

SEN data bulletin

What can we learn from national data on children and young people with special educational needs (SEN)?

Key facts and stats¹

The number of children with SEN in schools in England has fallen by one fifth in the last decade to 1.23 million in January 2016 (driven by recent reforms and criticism by Ofsted that schools were identifying too many children as having SEN).² Over the same period, the proportion of school children with more significant SEN, requiring specialist support provided through a statement or an education, health and care (EHC) plan remained steady at 2.8% or 237,000 children in 2016.

Across all children with statements/EHC plans, 73% are boys and 27% are girls (a more pronounced gender gap than in the social care or mental health data). The number of school children with statements/EHC plans increases with age, peaking at 15 years.

Autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) is the most common primary need amongst children with statements/EHC plans. 57,200 children have a statement/EHC plan for ASD, just over one quarter (26%) of all children with statements/EHC plans. The great increase

in the number of children with ASD is the clearest trend in the education data, across both mainstream and special schools. This trend is also evident in our analysis of disabled children in need.

Children with statements or EHC plans are now more likely to attend a special school than a mainstream school. Our analysis suggests that this mainly reflects rising numbers of children with complex needs over the past decade, rather than a drift away from inclusion, as:

- Special schools are working with a cohort of children whose needs are more complex than a decade ago
- The number of children with complex needs in mainstream schools has also risen.

The opportunity for children with complex needs to choose to attend a special or mainstream school varies greatly depending on where they live. Many more are included in primary schools than secondary schools. The great majority of those in mainstream

¹ Statistics in this summary are rounded to the nearest 100. More detailed figures and references are provided in the full text of this data bulletin.

² The SEND Code of Practice 2015 replaced School Action and School Action Plus with single category of SEN Support. Ofsted in 2010 criticised schools for inappropriately identifying so many children as having SEN (Ofsted, 2010, SEND Review: a statement is not enough).

schools are learning alongside their peers, rather than in separate units or specially resourced provision.

A very narrow estimate of the number of children with complex needs in schools in England in 2016 is 73,000, made up of:

- 10,900 children with profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD)
- 32,300 children with severe learning difficulties (SLD)
- 27,500 children with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) attending special schools
- 2,300 children with multi-sensory impairments.

The equivalent figure in 2004 was 49,300. This suggests that the number of school children with complex needs (narrowly defined, as above) in England has risen by nearly 50% since then.

The actual number is certainly higher, as children with other primary needs may have complex needs and because there are some important gaps in School Census data (the fullest dataset available on children with SEN). Notably:

- 13,500 children with statements/EHC plans in independent schools, many with complex needs as this sector provides some of the most specialist placements
- 23,100 *more* young people aged 16-25 years with statements/EHC plans who are not included in School Census data,

including over 1,000 aged 20-25 years.³ It is likely that most of these young adults have complex needs.

Another way of estimating the number of children and young people with complex needs is to look at the number of children and young people with statements/EHC plans in specialist placements. In 2016, a total of 117,900 children and young people with statements or EHC plans were placed in special schools or specialist colleges, with a small number in hospital schools.⁴

Over 5,200 children with the most complex needs live away from home in residential special schools. A recent survey suggests that this includes over 1,100 in full-time 52-week placements.

³ Difference at January 2016 between School Census total for young people aged 16-25 years with statements/ EHC plans (N=19,230) and LA data on statements/ EHC plans for 41,300 16-19 year olds and 1,065 20-25 year olds, published in SFR 17-2017 (table 1) and SFR 29-2016 (table 3).

⁴ Local authority data (SEN2) on placements of children with statements/EHC plans in special schools (maintained, non-maintained, academies, independent), hospital schools and specialist post-16 institutions. SFR 17-2016, table 1. Structural changes make it impossible to produce valid time comparison.

Data notes

Sources

1. School Census data for January 2016 from SFR 29-2016, including national, local authority and additional tables, and national tables from previous years.⁵ Breakdown of needs profile of children in mainstream resourced provision/specialist units and on residential placements by special request to DfE. The data requested from DfE is published online at <https://councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk/help-resources/resources/data-report>
2. SEN2 data for January 2016 reported by local authorities on all children for whom they maintained a statement/EHC plan, published in SFR 17-2016.⁶
3. Data on looked after children with SEN in 2015, published in SFR11-2016.⁷

Data limitations

1. Schools record children's primary needs, against a standard list of codes and descriptions (see Annex G). Secondary needs are reported for a minority of children and do not feature in most of the published data tables.
2. The School Census is a rich source of information on children aged 5-16, but less complete for younger and older age groups, as some are not in education and some are in settings which do not report data on individual children.
3. Independent schools are not required to report pupil level information, so the

growing number of children with complex SEN placed in these schools are omitted from most published data.

4. Local authority data provides a fuller picture across the whole age range (0-25 years) and all sectors, but cannot be broken down by type of need.
5. Data on children in residential placements are collected in the School Census but are not published routinely.

Rounding conventions

National headline figures (e.g. in executive summary) are rounded to the nearest 100. Most other data are rounded to the nearest 5, with some to the nearest 10 (if published on that basis). Percentages are rounded to nearest whole percentage point, except for figures under 10, which are rounded to one decimal place. Analysis of rounded data can give rise to small differences (usually not more than 1 percentage point or <10 children) which would be avoided if unrounded data were available.

We have not tested the significance of these data, but where there are doubts about robustness or potentially misleading conclusions (e.g. data on secondary needs and ethnicity), these are made clear to the reader.

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england-january-2016>. Equivalent data published at <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-special-educational-needs-sen-to-2010>; earlier data from the National Archives <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/webarchive/>

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/statements-of-sen-and-ehc-plans-england-2016>

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/outcomes-for-children-looked-after-by-las-31-march-2015>

1. How many children have SEN? How many have statements or EHC plans? Does this vary at local level?⁸

Just over 14% of the school population have special educational needs (SEN), around 1.23 million children.

This includes 2.8% of school children (237,000 children) who need more support than schools can reasonably be expected to provide, who have a statement or EHC plan.⁹ Local authorities and health commissioning bodies must ensure that the special provision set out in a child's statement or EHC plan is made.¹⁰

The proportion of school children with statements or EHC plans has remained steady throughout the last decade at 2.8%.

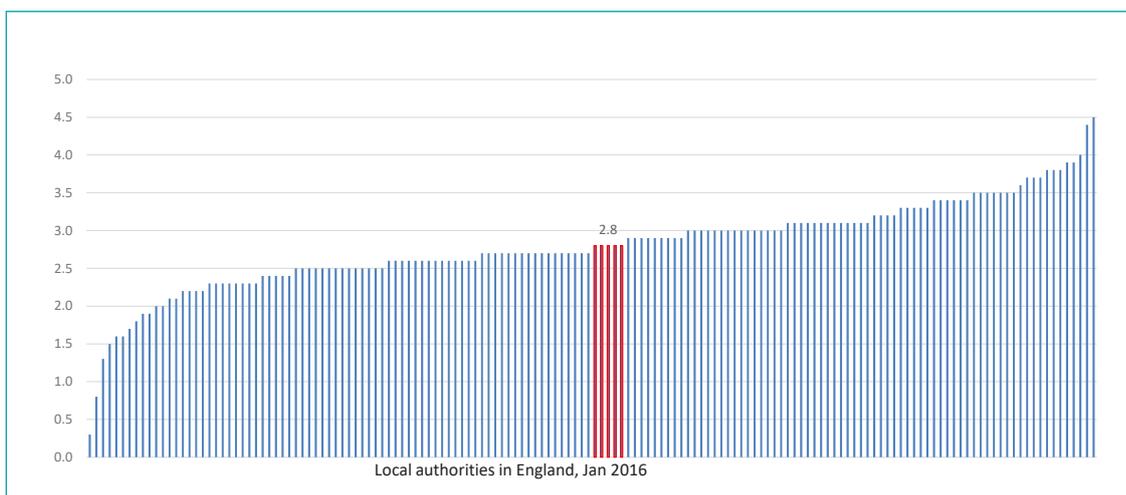
Demographic trends mean that the actual number of children with statements or EHC plans has increased by just over 4,000 since 2007.

Meanwhile the overall number of school children with SEN has fallen by around one-fifth (22%). This apparent decline in SEN prevalence is driven by a sharp decrease in the number of children on SEN Support¹¹ in school, who do not have a statement or EHC plan. This reflects recent reforms and criticism by Ofsted that schools were identifying too many children as having SEN.¹²

How does this vary at local authority level?¹³

In interpreting SEN data, it is important to understand that SEN is a relative concept.

Chart 1: Percentage of pupils with statements or EHC plans in each local authority, based on where children attend school



Source: SFR 29-2016 local authority table 12 (School Census data).

8 SFR 29-2016 (table 1)

9 The Children and Families Act 2014 replaced statements with EHC plans and made wide-ranging reforms to the statutory framework for SEN <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/6/part/3/enacted>

10 Children and Families Act 2014 (part 3, section 42).

11 SEN support has replaced School Action and School Action Plus. The graduated approach for meeting children's needs is set out in the SEND Code of Practice 2014 (para 6.44 and elsewhere). https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/398815/SEND_Code_of_Practice_January_2015.pdf

12 The SEND Code of Practice 2015 replaced School Action and School Action Plus with single category of SEN Support. Ofsted in 2010 criticised schools for inappropriately identifying so many children as having SEN (Ofsted, 2010, SEND Review: a statement is not enough).

