Mapping inclusion in education

Research paper

CENTRE FOR YOUNG LIVES

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Introduction

The Government has set a welcome ambition to bring forward a new era of inclusion in education. As part of this shift, the Department for Education and Ofsted are exploring how to measure and demonstrate school inclusion within new 'school profiles' which would give families a clearer and more complete picture of school performance. These plans are welcome, and raise key questions about how policy makers and educators might meaningfully measure school inclusion.

This research paper contributes to this discussion about measuring school inclusion, by considering how to establish a map of different levels of inclusion across the country. We use local authority data in this analysis to give a first stage picture of the indicators of local inclusion in education. This helps us to understand the extent to which a range of local factors might contribute to schools' ability to provide an inclusive education.

It is widely understood that where you live in this country determines whether you will access a fair share of good opportunities,[1] and it is now known that gaps in attainment for children with SEND or living in poverty are wider in some parts of the country than in others. The practices of schools, the social infrastructure and other factors come together to ensure that schools in some parts of the country are able to break down more barriers, and create more of an inclusive education system, than others.

To support this mapping inclusion research paper, the Centre for Young Lives commissioned academics at Sheffield Hallam University to consider how they might establish a nuanced inclusion score, using a range of variables including absence, attainment, and suspensions data to create an inclusion score for each local authority. This paper builds on previous research by the Centre for Young Lives which showed significant geographical variation in the rates of school absence, suspension, exclusion and other forms of lost learning across the country.[2] This research is intended as a first stage feasibility study for mapping inclusion, and we conclude by presenting implications for further research.

[1] Sutton Trust (2025) The Opportunity Index, https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/the-opportunity-index/

[2] Centre for Young Lives (2025) Everyone Included: Transforming our education system to be ambitious about inclusion, https://www.centreforyounglives.org.uk/news-centre/centre-for-young-lives-report-reveals-london-is-powering-ahead-of-the-rest-of-england-in-delivering-schools-that-leave-fewer-children-behind-as-part-of-a-new-plan-to-boost-inclusion-and-opportunity-for-all-children

Policy context

Many children who face additional barriers to learning, are falling through the gaps in our education system, with wide educational gaps and higher rates of suspension, exclusion and absence among children in poverty, with SEND, and with additional vulnerabilities.

The upcoming Schools White Paper, which will set out an approach to SEND reform, is due to be published next year. The Government has also committed to developing a national Pupil Engagement Framework to provide schools with clear guidance on how to foster inclusive, supportive environments for every child.

While these changes signal a welcome commitment to fostering an inclusive approach across the education system, an understanding of which areas of the country face greater barriers to inclusion in relation to a wide range of factors including disadvantage and SEND will be vital to delivering the Government's Mission to break down the barriers to opportunity.

Methodology

This briefing builds on and further develops the work undertaken in our previous report, *Everyone Included: Transforming our education system to be ambitious about inclusion*, published in May 2025.[3] The report analysed local authority datasets to rank all local authorities in England based on their rates of lost learning and attainment gaps for disadvantaged students. It also looked at indicators of inclusivity with a broad overview of which areas in the country have the lowest suspension and exclusion rates, lowest overall absence, and the smallest attainment gaps, as well as which areas had the highest. This approach was limited as it used local authority level data, and does not reflect local context, nor whether disadvantaged pupils – such as those eligible for free school meals (FSM) or those with special educational needs (SEN) – are suspended, excluded, or absent at a similar rate to their peers.

To better understand geographical variation in indicators of inclusive practice, we commissioned researchers from Sheffield Hallam University to create an

[3] Centre for Young Lives (2025) Everyone Included: Transforming our education system to be ambitious about inclusion, https://www.centreforyounglives.org.uk/news-centre/centre-for-young-lives-report-reveals-london-is-powering-ahead-of-the-rest-of-england-in-delivering-schools-that-leave-fewer-children-behind-as-part-of-a-new-plan-to-boost-inclusion-and-opportunity-for-all-children

inclusion score that better reflects the indicators of inclusive practice. The resulting score is based on three main areas, including attainment, suspensions, and absences, as well as the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers for each of these measures. The score also considers background information such as proportions of children eligible for FSM or diagnosed with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND) in a region.

The inclusion score is based on data on primary and secondary schools from 151 local authorities in England, excluding the smallest ones (Isles of Scilly and City of London). It brings together three main areas linked to inclusion in education:

- Attainment: how well pupils perform at primary and secondary level, and the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers. This includes the gap between children eligible for FSM and those not, and the gap between children with no SEN and children with SEN support or an education health and care plan (EHCP).
- School suspensions: multiple suspension rates and the suspension gaps between disadvantaged pupils and their peers.[4]
- School absences: persistent absence rate and the absence gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers.

Background data such as region, number of schools, and proportions of children eligible for FSM or diagnosed with SEN were also considered to help interpret results. Annex A provides further information about the data used.

We used local authority-level data published by the Department for Education in this analysis. This approach gives a big picture view of how inclusive each area's education system is overall, but some nuance is lost. For example, two local authorities could have similar, average levels of disadvantage but very different patterns across the schools themselves. Furthermore, local areas with a high inclusivity score can still contain schools that are less inclusive, while areas with a low inclusivity score can still contain schools that are more inclusive.

To calculate the inclusion score, the most recent data available for each variable from the Department for Education was used: Key stage 2 attainment for the academic year 2023/24, key stage 4 attainment for the academic year 2023/24,

[4] Multiple suspensions rates are the number of pupils who receive more than one suspension within a school year. Permanent exclusions data was not included in this analysis due to the high level of clustering for this variable (over a third of local authorities had zero permanent exclusions). These extreme values would have affected the analysis.

multiple suspensions data for the academic year 2023/24, and absence data for the academic year 2022/23.

The variables (attainment, suspensions and absences) were standardised using Z-scores[5], so they could be compared. Each Z-score was then ranked and then aggregated into one of the three domains: attainment, absence and suspensions. Each of these three domains was allocated a weight of ⅓ so that they contributed equally to the overall score.

