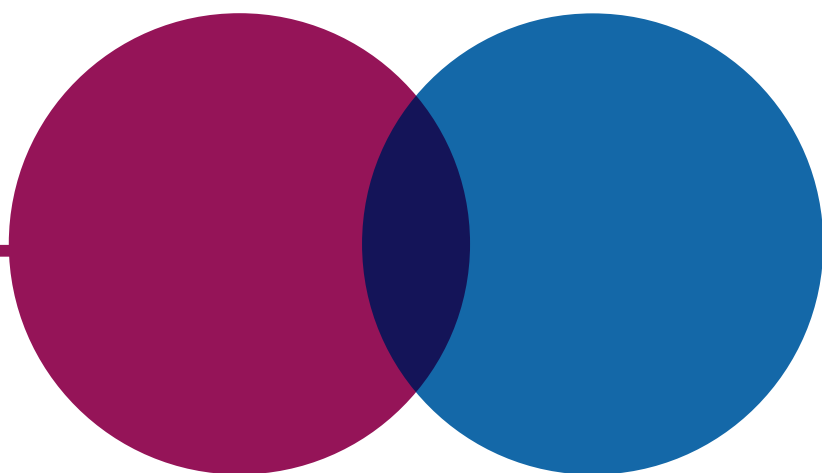




National Audit Office



REPORT

Home to school transport

Department for Education

SESSION 2024–2026
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Key facts

520,000

estimated number of children and young people (aged 0–25 years) in England receiving home to school transport as at February 2025

£2.3bn

total spending by local authorities in England on home to school transport for children and young people (aged 0–25 years) in 2023-24

£1.5bn

local authority spending in England on transport for children (aged 0–16 years) who receive transport due to special educational needs or disabilities (SEND)

6%	estimated proportion of children of compulsory school age and below in England receiving home to school transport as at February 2025
180,000	estimated number of children of compulsory school age and below receiving home to school transport because of their SEND
166%	increase in the number of children and young people with an education, health and care (EHC) plan, or statement of special educational needs (SEN), from 240,000 in January 2015 to 639,000 in January 2025
70%	real terms increase in spending on home to school transport for children and young people aged 0–25 years by local authorities in England between 2015-16 and 2023-24
106%	real terms increase in spending by local authorities in England, between 2015-16 and 2023-24, on transport for children and young people (aged 0–25 years) who receive transport due to SEND, compared with 9% for mainstream transport
£415 million	total overspend by local authorities in England against their planned budgets for home to school transport in 2023-24
£8,116	estimated median annual cost per pupil on transport for children (aged 0–16 years) with SEND, compared with £1,526 for mainstream transport

In this report we use the term 'SEND' to refer to children and young people with SEN or a disability, or both. EHC plans cover ages 0-25 years, whereas statements of SEN covered ages up to 19 years.

Summary

Introduction

1 The Education Act 1996 (the Act) aims to ensure that all children of compulsory school age (5 to 16 years) in England have access to an education. To ensure that transport is not a barrier, the Act puts a duty on local authorities to provide free-of-charge home to school transport for children of compulsory school age who attend their nearest suitable school and cannot reasonably be expected to walk there because of the distance; or because of a special educational need, a disability or mobility problem; or because the route is unsafe. There is also provision for children from low-income families to enable them a choice of school. Statutory walking distances date back to the 1944 Education Act.

2 While young people in England must remain in education or training until the age of 18, there is no legal duty for local authorities to provide free transport for pupils over 16. However, they have specific legal duties relating to transport to school or college for young people aged 16 to 25 with a special educational need or disability (SEND). The extent of these duties depends on the young person's age. Each local authority must publish an annual transport policy statement outlining arrangements for post-16 learners, with specific regard to those with SEND, but they have discretion over what support they provide. There is no duty to provide transport to children below compulsory school age (0–4 years), including 4-year-olds attending reception year at school.

3 The Department for Education (DfE) has policy responsibility for home to school transport in England. It aims to direct free transport to those children and young people who need it the most and may otherwise struggle to access education or training. DfE sets national eligibility criteria and issues statutory guidance to local authorities, who are responsible for arranging transport services. Local authorities normally commission third parties to provide transport although some have in-house fleets. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) is responsible for the financial framework within which local authorities operate, and allocates funding to local authorities through the Local Government Finance Settlement.

4 In 2023-24, local authorities spent £2.32 billion transporting an estimated 520,000 children and young people to school or college.