13 SFR 29-2016 local authority tables

SEN is defined as having ‘a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made’. SEN provision is defined as ‘additional to or different from that generally made for others the same age’ in mainstream settings.¹⁴

This means that where schools have the skills and resources to respond to children with higher levels of need without needing to seek advice and support from local specialist services, fewer children ‘have’ SEN. In some areas, local authorities have actively invested in developing the capacity of local schools to respond to SEN, which over time has resulted in lower numbers of pupils with statements or EHC plans (and in some areas, fewer attending special schools).

The proportion of school age children with statements or EHC plans varies more

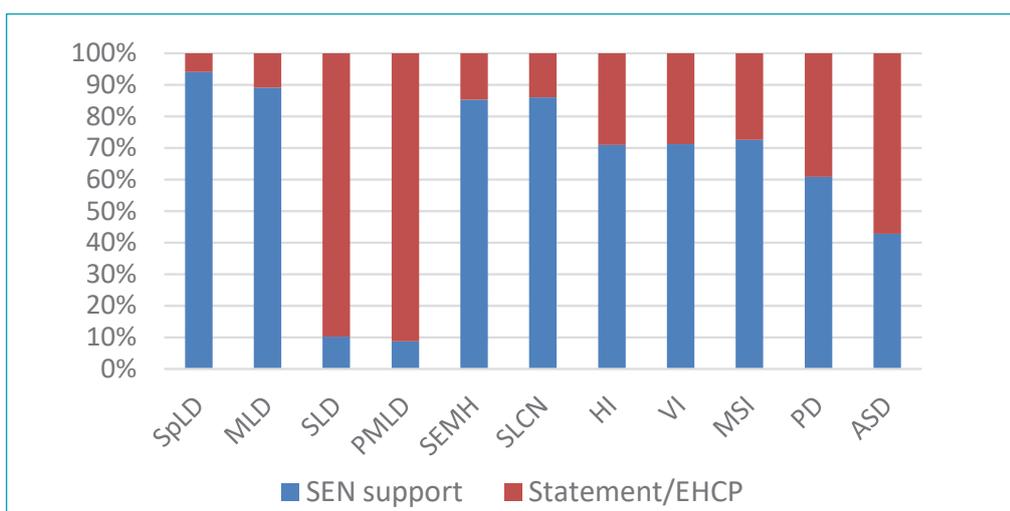
than five-fold, from 0.8% of children in the London Borough of Newham to 4.5% in West Berkshire with a mean of 2.8%.¹⁵ This wide variation reflects local policy more strongly than factors such as area deprivation.¹⁶

2. What do we know about the needs and personal characteristics of children with statements or EHC plans? Which needs are associated with complexity?

Primary needs of children with statements/ EHC plans¹⁷

The proportion of children with statements/ EHC plans varies greatly depending on their primary need. Nine out of ten children with severe learning difficulties (SLD, 90%) and profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD, 91%) have statements or EHC plans, indicative of the complexity of their needs. 57% of children with autistic spectrum

Chart 2: Children on SEN support or with a statement/ EHCP, by type of primary need



Source: SFR 29-2016 (analysis of table 8), School Census data. Note: excludes ‘other difficulty/disability’ and ‘SEN support, no specialist assessment’ categories of need.

¹⁴ Children and Families Act 2014, as above

¹⁵ Excluding City of London as an outlier, with only 8 pupils with statements.

¹⁶ Lewis J, Mooney A et al (2010) Special Educational Needs and Disability: Understanding Local Variation in Prevalence, Service Provision and Support, DCSF-RR211 http://eprints.ioe.ac.uk/16023/1/DCSF_RR211_FinReport.pdf

¹⁷ SFR 29-2016 (table 8)

disorder (ASD) have statements or EHC plans, a large and growing cohort. Taken together these children with these three needs, make up 58% of the special school population (see section 3).

Given the greater likelihood of having a statement or EHC plan and attending special school, these primary needs can be associated with complexity.¹⁸ For the purposes of this analysis, we focus most closely on these three needs, to shed light on trends in prevalence and provision for children with complex disabilities.

ASD is now the most common primary need amongst children with statements or EHC plans. 57,210 children have a statement/EHC plan for ASD, just over one quarter (26%) of all children with statements/EHC plans.

The next most common primary needs amongst children with statements or EHC plans are speech, language and communication needs (SLCN), moderate learning disabilities (MLD), severe learning difficulties (SLD) and social, emotional and mental health difficulties (SEMH) respectively. However, with the exception of SLD, the great majority of children with these primary needs are on SEN support (table 1).

Secondary needs¹⁹

Schools are able to report a secondary need for children with SEN in the School Census, but they generally do not. Among pupils with statements/EHC plans, many of whom have complex needs, the majority (57%) only have a primary need reported. So in interpreting secondary needs data, it is important to bear in mind that fuller data might reveal different trends. Nonetheless, secondary data throws

Table 1: Which types of need are met through a statement/EHC plan and which through SEN support in school?

Primary SEN	Children with a statement/EHCP	% with statement/EHCP	No. on SEN support	% on SEN support	Total no.
ASD	57,210	57%	42,800	43%	100010
SLCN	30,940	14%	190,515	86%	221455
MLD	29,650	11%	243,975	89%	273625
SLD	29,000	90%	3,305	10%	32305
SEMH	27,260	15%	157,670	85%	184930
PD	12,875	39%	20,025	61%	32895
PMLD	9,955	91%	960	9%	10915
SpLD	8,940	6%	142,215	94%	151155
HI	5,935	29%	14,560	71%	20500
VI	3,330	29%	8,260	71%	11590
MSI	630	27%	1,670	73%	2300
Total	221,225	20%	911,685	80%	1132905

Source: SFR 29-2016, analysis of table 8 (School Census data, rounded to nearest 5). Note: excludes children on 'SEN support, no specialist assessment' and those with 'other' difficulties/disabilities, so total does not equal sum of rows.

¹⁸ ASD is a spectrum. Children at the more severe and complex end are likely to have statements/EHC plans and attend special schools.

¹⁹ SFR 29-2016 additional tables (table G). Data rounded to nearest whole percentage point or nearest 5.

some light on which needs are commonly associated. This short section looks at the secondary needs reported for children with statements or EHC plans with a primary need of PMLD, SLD or ASD.

Profound and multiple learning difficulties: 54% have no secondary need identified, even though PMLD is closely associated with complexity. Physical disability is the most common secondary need, for 13%, followed by visual impairment, 11%. The next most common secondary needs are SLCN (6%) and ASD (6%). In addition, 785 children are reported to have PMLD as a secondary need; their primary needs are most commonly physical disability (33%), ASD (19%) and SLD (15%).

Severe learning difficulties: 49% have no secondary need identified, even though SLD is strongly associated with complexity. 18%

have a secondary need of ASD. The next most common secondary needs are SLCN (15%) and physical disability (7%).

There are also 6,345 children for whom SLD is identified as a secondary need, 65% with a primary need of ASD, 11% SLCN and 10% physical disability.

Autistic spectrum disorder: 61% have no secondary need identified. The most common secondary needs identified are SLCN (13%), SLD (7%, 4100 children) and SEMH (7%). ASD is also reported as the secondary need for just over 12,000 children, most commonly those whose primary need is SLD (44%), MLD (17%), SLCN or SEMH (each at 13%).

These data appear broadly consistent with academic research²⁰ in suggesting that learning disabilities and ASD often occur together; at the severe and complex end

Table 2: Which primary and secondary needs commonly occur together in children with statements or EHC plans?

Type of SEN	Most commonly occurring with (in order of frequency):
Profound and multiple learning difficulties	Physical disability Visual impairment Speech, language & communication needs Autistic spectrum disorder
Severe learning difficulties	Autistic spectrum disorder Speech, language & communication needs Physical disability
Autistic spectrum disorder	Speech, language & communication needs Severe learning difficulties Social, emotional and mental health Moderate learning difficulties

Source: SFR 29-2016 additional tables (table G). Caution: 57% of children with statements/EHC plans did not have a secondary need recorded, these data may be unrepresentative.

20 For example, see Emerson, E., Baines, S. (2010). The Estimated Prevalence of Autism among Adults with Learning Disabilities in England. Durham: Improving Health & Lives: Learning Disability Observatory, pp.7-8. Available at http://www.improvinghealthandlives.org.uk/uploads/doc/vid_8731_IHAL2010-05Autism.pdf

of the spectrum, often associated with significant communication difficulties.²¹

Personal characteristics

Gender²²

Across all children with statements or EHC plans, 73% are boys and 27% are girls (a slightly higher percentage of males than for the other datasets analysed). There are more boys than girls across all types of primary need (Chart 3).

The gender difference is greatest among children with the most common primary needs – social, emotional and mental health difficulties, autistic spectrum disorder and speech, language and communication needs; and narrowest among children with sensory impairments, profound and multiple learning disabilities and physical disabilities.

