the highest period 2 (2021-2024) fixed effects (top quartile). Their median EP coverage, of 2.5 EPs per 1,000 SEN pupils, becomes our baseline benchmark. We then adjust this baseline for each LA's specific need profile using their PC1 (general deprivation) and PC2 (absence patterns relative to deprivation) scores from the panel model. This produces need-adjusted benchmarks ranging from 1.3 to 3.8 EPs per 1,000 SEN pupils, ensuring high-need authorities are compared to what frontier LAs achieve in similar circumstances rather than using a one-size-fits-all target. In simple terms, need-adjusted benchmarks ensure that staffing levels are appropriate to the local context, providing more staffing where there is greatest need for support.

This benchmarking framework enables us to:

- Identify workforce gaps for each LA (how far below high-performer staffing levels)
- Estimate funding requirements to reach benchmark coverage (LA-level, regional, national)
- Target resources toward authorities with largest gaps between current and benchmark provision

However, the approach has inherent limitations. First, it cannot prove causation. We observe correlation between staffing levels and outcomes, not which specific EP practices (preventative consultation, statutory assessment balance, specialist roles, supervision models) drive effectiveness. Statistical methods help control for confounding but cannot eliminate it entirely, so high-performing authorities may benefit from unmeasured advantages. Second, it cannot guarantee transferability. Practices successful in one context may not transfer perfectly to others with different characteristics, local partnerships, or historical advantages. What this benchmarking approach does provide is an evidence-informed estimate of staffing as a necessary (albeit not sufficient) input to good outcomes for children.

The following section applies this framework to estimate funding requirements nationally, regionally, and for each LA in England.

How much would addressing workforce gaps cost?

The previous section identified LAs achieving consistently high outcomes for SEN pupils and set their median staffing level as a benchmark. These 33 high-performing authorities have median coverage of 2.5 EPs per 1,000 SEN pupils.

This section estimates what it would cost to bring under-staffed authorities to that level, using real employment costs from our LA interviews (£100,000 per EP FTE including salary, on-costs, and overheads). These estimates account for total EP provision (both LA-employed and non-LA staff), recognising that children's needs are met by the entire EP workforce regardless of employment arrangements. Including non-LA provision reduces the funding requirement by approximately one-third compared to an LA-only baseline.

These calculations combine multiple workforce data sources to estimate total EP capacity in each LA. These estimates should be considered indicative of the scale of the requirements only. Individual LA estimates, in particular, should be treated as illustrative due to uncertainty in allocating non-LA EPs to specific geographic areas and potential gaps in historical workforce reporting. The scaling analysis demonstrates the overall magnitude of funding needed and regional patterns, with LA-specific figures serving as planning benchmarks rather than precise requirements. These estimates also should not be taken to imply that remedying provision shortfalls will generate the outcomes of the high performing LAs in all areas of the country. There is likely to be much more to their high performance than simply the level of provision.

We present national, regional, and LA-level funding requirements, alongside implementation considerations.

National funding requirements

Applying this benchmark nationally, adjusted for each LA's specific need profile, reveals substantial workforce gaps. When we account for variations in local need (deprivation, SEN prevalence, and complexity), most authorities fall short of the staffing levels that high performing LAs achieve in similar circumstances. This has significant implications for funding priorities and service capacity.

Table 7 summarises the national funding requirement.

Table 7: National funding requirements to reach high-performer benchmark

Metric	Value
Coverage benchmark (EPs per 1,000 SEN)	2.5
Cost per EP FTE (in-house, £)	£100,000
LAs currently below benchmark	96
Additional EP FTE needed	1,400
Total funding required (£M)	£140M

Note: all figures are rounded to 2sf and may not sum to the total.

The baseline benchmark of 2.5 EPs per 1,000 SEN pupils represents the median among high-performing authorities. However, after adjusting for each LA's need profile, 96 authorities (60 per cent of LAs) fall below their need-adjusted targets. These authorities require approximately 1,400 additional EP FTE at a total cost of £140M to match the performance of comparable high-performing authorities.

Note that the national funding requirement compounds uncertainties from workforce estimation (multiple data sources with quality issues), cost averaging (six-LA sample with wide variation), benchmarking (frontier LAs may benefit from unmeasured contextual advantages), and need adjustment (PCA scores capture systematic patterns but not all dimensions of local circumstances). The figure should be interpreted as an order-of-magnitude estimate rather than a precise budget requirement. LA-level estimates are particularly uncertain and should inform relative priorities rather than exact allocations.

Accounting for LA-employed and non-LA EPs

A methodological question is whether funding calculations should include only LA-employed EPs or account for the entire workforce. The funding figures presented above account for total EP provision because children's needs are met by the entire EP workforce, regardless of their employment model. Using only LA-employed EPs as the baseline would ignore approximately one-third of the current capacity and inflate funding requirements by an estimated £70M (33 per cent nationally).