Focus of our report

5 Home to school transport is one of the fastest-growing areas of spending for local authorities and this report examines the reasons for this. This report builds on our 2024 report *Support for children and young people with special educational needs*¹ and our 2025 report *Local government financial sustainability*² in which we noted the increase in home to school transport costs. It looks at spending on, and delivery of, home to school transport by local authorities in England. It sets out:

- the eligibility criteria for, impact of, and spending on home to school transport (Part One);
- the pressures on home to school transport (Part Two); and
- how local authorities and government are responding to rising demand and costs for home to school transport (Part Three).

This report does not assess the value for money of DfE's or local authorities' approaches or spending. We have not examined the process for allocating school or college places. Planning for school places is the subject of a forthcoming NAO report. Appendix One sets out details of our audit approach and evidence base.

6 Our scope covers local authority spending recorded under "home to school" or "home to post-16 provision" in the Section 251 education and children and young people's service outturn statements.³ This report focuses on transport for eligible children of compulsory school age or below (0–16 years), young people of sixth-form age (16–18) and young learners with SEND (19–25 years). We use the term 'home to school' transport to cover transport to all educational settings. This report does not cover local authority spending on concessionary fare schemes or costs met by parents or guardians where their children are not eligible for home to school transport.

¹ Comptroller and Auditor General, *Support for children and young people with special educational needs*, Session 2024-25, HC 299, National Audit Office, October 2024.

² Comptroller and Auditor General, *Local government financial sustainability*, Session 2024-25, HC 691, National Audit Office, February 2025.

³ Department for Education, *Section 251 financial data collection 2023 to 2024 guidance for local authorities compiling their outturn statement*, July 2024.

Key findings

About home to school transport

7 An estimated 6% of children of compulsory school age and below receive home to school transport. DfE has not routinely collected information on how many children and young people receive transport or how they travel, but began to gather this information from local authorities in 2025. Based on this, DfE estimates that across England 520,000 children and young people receive home to school transport. This comprises 470,000 children of compulsory school age and below – of whom an estimated 180,000 receive transport because of their SEND – and 50,000 young people aged 16 and above.⁴ Available evidence suggests that the overall number of children and young people receiving home to school transport increased by 6% between 2019 and 2023 (paragraphs 1.13, 2.2 to 2.4 and 3.20).

8 As well as facilitating attendance, home to school transport can bring wider benefits to children and young people with SEND and their families. Transport costs can be substantially higher for children and young people with SEND. For families that rely on it, home to school transport is a valued service that enables their child to access education. It can also help to build a child's confidence and independence. In 2024, a survey by the charity Contact found that most parents (81%) who received local-authority-provided transport for their disabled children were satisfied with their child's travel arrangements and reported wider benefits. Of those who received it, 74% said it improved their child's readiness to learn, 58% said it supported their child's independence, and 50% said it helped them, as parents, to work (paragraphs 1.2 and 1.14).

9 DfE data show that on-the-day issues with home to school transport have minimal impact on school attendance, but DfE does not have the data to assess the impact that any policy changes would have. DfE, as the lead department for the government's mission to 'Break Down Barriers to Opportunity', aims to tackle rates of school absence. As home to school transport policy aims to facilitate a child's attendance at school, DfE considers it key to the opportunity mission. However, there is an inherent challenge in measuring the effectiveness of the policy in reducing absences given eligibility criteria have been in place for so long. DfE does not currently have the data to assess the impact that future changes to the policy would have on attendance, but is working to improve its understanding of who receives home to school transport. As part of its wider work to tackle school absence, since 2024 DfE has collected data on whether absence is due to issues with transport for those children already receiving it. These data show that transport issues have minimal impact on daily attendance (paragraphs 1.15, 1.16 and 2.2).

⁴ 180,000 is an estimate based on responses by local authorities in DfE's 2025 data collection to the question, 'How many pre-16 pupils does the local authority arrange SEN home to school transport for?'

10 Local authority spending on home to school transport increased by 70% in real terms between 2015-16 and 2023-24. In 2023-24 prices, total spending rose from £1.36 billion in 2015-16 to £2.32 billion in 2023-24. This rise is due mostly to increased spending on transport for children and young people with SEND, which rose by 106% compared with a 9% increase for ‘mainstream transport’. In 2023-24, approximately two-thirds (£1.52 billion) of total spending was for transporting children of compulsory school age and below with SEND. DfE estimates that, on the current trajectory, spending on home to school transport for children of compulsory school age and below could exceed £3.0 billion by 2029-30 (paragraphs 1.18 to 1.20, and Figures 3 and 4).