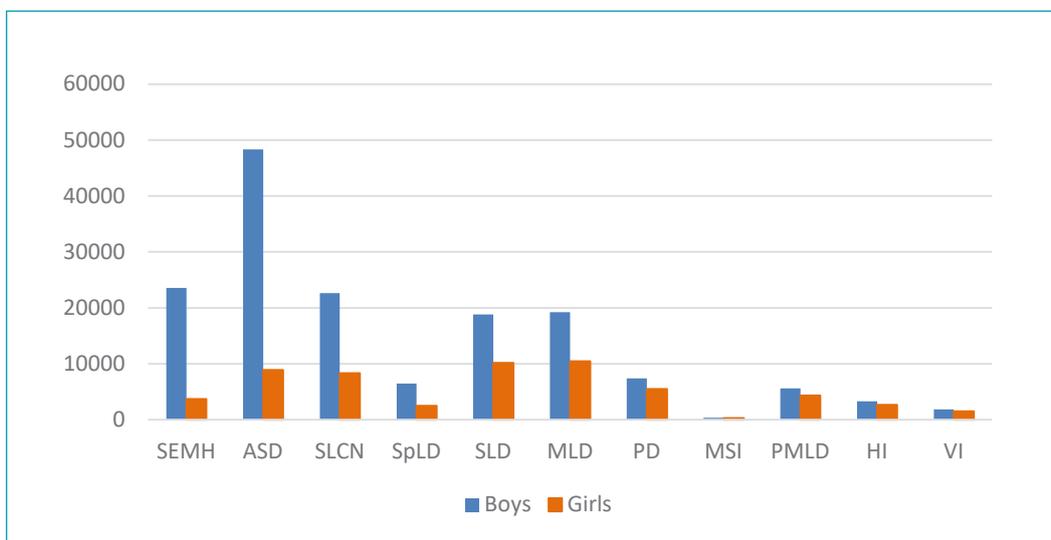
Age²³

The number of children with statements or EHC plans rises with age, peaking at 15 years. The greatest increases in the number of children with statements or EHC plans occur around the time of transition between phases of schooling – at ages four and five, when children start primary school; and to a lesser extent, at ages 10 and 11, around transition to secondary school.

The age distribution of children with statements/EHC plans varies significantly by type of primary need (Chart 4).

The age distribution of MLD and SEMH (two of the most numerically important primary needs) stands out, with relatively fewer children in the primary phase and a fairly steady, gradual growth in numbers continuing

Chart 3: Gender profile of children with statements or EHC plans, Jan 2016



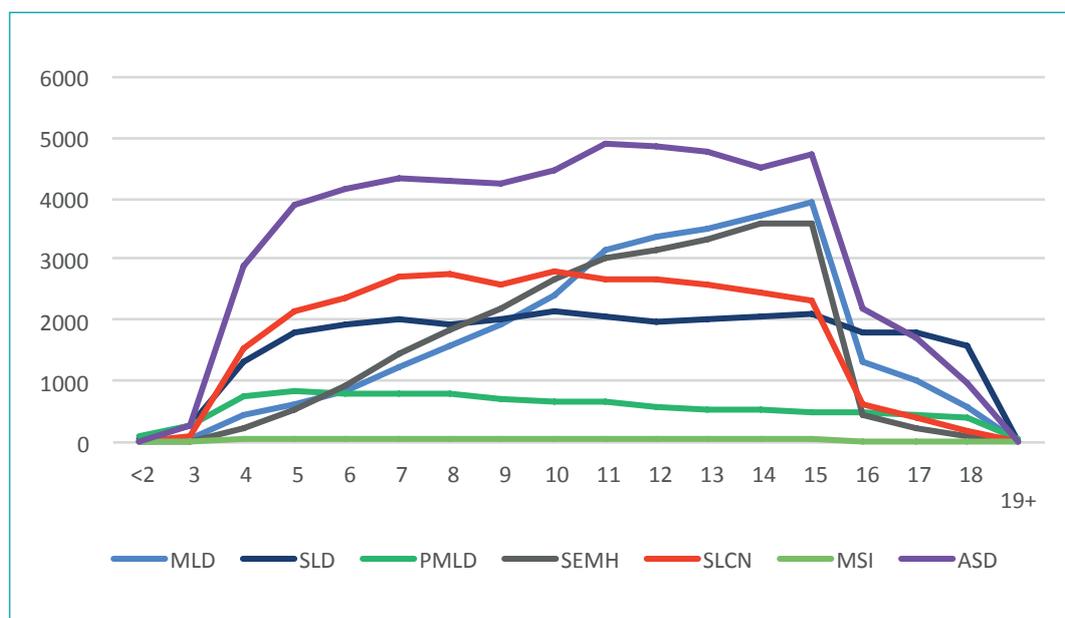
Source: SFR29-2016 Additional tables (table A), School Census data. Note: Excludes children with 'no specialist assessment' and those with 'other disability/difficulty'.

21 For example, see Challenging Behaviour Foundation factsheet (2013) <http://www.challengingbehaviour.org.uk/learning-disability-files/04-Communication-Information-sheet-web.pdf>

22 SFR 29-2016 national tables (table 3) and additional tables (table A).

23 Source: SFR 29-2016 national tables (table 3) and additional tables (table B).

Chart 4: Age distribution of children with statements/EHC plans, by type of primary need



Source: SFR 29-2016 additional tables (analysis of table B), selected needs. Note: School Census data is most complete for children of school age, those outside this age range are under-represented in this graph.

into secondary education, peaking at 14-15 years. This probably reflects school factors (i.e. the more demanding secondary curriculum, larger schools and many different teachers) and the onset of adolescence, as much as any underlying ‘impairments’.

By comparison, the proportion of children with SLD, PMLD, SLCN and MSI is highest in the primary phase:

- For SLCN, this may reflect child development: as difficulties often become obvious during primary education and this tends to be a key phase for intervention
- For SLD, PMLD and MSI, this may reflect the fact that these children have complex needs which are often evident from an early age.

Meanwhile the proportion of children with statements/EHC plans for ASD peaks at 11

years. This may reflect the transfer of children on the severe/complex end of the autistic spectrum to special schools at this age (so a statement/EHC plan is produced then²⁴); and for those at the mild end of the spectrum, perhaps a widening learning gap and more social and behavioural challenges, similar to the trend observed for children with MLD and SEMH. In terms of sheer numbers, this graph also illustrates how significant ASD has become throughout primary and secondary education.

Data collected from local authorities on children for whom they maintain statements/EHC plans across all types of provision gives a fuller picture of the age breakdown of children and young people with statements/EHC plans and how that is changing. In the seven years from 2010 to 2016, the number

²⁴ Children in special schools should have a statement/EHC plan, unless undergoing an assessment or in ‘exceptional circumstances’; see SEND Code of Practice, para 1.29.

of statements/EHC plans maintained by local authorities rose by 12%, including:

- Under-fives: up 11% to 10,515
- 5-10 year olds: up 14% to 92,215
- 11-15 year olds: down 6% to 111,225
- 16-19 year olds: up 104% to 41,300
- 20-25 year olds: up to 1065 in 2016, from only 10 in 2015 and none before that.²⁵

So the biggest growth areas for local authorities at present are in the 16-19 sector (with the transfer of many young people from learning disability assessments to EHC plans) with new demands for the 20-25 year age group, reflecting major reforms introduced under the Children and Families Act 2014²⁶. It is likely that many of these young adults have complex needs and require local authority

funding to continue in education, for example, by attending a specialist college²⁷.

Ethnicity²⁸

The relationship between ethnicity and SEN is complex, with many other variables such as socio-economic status, language and cultural barriers influencing children’s outcomes.²⁹ At an aggregate level, the School Census shows the following figures (table 3).

This suggests that black pupils are slightly more likely to have statements or EHC plans and Asian pupils are slightly less likely, on average. However, there is more variation within some of these ethnic groups than between them (see paragraphs below), so we cannot draw meaningful conclusions at this aggregate level.

Table 3: Number and % of children with statements or EHC plans, by ethnic group (main headings)

Ethnic group	Number	%
White	160,115	3.1
Mixed	11,215	3.1
Asian	19,040	2.6
Black	13,980	3.6
Chinese	655	2.3
Other	3,090	2.6
All pupils	210,850	3.0

Source: SFR 29-2016 national tables (table 6), School Census data rounded to nearest five. Given small values and small differences, % figures in this table are shown to one decimal place. Note: Omits ‘other’ and ‘unclassified’ categories.

25 SFR 17-2016 (table 1) based on SEN2 returns.

26 Amongst other things, extending local authorities’ duties towards young people who have left school, potentially up to the age of 25. See SEND Code of Practice 2015 (summary at pages 13-14) https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/398815/SEND_Code_of_Practice_January_2015.pdf

27 Specialist colleges provide education and training for around 3,000 19-25 year olds, two-thirds of them on a residential basis. Source: Estimates from the sector organisation, NatSpec as national statistics do not provide a clear picture of this sector.

28 Source: SFR 29-2016 national tables (table 6) and additional tables (table C2). Data rounded to nearest whole percentage point, except in summary table given low values.