Domains were then aggregated and averaged to create three overall scores:

- one for primary schools in a local authority
- one for secondary schools in a local authority
- one combined score for primary and secondary schools in a local authority.

The overall inclusion score is based on averaged ranks, with additional ranking procedures to avoid ties. As a result, the final scores ranked from 22.38 to 135.44. The top ranked local authorities were those which either performed well on all three domains (i.e. for attainment - higher levels of attainment and a smaller attainment gap) or exceptionally well on one or two domains, therefore bringing their overall score higher.

Domain	Variables included in domain	Groups Included	Year

Attainment	• LA level school mean % pupils who attained expected level at KS2
	  ○ Primary only
	• LA level school Mean attainment 8 score at KS4
	  ○ Secondary only
	• Attainment Gap
	  ○ Primary & Secondary
		FSM & SEND EHC – across all	Academic year 2023/24

School Suspensions	• LA level school mean multiple suspension rate • Suspension gap ○ Primary & Secondary phases	FSM & SEND EHC – across all	Academic year 2023/24

[5] A Z score is a standardised score-it is the measure of how many standard deviations below or above the mean a score is. Standardised scores allow data different scales to be combined.

School Absences	• Mean % pupils persistently absent • Absence gap • – Primary & Secondary phases	FSM & SEND EHC – across all	Academic year 2022/23[6]

Table 1 Inclusion domains explained

Limitations

The inclusion score provides a broad overview of the areas in the country that have stronger inclusive indicators, such as smaller gaps in the rate of suspensions, absence and absence between disadvantaged pupils and their peers.

Local authority data was used for the inclusion score, which limits the level of analysis that can be done, and may blur a range of "hidden" factors that also shape inclusion. This also abstracts from what might be considerable variation in inclusivity across different schools or academy trusts within the same local authority. Bringing in school level data would account for factors including level of deprivation and school size, and the level of variation within each local authority. However, making use of school data was not possible within the resources that were available for this project.

Additionally, data about pupil wellbeing and behaviour would help capture young people's experiences in schools, but this information is not available at a national level. While this analysis does contain scores for each local authority, it is not intended to rank local authorities or to make judgements about the effectiveness of local authorities in relation to education and inclusivity. Instead, this analysis is a simple way of exploring geographic variation in inclusivity scores, as well as a 'proof of concept' for potential further work in future based on more disaggregated data.

[6] The dates differ because the most recent data available for each variable was downloaded. Some variables are released at different times, and when data is broken down to local authority level and stratified by demographics, the most recent available year can vary.

Main findings

- London boroughs generally have higher scores on inclusion, with all ten of the highest-ranking local authorities being in London.
- Lower inclusion scores are concentrated outside of London, particularly in the South West, the South East, Yorkshire and the Midlands, and in rural and coastal areas.
- When London is removed from the analysis, areas with a higher inclusion score are more dispersed across England, with concentrations in the Midlands and East of England.

Overall inclusion score

The ten local authorities with the highest inclusion score were all London boroughs. The possible reasons for this are explored in a further section of this briefing.

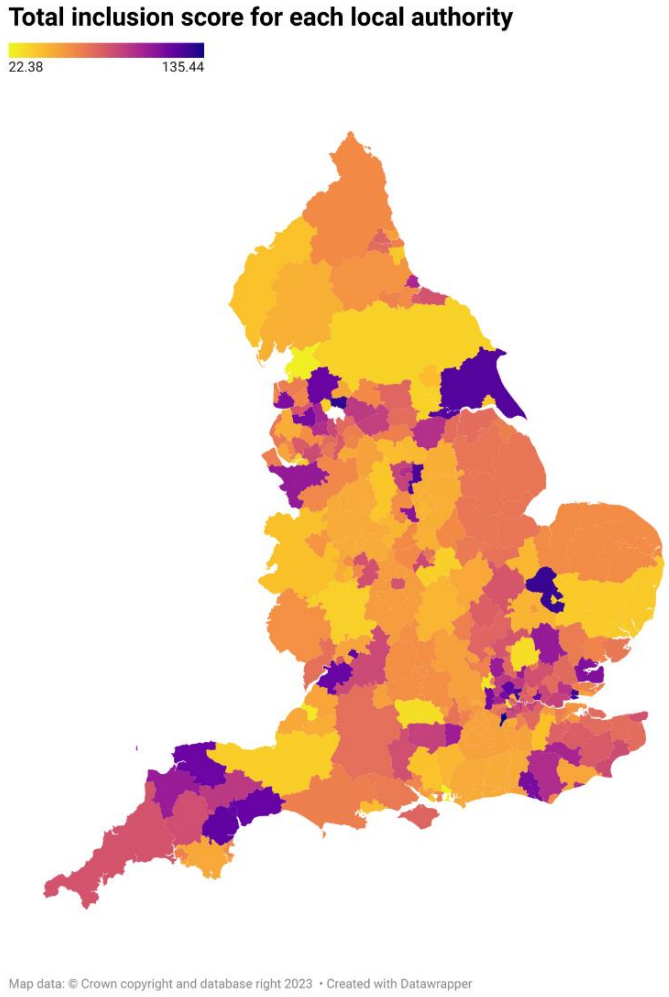
Local authorities with the...			
10 highest overall inclusivity scores		**10 lowest overall inclusivity scores**	
Tower Hamlets	135.44	**North Somerset**	22.38
Waltham Forest	130.65	**Oxfordshire**	24.00
Camden	128.29	**West Berkshire**	25.21
Southwark	128.10	**Bristol, City of**	26.81
Lambeth	126.63	**Sheffield**	28.15
Ealing	123.69	**Somerset**	31.71
Redbridge	122.25	**York**	35.56
Hounslow	121.35	**Warwickshire**	35.67
Merton	118.33	**North Northamptonshire**	36.00
Haringey	118.17	**East Sussex**	38.94

Table 2 Local authorities with the 10 highest and 10 lowest overall inclusivity scores

Local authorities that had the ten lowest overall inclusion scores on this matrix were all outside of London and were most likely to be located in the South West, South East, and parts of Yorkshire and the Midlands.