Table 8 shows how LA-employed and non-LA provision vary across the ten authorities requiring greatest funding. Non-LA provision ranges from approximately 20 to 70 per cent among these LAs, reflecting diverse local service delivery models.

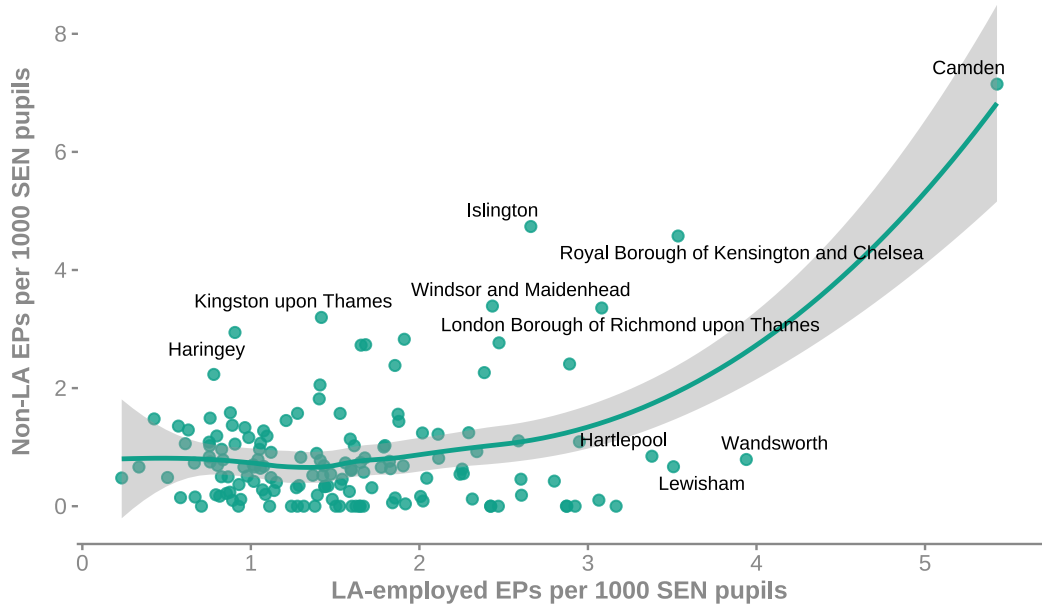
Table 8: LA-employed and non-LA EP provision for top 10 funding LAs (2024/25 estimates)

Local Authority	LA EPs	Non-LA EPs	Current Total	Target FTE	Gap	Funding (£M)
Kent	35	21	57	140	88	£8.9M
Essex	38	16	54	120	70	£7.1M
Hertfordshire	20	47	66	130	64	£6.5M
Lincolnshire	7.1	14	21	72	51	£5.2M
Liverpool	16	4.2	20	64	44	£4.5M
Norfolk	9.8	34	44	83	39	£4.0M
Hampshire	41	49	90	130	39	£3.9M
West Sussex	32	21	52	87	35	£3.5M
Surrey	48	34	83	120	33	£3.3M
Derbyshire	40	0.8	41	73	32	£3.3M

Note: all figures are rounded to 2sf and may not sum to the total.

A key policy question is whether non-LA provision compensates for LA shortfalls. That is, whether areas with low LA-employed provision tend to have high non-LA provision, affecting overall funding needs. Figure 9 shows this is not the case: LAs with high LA-employed provision also tend to have higher non-LA provision.

Figure 9: Correlation between LA-employed and non-LA EP provision (2024/25 estimates)



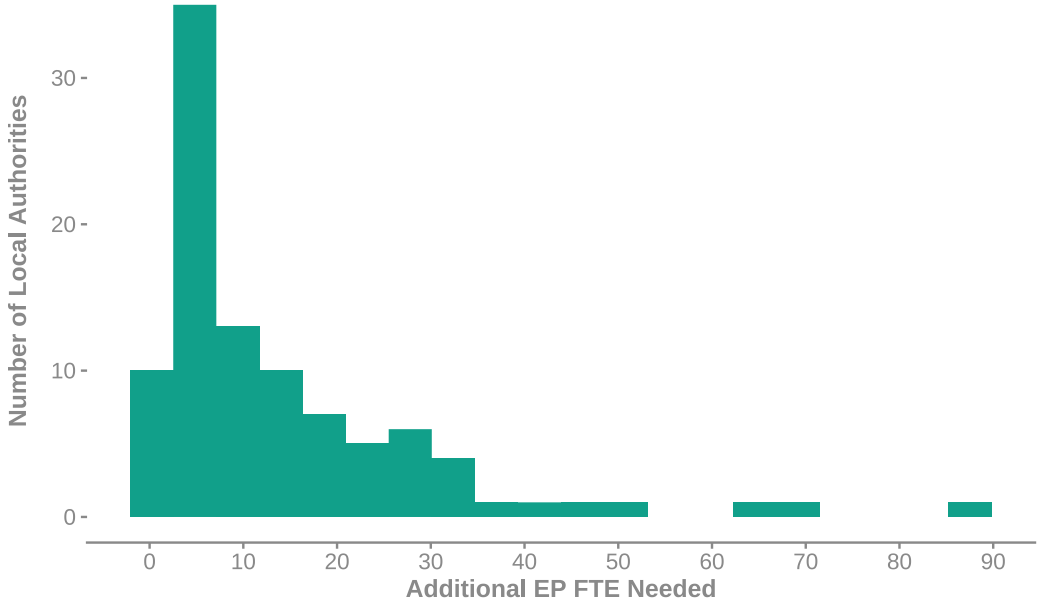
Note: Each point is an LA. Selected outlier LAs are named. The line of best fit uses LOESS estimation and displays a 95 per cent confidence interval in grey.