29 See research overview by Newman T. (2009) Ensuring all disabled children and young people and their families receive services which are sufficiently differentiated to meet their diverse needs, C4EO http://archive.c4eo.org.uk/themes/disabledchildren/diverseneeds/files/c4eo_diverse_needs_kr_6.pdf

There is even greater variation when these data are broken down by type of primary need, but again, much caution should be attached to any conclusions.³⁰

SLD

The incidence of SLD across all pupils with statements/EHC plans is 13%. This ranges from 12% of children of 'mixed' origin to 17% of Asian children with statements/EHC plans, and within the Asian grouping, 18% of Pakistani children – the highest incidence of SLD. Amongst black pupils with statements/EHC plans, the incidence of SLD ranges from 9% of those of Caribbean heritage compared to 15% of those of Black African heritage, illustrating wide variation within ethnic groupings.

PMLD

The incidence of PMLD across all pupils with statements/EHC plans is 4%. The greatest variation from this is seen in the Asian population, with an incidence of 8%, rising to 10% among pupils with statements/EHC plans of Pakistani origin.

ASD

The incidence of ASD is 26% across all pupils with statements/EHC plans. Asian children with a statement/EHC plan are the ethnic group least likely to have ASD, largely because of the lower level of ASD amongst children of Pakistani origin (17%), the largest of the Asian communities. Indian, Bangladeshi and other Asian background children all have a slightly higher incidence of ASD (26%-28%).

A higher incidence of ASD is seen among Black children with statements/EHC plans (35% overall), in particular, those of Black African origin (38%); with, as for SLD, a significantly lower incidence amongst those of Caribbean heritage (29%).

Free school meals³¹

Children from low income households are eligible for free school meals³² and this is reported in the School Census. Although far from a perfect measure, take-up of free school meals is widely used as a proxy for exploring the link between poverty and educational outcomes.

The relationship between disability, special educational needs and poverty is well established.³³ Children with statements or EHC plans are more than two and a half times more likely to be from low income homes, compared to children without SEN: 32% of those with statements or EHC plans are on free school meals compared to 12% of pupils without SEN. Meanwhile 26% of pupils on SEN support have free school meals.

This varies significantly across different primary needs and children with SEMH, MLD or SLD are the most likely to be on free school meals (Chart 5). The chart below also shows that across all types of need, pupils with statements/EHC plans are more likely to be eligible for free school meals than those on SEN support. This suggests that children from poorer homes are more likely to have higher support needs (requiring

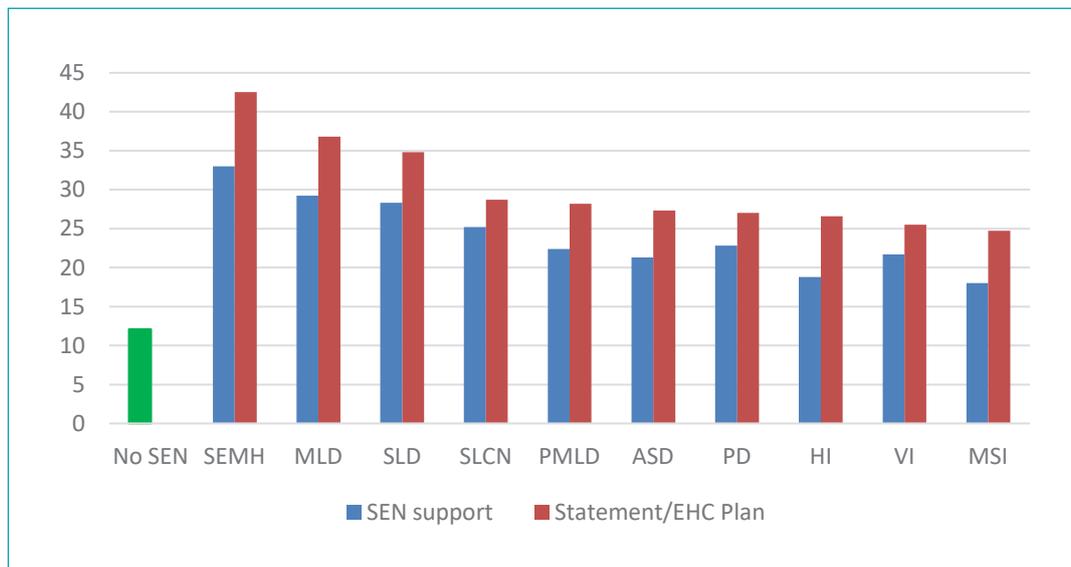
30 Needs breakdown from SFR 29-2016 additional tables (table C2). Given small values and small differences involved, % figures are presented to one decimal place.

31 Source: SFR 29-2016 national tables (table 5) and additional tables (table D)

32 See <https://www.gov.uk/apply-free-school-meals>

33 See for example Parsons S and Platt L (Nov 3013) Disability among young children: Prevalence, heterogeneity and socio-economic disadvantage, Centre for Longitudinal Studies, Institute of Education, University of London

Chart 5: Percentage of children with SEN taking up free school meals, by primary need (Jan 2016)



Source: School Census, SFR29-2016 additional tables (analysis of table D). Note: Omits children on SEN support with no specialist assessment of type of need and children with 'other disability/difficulty'.

a statement/EHC plan) than children with the same primary needs from more affluent homes.

Looked after status³⁴

The primary needs profile of children who are looked after by the local authority³⁵ and have a statement or EHC plan differs significantly to that of all children with statements or EHC plans.

Children who are looked after are three times more likely to have SEMH as their primary need (38% compared to 13%), but less than half as likely to have ASD (10% vs. 25%). The next biggest difference is in the proportion with SLCN, the primary need of 8.5% of looked after children with statements or EHC

plans compared to 14% of all children with statements or EHC plans.

3. What type of school do children with complex needs attend? Has this changed over time? Does this vary at local level? What do we know about residential placements?

The majority of children with complex needs attend special schools. 79% of children with SLD and 81% of those with PMLD are in special schools (including a small number on SEN support). Children with ASD are the next most likely group to attend a special school (27% of children with ASD go to a special school) and at 27,470 children, represent the largest group in special schools today.³⁶

³⁴ Note: data for 2015, latest available at time of this analysis. SFR11-2016 tables 4a & 4b, compared with SFR25-2015 national tables (table 8).

³⁵ Children may be looked after by the local authority (or 'in care') under the Children Act 1989.

³⁶ Please note, these figures include children on SEN support. Source: School Census data, SFR 29-2016 national tables (table 8)

How has this changed over time?³⁷

Looking back over the last ten years, the number of children with statements/EHC plans:

- In primary schools, has fluctuated from year to year. In 2016, 1.3% of primary school children had a statement/EHC plan (60,445 children)
- In secondary schools, has fallen in every year, down 15,450 or 22% since 2007. 1.7% of students in mainstream secondary schools have statements/EHC plans.

Meanwhile the number of children in maintained special schools (including those without a statement or EHC plan³⁸) has risen every year, up 18,620 (22%) since 2007.

This trend is reinforced when one looks at the rising numbers of children with statements/

EHC plans placed by local authorities in independent schools. Such placements have risen by 74% in the last decade, from 7,760 to 13,530 children. Independent schools approved for SEN provision cater for many children with the most complex needs, such as those in 52-week residential placements.³⁹ As these schools are not required to report data on individual pupils in the School Census, this represents a major gap in our data picture.

Meanwhile placements of children with statements in non-maintained special schools (not for profit, typically voluntary sector) have declined slowly, by 885 children over the last decade, a fall of 19%. Data on these children are reported, so are included in the School Census figures cited throughout this analysis. Taken together, out of authority

Chart 6: Mainstream vs special school placements for children with SEN, by type of primary need



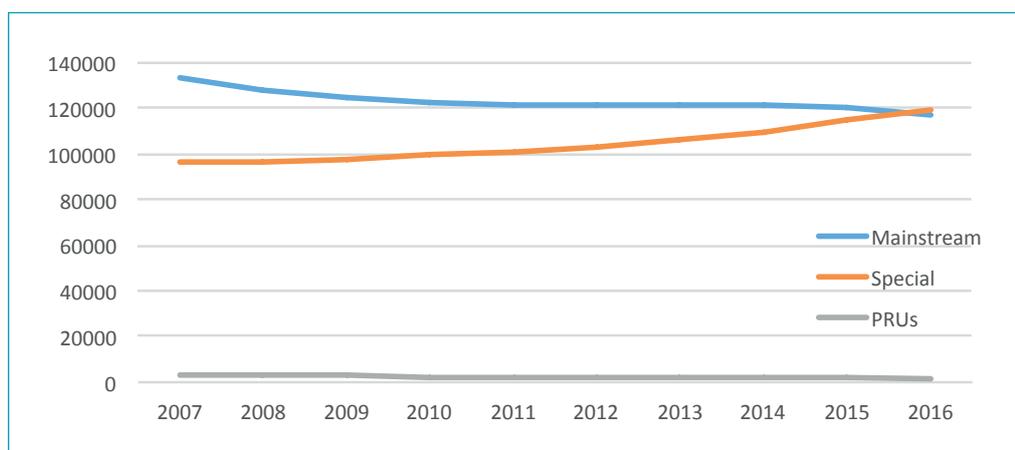
Source: School Census data from SFR 29-2016 national tables (table 8). Note: includes children on SEN support as well as those with statements/EHC plans.

³⁷ SFR 29-2016 national tables (table 1)

³⁸ Children in special schools should have a statement/EHC plan, unless undergoing an assessment or in certain 'exceptional circumstances'; see SEND Code of Practice, para 1.29.