The map below shows the overall inclusion score as a heatmap, where local authorities with a yellow to light orange colour have a low inclusion score, indicating lower indicators of inclusion; and local authorities with a purple to dark blue colour have a relatively high inclusion score, indicating higher inclusion. As the map shows, London stands out with high scores for inclusion, but there are also pockets of high inclusion in other parts of the country, mostly in urban

areas. Rural and coastal areas tend to contain the schools with lower inclusivity scores.



Map 1: Total inclusion score for each local authority

Primary school findings

For primary schools, almost all of the local areas with the highest inclusion scores are in London: Middlesborough is the only non-London area to feature in the top ten. The areas with the lowest inclusion scores are spread across the southern and midland counties, including wealthier areas such as Oxfordshire and West Berkshire.

Local authorities with the…

10 highest primary inclusion scores		10 lowest primary inclusion scores	
Waltham Forest	137.04	**North Somerset**	13.79
Southwark	134.88	**West Berkshire**	17.17
Camden	134.29	**Worcestershire**	22.46
Hackney	128.17	**Oxfordshire**	23.79

Tower Hamlets	125.88	**Hertfordshire**	24.42
Barnet	122.54	**Bristol, City of**	25.63
Brent	121.54	**Warwickshire**	27.13
Lambeth	120.50	**Surrey**	30.63
Newham	119.42	**Reading**	31.17
Middlesbrough	118.71	**Somerset**	31.63

Table 3: Local authorities with the 10 highest and 10 lowest primary inclusion score

Secondary school findings

At secondary level, all top ten local authorities for inclusion are London boroughs. The lowest scores are concentrated in the South West, Midlands and Yorkshire, including Torbay, Devon and Somerset. Some areas are coastal and/or rural, suggesting that there may be particular challenges facing these areas at secondary school level. Torbay, for instance, performs above average for KS2 (primary) attainment, but below average for KS4 (secondary) attainment.

Local authorities with the...

10 highest secondary inclusion scores		**10 lowest secondary inclusion scores**	
Tower Hamlets	145.00	**Torbay**	7.88
Redbridge	134.79	**Sheffield**	24.17
Ealing	134.29	**Oxfordshire**	24.21
Lambeth	132.75	**Nottinghamshire**	25.92
Hounslow	131.42	**Bristol, City of**	28.00
Merton	130.75	**North Northamptonshire**	30.13
Barking and Dagenham	129.79	**York**	30.21
Greenwich	128.58	**North Somerset**	30.96
Waltham Forest	124.25	**Devon**	31.54
Haringey	123.04	**Somerset**	31.79

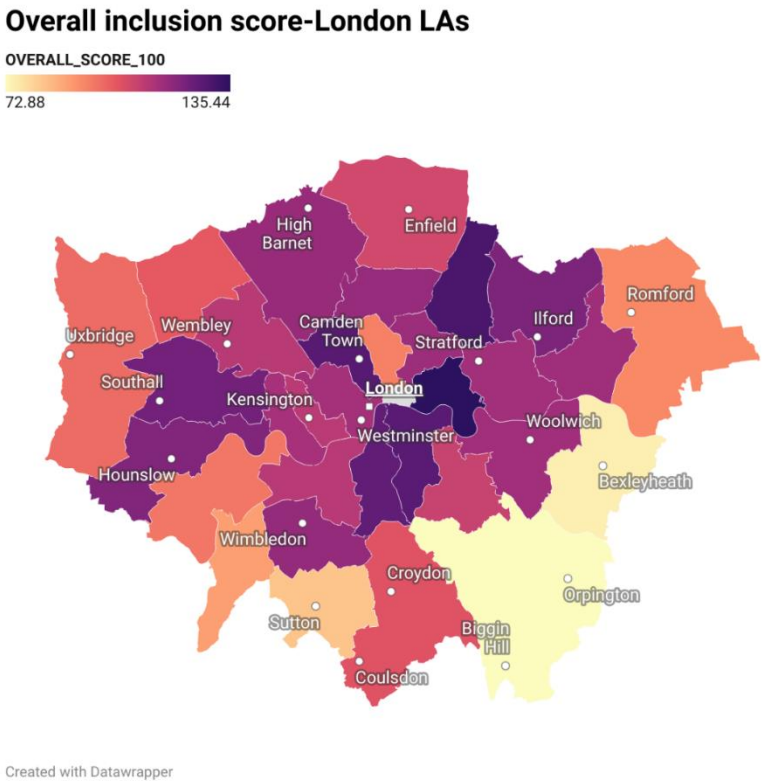
Table 4: Local authorities with the 10 highest and 10 lowest secondary inclusion score

A deep dive into London

Local authorities that have the strongest indicators of inclusion – including low suspensions, absence, and small gaps in the suspension and absence rate between disadvantaged pupils and their peers – are all London boroughs according to the inclusion score.

However, this does not mean that all schools across London are inclusive: this analysis presents an overview and there is a mixed picture across London, and indeed within London boroughs. Map 2 shows the variation of the inclusion score in London boroughs. Areas with a light yellow to orange colour have a relatively low inclusion score for London, whereas areas that are dark purple have a

relatively high inclusion score even for London. It should be noted that all London boroughs have an above average (median) inclusion score compared to the national picture.



Map 2: Overall inclusion score - London local authorities

The London Effect

It is now well evidenced that pupils in London have higher attainment and progress than those in the rest of England, particularly for pupils on Free School Meals.[7] In 2023/24, the average Attainment 8 score for disadvantaged pupils was 42, higher than the England average of 34.7, meaning that on average disadvantaged pupils in London are performing better in their main school subjects by the end of secondary school than disadvantaged pupils in the rest of the country.[8] This is often referred to as the *'London Effect'* or the '*London Advantage*'.[9]

[7] Department for Education (2020) Examining the London advantage in attainment: evidence from LSYPE, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5fb7cc538fa8f559dbb1ad4b/London_effect_report_-_final_20112020.pdf

[8] London Datastore (n.d.) KS4 Achievement, https://data.london.gov.uk/economic-fairness/equal-opportunities/ks4-achievement/

[9] Department for Education (2020) Examining the London advantage in attainment: evidence from LSYPE, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5fb7cc538fa8f559dbb1ad4b/London_effect_report_-_final_20112020.pdf

Parents of disadvantaged pupils in London were more likely to expect their child to go to university, and the pupils themselves tend to have higher aspirations. Parents in London are also more likely to be professional, highly educated, and more able to provide educational support.[10] A 2014 report also suggested that London has a high concentration of non-white migrant families whose children have higher aspirations and ambitions than their disadvantaged white peers.[11] This suggests that multiple factors, including ethnicity, family, and agency, may be at play.

