Special Educational Needs[i] and Disability[ii] (SEND)

Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) affect a significant and growing proportion of children and young people in Bristol. While many children with SEND achieve positive outcomes with appropriate support, there continues to be substantial inequalities in educational attainment, attendance, inclusion and preparation for adulthood. Understanding patterns of need is essential for planning services and support across education, health and social care.

Summary points

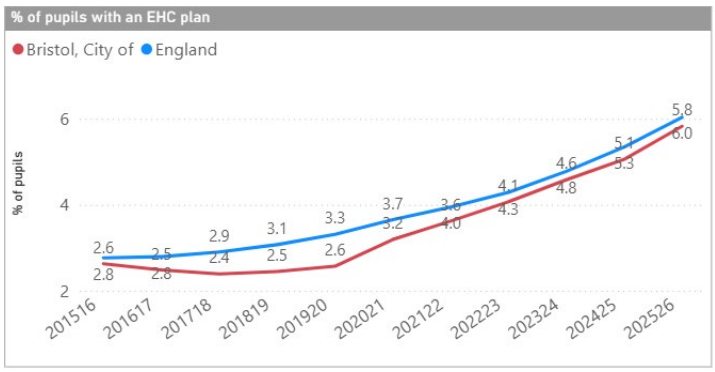
- Over 15,900 pupils in Bristol schools have special educational needs (Jan 2026) with 17.2% of pupils receiving SEN support and 5.8% with an EHC plan.
- The proportion of pupils with SEN in Bristol schools has been increasing year on year and has increased by 3.3% between 2025 and 2026.
- There is significant variation in SEN prevalence across Bristol, indicating differing levels of need and demand between communities.
- Social, emotional and mental health is the most common primary need for pupils with SEN in Bristol schools.
- Bristol has an above average rate of pupils with SEN support but the gap has narrowed slightly between 2025 and 2026.
- Children and young people with SEN experience poorer educational outcomes, higher absence rates and higher rates of suspension than their peers without SEN.

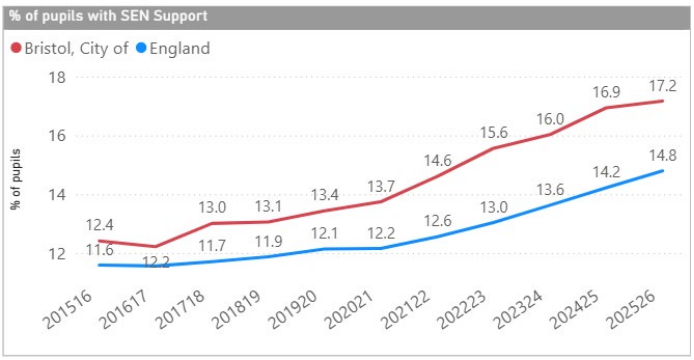
Numbers of children and young people with SEN in Bristol schools

As at January 2026, there were 69,339 children on roll in Bristol schools[1].

- 15,947 pupils with special educational needs (SEN)
  - 11,907 (17.2%) are receiving SEN support
  - 4,040 (5.8%) have an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan

Source: school census Jan 2026





The proportion of pupils with an EHC plan continues to increase both locally and nationally but Bristol remains below the national average. Since Jan 2025 there has been a 13.8% increase in the number of pupils with an EHC plan in Bristol, this is a faster rate of increase than seen in the previous year (+9%).

[1] All Bristol schools including academies and independent schools.

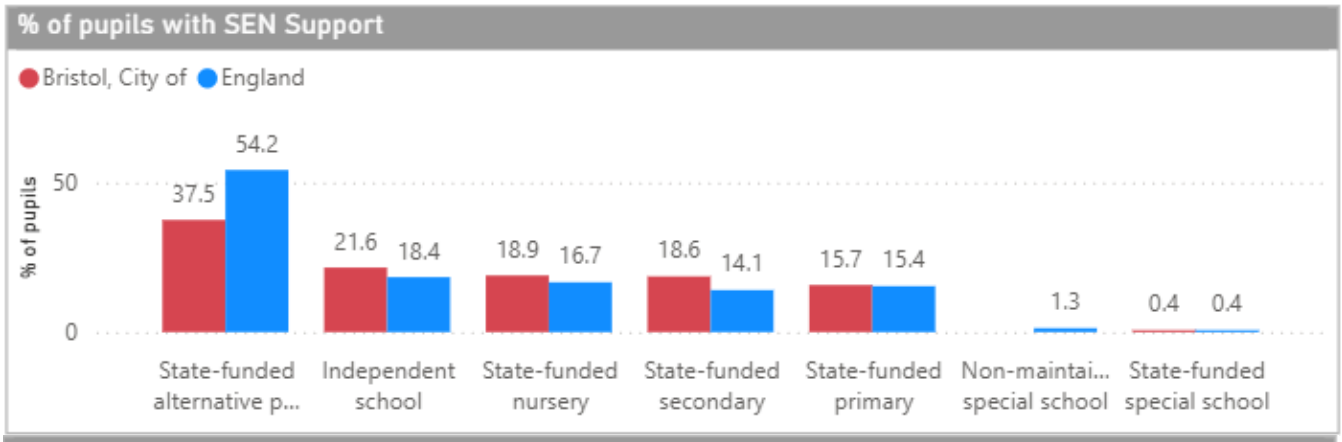
Bristol has a much higher than average proportion of pupils with SEN Support. In Jan 2026, 17.2% of pupils in Bristol schools had SEN support compared to 14.8% nationally. The gap between Bristol and the national average has decreased slightly in between 2025 and 2026.