³⁹ In 2016, 36% of children in SEN residential placements were in the independent sector, including an estimated two-thirds of those in full-time 52 week placements. See end of section 3 (residential placements).

Chart 7: Children with statements/EHC plans by type of school, 2007-2016



Source: SFR 29-2016 national tables (table 1) based on School Census including school level data reported by independent schools. Note: includes maintained, non-maintained and independent provision. PRU=pupil referral unit.

placements of children with statements/EHC plans in non-maintained and independent special schools have risen by 39% in the past ten years, an increase of 4,885 children.

Overall, in the last decade, we can observe a trend away from mainstream placements, in favour of special school provision (Chart 7), in spite of long-standing policy on inclusion, enshrined in international and domestic legislation.⁴⁰ As we see in the next section, this trend is clearest at secondary level.

In 2016, more children with statements/EHC plans were in special schools than mainstream schools.

Does more children in special schools represent a drift away from inclusion, or a pragmatic response to rising numbers of children with complex needs?

To shed light on this question, we explored how the needs profile of children in

special schools has changed, as far back as the data allow. We also looked at the changing pattern of provision for children with the needs most associated with complexity: PMLD, SLD and ASD at the severe/complex end of the spectrum.

Needs profile of children in special schools 2004 to 2016

The needs profile of children in special schools has changed strikingly over the last decade and beyond. Special schools are now working with many more children who have severe and complex needs than in 2004 (Charts 8 & 9).

The most important change (as for mainstream education) is the great increase in the number of children with ASD. In the special school cohort, this probably includes a significant number who have SLD and behaviour described as challenging.⁴¹

⁴⁰ The right to be included in mainstream education is enshrined in Article 24, UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; with a general presumption in Persons with Disabilities; with a general presumption in the Children and Families Act 2014, sections 33-35 (and other legislation).

⁴¹ See Pinney A. (Nov 2014) Children with learning disabilities whose behaviours challenge: what do we know from national data? CBF and CDC

We know from academic research⁴² that this cohort form an important part of the residential special school population, but data limitations mean that this is not evident in national statistics.⁴³

There are also important increases in the number of children with severe or profound and multiple learning disabilities in special schools (c.6,400 more combined, since 2004) and a big fall in numbers with MLD. There is also a steady rise in the number of children and young people whose main need is SLCN, which again, may include more children on the autistic spectrum.⁴⁴

This analysis confirms, as anecdotal evidence has long suggested, that special schools are catering for a cohort of children with more complex needs than a decade ago.

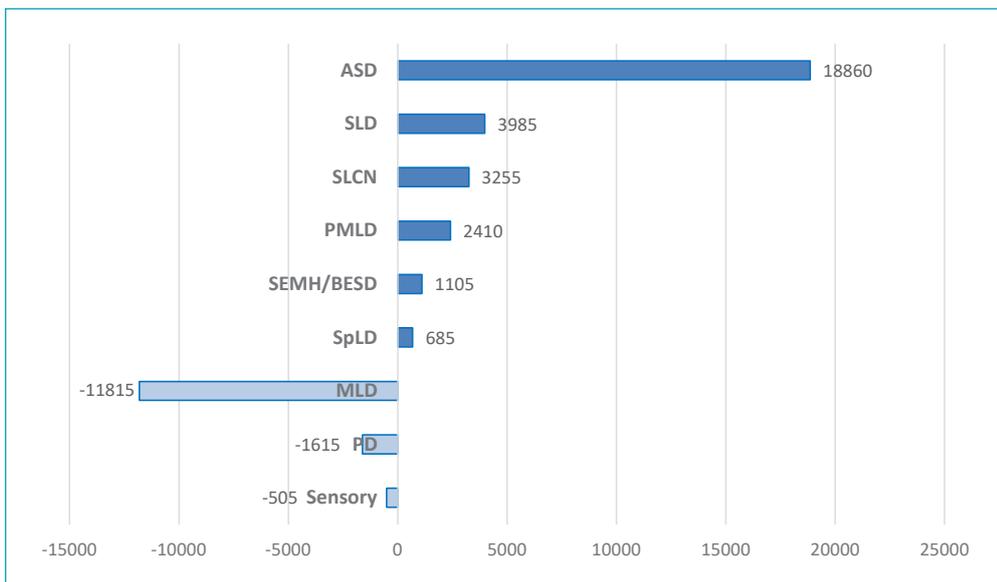
Changing pattern of provision for children with PMLD, SLD and ASD with a statement/EHC plan, 2004-2016

To understand these trends further, we explored the changing pattern of provision for children with SLD, PMLD and ASD at the severe/complex end of the spectrum.

PMLD

Number of children with PMLD has risen in every year since 2004 (as far back as our

Chart 8: Change in the primary needs of children in special schools between 2004 and 2016 (increases on right, decreases on left)



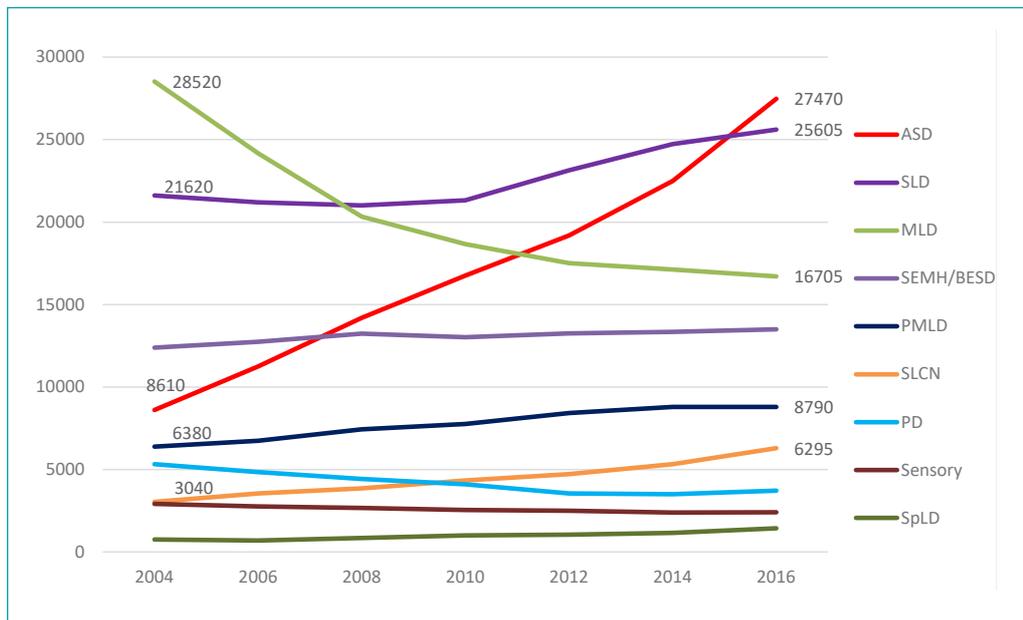
Source/notes: SFR 29-2016 national tables (table 8) compared to SFR 44-2004 (table 9). School Census data, excludes children in independent schools. Figures rounded to nearest 5. Categories 'other difficulty/disability' and 'no specialist assessment' excluded. Hearing impairment, visual impairment and multi-sensory impairments aggregated into 'sensory' category.

42 Gore et al (2015) NIHR School for Social Care Research Scoping Review: Residential school placements for people aged under 25 with intellectual disabilities <http://www.sscr.nihr.ac.uk/PDF/ScopingReviews/SR10.pdf>

43 Notably, primary needs data are of limited use in exploring trends in placements for children with complex needs; and independent schools, which cater for many children with the most complex needs, do not report pupil level data. See end of section 3 for more on residential placements.

44 ASD and communication difficulties are associated. See secondary needs analysis (section 2); national autistic society website <http://www.autism.org.uk/about/communication.aspx>; and academic research

Chart 9: Changing needs profile of children in special schools, 2004-2016 (bi-yearly data)



Source/notes: SFR 29-2016 national tables (table 8) and equivalent data at two-year intervals, back to 2004. Latest data rounded to nearest 5, 2004 data was rounded to nearest 10. Excludes children in independent schools. Categories 'other difficulty/disability' and 'no specialist assessment' excluded. Hearing impairment, visual impairment and multi-sensory impairments aggregated into 'sensory' category. The category BESD (behavioural, emotional & social difficulties) was replaced by SEMH (social, emotional and mental health) in 2015 which is similar, but not identical.

data goes) and by 40% overall, to 10,915 (Chart 10). This is a really important trend, as these children are likely to need support from health and social care throughout their lives.⁴⁵ More than 90% of children with PMLD have a statement or EHC plan. Just over 1,700 attend mainstream primary schools, an increase of just over 50% since 2004. Nearly 400 attend mainstream secondary schools, a similar increase over time. In other words, many more children with PMLD are being included in mainstream education now, compared to a decade ago.

Only 11% of children with a statement or EHC plan and a primary need of PMLD in mainstream schools are in specially resourced

provision or units, while nearly nine out of ten are learning alongside their peers.⁴⁶

Nonetheless, the great majority are in special schools, nearly 8,800 in January 2016, a growth of 38% since 2004 (Chart 10).