This positive correlation suggests that EP capacity, regardless of employment model, clusters in areas with existing infrastructure and demand. Areas with high need attract both LA-employed and non-LA EPs, rather than non-LA provision filling gaps where LA employment is low. Consequently, total capacity remains the binding constraint for meeting children's needs. Funding is required to expand overall EP numbers, with LAs retaining flexibility in delivery mechanisms.

Distribution of needs across LAs

While national totals provide important context, understanding the distribution of funding needs across LAs reveals whether gaps are concentrated in a few authorities or widespread. Figure 10 shows how many authorities need a different level of additional EP staffing. It is a histogram of the additional EP FTE required to achieve the target level of provision.

Figure 10: Distribution of EP workforce gaps across LAs



The corresponding funding requirements in monetary terms follow the same distribution because we are using a uniform cost per EP FTE. The distributions reveal substantial variation in funding needs. Among the 96 authorities below benchmark, approximately 55 per cent need fewer than 10 additional EP FTE (translating to funding under £1 million), while 4 per cent require 50+ FTE additions. The median gap is 9 FTE. Large county councils with substantial SEN populations show the largest absolute gaps.

The ten LAs requiring greatest funding (shown in Table 8 above) are predominantly large county councils and metropolitan areas with substantial pupil populations. These authorities account for a considerable proportion of the total national funding requirement. The largest gaps reflect both their scale and the extent to which current provision falls below benchmark levels adjusted for local need.

Regional distribution of funding needs

Funding requirements vary across regions, reflecting different combinations of current provision levels and need profiles.

Table 9 shows how funding needs are distributed across regions.

Table 9: Regional funding requirements to reach high-performer benchmark

Region	LAs in region	LAs needing funding	Additional EP FTE	Total funding (£M)
South East	19	15	310	£31M
East of England	11	10	260	£27M
North West	25	18	190	£20M
East Midlands	11	7	170	£18M
Yorkshire and The Humber	16	13	140	£14M
South West	18	11	120	£13M
West Midlands	14	10	110	£12M
Outer London	21	6	35	£3.6M
North East	12	6	33	£3.4M
Inner London	12	0	0	£0M

Note: all figures are rounded to 2sf and may not sum to the total.

Implementation considerations

For all the uncertainty inherent in workforce estimation and benchmarking, the funding requirements identified here are substantial. However, implementing a serious expansion of the EP workforce faces significant challenges.

Training capacity

Current doctoral programmes produce approximately 200 qualified EPs annually. Any meaningful expansion requires:

- University capacity development: Additional training places, academic staff, and supervision infrastructure.
- Practice placement expansion: More schools and LAs providing supervised training placements.
- Phased implementation: 5-10 year timescale for substantial workforce growth, given 3-year training period.

Retention as prerequisite to expansion, and vice versa

With 26 per cent of EPs considering leaving or changing employment model (BPS 2024), addressing retention is prerequisite to capacity expansion:

- Annual exits: If 10 per cent exit annually (approximately 340 EPs, roughly matching the rate for teachers), gross recruitment must replace leavers before achieving net growth.
- Cost comparison: Retention improvements benefit all LAs immediately, whereas recruitment is constrained by training pipeline.
- Root causes: Administrative duties (consuming 40-50 per cent of working time in some LAs where we interviewed the PEP), workload intensity, limited career progression, and remuneration concerns.

Investing in workforce expansion without also addressing retention through carefully planned services that mix statutory and non-statutory work to provide varied job roles and career development opportunities, risks expensive churn: training new EPs who may leave due to unsustainable working conditions. Qualitative findings from our interviews strongly suggest that the main barriers to retention are linked to low staffing levels, which result in a limited job role dominated by statutory work and few opportunities for professional advancement.