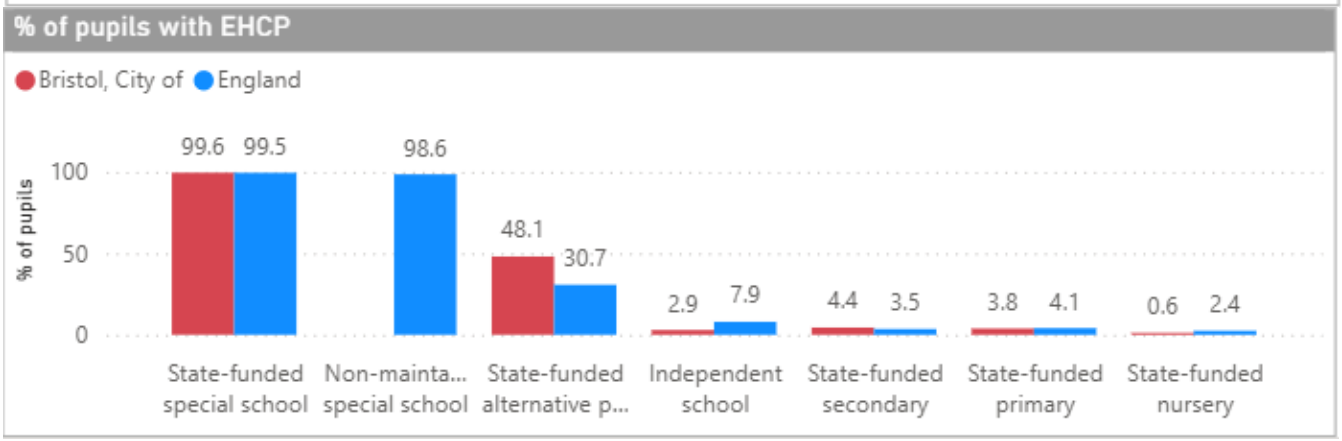
SEN is more prevalent in boys than girls, both locally and nationally.

- 71% of pupils with an EHC plan are boys
- 60% of pupils with SEN Support are boys

In Bristol, rates of EHC plans and SEN support are higher in secondary schools than primary schools. This is in contrast with national rates, which are higher in primary schools than secondary. The proportion of children with SEN support in primary schools has decreased between 2025 and 2026 for the first time since 2021 and is now much closer to the national average.

- In primary schools, 3.8% of pupils have an EHC plan and 15.7% have SEN support
- In secondary schools, 4.4% of pupils have an EHC plan and 18.6% have SEN support