Policy and Funding Drivers

Several initiatives have strengthened London's education system, including: the London Challenge which ran between 2004 and 2011, which invested in school leadership and built new secondary schools with a £40 million per year budget; Teach First programme which started in London, a teacher recruitment programme; and Sponsored Academies, where previously underperforming schools were brought under management of a new sponsor.[12] However, there has been a London Effect since the late 1990s when disadvantaged pupils in London started outperforming disadvantaged pupils in the rest of the country, and since the early 2000s for all pupils, indicating that a range of diverse factors shape London's academic success, and its particular success for disadvantaged pupils.[13]

While London schools receive more funding than the rest of the country, this factor also fails to fully explain the *London Effect*. For example, the IFS found that between 2019 and 2020, spending per pupil was about 40-50% above the national average in some inner London councils, including Tower Hamlets, a borough further explored below. This is also higher than deprived inner-city councils in the North such as Liverpool and Manchester, even after adjusting for

[10] Ibid.

[11] *Cited in* Department for Education (2020) Examining the London advantage in attainment: evidence from LSYPE, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5fb7cc538fa8f559dbb1ad4b/London_effect_report_-_final_20112020.pdf

[12] The Guardian (2025) Why are London schools outperforming the rest of England? https://www.theguardian.com/education/2025/aug/15/why-london-schools-outperforming-rest-england

[13] Department for Education (2020) Examining the London advantage in attainment: evidence from LSYPE, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5fb7cc538fa8f559dbb1ad4b/London_effect_report_-_final_20112020.pdf

differences in costs.[14] However, this funding differential has been a long-standing feature of the education system, predating the London Effect by several decades, as funding was higher still in the 1980s.[15]

In a more recent report published in 2025, the IFS also found that some local authorities make greater use of supplementary funding pots for the Early Years Single Funding Formula (EYSFF) than others. Urban areas, particularly London boroughs, tend to use these targeted top-up funds more.[16] This may indicate that London is actively using these funding tools to target inequality or inclusion in the early years.

In 2024, the London Violence Reduction Unit introduced the Inclusion Charter. The charter, backed by £1.4 million investment, promotes inclusive practices with children's rights at the heart, and aims to reduce suspensions and absence. Backed by research from the University of Bath, it aims to understand and address the barriers to pupils feeling like they belonged at school.[17] Research showed that 56% of secondary school children and 66% of primary aged children felt a sense of belonging in schools in London boroughs.[18] Factors that were identified as affecting a sense of belonging included friendships and peer relationships; respect for social identity, acceptance and equity; and individual identity building and affirming, such as feeling able to be themselves.[19] While the London Inclusion Charter is a recent initiative and in its early years, it may help to build local support for inclusion and embed inclusive approaches in schools.

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[14] IFS (2022) Does funding follow need? An analysis of the geographic distribution of public spending in England, https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-11/Does-funding-follow-need-An-analysis-of-the-geographic-distribution-of-public-spending-in-England-final-.pdf

[15] Department for Education (2020) Examining the London advantage in attainment: evidence from LSYPE, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5fb7cc538fa8f559dbb1ad4b/London_effect_report_-_final_20112020.pdf

[16] IFS (2025) Annual report on education spending in England: 2024-25, https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-01/IFS-REPORT-EDUCATION-SPENDING-2024-2025.1.pdf

[17] London's VRU (2024) London's Inclusion Charter, https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2024-02/London%27s%20Inclusion%20Charter%204.pdf; University of Bath (2024) Belonging, identity and safety in London schools, https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2024-01/Belonging%2C%20identity%20and%20safety%20in%20London%20schools%20UoB%20for%20VRU%284%29.pdf

[18] University of Bath (2024) Belonging, identity and safety in London schools, https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2024-01/Belonging%2C%20identity%20and%20safety%20in%20London%20schools%20UoB%20for%20VRU%284%29.pdf

[19] Ibid.

Overall, London's high inclusion scores likely reflect a combination of factors. The capital benefits from strong parental and pupil agency, a diverse population with high educational aspirations, and sustained investment in education. While these advantages are partly rooted in London's social and economic context, they offer valuable lessons that inclusion may be strengthened by fostering ambition, parental engagement, and a sense of belonging in schools.

Case studies

This section delves into individual local authorities to unpick the potential factors impacting inclusion scores. Three local authorities were selected, including Tower Hamlets, which had the highest inclusion score; North Somerset, which had the lowest inclusion score; and the Wirral, which had the median inclusion score. These local authorities were chosen to gain a deeper understanding of the different contexts, initiatives, and factors that may enable local authorities to seem more inclusive than others.

Tower Hamlets

- Tower Hamlets achieves strong inclusive indicators despite being one of the most deprived local authorities in England.
- Universal support, including London's free school meals policy, uniform grants, and family hubs, and a clear SEND strategy may support these outcomes.
- Improved systems, investment and a culture of inclusion ensure children facing barriers are well supported to stay engaged in education.

Tower Hamlets is a borough in inner London. Its high inclusion score indicates that there are lower rates of suspensions and absences, and there are smaller gaps in achievement, absence and suspensions between disadvantaged pupils (i.e., pupils eligible for FSM or pupils with SEN) and their peers, compared to other local authorities.