SLD

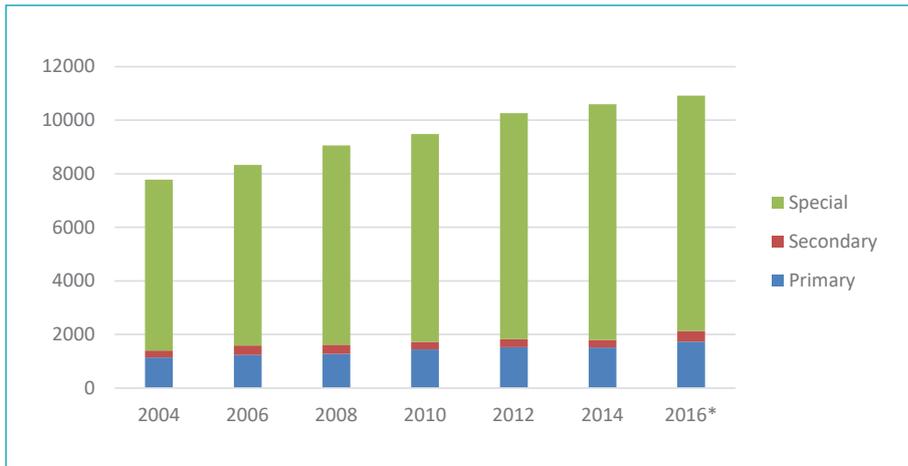
The growth in the number of children with SLD since 2004 appears modest (barely 300, with decreases in some years). Nonetheless, the 32,305 children with a primary need of SLD (in 2016) represent a numerically important group in our school population.

The modest growth in numbers over time may be explained in part by the rapidly-rising number of children with a diagnosis on the

45 Emerson E. and Hatton C. (June 2009) Estimating Future Numbers of Adults with Profound Multiple Learning Disabilities in England, CeDR Research Report 2009:1, University of Lancaster

46 Data request to DfE

Chart 10: Children with PMLD in schools in England, 2004-2016



Source/notes: SFR 29-2016 national tables (table 8) and equivalent data at 2-year intervals, back to 2004. Includes all children with PMLD including those (probably young children) whose needs were met at School Action Plus, now replaced by SEN Support (*2016 data). Excludes children in independent schools.

autistic spectrum, as these two needs often occur together.⁴⁷ In other words, children who in the past may have been reported (by SENCOs coordinators, filling in the School Census) as having SLD as their primary need, may now be considered to have ASD as their primary need.

Children with SLD, like those with PMLD, may require support from health and social services throughout their lives.⁴⁸

In contrast to those with PMLD, children whose primary need is SLD are now less likely to be included in mainstream schools than in 2004 (Chart 11): the number in mainstream primary schools has fallen by 2,770, and the number in mainstream secondary by 935⁴⁹; with a commensurate increase in the

special school population (+3,985). This may be because SLD is often associated with behaviour described as challenging⁵⁰; or it may be that many children with SLD now have a diagnosis on the autistic spectrum (considered next), so primary needs data do not show us the full picture.

ASD

The great increase in the number of children whose primary need is ASD is the clearest trend in the education data, evident in both the mainstream and special school cohorts. Autistic spectrum disorder ranges from the mild to severe and complex. The School Census does not include a marker for complexity, but it would be reasonable to assume that on average, children with a statement or EHC plan have more complex

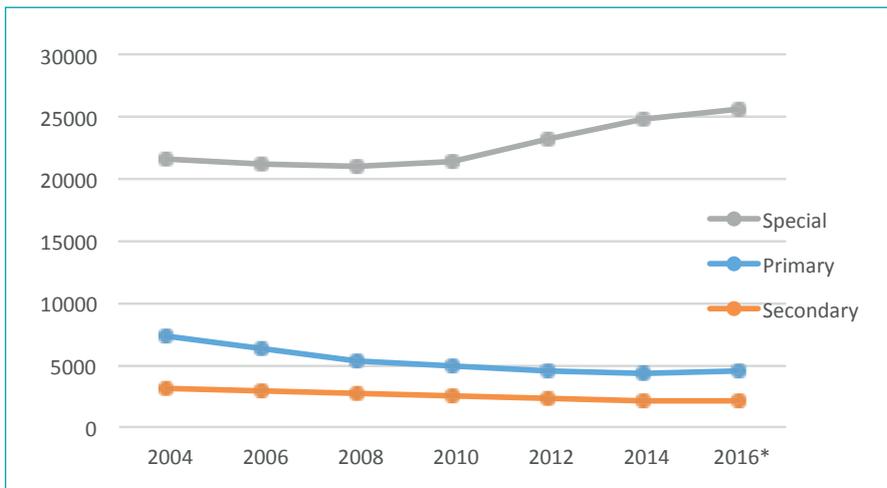
47 For example, see Emerson, E., Baines, S. (2010). The Estimated Prevalence of Autism among Adults with Learning Disabilities in England. Durham: Improving Health & Lives: Learning Disability Observatory, pp.7-8. Available at http://www.improvinghealthandlives.org.uk/uploads/doc/vid_8731_IHAL2010-05Autism.pdf.

48 See advice provided by a charity which supports families of children with SLD: <http://www.challengingbehaviour.org.uk/about-us/about-challenging-behaviour/severe-learning-disabilities.html>

49 Of those who are in mainstream school, the great majority (86%) are learning alongside their peers rather than in specially resourced provision or units (data requested from DfE, Jan 2016).

50 See above website and research cited in Pinney A. (Nov 2014) Children with learning disabilities whose behaviours challenge: what do we know from national data? CBF and CDC

Chart 11: Children with SLD in schools in England, 2004-2016*



Source/notes: SFR 29-2016 national tables (table 8) and equivalent data at 2-year intervals, back to 2004. Includes all children with SLD including those (probably young children) whose needs were met at School Action Plus, now replaced by SEN Support (*2016 data). Excludes children in independent schools.

needs than those without (acknowledging local variations in practice, Section 1); and that those in special schools generally have more complex needs than those in mainstream education.

If we use this approach to explore the trends amongst children with more complex ASD, significant increases are evident over the past decade. Since 2004, the number of children with ASD with a statement or EHC plan in mainstream schools or attending a special school has grown (Chart 12):

- In primary schools, by 54%
- In secondary schools, by 182%
- In special schools (including children without a statement/EHC plan) by 219%.

Of those in mainstream, 17% were in specially resourced provision or units, with the great majority learning alongside their peers in mainstream classes.⁵¹

In 2016, there were 57,615 children with more complex ASD (using the above definition) in schools in England, well more than twice the number (24,120) in 2004. Just under half (48%) of these pupils in 2016 were in special schools.

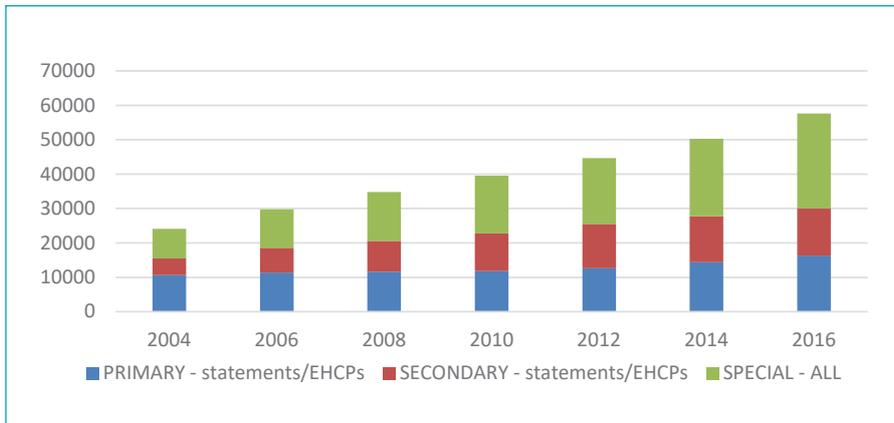
In conclusion, our analysis of primary needs data, with a particular focus on PMLD, SLD and ASD, shows that:

- Special schools are catering for many more children with complex needs than a decade ago
- Mainstream schools, particularly primary schools, are also catering for many more children with complex needs (PMLD and ASD with a statement/EHC plan), although fewer children with SLD.

This suggests that rising numbers in special schools probably reflects underlying trends in the prevalence of childhood disabilities (i.e.

⁵¹ Data requested from DfE 17% of children with a statement/EHC plan and a primary need of ASD in mainstream schools are in specially resourced provision or units (Jan 2016).

Chart 12: Growth in children with ASD with higher support needs* in schools in England, 2004-2016



Source/notes: SFR 29-2016 national tables (table 8) and equivalent data at two-year intervals, back to 2004. *Higher support needs: includes children with ASD with statements/EHC plans in mainstream primary and secondary schools; and all children with a primary need of ASD in special schools. Special school data includes children whose needs were met at School Action Plus to 2014 and at SEN Support in 2016. Excludes children in independent schools.

more children with complex needs), rather than a drift away from inclusion.

Local variations in the pattern of provision

The pattern of provision for children with more complex needs varies greatly across different local authority areas.

In section one, we noted the variation in the proportion of children with statements or EHC plans, linked most strongly to different local policies and approaches to resourcing SEN provision. A similar distribution is evident in the proportion of children educated in special schools, ranging from 0.2% in the London Borough of Newham⁵² to 2.9% in Newcastle in Tyne, with a mean of 1.4% (Chart 13).