Funding architecture

EP services are funded from general LA budgets and traded service income, with no ring-fenced allocation. Targeted funding therefore requires either:

- Increases to general LA budgets with EP service guidance: Provide additional funding through Revenue Support Grant or similar mechanisms, with non-binding guidance to allocate towards EP services. This preserves LA flexibility but provides no guarantee funds reach EP provision.
- Creation of ring-fenced EP funding: Establish dedicated EP service grants (currently non-existent) with expenditure restrictions. This ensures funding reaches EP services but reduces local flexibility and creates new administrative burden.

Policymakers must weigh protection benefits against flexibility costs. Ring-fencing may be justified given 20-fold provision variation and weak correlation between need and current coverage, suggesting local decision-making has not produced equitable allocation.

Conclusion

This analysis provides the first comprehensive national assessment of EP workforce adequacy in England, combining nine years of administrative data with detailed case study interviews. Our findings shift the policy discourse from "how many more EPs?" to "what outcomes do we want, and which approaches achieve them cost-effectively?"

Official statistics undercount the EP workforce by about a third. SWE captures only LA-employed EPs, missing approximately 1,300 FTE working through traded services, multi-academy trusts, and private practice. The total practicing workforce comprises approximately 3,400 FTE, with two-thirds LA-employed and one-third in alternative arrangements.

Geographic differences in provision are large. EP coverage varies from 480 pupils per EP in the best-covered LA to 9,400 in the least-covered. This is a 20-fold difference that far exceeds variation in measured need. This means parents and schools in some areas wait months for assessments that happen within weeks elsewhere.

Large workforce gaps exist when comparing authorities to high-performing peers with similar need profiles. Our analysis identifies 33 authorities demonstrating sustained high outcomes across 2017-2024, with median coverage of 2.5 EPs per 1,000 SEN pupils. After adjusting for local need (deprivation, SEN prevalence, complexity), approximately 96 authorities (60 per cent of LAs) fall short of these benchmarks, requiring an estimated £140 million funding for an additional 1,400 FTE. This suggests maintaining and improving current system performance requires both significant capacity expansion and learning from efficient practice. However, even lifting provision to the levels of the high-performing authorities does not guarantee their level of outcomes.

A retention crisis threatens workforce sustainability. 26 per cent of EPs report considering leaving or changing their employment model within the next year (BPS 2024). Administrative duties consume up to half of EPs' working time. If 10 per cent exit annually (approximately 340 EPs), gross recruitment must replace leavers before achieving any net growth, making retention the most urgent workforce challenge.

Annexes

Annex A: Methodology

This annex describes the methods in the order they contribute to the analysis. First, how the EP workforce is measured, how local authority need is characterised, and how pupil outcomes are constructed. Then how frontier local authorities are identified, how cost data are collected and standardised, and how investment requirements are calculated.

Data sources

We integrate nine datasets covering academic years 2016/17 through 2024/25:

- The DfE's School Workforce in England provides EP employment counts at LA level, covering only LA-employed EPs. Data are reported at the LA-by-year level with variables for EP headcount and FTE. Known issues include the systematic undercount because no non-LA EPs are counted, 15-25 missing LAs per year, and occasional attribution of staff to their home LA instead of their employment LA.
- HCPC Professional Register captures all registered EPs. It originates from Health and Care Professions Council extracts, covers active, inactive, and retired registrants, and lists practitioners at the individual level with home postcodes and registration status. The register includes non-practicing members, uses home addresses that may not match employment locations, and suppresses cells with fewer than five registrants for confidentiality. All values are rounded to the nearest five to prevent re-identification.
- AEP membership records Association of Educational Psychologists members. Data come from the AEP, reflect a voluntary subset of practicing EPs, and provide LA-level counts based on members' home addresses. Voluntary membership leads to coverage gaps, and the home-attribution issue again complicates LA alignment. Again, cells with fewer than five members are suppressed.
- Schools, Pupils and Characteristics delivers pupil demographic context. The DfE pupil SWE covers every state-funded school, reports LA-by-year pupil counts, and supplies total pupil numbers, FSM eligibility, and demographic breakdowns.
- EHCP Timeliness and Assessments track statutory assessment volumes. DfE SEN statistics cover all new EHCP assessments, provide LA-by-year data, and include variables for EHCPs issued and assessment timeliness.
- SEN pupil data describe SEN prevalence by type. Again, sourced from DfE SEN publications, the dataset covers all SEN pupils in state-funded schools, structured at the LA-by-year-by-SEN-category level, with prevalence counts for autism, SEMH, SLCN, MLD, and other categories.
- Level 2 attainment reports qualification outcomes by SEN type. DfE destinations and attainment releases cover pupils reaching age 19, provide LA-by-year-by-category measures, and detail the share achieving Level 2 English and maths.
- School absence captures attendance patterns. DfE absence statistics cover all state-funded schools, provide LA-by-year-by-SEN-category data, and record overall absence and persistent absence rates.