Tower Hamlets is described as a 'borough of contrasts'.[20] While its GDP per capita in 2023 was £140,500 – much higher than the UK average of £39,400 [21] -

[20] Tower Hamlets (n.d.) Tower Hamlets Equality Policy 2023-2027, https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/lgnl/community_and_living/Equalities_in_Tower_Hamlets/Tower-Hamlets-Equality-policy.aspx

[21] ONS (2023) Regional economic activity by gross domestic product, UK: 1998 to 2023, https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/grossdomesticproductgdp/bulletins/regionaleconomicactivitybygrossdomesticproductuk/1998to2023#gross-domestic-product-per-head-for-uk-local-authorities-1998-to-2023

in the same year over a third of residents aged 16-64 were not employed.[22] This is particularly the case for some ethnic groups, as only 51% of residents from Black, Asian, Mixed or Other ethnic backgrounds were in employment in 2021, compared with 73% of residents from White ethnic backgrounds.[23] This indicates that the borough has pockets of both deprivation and affluence.

Tower Hamlets: key facts

- **Pupil ethnicity**: 63% Bangladeshi, 7.4% White British, and 4.6% from a different White background.[24]
- **Pupil free school meal eligibility**: 43% of children are eligible for FSM, which is much higher than the national or London average (25.7% and 27.9% respectively).[25]
- **Deprivation:** Tower Hamlets ranked as the 27th most deprived local authority in 2025 (rank of average score).[26]
- **Poverty**: In 2024, 29% of children lived in households with relative low income.[27]

Suspension rates

Despite high levels of poverty and deprivation, Tower Hamlets has very low suspension rates. The suspension rate of 3.46 suspensions per every 100 pupils is much lower than the national average of 11.31, and lower than the London average of 5.65. Bangladeshi pupils have a particularly low suspension rate of 1.71, compared with 11.32 for White British pupils.[28]

Disadvantaged children also fare better than the rest of England. Children eligible for FSM in Tower Hamlets are 2.8 times more likely to be suspended than those

[22] ONS (2024) Employment, unemployment and economic inactivity in Tower Hamlets, https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/labourmarketlocal/E09000030/#employment-rate

[23] Tower Hamlets (n.d.) Tower Hamlets Equality Policy 2023-2027, https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/lgnl/community_and_living/Equalities_in_Tower_Hamlets/Tower-Hamlets-Equality-policy.aspx

[24] Department for Education (2025) Schools, pupils and their characteristics, Academic year 2024/25, https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics/2024-25

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2025) English indices of deprivation 2025, https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2025

[27] Department for Work and Pensions (2025) Children in low income families: local area statistics 2014 to 2024, https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-in-low-income-families-local-area-statistics-2014-to-2024

[28] Department for Education (2025) Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England Academic year 2023/24, https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/suspensions-and-permanent-exclusions-in-england/2023-24

not eligible, but this gap is smaller than regionally or nationally, where children with FSM are 3.6 times and 4.6 times more likely to be suspended than their peers, respectively.[29] This indicates that children who live in poverty are better supported in their education in Tower Hamlets than in London or England as a whole.

Children in Tower Hamlets receiving SEN support are 3.3 times more likely to be suspended than those with no SEN, again a smaller gap than nationally or regionally. However, the gap is wider for pupils in Tower Hamlets with an EHCP, who are 4.6 times more likely to be suspended than those with no SEN, compared with 3.4 times nationally and 3.5 times regionally. Even so, the overall rate of suspension for children with EHCPs of 10.3 suspensions per 100 pupils is below the national suspension rate for all children of 11.31.[30] This further indicates that children who face additional barriers to their learning are well supported in accessing and engaging with their education.

Drivers of Tower Hamlets' Success

The reasons behind Tower Hamlets' strong inclusion outcomes are likely multi-layered. As explored in the previous section, the factors contributing to the *London Effect* are likely playing a role, including higher levels of agency and parental expectations, previous policy initiatives, and higher funding.

Tower Hamlets provides universal support that helps all families, particularly those in poverty. It was the first local authority to roll out free school meals across primary and secondary schools, and the authority also provides universal uniform payments to families. Tower Hamlets also notes that its family hubs are well attended.[31] This greater universal support ensures that all children can benefit from a consistent baseline of support.

Youth voice is also a key focus for Tower Hamlets. The Council have had a Young Mayor and deputies since 2006, who represent young people across the borough and attend meetings with local councillors and decision makers. They aim to strengthen community relations, influence decisions, speak for young

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Tower Hamlets (2025) Annual Report on School Performance for 2023-2024, https://towerhamlets.moderngov.co.uk/mgConvert2PDF.aspx?ID=250957

people, and run campaigns and events. In recent years, the Young Mayor elections have engaged large numbers of young people in local democracy.[32]

Moreover, Tower Hamlets' Children and Families Partnership Strategy, published in 2024, was driven by what children and young people told them, including wanting more support for their mental health and wellbeing, concerns about bullying and discrimination, and how their education achievements can translate into career opportunities. It also drew on the Pupil Attitude Survey 2022, which revealed that 69% of primary school and 43% of secondary school pupils reported feeling happy, leading the partnership to committing to improving mental health support for children and young people, particularly those with SEND, looked after, or in the youth custody system.[33]

Strategic focus on inclusion

The borough's SEND and Inclusion Strategy, published last year, prioritises timely and effective support for children and young people with SEND, user-friendly services for children with SEND including a 'SEND front door', early identification for under fives, and ensuring that children and young people with SEND are "valued, celebrated, and supported to thrive."[34]

These efforts were broadly recognised in the last Ofsted and CQC inspection in June 2025, which found that there had been "many improvements" since the previous inspection in 2021, as the "children and young people with SEND are genuinely noticed and valued." The improvements included high achievement, good offer for speech and language therapy, parents being able to directly influence inclusion agenda, timely identification, knowledge of services, and a range of support available. Areas of improvement were highlighted, including

[32] Tower Hamlets (2025) Young Mayor of Tower Hamlets, https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/lgnl/education_and_learning/young_people/young_mayor.aspx ; Tower Hamlets (2023) Young Mayor Election 2024-2026, https://democracy.towerhamlets.gov.uk/documents/s227742/Appendix.