To explore how the pattern of provision for children with complex needs varies across different local authority areas, we analysed

local authority data on placements for children with a primary need of PMLD, SLD or ASD.

PMLD⁵³

Nationally, there are almost 11,000 pupils with PMLD. At local level, the number ranges from less than 10 children in three local authorities to 300 in the largest local authority, Birmingham, with a median (i.e. middle of the range) of 55.

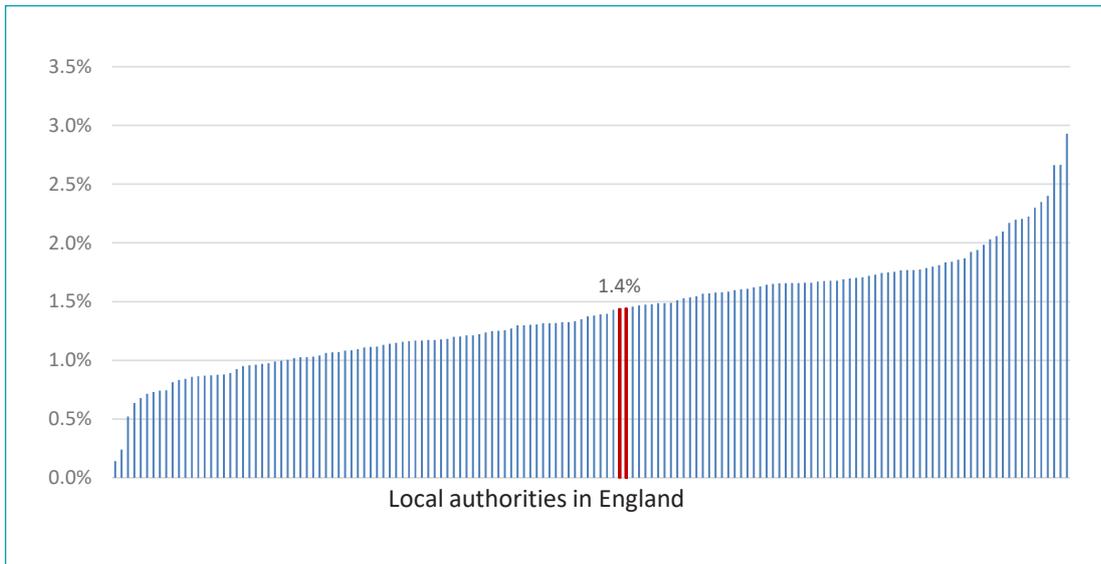
Children with a primary need of PMLD are the most likely to attend special school: 81% are in special schools, 16% in primary schools and 4% (395 children) are in mainstream secondary schools.

How far children with PMLD are included in mainstream schools varies greatly by local authority. The London Borough of Newham is known for its strong emphasis on inclusion,

⁵² Excluding Rutland (0.1%) as an outlier, with just 8 pupils in special schools.

⁵³ Source: SFR 29-2016 local authority tables (analysis of tables 16-18). Pupil numbers rounded to nearest 5, totals may not equal sum of parts. School Census data, based on where children attend schools, excluding independent schools.

Chart 13: Percentage of children attending special schools in each local authority area (England, 2016)



Source: SFR 29-2016 local authority tables (analysis of table 14). School Census data, based on where a child attends school. Excludes children in independent schools.

dating back over two decades, and this is reflected in their provision for children with PMLD. There are 135 children with PMLD in Newham, 75 of them in mainstream primary schools, 25 in mainstream secondary schools while only 35 (26%) attend special school.

Chart 14 shows the proportion of children with PMLD in special schools in each local authority area (excluding two local authorities which have almost no children with PMLD in local special schools⁵⁴). Newham is at one end of the spectrum (with Richmond on Thames, which had fewer than 15 children with PMLD). At the other end, three local authorities (North Tyneside, North Lincolnshire and West Berkshire) had no pupils with PMLD in local mainstream schools.

SLD

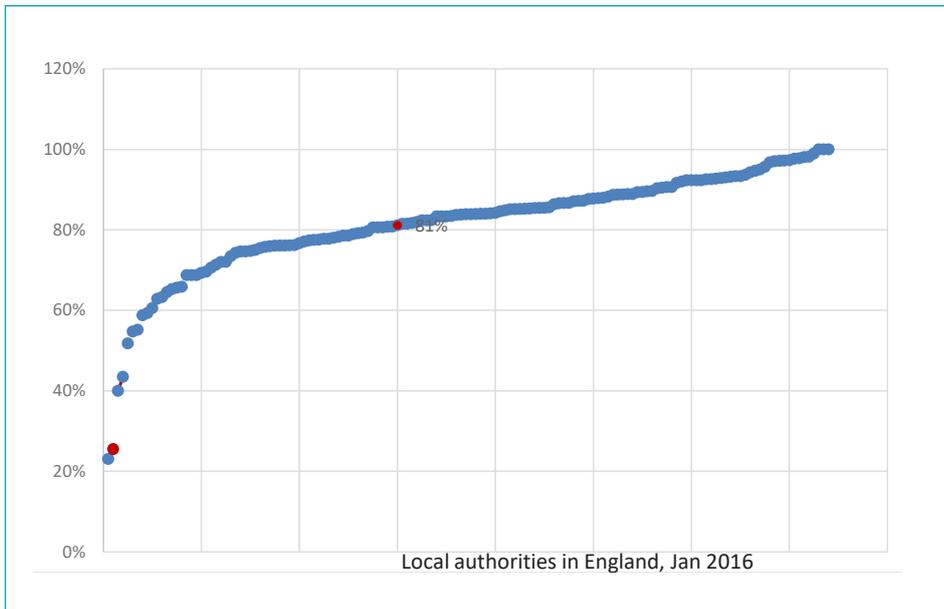
A similar picture emerges for children with severe learning disabilities, a far more numerous group. There are 32,305 children with SLD attending schools in England, 79% of them in special schools, 14% in primary schools and 7% in secondary schools.

At local level, the number of pupils with SLD ranges from 15 pupils in Rutland (a small unitary authority) and around 30 in two London Boroughs; to around 800 to 1,000 in three of the largest counties (Kent, Hampshire, Essex), with a median of 155 children.

As with PMLD, the London Borough of Newham stands out for including the highest proportion in mainstream schools: with 70 children with SLD in local primary schools,

⁵⁴ Kensington & Chelsea and Rutland.

Chart 14: Percentage of children with PMLD in special schools in each local authority area (England, 2016)



Source: SFR 29-2016 local authority tables (analysis of tables 16-18). School Census data, based on where children attend schools, excluding independent schools.

55 in local secondary schools and just under 20 in special schools (13%). Newham is an outlier (i.e. atypical) as the distribution in Chart 15 shows, as upwards of 38% children with SLD attend special schools in most local authority areas, with a median of 82%.

ASD

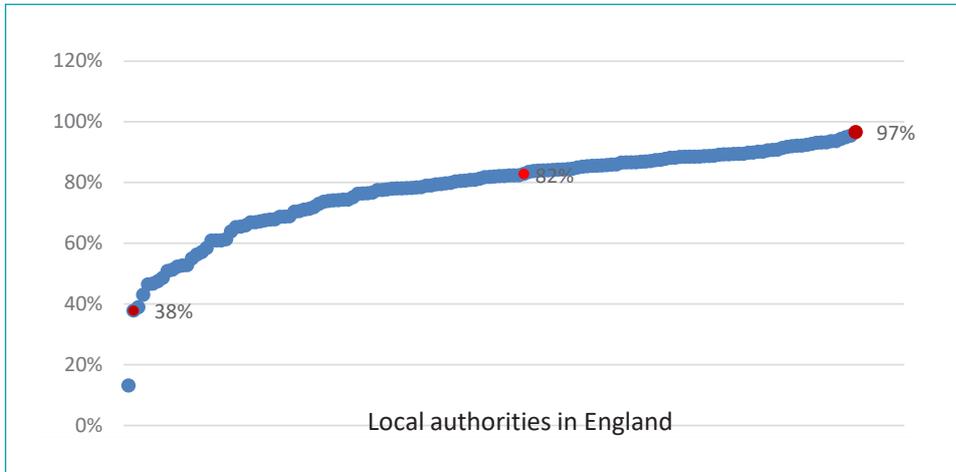
Elsewhere in this analysis we have focused on children at the more severe/complex end of the autistic spectrum, by exploring trends for those with statements/EHC plans or attending special schools. We were unable to use this approach here, as published local authority data (by type of SEN) includes children on SEN support, not just those with statements or EHC plans. As we saw in Section 1 (Table 1), 57% of children with ASD have a statement or EHC plan.

Bearing this in mind, the proportion of children with ASD attending special schools ranges from none in four of the smallest local authorities to nearly two-thirds (63-64%) in two areas (Hammersmith & Fulham and Trafford), with a median of just over one quarter (27%) (Chart 16).

