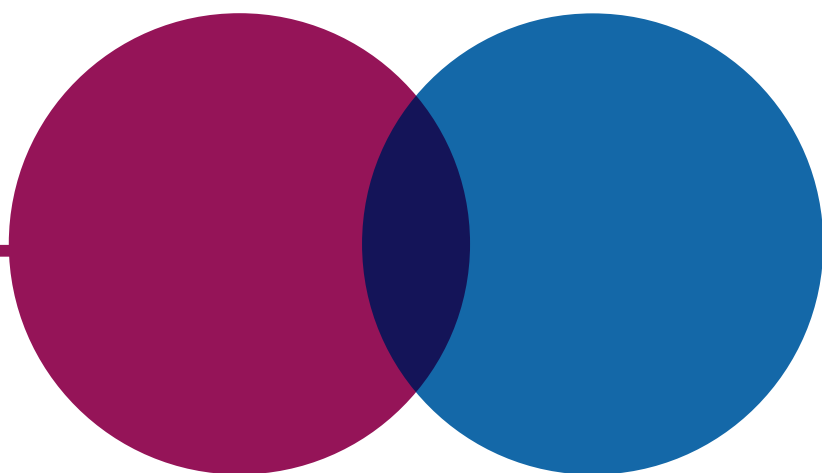




National Audit Office



REPORT

Home to school transport

Department for Education

SESSION 2024–2026
31 OCTOBER 2025
HC 1377



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National Audit Office

Home to school transport

Department for Education

Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General

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Commons in accordance with Section 9 of the Act

Gareth Davies
Comptroller and Auditor General
National Audit Office

23 October 2025



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The National Audit Office study team consisted of:

Anna Clift, Joanna Lewis,
Shivam Sood and
Fiorella Colonio-Salazar,
under the direction of
Vicky Davis.

For further information about the National Audit Office please contact:

National Audit Office
Press Office
157–197 Buckingham Palace Road
Victoria
London
SW1W 9SP

 020 7798 7400

 www.nao.org.uk

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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.

Part One

About home to school transport

1.1 This part of the report sets out the eligibility criteria for, impact of, and spending on home to school transport.

Travel to school

1.2 For most children and young people, their parents arrange the travel to their place of education. Travel costs vary significantly depending on location, distances travelled, and modes of transport used. Transport costs can be substantially higher for children and young people with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND).

1.3 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. DfE sets national eligibility criteria and issues statutory guidance to local authorities. Local authorities arrange home to school transport for children and young people who meet these criteria. Transport can include local taxis, private hire vehicles, minibuses, coaches or buses. Some local authorities have a fleet of in-house vehicles. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government is responsible for the financial framework within which local authorities operate, and allocates funding for home to school transport to local authorities through the Local Government Finance Settlement. This funding is not ringfenced and local authorities decide how to allocate it based on local priorities.

Eligibility

1.4 The Education Act 1996 aims to ensure that children of compulsory school age⁵ (5 to 16 years) have access to an education. To ensure transport is not a barrier, the Act places a duty on local authorities to arrange free-of-charge home to school transport in certain circumstances. The duty applies where a child attends their nearest suitable school and cannot reasonably be expected to walk due to the distance involved (living further than statutory walking distance); or a special educational need, disability or mobility problem; or the nature of the walking route being unsafe.

⁵ Children are of compulsory school age from the start of the term following their fifth birthday until the last Friday in June of the school year in which they turn 16.

1.5 The eligibility criteria regarding statutory walking distances have been in place, largely unchanged, since the Education Act 1944 (**Figure 1**). When first introduced, these enabled children in rural areas to attend school and ensured that transport would not be a valid defence against prosecution for failure to attend school.

Figure 1

Eligibility criteria for home to school transport in England, 2025

Some children of compulsory school age have a statutory entitlement to home to school transport

Age group	Statutory entitlement	Discretionary provision
Under 5 years old (below compulsory school age)	No statutory entitlement to free-of-charge transport.	Local authorities have discretionary powers to provide transport for children below compulsory school age (such as those in reception or pre-school).
Aged between 5 and 16 years old (compulsory school age)	Local authorities must provide free-of-charge transport to a pupil's nearest suitable school if: - they are under eight and the school is more than two miles away; or - they are eight or over and the school is more than three miles away; or - they would not be able to walk there safely, even if accompanied by a parent or guardian; or - they would not be able to walk there safely because of their special educational needs, disability or a mobility problem, even if accompanied by a parent or guardian. Extended rights apply for children from low-income families. They apply if a pupil is eligible for free school meals and: - they are aged eight or over but under 11, go to their nearest suitable school and it is at least two miles away; or - they are aged 11 to 16 and go to a school two to six miles away, where it is one of their three nearest suitable schools; or - they are aged 11 to 16 and go to a school two to 15 miles away, that their parents have chosen because of their religion or belief.	Local authorities also have discretionary powers to provide free or subsidised transport outside of the statutory criteria. However, they are not required to do so. For example, they may choose to provide transport to: - pupils living closer than statutory walking distances; or - siblings of eligible children; or - pupils travelling to breakfast clubs or other activities.
Aged between 16 and 18 (sixth-form age)	Local authorities have no legal requirement to provide free transport for learners aged 16–18, including those with an education, health and care (EHC) plan. Local authorities must publish an annual transport policy statement outlining available support and the appeals process, and must act reasonably in assessing requests. The transport policy statement should include information on what transport arrangements are available to support young people aged 16–18 with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) to encourage, enable and assist their attendance in education and training.	Local authorities may provide transport assistance to support sixth-form age learners in accessing education or training, especially for those with SEND, those from low-income families or those living in rural areas. Support may include: - travel passes or allowances; - shared transport (e.g. minibuses); or - personal travel budgets. Provision is often not free and may require parental contributions. Local authorities are expected to ensure provision is affordable and accessible.

Figure 1 *continued*
Eligibility criteria for home to school transport in England, 2025

Age group	Statutory entitlement	Discretionary provision
Aged 19 and over (adult learner)	Local authorities must provide free transport to adult learners with an EHC plan where it is deemed necessary, such as when specialist vehicles are required. This applies only if the adult learner is attending a course started after their 19th birthday and the local authority has arranged the education and any associated boarding. Local authorities also have specific legal duties for learners with SEND aged 19–25, including publishing an annual transport policy statement.	Local authorities may pay all or part of reasonable travel costs for other adult learners, including those with SEND, but are not required to do so. Support may include: • mileage allowances; • public transport passes; or • personal travel budgets.

Notes

- 1 Children are of compulsory school age from the start of the term following their fifth birthday until the last Friday in June of the school year in which they turn 16.
- 2 Section 42 of the Children and Families Act 2014 places a duty on local authorities to secure special educational provision in accordance with a child or young person's EHC plan. In some circumstances, they may need to arrange transport for a child who is below compulsory school age if it would be necessary for them to do so for the child to access the special educational provision specified in their plan.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Department for Education documents

- 1.6 In 2006, the government introduced additional provisions, known as ‘extended rights,’ to expand eligibility for home to school transport to children from low-income families. Extended rights allow parents to exercise greater choice over the school their child attends. While access to extended rights is means tested, general access to home to school transport is not.
- 1.7 Local authorities have discretionary powers to provide free or subsidised transport to pupils who do not meet the statutory criteria. For example, they may choose to provide transport to pupils living closer than statutory walking distances, or to pupils above or below compulsory school age, but they are not legally required to do so.