- National Funding Formula supplies demographics and deprivation indicators. DfE NFF allocation tables cover every LA, report LA-by-year values, and detail IDACI scores, deprivation metrics, and Disability Living Allowance claimant counts.

Validation of SWE data

School Workforce in England data undergo validation to identify and correct implausible values before they enter the analysis. Five rules flag observations requiring replacement.

Rule	What is checked	Threshold
1. HC:FTE ratio	FTE relative to headcount	FTE > headcount, or FTE < 0.5 × headcount
2. Temporal outlier	Within-LA z-score and year-on-year change	> 3 SD from LA mean, or > 100% change with ≥ 5 FTE swing
3. Cross-sectional outlier	EP-per-pupil vs national distribution	> 3 SD from national median
4. Cross-source consistency	SWE vs HCPC (2024/25 only)	SWE headcount > HCPC registered + 2.5
5. Missing/zero	Missing or zero where HCPC records EPs	Missing HC or FTE; or SWE = 0 where HCPC > 0

The flagging rate varies across years due to data source availability: the 2024/25 collection shows 31 per cent of LAs flagged (with HCPC cross-source validation available for the first time), whilst earlier years without LA-level HCPC data show lower rates. Sensitivity confirmed that alternative reasonable thresholds move national totals by less than 10 per cent.

Flagged observations move through a four-step replacement process:

- First, we apply linear interpolation whenever valid observations exist within two years on either side, which resolves roughly 10 per cent of flagged cases.
- Second, if interpolation is impossible, we use the hierarchical regression models described below, and this provides replacements for about three quarters of the flagged observations.
- Third, if neither interpolation nor modelling is feasible because predictors are missing, we substitute the regional mean FTE and headcount for the corresponding year, a step that applies to approximately 6 per cent of cases.
- Finally, if no method can supply a credible value, the observation remains missing but carries explicit quality metadata.

We fit two period-specific, linear mixed effects models to account for the possibility that the pandemic created a structural break in the relationship between need and provision. LA random effects capture stable between-LA differences in service organisation, while the fixed predictors capture demand-driven variation.

Model 1: 2015-2019

$$\text{EP\_\{FTE\}} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{ pupil\_fte} + \beta_2 \text{ SEN\_pupils} + \beta_3 \text{ AEP} + \beta_4 \text{ Time} + \mu_{LA} + \varepsilon$$

This specification uses LAs with valid SWE, pupil, and SEN data. HCPC inputs are unavailable before 2020, so the model excludes those counts as predictors.

Model 2: 2020-2024

$$\text{EP FTE} = \beta^0 + \beta^1 \text{pupil}_{\text{fte}} + \beta^2 \text{SEN}_{\text{pupils}} + \beta^3 \text{AEP} + \beta^4 \text{Time} + \beta^5 \text{Time}^2 + \mu_{LA} + \varepsilon$$

For 2020-2024, HCPC data remain too sparse at LA level to act as a predictor, but we still rely on them for Rule 4 cross-source validation. The quadratic time term captures the pandemic disruption and recovery path.

Raw SWE totals for 2024/25 report 2,190 FTE LA-employed EPs, reflecting the undercount created by missing LAs and zeros. After applying the validation configuration described above, we lose 40 FTE, producing a validated total of 2,160 FTE.

Estimating total EP workforce (2024/25)

A separate cross-sectional model estimates LA-employed EP headcount for 2024/25 for LAs where SWE data are missing or implausible. This model differs from the period-specific replacement models described above because LA-level HCPC registration is available, so it uses HCPC and AEP registrations as predictors (not pupil numbers).

$$\log(\text{SWE headcount} + 1) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \log(\text{HCPC} + 1) + \beta_2 \log(\text{AEP} + 1) + \sum_{\text{r}} \gamma_{\text{r}} \text{Region}_{\text{r}} + \epsilon$$

Region fixed effects capture systematic differences in AEP membership and HCPC registration patterns across regions. The log-log transformation stabilises variance and ensures non-negative predictions. The model is estimated on LAs with complete data from all three sources (SWE, HCPC, AEP).

Observed SWE values exceeding the upper 95 per cent prediction interval from this model are flagged as implausible and replaced with model predictions. This catches reporting errors (misclassified staff, data entry mistakes) that are not captured by the panel validation rules. Out-of-sample validation against six interview LAs self-reported staffing confirms model accuracy.

The HCPC register includes all practising EPs but does not distinguish LA-employed from independent practitioners. We estimate the proportion of HCPC-registered EPs in LA employment by comparing HCPC regional totals to SWE regional totals across all available region-year observations:

$$\text{LA employment rate} = \frac{\sum \text{SWE FTE}}{\sum \text{HCPC registered}}$$

It is then applied to adjust LA-level HCPC counts when estimating LA-employed workforce where SWE is missing. Where EP headcount is available, but FTE is missing, FTE is imputed using regional headcount:FTE ratios computed from LAs with complete observed SWE data:

$$\text{Imputed FTE} = \text{headcount} \times \frac{\sum \text{SWE FTE}_{\text{region}}}{\sum \text{SWE headcount}_{\text{region}}}$$

The national ratio is used as a fallback where a region lacks sufficient observations.