Residential placements

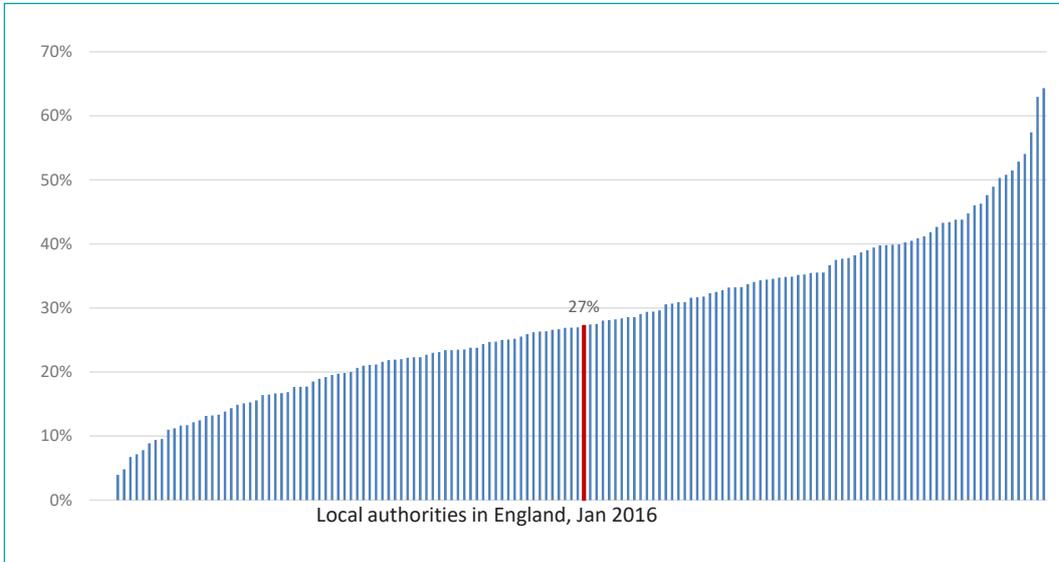
Over 5,200 children with the most complex needs are in SEN residential placements, some providing year-round, full-time specialist care to meet children’s needs. Although the School Census collects data on residential placements this is not routinely analysed or published, so a request was made to DfE (see Table 4). This shows that the majority of SEN residential placements are out of authority.

Chart 15: Percentage of children with SLD attending special schools in each local authority area (England, 2016)



Source: SFR 29-2016 local authority tables (analysis of tables 16-18). School Census data, based on where children attend schools, excluding independent schools.

Chart 16: Proportion of children with ASD (including those on SEN support) in special schools in each local authority area



Source: SFR 29-2016 local authority tables (analysis of tables 16-18). School Census data, based on where children attend schools, excluding independent schools.

Table 4: Children boarding in special schools (England, 2016)

Sector	Number	%
State-funded special schools*	2,080	40%
Non-maintained special school	1,245	24%
Independent special school	1,895	36%
Total	5,215	100%

Source: School Census and School Level Annual School Census (SLASC) data, by request to DfES; data for 2015 was also provided. Note: *State-funded special schools include academies, community & foundation schools.

Data on residential special school placements is seldom published, but an analysis by the author just over a decade ago, found that 9,500 children with SEN were boarding in residential special schools in 2004 – suggesting a steep decline (45%) in SEN residential placements over the last twelve years.⁵⁵ DfE data for January 2015 shows a decline of 11% (580 children) in the last year.

We also requested a breakdown of the primary needs of children with statements/EHC plans in residential placements. This omits nearly 1,900 children boarding in independent special schools, which represents a really important hole in the picture.

These data show that half of all children boarding in residential special schools have social, emotional and mental health difficulties (30%), or autistic spectrum disorder (20%), as their primary

need (Chart 17). However primary needs data only tell part of the story as the great majority of children in residential placements have complex needs. We know from academic research that a diagnosis on the autistic spectrum, learning disabilities and behaviour described as challenging are all common in this cohort.⁵⁶

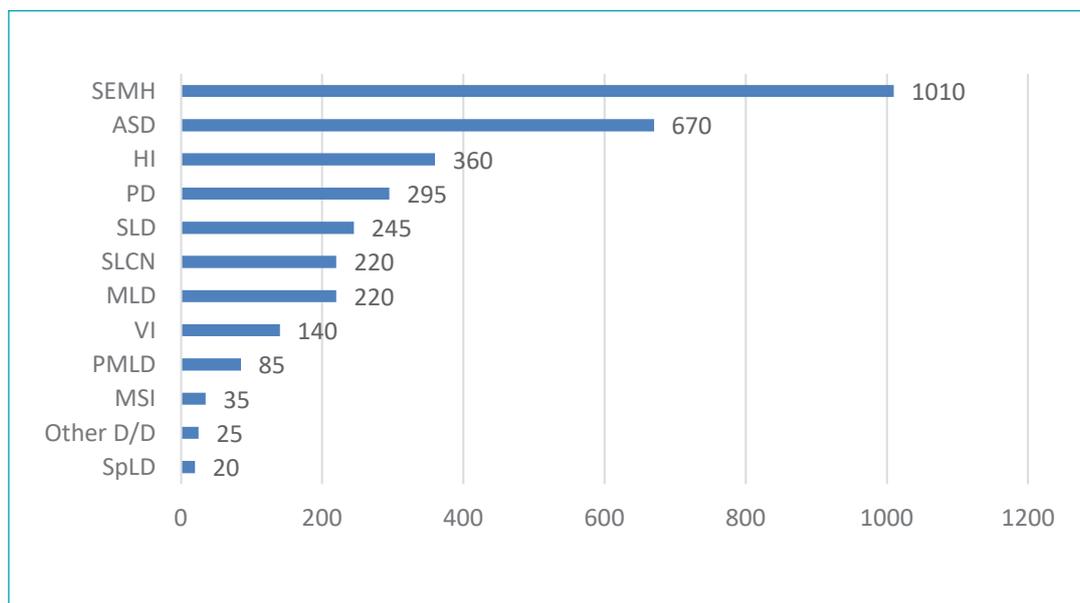
Children with complex disabilities may of course be in other types of residential placement – for example, in specialist colleges, children’s homes, mental health inpatient units or youth justice facilities. At present, there are no authoritative data on the full range of residential placements made for disabled children. It is hoped that the forthcoming Lenehan Review of specialist residential placements may be able to fill this gap and raise the debate about the role of residential placements in meeting the needs of disabled children.⁵⁷

55 Pinney A. (2005), Disabled Children in Residential Placements, DfES

56 Gore et al (2015) NIHR School for Social Care Research Scoping Review: Residential school placements for people aged under 25 with intellectual disabilities <http://www.sscr.nihr.ac.uk/PDF/ScopingReviews/SR10.pdf>

57 Announced in the Government’s response to the Narey Review, page 6 https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/579549/Government_response_to_Narey_review.pdf

Chart 17: Primary needs of children with statements/ EHC plans in residential placements in maintained and non-maintained schools (N=3,325)



Source: School Census data for Jan 2016, by request to DfE. Rounded to nearest 5. Excludes children in independent schools (36% of SEN residential placements). Includes 10 children boarding in pupil referral units.

52-week residential placements

There is anecdotal evidence of rising demand for the most specialist full-time (52-week) residential placements, in dual-registered special schools and children’s homes. Around two-thirds of these placements are in the private sector.⁵⁸ The School Census does not collect data on this basis (in any case, private schools do not report pupil level information), but from 2018, local authorities will be asked to report on the number of SEN residential placements of 38-51 weeks and 52 weeks.⁵⁹

In the meantime, a survey of local authorities was carried out in December 2015 under the

Transforming Care Programme⁶⁰ to identify the number of young people leaving 52-week residential placements and to ensure that appropriate transition plans were in place. This reflected concerns about the ‘large increase in (mental health) inpatient numbers’ through the transition phase.

The survey found that there are currently over 1,100 children and young people with learning disabilities and/or autism in 52-week placements in residential special schools, or between zero and 36 children and young people per local authority area. More than three-quarters were placed at a distance of more than 20 miles from their family home.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Unpublished research by the author (2016). It is hoped the forthcoming Lenehan Review will lead to robust published data on these trends.

⁵⁹ In SEN2 returns. Source: correspondence with DfE analysts.

⁶⁰ See accompanying mental health bulletin. Transforming Care is an ambitious reform programme to reduce to a minimum the number of people with learning disabilities and/or autism in mental health living inpatient facilities.

⁶¹ Provisional data shared with the author, expected to be published soon.

Glossary of terms, definitions and acronyms

‘SEN type’ – Codes and descriptions used in School Census reporting¹

SpLD	Specific learning difficulty (e.g. Dyslexia, dyspraxia)
MLD	Moderate learning difficulty
SLD	Severe learning difficulty
PMLD	Profound & multiple learning difficulty
SEMH	Social, emotional and mental health
SLCN	Speech, language and communication needs
HI	Hearing impairment
VI	Visual impairment
MSI	Multi-sensory impairment
PD	Physical disability
ASD	Autistic spectrum disorder (includes Asperger syndrome).



¹ DfE (Jan 2016) School census 2015 to 2016 Guide (version 2.5) https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/495464/2015_to_2016_School_Census_Guide_V_2_5.pdf



**Data bulletin of an exploratory analysis
commissioned by the Council for Disabled Children
and the True Colours Trust.**

by Anne Pinney

The full report and in-depth data bulletins can be found at
www.councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk/helpresources/data-report