Transport for young people aged 16 and over

- 1.8 While young people in England must now remain in education, training or employment until the age of 18, there is no legal requirement for local authorities to provide free transport for learners over 16.
- 1.9 The Children and Families Act 2014 aimed to improve the lives of children and families and introduced major reforms to the SEND system. It extended support to young people with SEND up to age 25 and replaced statements of SEN and learning difficulty assessments with education, health and care (EHC) plans.⁶ EHC plans are legal documents that set out the support to which a child or young person is entitled. They describe the support and care needed, and the name or type of school or other educational setting that the child or young person should attend.

6 Before the legislative changes in 2014, ‘statements of special educational needs’ applied to children until they left school; separate ‘learning difficulty assessments’ applied to young people under 25 who required additional support as part of their further education.

1.10 A child or young person does not need an EHC plan to qualify for transport due to SEN, disability or mobility issues. However, if a specific school or setting is named in an EHC plan, it is treated as the nearest suitable setting. Where parents have a preference, the local authority must name that school unless it is unsuitable or it is incompatible with the efficient use of resources or the efficient education of others.

1.11 Local authorities have specific legal duties relating to transport to school or college for young people with SEND. Different duties apply depending on whether the young person is of sixth-form age or is an adult learner (over sixth-form age). As Figure 1 shows, there are different requirements on local authorities between 16-19 and post-19. In theory, a pupil could lose transport post-16 to then have it reinstated post-19 if it was deemed necessary.

1.12 **Figure 2** on pages 17 and 18 summarises the legislative changes that impact local authority arrangements for home to school transport.

Impact of home to school transport

1.13 Home to school transport is an important service at a time when the government is concerned about poor school attendance following the COVID-19 pandemic and with families struggling with the cost of living. Based on a data collection exercise from February 2025, DfE estimates that nationally, 520,000 children and young people receive home to school transport. Of these, 470,000 are children of compulsory school age and below (around 6% of all pupils in this cohort) and 50,000 are young people aged 16 and above.

1.14 Making it easier to get to school, home to school transport can bring benefits to children and young people with SEND, and their families. There are reports that it can help young people to develop independence, build confidence and engage more fully with their community. In 2024, Contact, a charity for families with disabled children, surveyed parents and guardians of children and young people with SEND asking them about their experiences of home to school transport. It found that around half of parents surveyed received local-authority-arranged home to school transport, and that of those who received it:

- 81% were satisfied or very satisfied with their children's travel arrangements;
- 74% said it helps their child arrive ready to learn;
- 58% said it helps their child's independence;
- 41% said it enables them to get other children to school; and
- 50% said it helps them, as parents, to work.

Figure 2

Key developments related to home to school transport legislation in England, 1944 to 2025

The initial legislation for home to school transport dates back to 1944

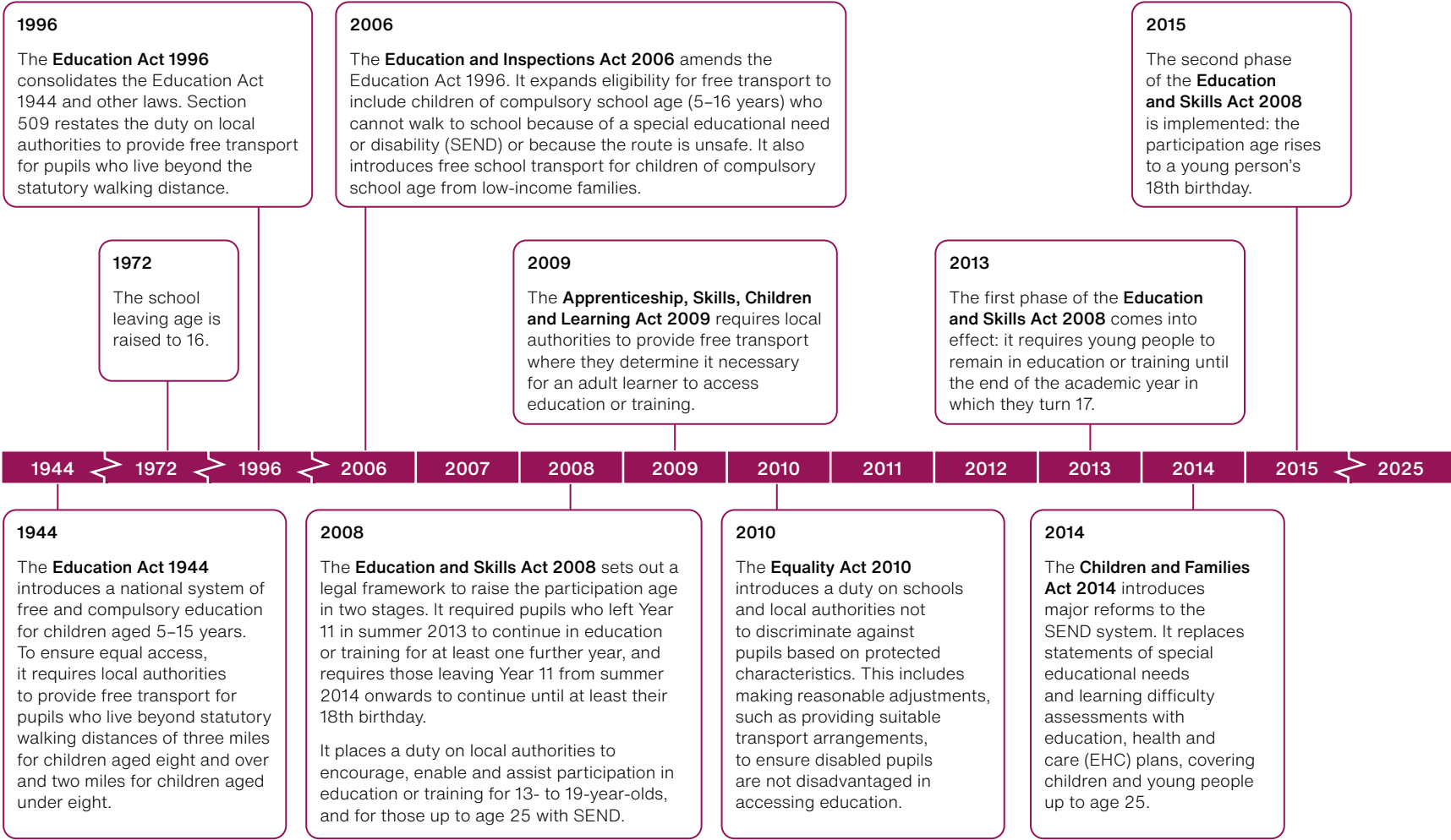


Figure 2 *continued*

Key developments related to home to school transport legislation in England, 1944 to 2025

Notes

- 1 We have inserted breaks in the timeline where there are no significant legislative developments over extended periods.
- 2 The Education Act 1944 raised the school leaving age to 15, with a stated intention to raise it to 16; this intention was not implemented until 1972, when the school leaving age was formally raised to 16.
- 3 Participation age is the age up to which participation in education or training is compulsory.
- 4 Although the Education and Skills Act 2008 established the legal basis for raising the participation age, the changes were phased in gradually. The requirement to stay in education or training until the academic year in which a young person turned 17 began in 2013, followed by an increase to a young person's 18th birthday in 2015.
- 5 An adult learner, for the purposes of transport duties under the Education Act 1996, is an individual aged 19 or over who began their current course of education or training after turning 19.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of government legislation

1.15 As the lead department for the government's mission to 'Break Down Barriers to Opportunity', DfE aims to tackle rates of school absences – nearly one in five children miss a day or more of school per fortnight. 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 because the eligibility criteria have been in place for so long. DfE does not currently have the data to assess the impact that any future changes to the policy (or changes to local discretionary criteria) affecting who receives home to school transport would have on attendance. It is working to improve its data on who receives home to school transport (Part Two).