Non-LA EPs and historical panel adjustment

The analysis distinguishes between LA-employed EPs (reported in DfE school workforce surveys) and non-LA EPs (estimated from HCPC registers minus DfE workforce data). Funding calculations use total provision (LA + non-LA combined) because children's needs are met by the entire workforce regardless of employment model. Nationally, approximately two-thirds of EPs are LA-employed and the remaining third work through other arrangements (academies, MATs, private practice, traded services). This is why funding requirements are lower than LA-only workforce baselines would suggest.

For 2024/25, where HCPC data are available at LA level, non-LA EPs are estimated as the residual between registered and LA-employed:

$$\text{Non-LA EPs} = \max(0,\ \text{HCPC registered} - \text{LA-employed headcount})$$

Non-LA FTE is then calculated using the same regional headcount:FTE ratios applied to LA-employed EPs.

HCPC data at LA level are available only for 2024/25; the panel model requires EP coverage estimates across all years from 2017/18. For historical years we inflate the SWE (LA-employed) FTE using the LA-specific ratio of total:LA-employed EPs derived from the 2024/25 estimates:

$$\text{Total EP FTE}_{it} = \text{SWE FTE}_{it} \times \text{ratio}_{i}$$

where $\text{ratio}_i = \text{total EP FTE}_{i,2024/25} / \text{LA-employed FTE}_{i,2024/25}$. This assumes the total:LA-employed ratio is approximately stable over time, which is a simplifying assumption. The ratio is capped at 2 to prevent implausible adjustments for LAs where HCPC registrations greatly exceed SWE headcount (which can reflect home-address attribution issues). For LAs without a valid 2024/25 ratio, no adjustment is applied.

Measuring need

With workforce levels established, the next step is to characterise the need context in each LA, because a fair comparison of provision must account for the fact that high-deprivation LAs require more EP resource per pupil to achieve equivalent outcomes.

The PCA input comprises the following variables, all expressed as rates per pupil:

- Total SEN prevalence.
- Attainment rates for EHCP pupils and SEN-support pupils.
- Absence rates for EHCP pupils and SEN-support pupils.
- Six IDACI deprivation bands (a–f).
- FSM eligibility rate.
- Disability Living Allowance recipient rate.

- Prevalence of bad or very bad health.

All count-based variables are divided by total pupil headcount to enable comparability across LAs of different sizes.

Count variables are converted to rates by dividing by pupil headcount; LAs with zero headcount receive missing values. Rates are then averaged across 2022/23 and 2023/24 to reduce single-year noise before PCA is conducted on the wide-format (one row per LA) dataset.

Principal component analysis on the 2022/23 and 2023/24 need indicators produces two dominant components. Individual SEN subtype prevalence rates (ASD, SEMH, SLCN) are excluded from the analysis because they show limited sampling adequacy for PCA; total SEN prevalence captures the aggregate demand signal. PC1 (general deprivation, 44 per cent of variance) loads strongly on FSM rate (−0.38), poor health (−0.36), IDACI deprivation bands (−0.23 to −0.33), overall SEN prevalence (−0.30), and DLA recipient rates (−0.30), with positive loadings on SEN pupil attainment (+0.26 to +0.30), capturing broad socioeconomic disadvantage. PC2 (absence patterns relative to deprivation, 19 per cent of variance) loads positively on SEN pupil absence rates (EHC plan pupils: +0.40; SEN support pupils: +0.43) and loads negatively on lower-deprivation IDACI bands (−0.25 to −0.45), distinguishing authorities with high SEN pupil absence relative to their level of deprivation, which is a pattern associated with complex disability profiles in more affluent areas.

Measuring outcomes

The outcome composite combines four measures: the Level 2 English and maths achievement rate by age 19 for pupils with EHCPs, the same rate for pupils receiving SEN support, the school attendance rate for EHCP pupils, and the attendance rate for SEN-support pupils. Absence rates are inverted to attendance (100 − absence rate) so that higher values consistently represent better outcomes across all four variables. Pupils without identified SEN and unclassified categories are excluded throughout.

Level 2 attainment and school attendance were selected because they are measured consistently across all LAs, reflect long-term educational progress, and capture both academic and engagement dimensions that EP services aim to improve.

For descriptive comparisons of LA outcome levels, PCA is conducted on 2022/23 data only, which is the most recent year with complete attainment and attendance data across all LAs. This single-year analysis yields the loading values reported above and a single outcome score per LA.