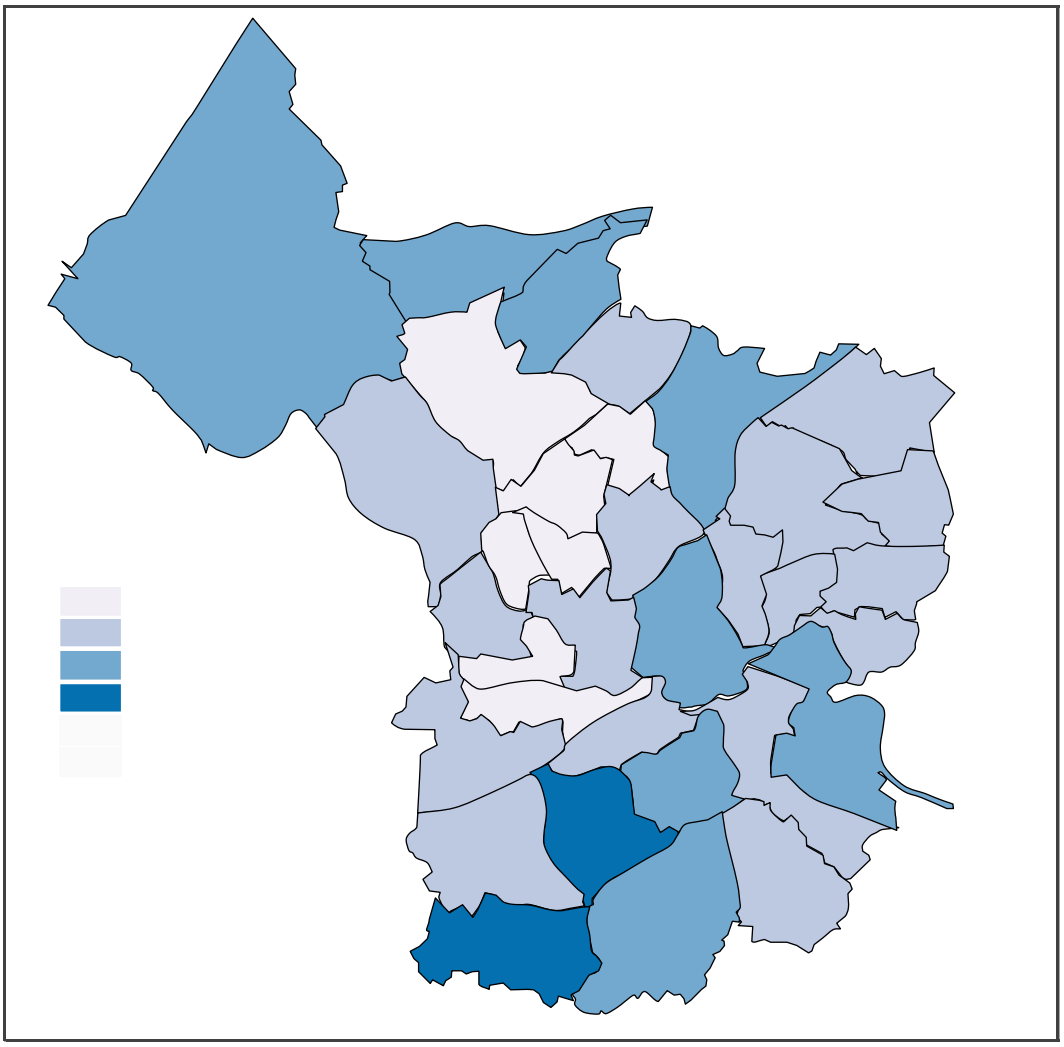




SOURCE: SCHOOL CENSUS JAN 2026

Percentage of Pupils with SEN by Ward

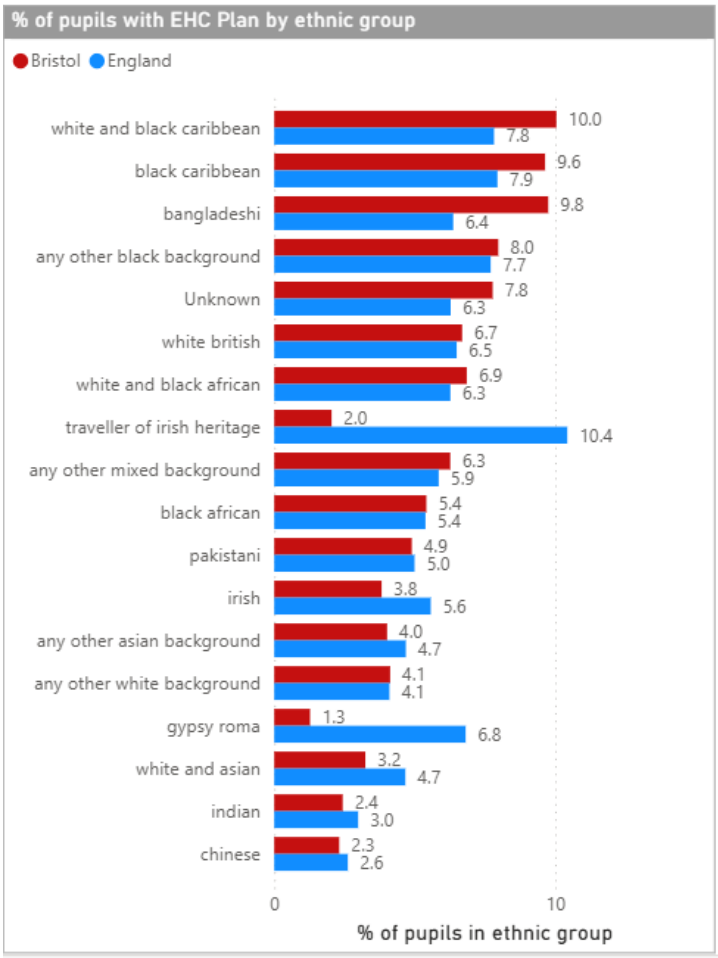
Local school census data for pupils with SEN (EHC plans and SEN support) shows a wide variation across Bristol, ranging from 12.8% in Redland to 32.4% in Hartcliffe and Withywood. This variation is likely to reflect a combination of demographic, socioeconomic and school population factors and should be interpreted alongside local context.