[33] Tower Hamlets (2024) TH_IS ACCELERATE! The Tower Hamlets Children and Families Partnership Strategy 2024-2029, https://democracy.towerhamlets.gov.uk/documents/s226619/Appendix.%201%20for%20Children%20and%20Families%20Strategy%202023-2028.pdf

[34] https://5f2fe3253cd1dfa0d089-bf8b2cdb6a1dc2999fecbc372702016c.ssl.cf3.rackcdn.com/uploads/ckeditor/attachments/17116/1._Special_Educational_Needs__Disability_and_Inclusion_Strategy_2024-2029_final.pdf

concerns about the EHCPs, although the council pledged to invest an additional £1.6 million into SEND.[35]

Tower Hamlets Council offers a tool for schools to access information on universal provision and SEND support through the SEND Inclusion Framework. This covers expectations for schools and examples of good practice, including how to create a supportive and inclusive environment where all children feel safe.

Together, this indicates that Tower Hamlets' strong inclusion outcomes reflect a combination of targeted support, universal provision, and a clear strategic focus on inclusion. Despite high levels of deprivation and poverty, the borough has established a system where children who face disadvantage or additional barriers are well supported to remain in and engage with education.

Wirral Council

- Nearly half of all pupils with SEND live in the most deprived areas, highlighting entrenched inequality.
- Financial strain and higher gaps in the rate of suspension between disadvantaged children and their peers reflect system stress, despite low overall exclusion rates.
- Participation in Delivering Better Value in SEND and new inclusion initiatives show foundations for improvement, although systemic issues remain.

Wirral Council is in the North West located on the coast across the river Mersey from Liverpool. Its inclusion score is broadly average compared to other local authorities in England.

Historically, Wirral Council has been among the 20% most deprived authorities. While the borough as a whole no longer falls in this bracket, many neighbourhoods continue to experience severe deprivation.[36]

Wirral Council: key facts

[35] Tower Hamlets (2025) Partnership inspection finds children and young people with SEND are valued in Tower Hamlets, https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/News_events/2025/August/Partnership-inspection-finds-children-and-young-people-with-SEND-are-valued-in-Tower-Hamlets.aspx

[36] https://www.wirralhealthwellbeingknowledgehub.co.uk/our-jsna/inequalities/wirral-indices-of-deprivation/

- **Pupil ethnicity**: 84% White British, 2.2% any other White background.[37]
- **Pupil free school meal eligibility** 31.6% eligible for FSM, higher than the North West average (28.9%) and national average (25.7%)[38]
- **Deprivation:** Wirral ranked as the 47th most deprived local authority in 2025 (rank of average score).[39]
- **Poverty:** In 2024, 22.5% of children lived in households with relative low income, higher than the national average of 21.8%. [40]

Deprivation and financial pressures

There is a stark correlation between deprivation and SEND within Wirral. Nearly half (42.1%) of pupils with SEND in Wirral live in the most deprived 10% of wards, compared with only 19.3% of all children and young people. In the least deprived decile, only 2.6% of children have SEND.[41]

Financial pressures compound these challenges. Wirral has a higher than average proportion of young people with EHCPs in maintained schools, at 38% compared to 30% nationally, creating additional cost pressures.[42]

Suspension rates

Wirral's suspension rates are 30% below the North West average. However, children eligible for FSM in Wirral are almost 5 times more likely to be suspended than their peers, greater than the national average of 4.6 times more likely. While children in Wirral with SEND are 3.8 times more likely to be suspended than their peers, similar to the national average, the suspension gap between children in

[37] Department for Education (2025) Schools, pupils and their characteristics, Academic year 2024/25, https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics/2024-25

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2025) English indices of deprivation 2025, https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2025

[40] Department for Work and Pensions (2025) Children in low income families: local area statistics 2014 to 2024, https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-in-low-income-families-local-area-statistics-2014-to-2024

[41] Public Health Intelligence (2024) JSNA: Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), https://www.wirralhealthwellbeingknowledgehub.co.uk/media/ndxeuuj3/latest-wirral-send-jsna-v5-on-03-10-24-accchkd.pdf

[42] Wirral Council (2024) Schools Forum – Report of the Director for Children, Families and Education, https://democracy.wirral.gov.uk/documents/s50111772/Delivering%20Better%20Value%20Update%20and%20High%20Needs%20Funding%20Arrangement.pdf

Wirral with EHCPs and their peers is much higher, as children with EHCPs are 5 times more likely to be suspended, compared to 3.4 times nationally.[43]

Efforts to improve SEND practice

In 2023, Wirral Council became one of the 55 local authorities to join the Department for Education's *Delivering Better Value in SEND* programme. As a result of this work, Wirral Council has introduced The Graduate Programme, which is a team of volunteers working with 13 of Wirral's schools to help children achieve their aspirations. The volunteers will also help schools to use the Graduated Approach, which is a 4 tier model approach to responding to a pupil's needs: universal offer, early SEND support, targeted SEND support, and EHCP assessment.[44]

Despite these efforts, a joint Ofsted and CQC inspection of Wirral Council's Local Area SEND Partnership's agreements in January 2025 found widespread and systemic failures. The inspection highlighted EHCPs, preparation for adulthood, and waiting times for specialist speech and language assessments to be areas of priority. However, as Wirral Council had already implemented recovery plans for some of these concerns, the inspection recognised a "more ambitious intent for the children and young people with SEND."[45]

Youth voice is also incorporated through Wirral's Youth Partnership, where young people in Wirral represent the views of young people to local authority representatives, councillors, services and organisations.[46] To support young people with SEND to have their voices heard, Wirral Council also runs a Wirral SEND Youth Voice Group.[47]

In summary, Wirral Council faces persistent inequality. Deep-rooted deprivation continues to shape patterns of SEND and educational outcomes, placing sustained pressure on local systems. Yet the borough's participation in national improvement programmes and its renewed focus on aspiration and inclusion

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[43] Department for Education (2025) Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England Academic year 2023/24, https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/suspensions-and-permanent-exclusions-in-england/2023-24

[44] WirralView (2025) Volunteers supporting Wirral's journey to inclusion, https://wirralview.com/children-and-families/volunteers-supporting-wirrals-journey-inclusion; SENDLO (n.d.) Wirral's Graduated Approach, https://www.sendlowirral.co.uk/wirral-graduated-approach

[45] Wirral Council (2025) Children and Young People and Education Committee, SEND Improvement, https://democracy.wirral.gov.uk/documents/s50131903/SEND%20Improvement.pdf

[46] ZilloWirral (n.d.) Youth Voice Wirral, https://www.zillowirral.co.uk/youth-voice

[47] SENDLO (2025) Wirral's SEND Youth Say it Out Loud, https://www.sendlowirral.co.uk/news/wirrals-send-youth-say-it-out-loud

suggest the potential foundations for a more equitable future, and may be part of the reason why Wirral ranks average amongst local authorities in terms of inclusive outcomes.