The Panel PPF requires a temporal outcome composite spanning 2017/18 to 2023/24. PCA is run once on the pooled dataset (all LA-year observations together), so that a score of 1.0 in 2018 is comparable to a score of 1.0 in 2023. PC1 from the pooled PCA explains 44 per cent of variance, capturing a general pupil success dimension. The academic year 2019/20 is excluded because COVID-19 school closures disrupted both attendance measurement and Level 2 achievement pathways for that cohort.

Panel PPF: detailed specification

$$\log(\text{Outcome}_{it}) = \beta_1 \text{PC1}_{it} + \beta_2 \text{PC2}_{it} + \alpha_i + \gamma_t + \varepsilon_{it}$$

The estimation sample comprises 729 LA-year observations drawn from 133 LAs across eight years (2017-2024). The model controls for time-varying need through PC1_{it} (general deprivation) and PC2_{it} (absence patterns relative to deprivation), derived from pooled panel PCA on FSM rate, IDACI band rates (a–f), total SEN rate, ASD rate, SEMH rate, MLD rate, SPLD rate, SLCN rate, absence rates (EHC plan and SEN support pupils), DLA rate, and poor health rate. LA fixed effects α_i capture persistent efficiency differences and service quality after controlling for changing need, year fixed effects γ_t absorb national shocks. Frontier LAs sit in the top quartile of the α_i distribution (n=33), yielding a median coverage benchmark of 2.5 EPs per 1,000 SEN pupils.

To validate that frontier LAs reflect persistent organisational quality rather than single-period luck, we estimate LA fixed effects separately for two non-overlapping three-year windows — an early period (2017/18–2020/21) and a recent period (2021/22–2023/24) — and compute the rank correlation between the two sets of fixed effects. A high correlation confirms that LAs achieving persistently high outcomes after controlling for need in the early period continue to do so in the recent period.

The frontier benchmark and all investment calculations use the recent-period fixed effects only. Identifying frontier LAs establishes the coverage target but not the cost of reaching it. Cost benchmarks come from six case study interviews.

Interview data collection

We interviewed six LAs between August and October 2025, selecting them to reflect a mix of regions and deprivation levels.

Each interview gathered:

- EP staffing by grade (trainee, EP, senior EP, principal EP).
- Salary scales and on-costs.
- Overhead allocations covering office space, IT, professional development, and supervision.
- Agency and locum rates and spending.
- Statutory versus preventative service models.
- Caseload metrics such as EHCP assessments per EP and consultation hours.

Interview LAs report budgets on different bases: some provide staff-only figures; others include full service budgets or mixed funding streams. For comparability, we reconstruct a consistent total cost measure from three components: permanent staff salary costs, employer on-costs (pension and National Insurance contributions, typically 25 per cent of salary), and locum or external contractor spending. Where salary data are not directly available, costs are estimated from EP establishment numbers multiplied by regional salary scales.

Locum spending is estimated where not directly reported using LA-specific day rates where available, or a default of £650 per day (midpoint of the £600–£700 range reported across interview LAs) multiplied by two days per EHCNA assessment. One LA's empirically observed cost of £1,140 per complete EHCNA (total locum spend divided by locum-delivered assessments) provides a per-EHCNA benchmark where day-rate data are unavailable.

EP service costs are decomposed into EHCNA delivery and other professional activities (consultation, training, preventative work, case management) using locum market rates as a benchmark for the statutory cost of a single assessment. The in-house share devoted to EHCNA delivery is then:

$$\text{EHCNA share} = \frac{\text{Number of EHCNAs} \times \text{Cost per EHCNA}_{\text{locum rate}}}{\text{Total in-house cost}}$$

This is conservative: locum rates include agency premiums and flexibility costs that do not apply to permanent staff, so the locum-rate method likely overstates the EHCNA share.

National cost extrapolation

Cost benchmarks (cost per EP FTE, cost per EHCNA, and the EHCNA share of costs) are extracted from the interview LAs. Current LA spending is estimated by applying benchmarks to each LA's validated EP FTE:

$$\text{Estimated cost}_i = \text{EP FTE}_i \times \text{cost per FTE}$$

The investment calculation then adds the cost of additional EPs needed to reach the coverage target.

Need-adjusted investment calculation

The frontier benchmark (median EP coverage among frontier LAs, 2.53 per 1,000 SEN pupils) is a national figure. Because high-need LAs require greater EP provision per SEN pupil to achieve comparable outcomes, the benchmark is adjusted for each LA's need context using the Panel PPF model coefficients:

$$\text{Adjustment}_i = \widehat{\beta_1} \times \left(\text{PC1}_i - \overline{\text{PC1}}\right) + \widehat{\beta_2} \times \left(\text{PC2}_i - \overline{\text{PC2}}\right)$$

where $\widehat{\beta_1}$ and $\widehat{\beta_2}$ are the estimated need coefficients from the Panel PPF regression and $\overline{\text{PC1}}, \overline{\text{PC2}}$ are panel means, so an LA with average need receives zero adjustment.