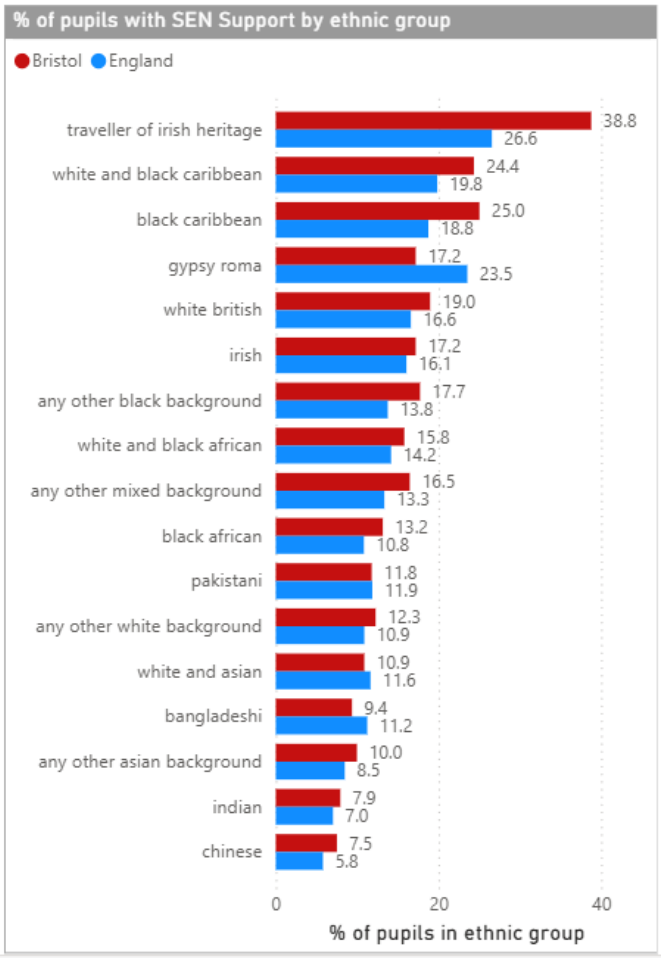


Ethnicity

Rates of children and young people at SEN support vary by ethnicity and are highest amongst pupils from Irish Traveller and Black Caribbean backgrounds. EHC plans are most prevalent in the White and Black Caribbean ethnic group (as in 2025).

Bristol has a significantly higher rate of Black Caribbean pupils receiving SEN Support than the national average (25.0% compared to 18.8%). The lowest recorded rates of SEN are for children and young people from Chinese and Indian communities.





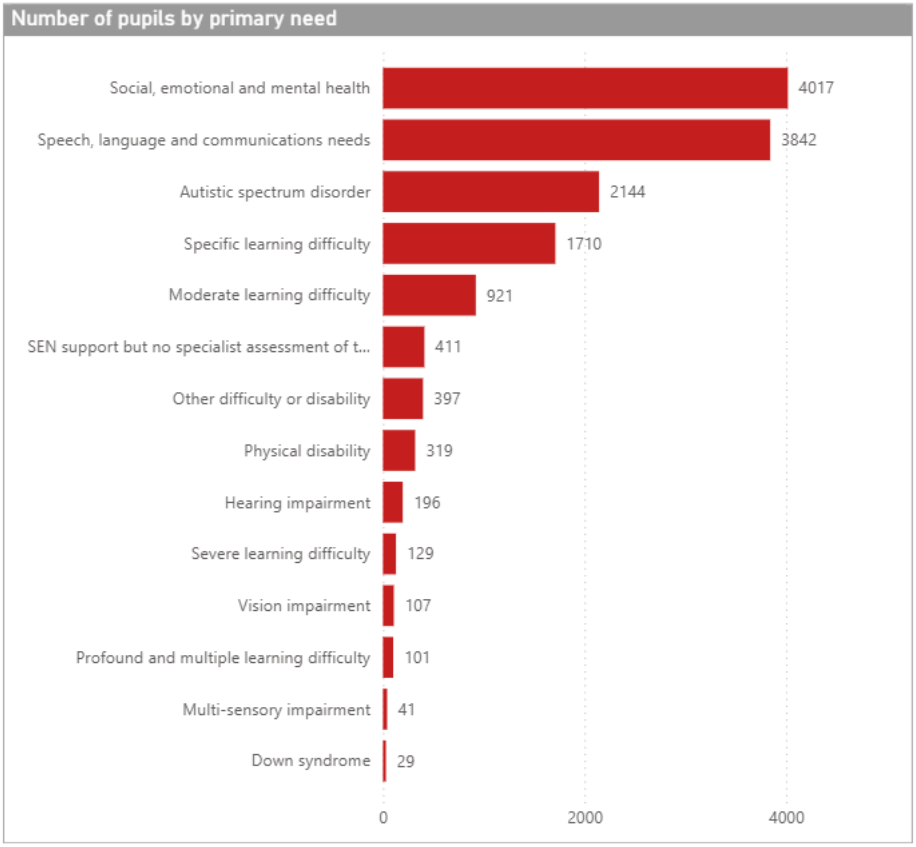
SOURCE: SCHOOL CENSUS JAN 2026

Primary Need of children with SEN

Social, emotional and mental health is the most common primary need for pupils with SEN in Bristol schools.

For pupils with an EHC plan the most common need type is Autistic Spectrum Disorder (1,283 pupils). This is the same nationally.

For pupils with SEN support the most common need type is Social, Emotional and Mental Health (3,092 pupils), overtaking Speech, Language and Communication needs for the first time.



SOURCE: SCHOOL CENSUS JAN 26

The most common primary need for SEN pupils in primary schools is speech, language and communication needs (2,501 pupils) and in secondary schools the most common primary need type is social, emotional and mental health (1,987 pupils).