1.16 As part of its wider work to tackle school absence, since 2024 DfE has collected data on whether absence is due to issues with local-authority-provided transport (for those children already receiving it). These data show that only around 0.15% of all the missed school sessions in 2024/25 were due to issues with local-authority-provided transport. DfE's wider work also includes, for example, the roll-out of real-time attendance data tools, powered intelligent reports comparing a school's attendance outcomes to statistically similar schools, and sharing with secondary schools the year 6 attendance data for all pupils offered a place at their school.

Spending on home to school transport

1.17 In 2023-24, local authorities in England spent £2.32 billion on home to school transport. Local authorities submit their spending on home to school transport as part of their annual section 251 returns to DfE. Spending is split across five categories according to age and whether or not travel has been agreed for reasons of a child's special educational need and/or disability.⁷ DfE publishes this information annually.

⁷ Department for Education, Education & Skills Funding Agency, *Guidance: Section 251 financial data collection: Guidance for local authorities compiling their outturn statement*, updated July 2025.

1.18 In 2023-24, most spending (88%) went on transporting children of compulsory school age and below. **Figure 3** overleaf shows how spending in 2023-24 breaks down by age group and how much is for children travelling to mainstream settings or due to SEND. Approximately two thirds (£1.52 billion) went on transporting children aged 0 to 16 with SEND, compared with 55% in 2015-16. Local authorities are not consistent in the way they categorise spending on SEND and mainstream transport. For example, many categorise any spending on any child with an EHC plan as 'SEN transport', irrespective of the reason they are eligible for transport.

Change in spending over time

1.19 Local authority spending on home to school transport has increased significantly since 2015-16. Total spending in England increased by 70% in real terms between 2015-16 and 2023-24, from £1.36 billion (2023-24 prices) to £2.32 billion. It is one of the fastest growing areas of spending for local authorities. 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.

1.20 This growth has been driven largely by increased spending on transport for pupils with SEND (which in real terms, more than doubled in less than a decade). While spending on 'mainstream transport' rose by 9% in real terms (from £0.51 billion to £0.55 billion) between 2015-16 and 2023-24, spending on 'SEN transport' rose by 106% (from £0.85 billion to £1.76 billion).⁸ Spending increased most significantly after 2020-21; almost three quarters of the £0.8 billion real terms increase was on transporting pupils aged 0-16 with SEND (**Figure 4** on pages 21 and 22). We examine available data on cost per pupil and the key drivers behind the increases on home to school transport spending in Part Two.

1.21 Available data show that 143 of the 153 local authorities with a duty to provide home to school transport⁹ have increased real terms spending on home to school transport over the past eight years. For just over one in five (22%) local authorities, spending on home to school transport has doubled between 2015-16 and 2023-24.

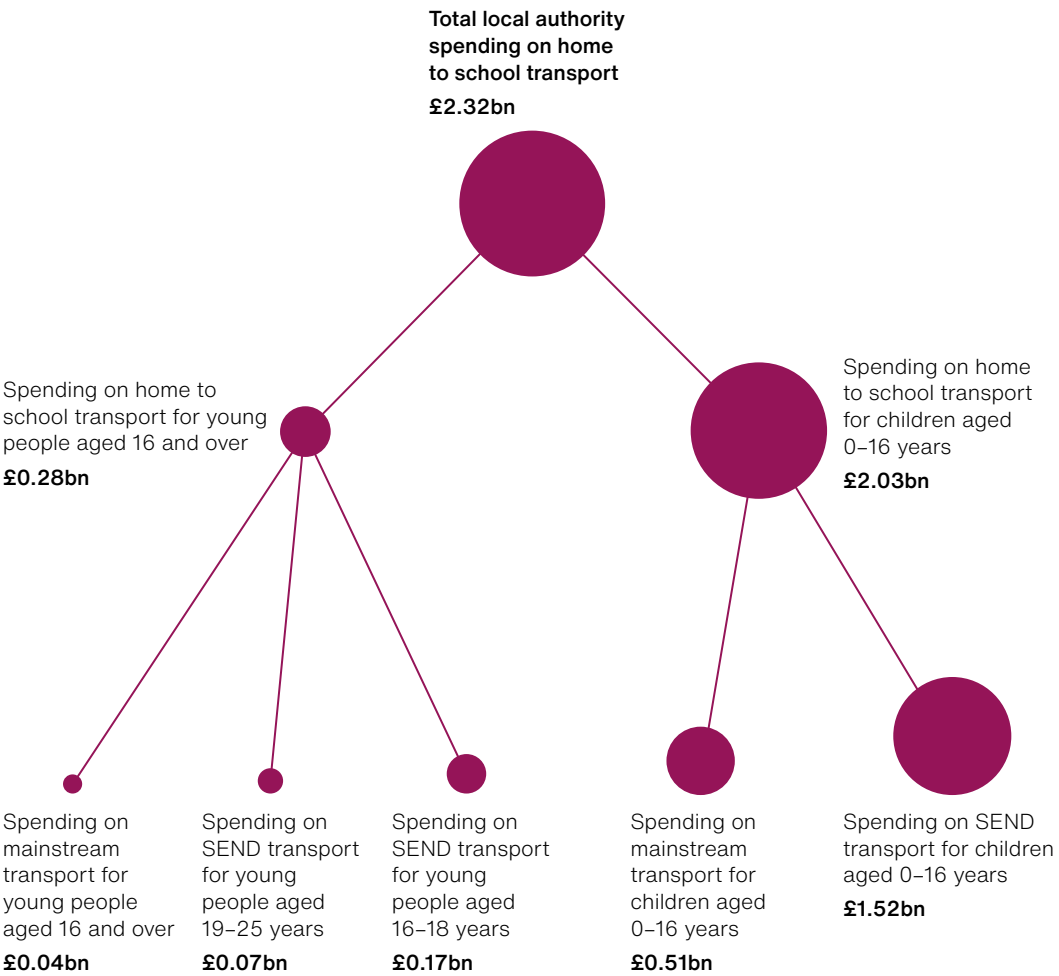
1.22 There is also significant geographical variation in spending on home to school transport. Many rural and county authorities have significant spending on mainstream transport, while the largest spend for London boroughs and metropolitan boroughs is 'SEN transport'. Over 90% of actual expenditure by London and metropolitan borough councils is on 'SEN transport', compared with 69% in county councils and 68% in unitary authorities. This variation reflects the fact that schools in urban areas are generally closer to pupils' homes and better served by public transport.