The LA-specific target is then:

$$\text{Target}_i = \text{Benchmark} \times (1 + \text{Adjustment}_i)$$

The total adjustment is capped at ± 50 per cent, so no LA's target falls below 50 per cent or exceeds 150 per cent of the national benchmark. This cap prevents extreme extrapolation for the most and least deprived LAs and is tested in sensitivity analysis (±25 per cent and ±75 per cent variants). LAs with missing need PCA scores receive the unadjusted benchmark.

Required EP FTE is calculated from the LA-specific target and current SEN pupil population:

$$\text{Required FTE}_i = \text{Target}_i \times \text{SEN pupils}_i$$

Investment is calculated only where the gap (required minus current FTE) exceeds 0.5 FTE, filtering out immaterial differences. For LAs needing investment:

$$\text{Investment}_i = \max(0,\ \text{Required FTE}_i - \text{Current FTE}_i) \times \text{Frontier cost per FTE}$$

Investment estimates are recalculated across a structured set of scenarios varying: (a) the frontier threshold (25th, 75th, and 90th percentile of LA fixed effects rather than the default 75th); (b) the cost multiplier (±20 per cent of the frontier cost benchmark); (c) the need adjustment strength (half and double the Panel PPF coefficients); and (d) the adjustment cap (±25 per cent, ±75 per cent, and no cap). This sensitivity analysis quantifies the range of plausible investment requirements and identifies which assumptions most affect the headline figure.

Annex B: Sensitivity analysis

Our central estimate of approximately £140 million rests on modelling choices that involve uncertainty. This annex reports how the investment estimate changes across alternative assumptions. We vary five parameters independently, holding all others at baseline values.

Across all 14 scenarios, the national investment estimate ranges from approximately £77 million to approximately £617 million. Benchmark threshold choice accounts for the majority of that range; cost and non-LA upscaling assumptions have proportional or negligible effects.

Baseline

	Benchmark (per 1,000 SEN)	Additional EPs	Investment	LAs needing investment
Central estimate	2.53	1,374	£140M	96

Benchmark threshold

The target EP coverage rate is set at a percentile of high-performing LAs. Moving from the 50th to the 90th percentile of that group raises every LA's target, increasing both the number of LAs that fall short and the size of each gap.

Scenario	Benchmark (per 1,000 SEN)	Additional EPs	Investment	LAs
Very conservative (median, all LAs)	2.07	755	£77M	78
Baseline (median, frontier LAs)	2.53	1,374	£140M	96
Ambitious (75th percentile, frontier LAs)	3.71	3,162	£321M	127
Very ambitious (90th percentile, frontier LAs)	5.47	6,068	£617M	137

Cost per EP FTE

Cost estimates are derived from five interview LAs and investment is the EP gap multiplied by a unit cost. Any proportional shift in cost per FTE produces an identical proportional shift in total investment.

Scenario	Additional EPs	Investment	LAs
Lower cost (−20%, £80,000 per EP FTE)	1,374	£112M	96
Baseline (£100,000 per EP FTE)	1,374	£140M	96
Higher cost (+20%, £120,000 per EP FTE)	1,374	£168M	96

Need adjustment strength

The panel regression coefficients scale each LA's target up or down relative to the benchmark, based on its SEN population's needs. Removing or amplifying the adjustment changes how much higher-need LAs are expected to invest relative to lower-need ones, without altering the national average benchmark.

Scenario	Additional EPs	Investment	LAs
No adjustment (0×)	878	£89M	97
Halved (0.5×)	1,101	£112M	101
Baseline (1×)	1,374	£140M	96
Amplified (1.5×)	1,481	£150M	95

Need adjustment cap

The need adjustment is bounded at ±50 per cent of the benchmark to prevent targets that are implausible for a given LA. A tighter cap compresses the distribution of targets, most visibly in regions such as the South East where many LAs hit the ceiling. A looser cap allows more differentiation.

Scenario	Additional EPs	Investment	LAs
Tight cap (±25%)	1,120	£114M	99
Baseline (±50%)	1,374	£140M	96
Loose cap (±75%)	1,464	£149M	96
No cap	1,467	£149M	96

Non-LA EP upscaling

the panel data use SWE LA-employed counts, upscaled by the 2024/25 ratio of total to LA-employed EPs. The ratio is capped at 2.0 to prevent small-denominator distortions. Removing the cap has negligible effect on the benchmark because no frontier LA has a ratio above that threshold.

Scenario	Benchmark (per 1,000 SEN)	Additional EPs	Investment	LAs
Capped ratio at 2:1 (baseline)	2.53	1,374	£140M	96
Uncapped ratio	2.52	1,357	£138M	95

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