11 Local authorities consistently spend more on home to school transport than they have budgeted, meaning they have less to spend on other services. In 2023-24, local authorities spent a total of £415 million (22%) more than they had budgeted on home to school transport. Almost half reported annual overspends of 20% or more. This was up from £51 million (2023-24 prices) – or 4% – in 2015-16 when one in five authorities reported overspends of 20% or more. Local authorities report that the misalignment of financial years (upon which they budget) and academic years (over which transport is planned and delivered), combined with late changes to pupil numbers, types of transport needed, and provider prices can make it difficult for them to plan. Local authorities also reported being affected by private provider cost increases just before the academic year starts (paragraph 1.23).

Pressures on home to school transport

12 There has been an increase in the number of children and young people assessed as having special educational needs (SEN), which has implications for home to school transport. Following the Children and Families Act 2014, there have been significant increases in the number of children and young people assessed as having SEN and education, health and care (EHC) plans. EHC plans set out legally enforceable entitlements to specific support, for children and young people up to 25 years. The number of these plans, or statements of SEN, increased by 166% between January 2015 and January 2025, from 240,000 to 639,000. In 2024, we reported that low parental confidence in the SEN system – a challenge which DfE had recognised in 2022 – was encouraging parents to seek specialist provision and EHC plans. There were various hypotheses as to why SEN and therefore EHC plans had increased, including needs being better identified, but also incentives for schools to request EHC plans to access high-needs funding. Around a third of pupils with an EHC plan attend special schools. As these schools tend to serve broader geographical areas, it is more likely that pupils attending them will live beyond statutory walking distances and qualify for local-authority-arranged transport. Additionally, insufficient local capacity, especially in state special schools, can compel local authorities to name out-of-area placements, meaning more children travelling even further to their place of education (paragraphs 1.9, 2.5 to 2.9 and Figure 6).

13 Travel costs per pupil are higher for children and young people with SEND.

On average, local authorities spend around five times more on transport per pupil with SEND than on other pupils. For 2023-24, DfE's data indicate a median annual cost per pupil (0-16 years) for 'SEND transport' of £8,116 compared with £1,526 for 'mainstream transport' – though there is large variation between the highest- and lowest-cost journeys and between local authorities. As children and young people with SEND travel longer distances to educational settings that can meet their needs, the number of unique journeys is increasing, and there is less opportunity for sharing transport. Pupils with more complex needs can also require specialist vehicles and – sometimes specially trained – passenger assistants. For example, one local authority reported transport costs of around £145,000 per year for one pupil. Using smaller and single-occupancy vehicles (for example, where pupils cannot share routes due to medical, behavioural or safeguarding needs) can also push up the cost of transport for pupils with SEND (paragraphs 2.8 and 2.11 to 2.16).

14 Provider capacity constraints, higher costs for transport operators and reduced public transport services are also increasing costs of home to school transport. These cost pressures include the following.

- Local authorities told us that local provider markets that had not yet recovered following the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted their ability to negotiate favourable rates. Several also told us they had faced last-minute cancellations and price rises from providers just before the start of the academic year, leaving them with little option but to pay higher prices.
- DfE and local authorities cited persistent difficulties in recruiting and retaining drivers and passenger assistants. They explained that many drivers did not return to the sector following the COVID-19 pandemic, having retrained or taken higher paid delivery work, and that it was difficult to find candidates willing to work irregular hours and take responsibility for children with complex needs.
- Transport operators are facing higher costs. The Department for Transport (DfT) estimated that bus operators had seen a 12% increase in the price of fuel and a 28% increase in wages between 2021 and 2024.
- Reductions in public transport services have increased reliance on local-authority-provided transport. In 2025, we reported that there had been a 15% reduction in bus services outside London between 2019-20 and 2023-24, as measured in kilometres travelled (paragraphs 2.19 to 2.22).

The government's response to pressures

15 One of the ways in which local authorities have responded to increased demand and cost is by reducing non-statutory home to school transport.

Local authorities have been scaling back discretionary transport for some time. In 2016, the Campaign for Better Transport reported that nearly 80% of authorities had reduced their school transport offer since 2010. Many have continued to do so. Of the authorities we spoke to, all had withdrawn or restricted free or subsidised transport for young people of sixth-form age, children below compulsory school age, or those not attending their nearest suitable school. DfE acknowledges that transport costs can be a significant barrier to participation for post-16 students, particularly those with SEND, and that scaling back discretionary transport may contribute to more young people not in education, employment or training. We heard from groups representing parents of children and young people with SEND that losing transport can lead parents to give up work, or work fewer hours, to take their children to school or college (paragraphs 3.3 to 3.5).