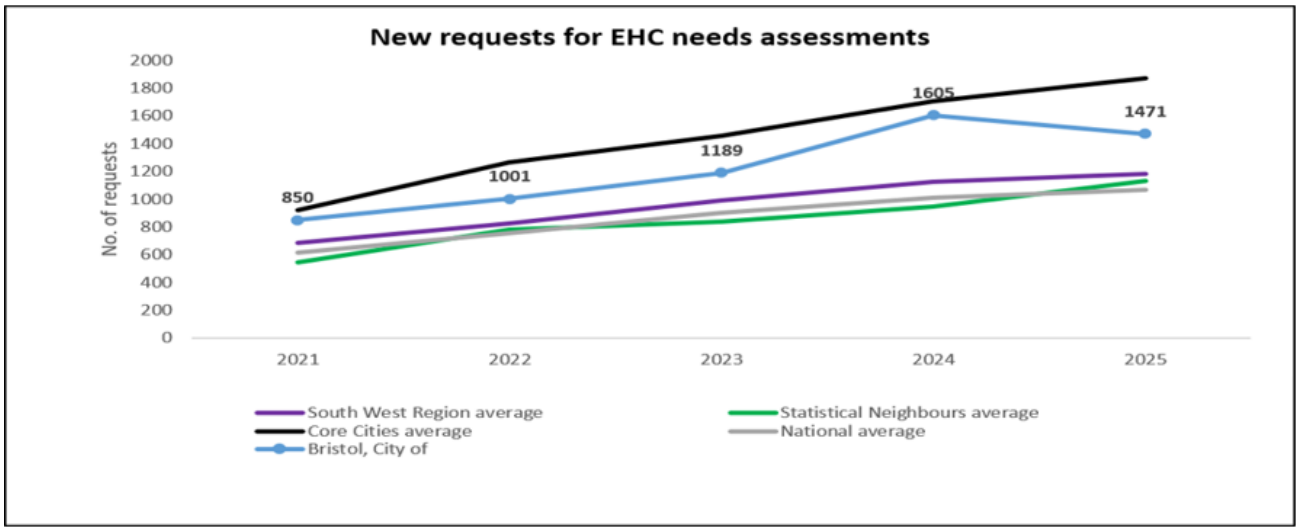
Social care (as of September 2026)[2]

- 3.1% (208) of children in Bristol with an EHC plan are in care
- 1.3% (85) of children in Bristol with an EHC plan are subject to a child protection plan
- 10.8% (718) of children in in Bristol with an EHC plan are children in need (Including CLA & CPP)

EHC Needs Assessments[iii]

There were 1,471 initial requests for an EHC plan in Bristol during 2025, a reduction of 8% when compared to 2024. Nationally there was a 5% increase. Bristol's requests received in 2025 represented 0.8% of Bristol's 0–25-year-old population compared to 0.9% nationally.

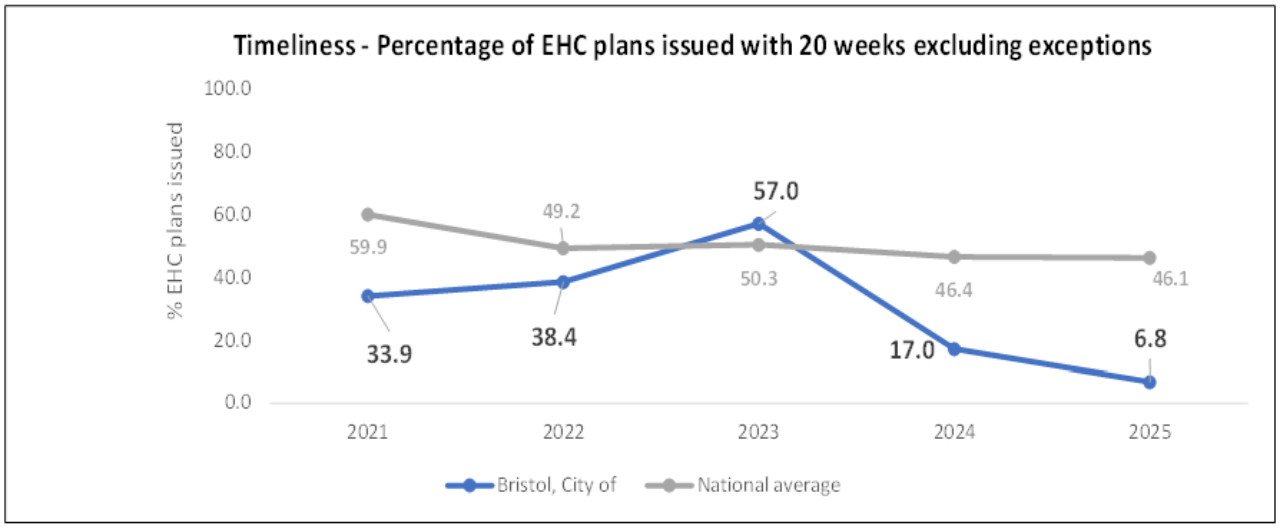
[2] Source: Bristol City Council Local data as at the end of September 2026.