North Somerset

North Somerset is a coastal local authority in the South West based to the west of Bristol. Its low inclusion score indicates that the local authority has pupils with additional needs or eligible for FSM who are falling behind or being disproportionately excluded, rather than being supported to succeed.

North Somerset: key facts

- **Pupil ethnicity**: North Somerset is predominantly white and racially homogenous area. 82.2% of pupils are White British, 6.5% any other White background, 1.4% Indian.[48]
- **Pupil free school meal eligibility:** 16.6% are eligible for FSM, lower than the regional average (21%) and national average (25.7%)[49]
- **Deprivation:** North Somerset ranked as the 123rd most deprived local authority in England in 2025 (rank of average score), meaning it is one of the least deprived authorities in the country.[50]
- **Poverty:** In 2024, 15% of children lived in households with relative low income, lower than the national average of 21.8%.[51]

Suspension rates

North Somerset is an area of low deprivation and low poverty. Despite this, North Somerset has a higher than national average suspension rate of 13.12, although slightly lower than South West regional average (15.16).

Children in North Somerset eligible for FSM are suspended at over six times the rate than children not eligible. This is a wider gap than the regional or national

[48] Department for Education (2025) Schools, pupils and their characteristics, Academic year 2024/25, https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics/2024-25

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2025) English indices of deprivation 2025, https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2025

[51] Department for Work and Pensions (2025) Children in low income families: local area statistics 2014 to 2024, https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-in-low-income-families-local-area-statistics-2014-to-2024

average, where children eligible with FSM are suspended at 4.8 times and 4.6 the rate of those who are not eligible, respectively.[52]

This pattern is consistent across different levels of SEND. Children in North Somerset receiving SEND support are suspended at 6.8 times the rate of those with no SEND, while those with an EHCP are 5.3 times more likely to be suspended than those without SEND. Both gaps are higher than the national and regional average.[53]

Pressures on the SEND system

In 2023, North Somerset children's services received 'requires improvement to be good' ratings from Ofsted and CQC for the third time in a row. Inspectors found that a third of posts were vacant, and the Council was facing issues with recruitment and retention of social workers.[54] The latest focused visit in 2025 found that high staff turnover and churn of social workers were affecting the quality of support for disabled children.[55]

North Somerset faces financial pressures, with a SEND overspend of more than £13.3 million in 2024 which had grown from £8.7 million in 2023.[56] Part of this overspend may be due to the growth in the number of children and young people needing EHCPs. Between 2014 and 2019, North Somerset had an average of 88 new EHCPs per year, and between 2020 and 2023 the average of new EHCPs produced increased to 340.[57] During 2023/24, the Council had seen the largest increase in issuing EHCPs in the South West at 107 EHCPs per 10,000 population.[58]

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[52] Department for Education (2025) Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England Academic year 2023/24, https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/suspensions-and-permanent-exclusions-in-england/2023-24

[53] Ibid.

[54] BBC (2023) North Somerset children's services still 'requires improvement', https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-somerset-66089357

[55] Ofsted (2025) Letter to Clare Shiels: Focused visit to North Somerset local authority children's services, https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/50272379

[56] BBC (2024) Council makes bankruptcy warning over SEND budget, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cpw8r1zjjnno

[57] North Somerset Council (2024) Joint Strategic Needs Assessment 2024, https://n-somerset.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2024-07/jsna_spotlight_report_-_special_educational_needs_and_send.pdf

[58] Local Government Lawyer (2024) Council highlights "urgent" need for action on financial sustainability of SEND system, warning it will be "forced into making cuts", https://localgovernmentlawyer.co.uk/education-law/394-education-news/58249-council-highlights-urgent-need-for-action-on-financial-sustainability-of-send-system-warning-it-will-be-forced-into-making-cuts

Financial concerns

To address this, North Somerset Council entered a 'safety valve' agreement with the Department for Education last year.[59] The Council has since reported delays in implementation of funding and said that funding has not kept with rising costs.[60]

Similarly, Bristol, which also has one of the lowest overall inclusion scores, entered a safety valve agreement after struggling to reduce its SEND deficit.[61] This indicates that deficits in the SEND budget and other financial pressures may have a large impact on a local authority's ability to foster inclusive practices.

The Council also pointed to the 'broken' current funding formula for local government: it has the second lowest council tax rate in the South West, meaning that it receives £9.1 million less per year in council tax than its neighbours. Government funding is also low at £2,127 per household, £414 a year less than the England average and adding up to £41 million per year less than the average local authority. In total, the Council claim that North Somerset is losing out on £50 million per year compared to other years, with the Leader saying that "North Somerset is locked in a cycle of historic underfunding that is leaving us further and further behind."[62]

Signs of improvement

Improvements in North Somerset Council are beginning to be seen. In 2025, 96% of EHCPs were issued within the statutory 20 weeks, a significant increase from 60% in 2024 and above the national average in 2024 of 46.4%.[63] The Council

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[59] BBC (2024) Council makes bankruptcy warning over SEND budget, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cpw8r1zjjnno

[60] Local Government Lawyer (2024) Council highlights "urgent" need for action on financial sustainability of SEND system, warning it will be "forced into making cuts", https://localgovernmentlawyer.co.uk/education-law/394-education-news/58249-council-highlights-urgent-need-for-action-on-financial-sustainability-of-send-system-warning-it-will-be-forced-into-making-cuts