⁸ Figures may not sum, due to rounding.

⁹ Local authorities with a duty to provide home to school transport include county councils, unitary authorities and London borough councils as well as the Council of the Isles of Scilly and the Common Council of the City of London.

Figure 3
Spending on home to school transport by local authorities in England in 2023-24

Most expenditure on home to school transport is on children aged 0-16 years with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)



Notes

1 Figures may not sum, due to rounding.

2 Children are of compulsory school age from the start of the term following their fifth birthday until the last Friday in June of the school year in which they turn 16.

3 Local authorities record their spending across five categories, based on age and whether a child qualifies for transport due to SEND. The Department for Education (DfE) publishes this information annually in the Section 251 local authority financial returns. The categories are: "Pre-16 SEN transport", "Pre-16 mainstream transport", "Post-16 mainstream transport", "Post-16 SEN transport (16-18)", and "Post-16 SEN transport (19-25)". This figure groups those categories to show total spending, spending by age group (children aged 0-16 years and young people aged 16 and over) and by transport type (mainstream and SEN).

4 Figures show gross total expenditure.

Figure 4

Real terms gross expenditure on home to school transport in England, 2015-16 to 2023-24 (2023-24 prices)

Real terms expenditure on home to school transport for children aged 0–16 with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) increased substantially after 2020-21

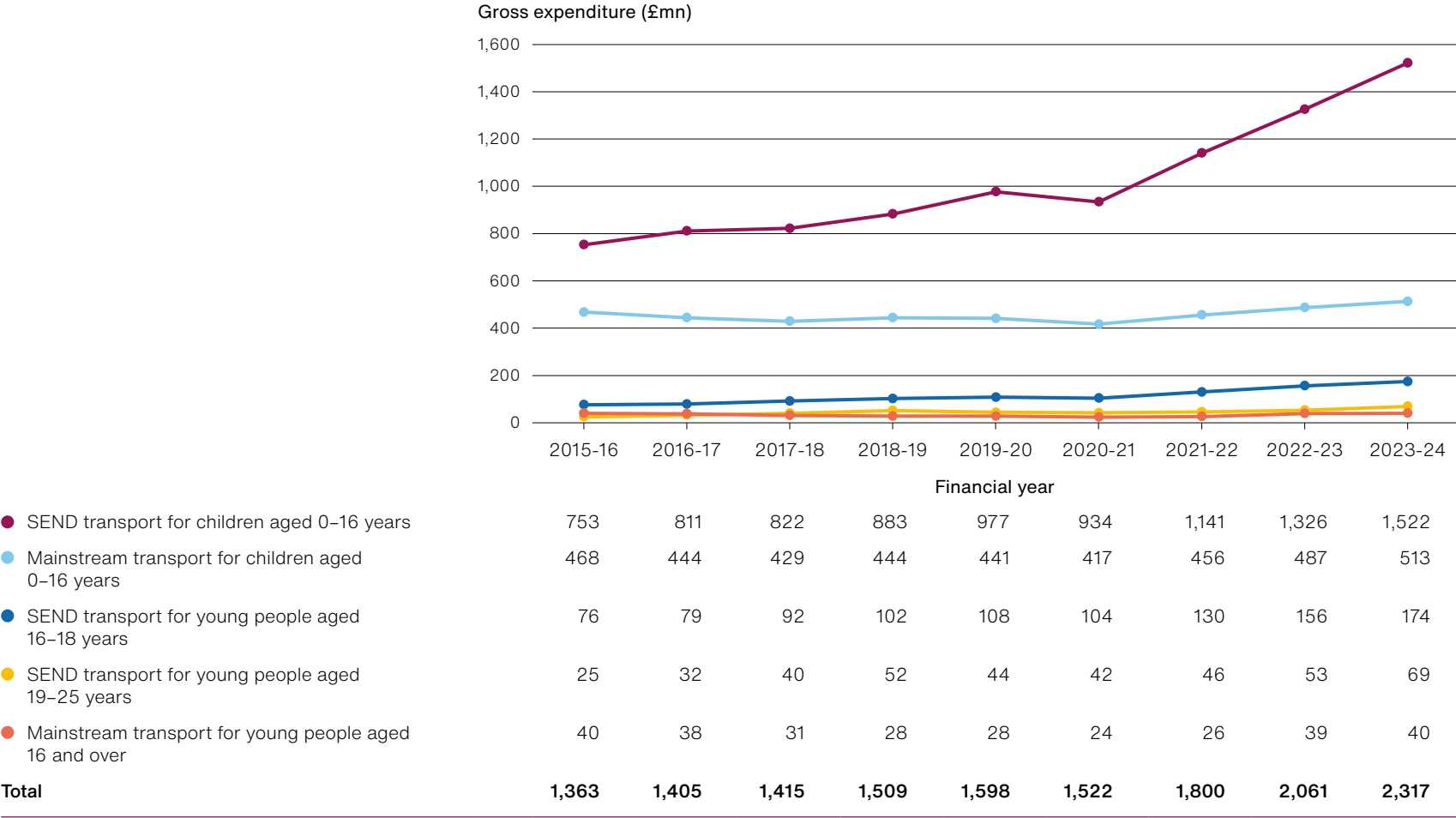


Figure 4 *continued*
Real terms gross expenditure on home to school transport in England,
2015-16 to 2023-24 (2023-24 prices)

- Notes**
- 1 Children are of compulsory school age from the start of the term following their fifth birthday until the last Friday in June of the school year in which they turn 16.
 - 2 Local authorities record their spending across five categories according to age and whether or not a child qualifies for transport due to SEND. The Department for Education (DfE) publishes this information annually in the Section 251 local authority financial returns. The categories are: "Pre-16 SEN transport", "Pre-16 mainstream transport", "Post-16 mainstream transport", "Post-16 SEN transport (16-18)" and "Post-16 SEN transport (19-25)".
 - 3 Figures show gross total expenditure.
 - 4 Figures may not sum, due to rounding.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Department for Education data

Impact on local authority budgets

1.23 Since 2015-16, local authorities have consistently spent more than they planned on home to school transport, which means they have less to spend on other services. In 2023-24, local authorities overspent by £415 million, or 22% more than they budgeted. Almost half of authorities reported annual overspends of 20% or more. By contrast, in 2015-16, local authorities overspent by £51 million (4%) in real terms (2023-24 prices), and one in five authorities reported overspends of 20% or more. Local authorities told us that overspends could arise because of the difference between the financial year basis on which they set budgets and the academic year over which home to school transport is planned and delivered. This timing difference is particularly challenging when unforeseen cost pressures arise, such as extra pupils needing transport, pupils requiring a taxi as they are unable to use a planned bus service, or late cost increases. Local authorities reported being affected by private provider cost increases just before the academic year starts.

Part Two

Pressures on home to school transport

2.1 This part of the report covers:

- the demand for home to school transport;
- the variation in per-pupil costs for home to school transport; and
- the main factors driving the increased cost of home to school transport.