SOURCE: SEN2 2025

Current year data shows 1,018 new requests between January 2026 and end of September 2026, a decrease of 7% on the same period in 2025. The majority of requests to date are for primary school aged children (45%), with 27% for secondary and 25% for early years (Source: BCC internal data).

Timeliness remains below the national average. In 2025, 6.8% of EHC plans were finalised within the statutory 20 week timescale. This is below the national average of 46.1%. Performance during 2026 continued to be affected by the high volume of requests received in previous years. An EHCNA improvement plan is in place and year-to-date performance has improved to 21% as at September 2026.



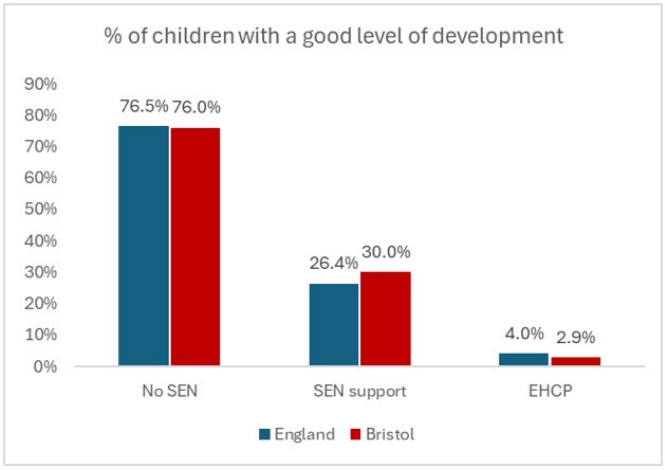
SOURCE: SEN2 2026

Education

Educational outcomes for children and young people with SEN remain significantly below those of their peers without identified SEN at every stage of education. The gap is greatest for pupils with an EHC plan.

Early years

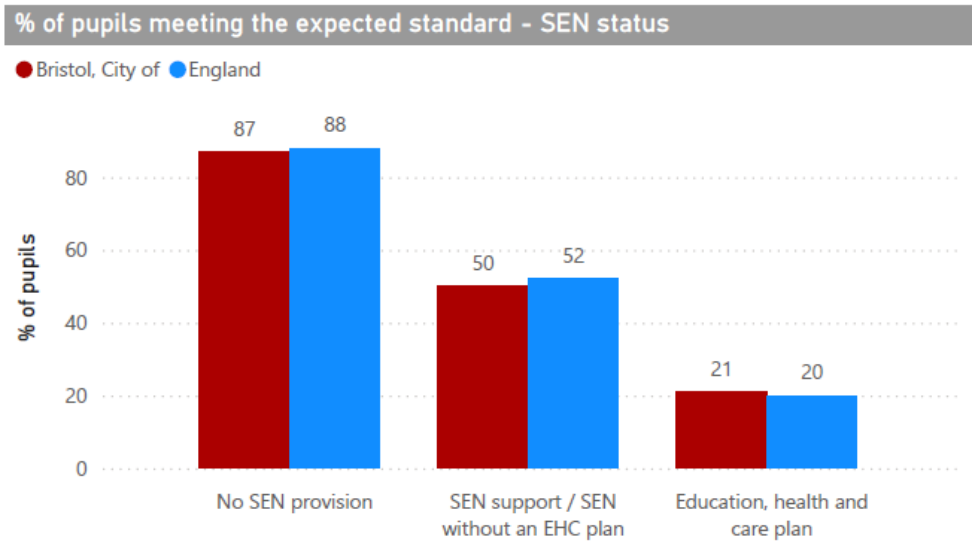
- In 2025, 30% of children receiving SEN support achieved a good level of development at Early Years Foundation Stage, above the England average of 26.4%. For Bristol this is an increase of 3.1 percentage points when compared to the previous year but still falls well below children with no identified SEN (76%).
- 2.9% of children with an EHC plan achieved a good level of development at Early Years Foundation Stage, down from 4.1% last year and now below the England average of 4.0%.



Source: DfE data

Phonics

- In 2025, the percentage of children meeting the expected standard in phonics year 1 is lowest for children with SEN – especially those with an EHC plan.
- However, outcomes for children with SEN have improved in the last year in Bristol. The gap between Bristol's SEN support children and the national average has narrowed and children with an EHC plan in Bristol are now above the national average by 1ppt.