[61] BBC (2024) Council makes bankruptcy warning over SEND budget, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cpw8r1zjjnno

[62] North Somerset Council (2024) Tough decisions still to be made after Local Government Finance Settlement, https://n-somerset.gov.uk/news/tough-decisions-still-be-made-after-local-government-finance-settlement

[63] North Somerset Council (2025) Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Self Evaluation and Safety Valve update, https://n-somerset.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s7860/7.%20Special%20Education%20Needs%20and%20Disabilities%20SEND%20Self%20Evaluation%20and%20Safety%20Valve%20update.pdf; Department for Education (2025) Education, health and care plans, https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/education-health-and-care-plans/2025

also enhanced the SEND hub and added specialist SEND sessions to the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme.[64]

While North Somerset faces relatively low deprivation or poverty, its funding may have had an impact on the Council's ability to respond to children who face disadvantages or who have additional needs. A higher rate of suspension among children on FSM indicates that the school system in North Somerset is serving children on FSM less well than other parts of the country. Compared to London, North Somerset is also a racially homogenous local authority with the vast majority of the population being White British, which may shape the aspirations and influence of children's family backgrounds.

North Somerset has also recently launched the North Somerset Youth Parliament, which met for the first time in October 2025. Over 40 young people from across North Somerset secondary schools, specialist provision and youth groups had their voices heard and identified their priorities for the year ahead, including tackling racism and hateful behaviour, mental health support, and safer streets.[65]

Conclusion

This analysis contributes to an ongoing policy and research discussion about how to appropriately measure school inclusion. This is particularly pertinent as the government develops its school profiles to provide transparent and clear information to parents – including exploring how to measure and establish school inclusion.

While this methodology is very much a first stage in interrogating the nature and variation in inclusive practices across England, it reveals clear geographic patterns in the inclusivity indicators analysed, measured by outcomes across attainment, attendance and suspensions, and small gaps between the outcomes of disadvantaged pupils and their peers.

[64] North Somerset Council (2025) Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Self Evaluation and Safety Valve update, https://n-somerset.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s7860/7.%20Special%20Education%20Needs%20and%20Disabilities%20SEND%20Self%20Evaluation%20and%20Safety%20Valve%20update.pdf

[65] North Somerset Council (2025) Young people take centre stage at launch of North Somerset Youth Parliament, https://n-somerset.gov.uk/news/young-people-take-centre-stage-launch-north-somerset-youth-parliament https://n-somerset.gov.uk/news/young-people-take-centre-stage-launch-north-somerset-youth-parliament

London boroughs consistently show higher average inclusivity scores than the rest of the country, consistent with the well-recognised 'London Effect'. Outside the capital, inclusion outcomes are more uneven, with lower scores concentrated in rural and coastal areas, as well as parts of the South and Midlands. This indicates that contextual factors relating to place should be considered in analysis of inclusive indicators.

We note that most schools and colleges have significant autonomy and independence from their local authority and will make their own decisions about educational provision, including but not limited to practices related to inclusion. This analysis therefore does not seek to draw firm conclusions about the effectiveness or performance of different local authorities, nor does it provide definitive reasons behind the variations in local authority areas we have found.

However, it does help to begin to build a picture of how different areas are achieving inclusive outcomes and inform potential future research on the impact of local inclusive education strategies and leadership. By highlighting the areas with higher and lower inclusivity scores, we can begin to explore the patterns and trends in local education delivery and its impact. These patterns can include workforce quality, local poverty rates, funding per child, family aspirations, inclusive leadership, personalised support, early intervention, and quality SEND provision. These factors are all important considerations for the ongoing development school profiles.

Our analysis suggests that the government's inclusion reforms must account for local and regional variation which may be affected by local resources, leadership, historic and geographic factors, and the state of the local sector. It highlights the importance of ensuring that the schools funding formula better serves schools in highly deprived neighbourhoods and accounts for the higher costs of delivering inclusive education in disadvantaged areas. It also underlines the value of coupling financial investment with clear, evidence-based local strategies that build the capacity of schools to meet diverse needs.

Further research

This research explored the potential of mapping inclusion at a local authority level using indicators of inclusive practice. There are a wealth of further insights that could be drawn using a longer list of indicators and different levels of data. For example, an understanding of the make-up of a school roll, and the extent to

which it reflects the local community, would indicate the extent to which a school's admissions policies are inclusive.[66]

Further research could use school level data to look at variations within local authorities and across different academy trusts. It could also account for factors including level of deprivation and school size. Using pupil level data alongside school and local authority level data could further understanding of inclusive practice, and better reflect the complexity of England's education system.

Further research could also explore the data available on wider pupil wellbeing and behaviour which can be included in the inclusion score to better reflect pupil experience. Indeed, a nationwide student and parent survey would provide a welcome understanding of the experience of pupils and their families.

[66] EPI's Effective School Groups data tool provides some data which allows for this level of analysis, including the likelihood of a local pupil who is disadvantaged or has SEND being admitted into the trusts' schools. https://edu-policy-inst.shinyapps.io/effective-school-groups-app-v2/

Annex A

The table below shows the data that was used to create the inclusion scores.

Domain	Variables included in domain	Groups Included	Year

Attainment	• LA level school mean % pupils who attained expected level at KS2
	  ○ Primary only
	• LA level school Mean attainment 8 score at KS4
	  ○ Secondary only
	• Attainment Gap
	  ○ Primary & Secondary
		FSM & SEND EHC – across all	Academic year 2023/24

School Suspensions	• LA level school mean multiple suspension rate • Suspension gap ○ Primary & Secondary phases	FSM & SEND EHC – across all	Academic year 2023/24
School Absences	• Mean % pupils persistently absent • Absence gap • – Primary & Secondary phases	FSM & SEND EHC – across all	Academic year 2022/23[67]

[67] The dates differ because the most recent data available for each variable was downloaded. Some variables are released at different times, and when data is broken down to local authority level and stratified by demographics, the most recent available year can vary.

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