Users of home to school transport

2.2 The Department for Education (DfE) has collected and published local authority budget and spending data for many years; it has not routinely collected information on how many children and young people receive transport, how they travel or the criteria by which they are eligible. DfE recognises that this limits its ability to analyse trends or draw firm conclusions about who is using the transport and the key drivers behind increases in spending. In February 2025, it began collecting wider home to school transport data from local authorities on a voluntary basis and got a 75% response rate, although not all local authorities answered all questions. While incomplete, these returns provide some useful indications around pupil numbers, modes of transport and cost per pupil travelling. We have drawn on other sources to provide indications of trends. Despite the data limitations, there is a good understanding across DfE and local authorities of the main factors driving the large increases in spending on home to school transport.

2.3 DfE estimates that 180,000 (38%) children of compulsory school age and below receive home to school transport because of their special educational needs or disabilities (SEND).¹⁰ In its 2025 data collection, DfE sought to understand how many children qualified for home to school transport under each eligibility criterion (see Figure 1). Some children qualify on more than one criterion and, to avoid double counting, DfE asked local authorities to record each pupil under just one of the criteria. DfE assumes there is a hierarchy of criteria with distance at the top. This means that a pupil with SEND travelling more than three miles to school would qualify on distance. Only children living within statutory distances who are unable to walk due to a special need, disability or mobility issue would qualify under the SEND criterion. In the 2025 data collection, local authorities that responded reported that over half of children of compulsory school age and below (59%) qualify for transport because they live beyond the statutory walking distances, and around a fifth (19%) because of SEND or a mobility issue (**Figure 5**). In reality, many children are eligible on more than one criterion. There is no breakdown available on why local authorities provide transport for young people over the age of 16 as this is largely discretionary (see Figure 1).

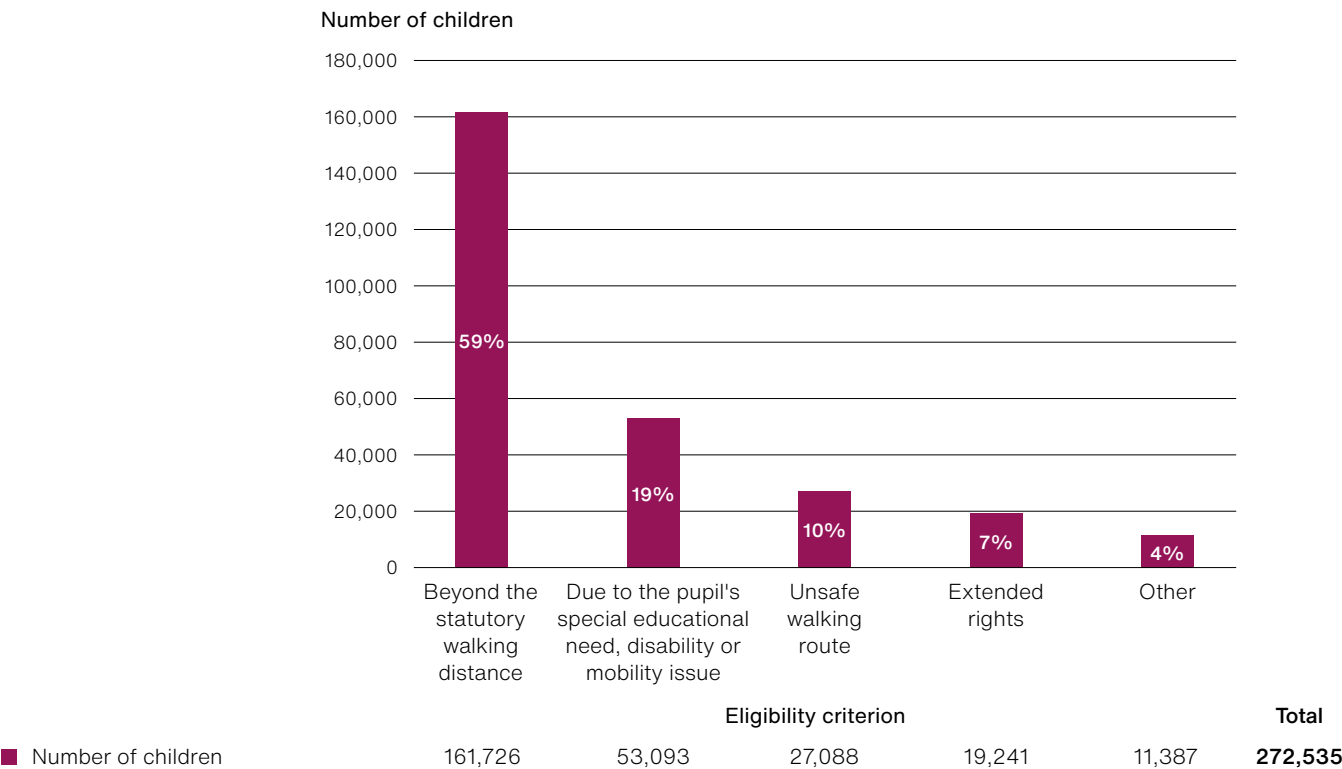
2.4 Available evidence suggests that the overall number of pupils receiving home to school transport increased by 6% between 2019 and 2023, but the profile of those pupils changed significantly. In 2023, the County Councils Network (CCN) estimated that the number of children and young people for whom its members provided home to school transport had increased by 20,400 between 2019 and 2023, from 321,800 to 342,200.¹¹ Of these, 17,700 (87%) were children and young people with SEND. Meanwhile, the number of young people over 16 receiving “mainstream” transport fell by 700. In 2025, the Local Government Association (LGA) estimated that the number of children and young people receiving home to school transport had increased by 10% between 2021 and 2025.

¹⁰ 180,000 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?’

¹¹ CCN data is not complete and includes data only for its member councils.

Figure 5
Department for Education (DfE) findings on reasons why children of compulsory school age and below are eligible for home to school transport in England, February 2025

Local authorities reported that the majority of children who receive home to school transport are eligible because they live beyond the statutory walking distance



Notes

- 1 Figure is based on data collected by DfE from local authorities in February 2025 and shows responses for the 71 (46%) local authorities that responded to the question on reasons for eligibility. These numbers have not been extrapolated to a national number.
- 2 In its data collection, DfE asked local authorities to provide data for all children receiving home to school transport aged 16 and under. This figure includes both children of compulsory school age (5–16) and below. Children are of compulsory school age from the start of the term following their fifth birthday until the last Friday in June of the school year in which they turn 16. Local authorities have discretionary powers to provide transport for children below compulsory school age.
- 3 Local authorities categorise spending on home to school transport as part of their section 251 returns to DfE. Spending is split across five categories according to age and whether or not travel has been agreed for reasons of a child's SEND. The term "SEN transport" refers to spending agreed because of a child's SEND.
- 4 To avoid double counting, DfE asked local authorities to record each pupil under a single eligibility criterion according to a hierarchy. Using the hierarchy, eligibility for a child with SEND who lives beyond statutory walking distance would be presented in the category "Beyond the statutory walking distance". Based on responses by local authorities in DfE's 2025 data collection to a separate question, "How many pre-16 pupils does the local authority arrange SEN home to school transport for?", DfE estimates that around 38% receive transport because of their SEND "SEN transport".
- 5 Percentages may not sum, due to rounding.
- 6 The categories in this figure come from the eligibility criteria stated in DfE's statutory guidance on home to school transport.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Department for Education data