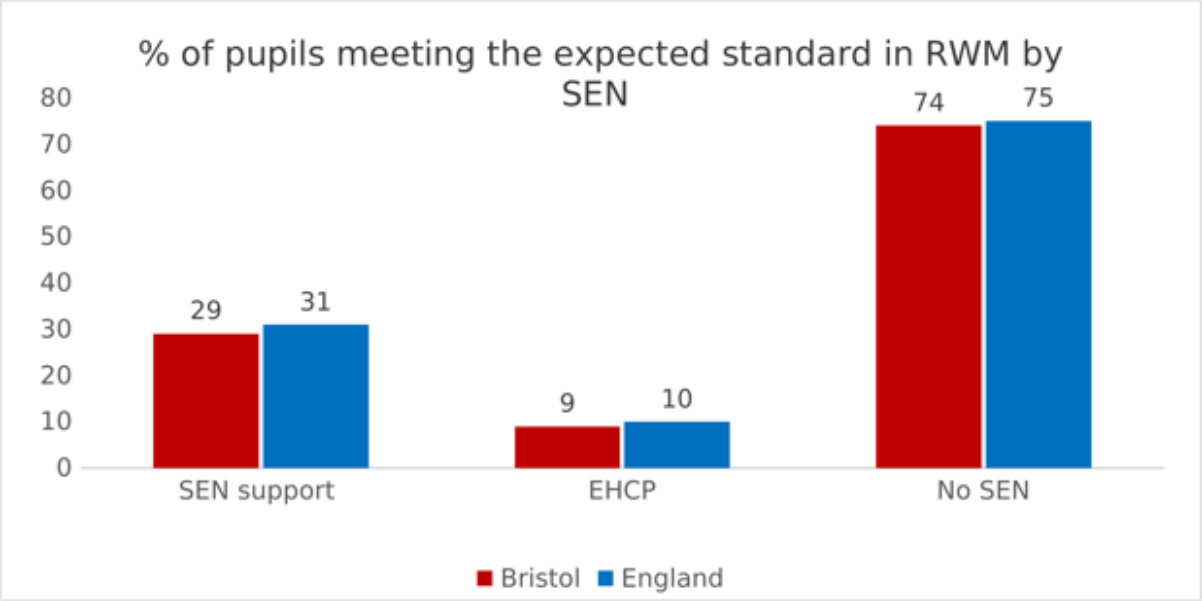
source: DfE data

KS2

- KS2 attainment results are lower for pupils with SEN, especially those with an EHC plan.
- Provisional data shows that the gap between pupils with SEN and pupils with no SEN has widened by 2 percentage points between 2025 and 2026.

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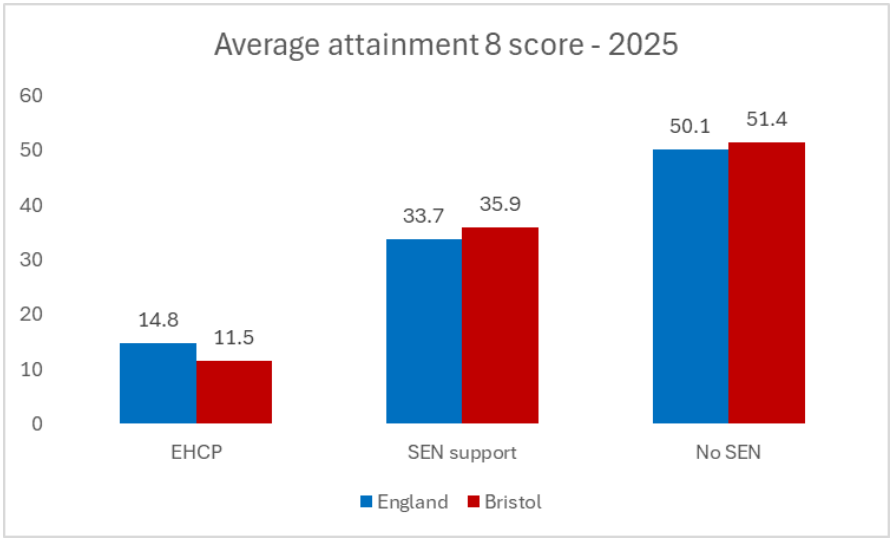
- In Bristol, 29% of pupils receiving SEN support, up 1ppt since 2025.
- 9% with an EHC plan met the expected standard, down from 10% last year.
- Bristol is 2ppts below England for SEN support and 1ppt below for EHC plans and no SEN.



Source: DfE provisional data 2026

KS4

- In 2025, the average attainment 8 score for pupils with SEN support was 35.9, above the national average of 33.7.
- The average score was 11.5 for pupils with an EHC plan, below the England average of 14.8.
- 27.9% of pupils with SEN support achieved grade 5 or above in English and maths GCSEs and 5.8% of pupils with an EHC plan. This compares to 52.8% of pupils with no SEN.



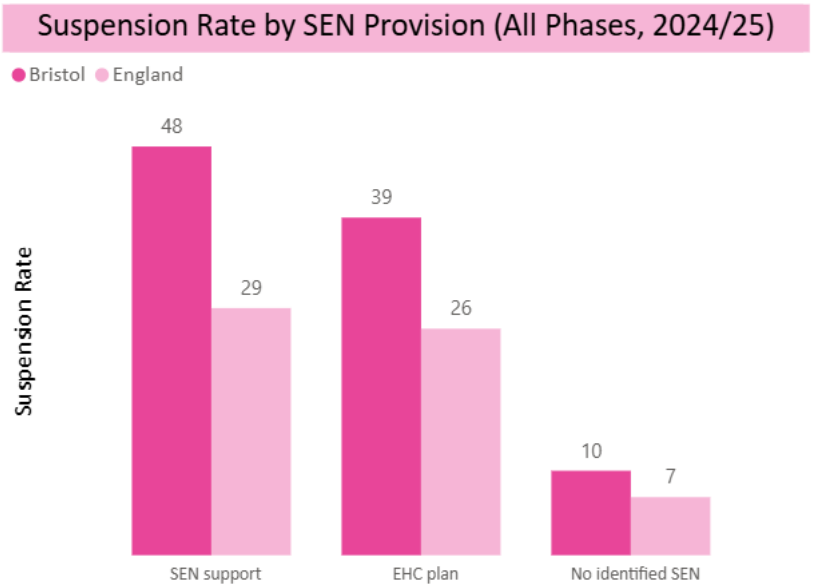
Source: DfE data 2025

- KS4 performance for pupils with SEN remains significantly lower than pupils without SEN.