16 Local authorities are adopting a range of other measures to manage rising transport costs, but there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Almost all are promoting personal travel budgets and independent travel training which can reduce costs to the local authority but also help to increase independence for some pupils. Local authorities are also pursuing efficiency savings, managing markets where they can to secure better value from suppliers, and finding lower-cost alternatives, in efforts to reduce the overall bill for home to school transport. Local authorities told us that route-optimisation software has helped to increase efficiency, for example by identifying opportunities for combining single-occupancy routes and maximising passengers per journey. While some local authorities have brought fleets of vehicles in-house to reduce reliance on external suppliers, others said that it was not cost-effective to do this at scale, or they lacked the up-front capital or the space to park fleets. Some had driven down contract prices through reverse auctions or tight contract management, which had kept contract variations within agreed limits (paragraphs 3.6 to 3.16).

17 Home to school transport decisions can reduce the chance of achieving the government's objectives around net zero and sustainable travel. Local authorities have a duty to promote sustainable travel to schools. However, reduced discretionary transport, and reliance on low and single-occupancy vehicles for children and young people who are still eligible, alongside cuts to bus services, are putting more cars on the road. This, combined with longer travel distances, particularly for pupils with SEND who may have long journeys to specialist settings, is contributing to higher carbon emissions and congestion. Local authority efforts to address rising costs, such as optimising travel routes and maximising passenger numbers, together with DfT local transport initiatives such as on zero emission buses and improving walking routes to school, could help to combat these negative consequences (paragraphs 3.17 and 3.28).

18 DfE is responding to the pressures on home to school transport through improving data, issuing guidance and planned SEND reforms. DfE believes that forthcoming SEND reforms, designed to promote a more inclusive education system where the needs of more pupils will be met in mainstream settings, will be central to reducing home to school transport costs. Although it acknowledges that it may be some years before any savings start to materialise, DfE's new data collection on home to school transport, which it intends to make mandatory, should help identify cost drivers and support benchmarking across local authorities. However, the data is disparate and, to maximise its usefulness, DfE acknowledges that it needs to work with local authorities to ensure it can be collated in a uniform way. It is not yet known whether home to school transport metrics will feature in the local government outcomes framework to come. To support local authorities in meeting their legal responsibilities, DfE has updated its statutory guidance and plans to issue new partnership guidance. The latter aims to encourage more joined-up decision-making between local authorities, schools and health bodies, to ensure travel arrangements meet needs while limiting costs (paragraphs 1.17, 2.2, 2.11 and 3.18 to 3.21).

19 Other government departments' decisions can impact home to school transport. DfE is working with MHCLG to develop a funding formula for pre-16 home to school transport, to better align funding with local authority need. Over time, DfE expects its new data collection to help refine the assumptions used in the formula. DfE also expects the Bus Services Bill sponsored by DfT to make it easier for local authorities to integrate home to school transport with public transport, and to improve bus service provision and frequency in rural areas. In July 2025, the mayors of England's combined authorities committed to working with Active Travel England and DfT to create safer routes to schools, shops and high streets, workplaces and transport hubs (paragraphs 3.24 to 3.28).

Concluding comments

20 For the children and young people who rely on it to get them to school and college each day, local-authority-provided transport is an invaluable service. Without it, many may struggle to access or continue with their education. When first introduced, it was predominantly a service for children in rural areas. Following changes in legislation, the number of children and young people assessed as having SEN increased, with implications for home to school transport. Spending on home to school transport has increased significantly over the past decade, and a large and growing proportion of expenditure now goes on transporting children and young people with SEND to school.

21 Local authorities are struggling to balance their statutory duties to provide transport for eligible pupils with their duty to balance their budget. Efforts to address escalating costs are delivering savings and can help to increase independence for some young people. However, where discretionary services have been cut, some pupils may miss out or parents may have to adjust working patterns or give up work altogether to take their children to school. Yet there is currently insufficient data to judge how any changes to home to school transport might impact attendance. Local authorities are looking to DfE's upcoming SEND reforms to ensure the long-term sustainability of the service.

Recommendations

22 DfE should:

- a** ensure that forthcoming SEND reforms and their implementation consider implications for home to school transport to ensure that the whole SEND system is delivering the outcomes intended;
- b** as it seeks to improve its data collection and make it mandatory:
 - review the design of its data collection to ensure that the information it receives enhances understanding of cost drivers and supports effective benchmarking, while remaining practical for local authorities to provide;
 - ensure the findings from its data collection are available to local authorities to encourage higher completion rates, better data quality and to support local authority benchmarking and best practice sharing;
 - work with the local government sector to explore what more it could do to understand the overall effectiveness of its home to school transport policy and the impact of changes in policy or discretionary transport, for example on attendance; and
- c** monitor the impact of the home to school transport funding formula on different types of authority, and check whether the changes better align funding with local need.