Changes in demand for transport for students with SEND

Demand for education, health and care (EHC) plans

2.5 There has been a sustained increase in the number of children and young people assessed as having special educational needs (SEN) since the Children and Families Act 2014, particularly those with EHC plans specifying a need for support in specialist settings. As at January 2025, a total of 639,000 children and young people had an EHC plan,¹² or statement of SEN, up from 240,000 in January 2015¹³ – an increase of 166%. Over the same period, the total number of pupils in England in full time education grew by 7%.¹⁴ As at January 2025, 19.6% of school pupils in England (over 1.7 million pupils) had a learning difficulty or disability that meant that they needed extra support at school.¹⁵ Around 5% (483,000) with more complex needs are legally entitled to specific support set out in an EHC plan (**Figure 6** on pages 27 and 28). In our 2024 report *Supporting children and young people with special educational needs*, we reported that, without policy interventions, DfE estimated the number of EHC plans will reach just over one million in 2032-33.¹⁶

2.6 In our 2024 report, we said that increases across certain identified primary needs had significantly contributed to greater demand for EHC plans.¹⁷ These needs were autistic spectrum disorders; speech, language and communication needs; and social, emotional and mental health needs. While there was no comprehensive explanation for the increases, we said that hypotheses included greater awareness and understanding of conditions, a cultural shift to accept and support those with SEN, and incentives for schools to request EHC plans, for example, to access additional high-needs funding.

12 This is the total number of children and young people aged 0–25 in England with an EHC plan, across both school and non-school settings.

13 Until 2018, data on EHC plans included children and young people with either an EHC plan or a Statement of SEN. Under the Children and Families Act 2014, Statements of SEN were replaced by EHC plans, and local authorities were required to complete the transfer by 1 April 2018 by either issuing an EHC plan for eligible individuals or deciding that one was not needed. From 2018 onwards, data on EHC plans no longer includes Statements of SEN.

14 This is the headcount of all pupils in England (aged 0–16) in state-funded nursery, primary, secondary and special schools, non maintained special schools, pupil referral units, general hospital schools and independent schools at January 2025.

15 This is the proportion of pupils in England assessed as having SEN (both with and without EHC plans). It includes all pupils in the settings listed in footnote 14.

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

17 See footnote 16.

Figure 6

Number of children and young people with an education, health and care (EHC) plan and pupils with special educational needs (SEN) support, 2015 to 2025

In 2025, 638,745 children and young people had an EHC plan

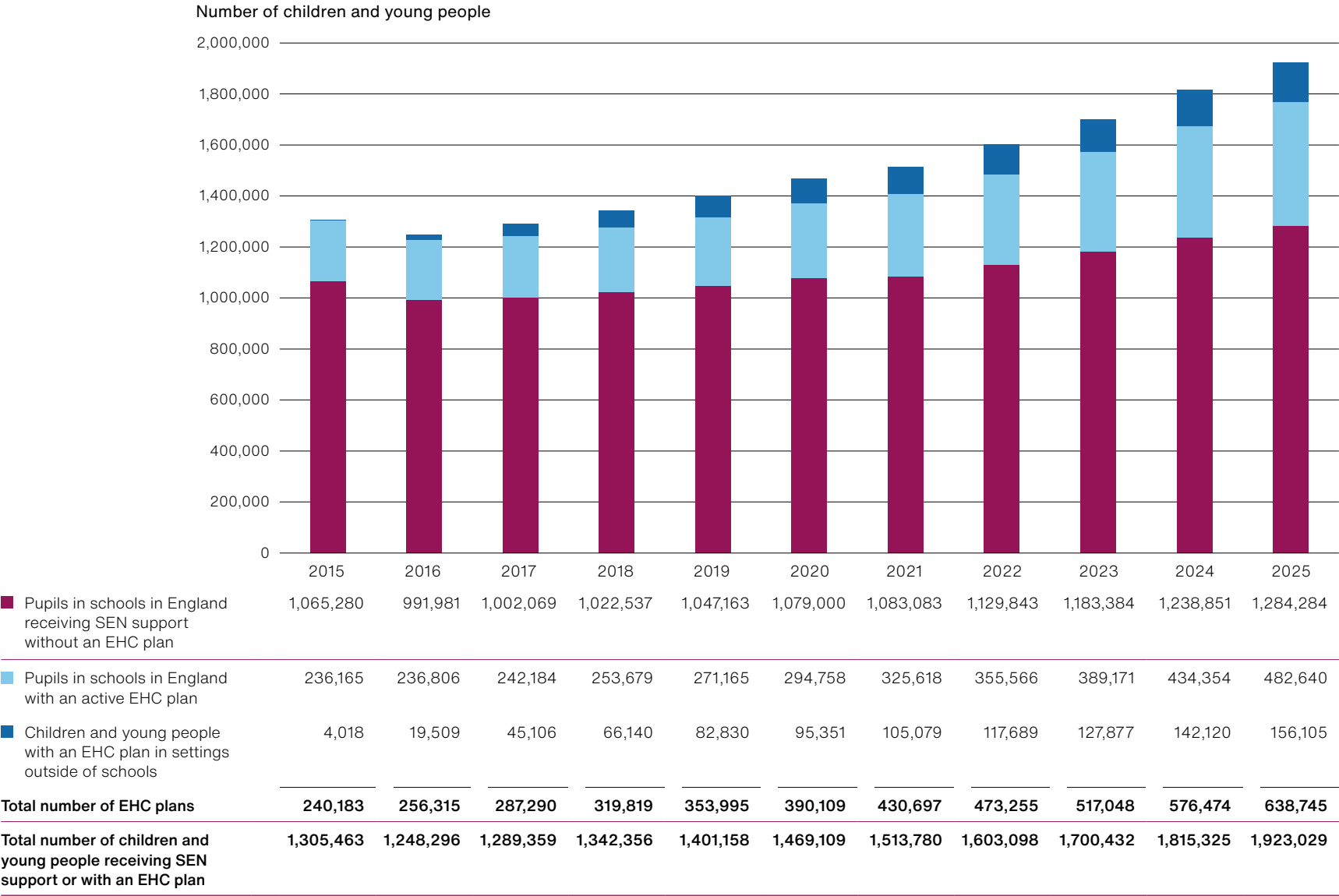


Figure 6 *continued*

Number of children and young people with an education, health and care (EHC) plan and pupils with special educational needs (SEN) support, 2015 to 2025