Absence/suspensions

Pupils with SEN are disproportionately represented in suspension data and experience higher levels of absence. This can have a cumulative impact on educational attainment, inclusion and longer-term outcomes.

- Suspension rates are significantly higher for pupils with SEN.
- Between 2024 and 2025, there has been a large increase in suspension rate for pupils receiving SEN support (+11ppts).
- Suspension rates for pupils with SEN in Bristol are significantly higher than the national average.
- Permanent exclusion rates have decreased slightly both locally and nationally between 2024 and 2025. In Bristol for 2024/25, the permanent exclusion rate for pupils with an EHC plan was 0.27, the same as the national figure. For pupils with SEN support the rate is lower in Bristol at 0.30 compared to 0.37 nationally.



- In 2024/25, the absence rate for children and young people with an EHC plan in Bristol was 15.4, compared to the England average of 12.7.
- Absence rates for children and young people receiving SEN Support in Bristol was 12.0, compared to the England average of 9.8.

Post 16

- At the end of 2023/24, 82.2% of KS4 pupils with an EHC plan who left KS4 in 2022/23 were in sustained education, employment and apprenticeships, below the national average of 87%.
- 87.3% of KS4 pupils with SEN support were in sustained education, employment and apprenticeships, above the national average of 84.5%[3].
- Those students with an EHCP were more likely to continue in education whereas SEN support students were more likely to continue in an apprenticeship or employment after KS4.
- 14% of 16-17 year olds with an EHC plan are recorded as NEET or Not Known for 2026[4]. This is worse than the national average of 9.9%.
- 8.3% of 16-17 year olds with SEN support are recorded as NEET or Not Known for 2026[5]. This is better than the national average of 10.0%.
- In 2025, 14.2% of 19 year olds with an EHC plan and 50.3% with SEN support were qualified to Level 2 including English and maths. This compares to 75.4% of pupils with no identified SEN[6].
- 13.7% of 19 year olds with an EHC plan were qualified to level 3 and 39% of pupils with SEN support.

What this means for Bristol

- Demand for support continues to increase, particularly for EHC plans.
- SEMH needs are becoming increasingly prominent.

[3] Source: DfE: Key stage 4 destination measure. Data is for pupils leaving state funded mainstream and special schools.
[4] Data is an average of the rates for Dec 2025, Jan 2026 and Feb 2026.
[5] Data is an average of the rates for Dec 2025, Jan 2026 and Feb 2026.
[6] Source: DfE: Level 2 and 3 attainment age 16-25

- Significant inequalities in educational outcomes persist for children and young people with SEN.
- Improving attendance, reducing suspensions and supporting successful preparation for adulthood remain key priorities.

Further data / links

- Bristol's SEND Local Offer – www.Bristol.gov.uk/web/bristol-local-offer
- Special educational needs in England: January 2026 - GOV.UK
- Education, health and care plans: England 2026 - GOV.UK
- Education, Health and Care plans LIVE

Date updated: September 2026

Endnotes: Definitions

[i] **Special educational needs (SEN)[i]**
A child or young person has special educational needs (SEN) if he or she has a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made for him or her. A child or young person is considered to have a learning difficulty if he or she has a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of others of the same age. A child or young person has a learning disability if they have a disability which prevents or hinders them from making use of facilities of a kind generally provided for others of the same age in mainstream schools or mainstream post-16 institutions.

[ii] **Disability**
A person has a disability if she or he has a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial, long term adverse effect on his or her ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.

Statutory guidance and the SEND Code of Practice provide additional information to help with the interpretation and application of these definitions. The statutory definitions of special educational needs (SEN) and disability which are described above are found in Section 20 of the Children and Families Act 2014 and section 6 of the Equality Act 2010.

[iii] **Education, health and care needs assessment (EHCNA)**
The majority of children and young people with SEN or disabilities will have their needs met within local mainstream early years settings, schools or colleges. Some children and young people may require an EHC needs assessment in order for the local authority to decide whether it is necessary for it to make provision in accordance with an EHC plan. The assessment seeks to establish and record the views, interests and aspirations of the parents and child or young person to provide a full description of the child or young person's special educational needs, and any health and social care needs. It establishes outcomes across education, health and social care based on the child or young person's identified needs and aspirations. It specifies the provision required and how education, health and care services will work together to meet the child or young person's needs and support the achievement of the agreed outcomes.