Notes

- 1 Data for the number of children and young people are presented as at January of each year.
- 2 EHC plans set out legally enforceable entitlements to specific support.
- 3 Until 2018, data on EHC plans included children and young people with either an EHC plan or a statement of SEN. Under the Children and Families Act 2014, statements of SEN were replaced by EHC plans, and local authorities were required to complete the transfer by 1 April 2018 by either issuing an EHC plan for eligible individuals or deciding that one was not needed. From 2018 onwards, data on EHC plans no longer includes statements of SEN.
- 4 The categories “Pupils in schools in England receiving SEN support without an EHC plan” and “Pupils in schools in England with an active EHC plan” only include pupils in schools in England. This covers all pupils in state-funded nursery, primary, secondary and special schools, as well as non-maintained special schools, pupil referral units, and independent schools.
- 5 The category “Children and young people with an EHC plan in settings outside of schools” only includes children and young people with an EHC plan who are not in school settings. This includes those in further education colleges, early years settings or other care or residential placements. It also includes children and young people who are not in education, employment or training.
- 6 The category “Total number of EHC plans” shows the total number of children and young people aged 0–25 in England with an EHC plan, across both school and non-school settings. It is calculated by summing the categories “Pupils in schools in England with an active EHC plan” and “Children and young people with an EHC plan in settings outside of schools”.
- 7 The category “Total number of children and young people receiving SEN support or with an EHC plan” is calculated by summing the categories “Total number of EHC plans” and “Pupils in schools in England receiving SEN support without an EHC plan”.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of Department for Education data

2.7 There is some evidence that insufficient capacity in mainstream schools, and lack of confidence in the SEN system are driving both parents and schools towards EHC plans and specialist settings. DfE told us that funding for children with SEND had not kept pace with inflation and has impacted schools’ ability to cope. We reported previously that mainstream schools were not incentivised to be inclusive. In our 2024 report, we cited stakeholder views that insufficient resources and capacity in mainstream schools (alongside shortages in specialist staff to support children with SEN) had contributed to low parental confidence – a challenge DfE had recognised in 2022. We said this lack of confidence had contributed to increased demand for EHC plans and specialist schools, which some parents saw as the only way to guarantee support.¹⁸

Distance travelled

2.8 An increase in the number of EHC plans has implications for demand for home to school transport, as more children travel further to schools that can meet their needs:

- DfE’s 2025 data indicate that around 94% of pupils receiving transport due to SEND have an EHC plan.
- The LGA estimates that one child or young person will qualify for transport for every three EHC plans.

¹⁸ See footnote 16.

- The 2025 School Census shows that pupils with EHC plans are likely to travel further than pupils travelling to mainstream schools; 17% of pupils at mainstream secondary schools and 28% of pupils with EHC plans (across all school types) live three or more miles from their school.
- Around a third of pupils with an EHC plan attend special schools. These schools tend to serve broader geographical areas than mainstream schools and it is more likely that pupils attending them will live beyond statutory walking distances and qualify for local-authority-arranged transport. Between 2018/19 and 2024/25,¹⁹ the number of children and young people with EHC plans at specialist schools or specialist post-16 institutions rose from 142,000 to 204,000.

2.9 As well as a general parental preference for specialist settings, other factors that can increase distances travelled by children and young people with SEND can include the following:

- Insufficient local capacity, especially in state special schools, which can give local authorities little choice but to name out-of-area or independent schools that require longer journeys.²⁰
- Different approaches to how SEND teams and transport teams work together. Some told us that SEND teams do not always consider transport early on when deciding on placements in an EHC plan. In some cases, where parents have a preferred school, the threat of tribunal can make SEND teams more reluctant to consider alternative placements with lower associated transport costs.
- Disputes over the school named by a local authority in an EHC plan. School placements are among the most common reasons for appeal to the Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal (SENDIST). Around 99% of cases that go to a hearing are upheld,²¹ and the Tribunal can order the local authority to name the parents' preferred school – which may be further away.

2.10 Once a child or young person is placed and settled in an appropriate setting, local authorities typically avoid relocating them, even if local specialist provision becomes available. Where local authorities open new special schools, they reach capacity quickly, driven by high levels of demand and the need to accommodate pupils already awaiting placements, and offer limited scope to reduce existing transport pressures.

¹⁹ School and college academic years are written as, for example, '2024/25' and run from 1 September to 31 August; financial years are written as '2024-25' and run from 1 April to 31 March.

²⁰ See footnote 16.

²¹ Appeals are counted as upheld when the majority of the local authority's decision is overturned.

Per-pupil costs of home to school transport

2.11 While incomplete, DfE's 2025 data collection and surveys of local authorities can provide useful indications of how much it costs per pupil for home to school transport. The per-pupil costs presented use data on the number of children aged 16 and under receiving home to school transport as at February 2025 and expenditure data from the 2023-24 financial year. These are the most up-to-date datasets available. Our analysis of this data suggests significant variation between different authorities. We calculated that, for 2023-24, annual spending ranged from £3,094 to £14,846 per child with SEND,²² and from £101 to £4,423 per child without SEND.²³ The difference reflects factors such as differences in geography, local transport markets, who is using the service and approaches to commissioning.

2.12 Local authorities spend five times more on average to transport a pupil with SEND to school and see a large range between the highest and lowest cost journeys. DfE's data indicates that in 2023-24, the median annual cost of providing children aged 16 and under with SEND transport was £8,116 per child compared with a median annual cost of £1,526 per child for mainstream transport. Similarly, data from the Association of Transport Co-ordinating Officers' (ATCO) *Transport benchmarking survey 2024*, suggests a median cost per child with SEND of £8,920 per year, compared with £1,495 for mainstream.

Change in per-pupil costs over time

2.13 Available data are limited but suggest that per-pupil costs have increased more for children with SEND.

- Comparing DfE's 2025 data on average costs against those estimated by the Campaign for Better Transport in 2016 suggests there has been a real terms increase of around 52% for transporting pupils with SEND, and 32% for mainstream, between 2016-17 and 2023-24.
- From its analysis of county councils in 2023, CCN estimated that between 2018-19 and 2021-22, the real terms cost per pupil for pre-16 SEND home to school transport increased by 14%. In contrast, the cost per pupil for pre-16 mainstream transport decreased by 3% over the same period.

²² Based on analysis of 110 local authorities.

²³ The per-pupil costs presented use data on the number of children and young people receiving home to school transport as at February 2025 and expenditure data from the 2023-24 financial year. These are the most up-to-date datasets available. For more details see methodology Appendix One.

Cost of transporting children and young people with SEND

2.14 Though averages provide a useful indication, local authorities see a large range between the highest- and lowest-cost journeys. Children and young people with the most complex needs can require specialised vehicles and specially trained assistants to get them to school. One local authority told us that it spends £145,000 per year on transport for one pupil. Higher use of single-occupancy transport – often private hire vehicles – to meet individual needs can increase the cost of transport for children and young people with SEND. Although a family may have a Motability vehicle, per the statutory guidance, local authorities are not permitted to take it into account when deciding on what transport to provide.

Distance travelled

2.15 A shift in placement patterns, driven by a shortage of suitable local provision, is increasing the need for bespoke travel arrangements. As more children and young people with SEND travel further to educational settings that can meet their needs, the number of unique journeys has increased, and opportunities for shared transport decreased. A rise in placements outside of mainstream schools (such as alternative provision academies, pupil referral units, and outdoor learning centres) has exacerbated this trend. DfE's data shows that 13% of children receiving pre-16 home to school transport travelled to an educational setting outside of their local authority. To meet this demand, one local authority told us that it arranges around 1,700 taxi and minibus journeys each day; and another reported organising over 2,200 transport contracts.

Type of transport used

2.16 The use of single-occupancy and private hire vehicles is increasing. Where pupils travel alone to specialist settings or cannot share routes due to medical, behavioural or safeguarding needs, a car may be the only suitable mode of transport. Based on a 2023 survey of its members, CCN reported a 36% increase in the use of cars, including taxis, for home to school transport for pupils with SEND between 2019 and 2023. It estimated that in 2023 its members transported 31,500 pupils with SEND by car and 31,900 by minibus.

2.17 Journey times can limit opportunities for using larger, lower-cost modes of transport. To ensure that pupils arrive at their educational setting ready to learn, DfE's statutory guidance says that, in general, journeys should not exceed 45 minutes each way for primary-aged pupils and 75 minutes for secondary-aged pupils. The guidance is clear, however, that there will be circumstances in which this is not possible; for example, where a child needs to travel a long way to their educational setting or when journey times are extended by traffic delays. Local authorities told us that this limits the number of individual pick-ups a driver has time to make and means they cannot make use of larger vehicles. This is particularly challenging where students have more complex needs and need assistance to board a vehicle. Congestion, particularly in urban areas, can exacerbate this problem. One local authority told us that local traffic was so bad that, to ensure journey times did not exceed 1.5 hours for any one passenger, it could not fill its minibuses to capacity.

Other cost drivers

2.18 Other factors impacting spending on home to school transport include availability of public transport and market pressures.

Availability of public transport

2.19 Limited availability of public transport, especially in rural areas, increases reliance on local-authority-provided transport. In our 2025 report *Local Bus Services in England*, we reported that between 2019-20 and 2023-24 there had been a 15% reduction in bus services outside of London, measured in kilometres travelled.²⁴ We reported significant reductions in commercial routes, particularly in rural areas, as routes have been withdrawn or been made shorter or less frequent.

Market pressures

2.20 Capacity constraints have driven up costs of home to school transport for local authorities. Conditions vary, but some local authorities told us that local coach and minibus markets had not recovered since the pandemic. This, they said, had reduced their ability to negotiate favourable rates and increased their reliance on taxis. Several told us that they had faced last-minute contract cancellations and price rises from taxi companies just before the start of the academic year, leaving them with little option but to pay the higher price. In response to CCN's November 2023 survey, 90% of respondents reported that constrained market capacity was driving up the cost of SEND transport while 87% said the same for mainstream provision.

²⁴ Comptroller and Auditor General, *Local Bus Services in England*, Session 2024-25, HC 949, National Audit Office, June 2025. Available at: www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/local-bus-services-in-england.pdf

2.21 A shortage of drivers is contributing to transport market issues.

Local authorities reported persistent challenges in recruiting and retaining drivers and passenger assistants (PAs). DfE and local authorities explained that many drivers did not return to the sector following the COVID-19 pandemic, having retrained or moved into better-paid delivery jobs. These roles can be rewarding yet challenging and require candidates who can build rapport with some of society's most vulnerable children and young people, which DfE says can be difficult to find. Low pay, irregular, part-time hours, and competition from other sectors can also make these roles less attractive.

2.22 Transport operators are also facing higher costs. The Department for Transport estimated that between 2021 and 2024, bus operators had seen a 12% increase in the price of fuel and a 28% increase in wages. Increases in employer National Insurance contributions took effect in April 2025, and local authorities say they could affect the availability and cost of home to school transport. In November 2023, the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) and the Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport (ADEPT) reported that where contracts have ended, re-tendered contracts were costing 20% or more due to inflation, wage rises, and fuel costs.²⁵ DfE attributes increased local authority spending on mainstream transport mostly to higher pupil numbers and the impact of inflation.

Regulatory changes

2.23 Some regulatory requirements designed to make vehicles safer and more accessible, may impact home to school transport costs. For example, vehicles with more than eight seats require an operator license, while inconsistent taxi and private hire licensing rules across local authorities increase complexity and costs for operators. Public Sector Vehicle Accessibility Regulations require larger buses and coaches to be accessible for disabled passengers. Home to school transport vehicles are currently exempt from these requirements, but exemptions are due to expire in August 2026. While this is intended to improve accessibility, many vehicles currently used for home to school transport are not compliant, and the changes could reduce the pool of available vehicles and put pressure on contract costs.

25 ADCS and ADEPT, *Final report from the ADCS and ADEPT working group on home to school travel*, November 2023.

Part Three

The government's response to pressures

3.1 This part of the report sets out how local authorities and the government are responding to rising demand and costs for home to school transport.

How local authorities are responding

3.2 As demand and costs for home to school transport rise, alongside demand for other services and wider financial pressures, local authorities must fulfil their statutory duty to provide home to school transport while also delivering a balanced budget. They have adopted a range of approaches given their different geographic, demographic and financial contexts to try to meet that challenge. In November 2023, the Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport (ADEPT) published a toolkit of example initiatives²⁶ to help local authorities manage the cost and demand of providing travel services for children and young people with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND). Measures taken may not always be well received by parents or carers, particularly where they result in reduced service levels or loss of entitlement or put burdens on families. We heard that parents can have high expectations about the type of transport local authorities can provide, regardless of cost.

Reviewing discretionary transport services

3.3 Local authorities have been scaling back their non-statutory home to school transport services for some time. In 2016, the Campaign for Better Transport reported that nearly 80% of authorities had reduced their school transport offer since 2010. It also reported that two-thirds of local authorities in England had stopped offering free post-16 transport and around 50,000 16 to 18-year-olds in England had lost their entitlement to free transport since 2008, as part of austerity measures. All the local authorities we spoke to had cut back their discretionary transport offering.

²⁶ The Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning & Transport, *SEND Transport Toolkit*, November 2023.

- **Removing or restricting free or subsidised transport to young people of sixth-form age.** All local authorities we spoke to have reduced their post-16 home to school transport offer. This has typically involved introducing or increasing parental contributions or narrowing eligibility to focus primarily on young people with SEND.
- **Scaling back free transport to sixth-form age pupils with SEND.** In 2024, Contact, a charity for families with disabled children, found that for young disabled people who had received free transport aged 5–15 years, almost 60% had faced changes to their transport on turning 16, including 15% whose transport had stopped altogether. It found that 20% were now charged for transport.
- **Removing or restricting free transport to children below compulsory school age.** Many local authorities continue to offer transport to 4-year-olds at school if they meet the eligibility criteria for compulsory school age. Some local authorities require a contribution from parents for this service. For example, for the 2025/26 academic year, one local authority we spoke to charges parents £1,028 per pupil aged under 5 who receives home to school transport.
- **Restricting transport to all but the nearest suitable school.** For example, some local authorities we spoke to had replaced catchment-based transport policies with ones that provided free transport only to a child's nearest suitable school. Others have removed free transport to faith schools.

3.4 However, there is a risk that restricting access to free transport, could have adverse impacts on children and young people, and their families. The Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) has advised local authorities not to make blanket decisions on post-16 school transport applications, and to consider families' circumstances when reviewing applications for transport. Potential impacts include the following.

- **Additional costs for families with young learners.** In 2024, Contact estimated that for learners aged 16–19 with SEND families now faced average annual charges of £522. Our analysis of how much local authorities charge for post-16 transport suggests significant variation between authorities. The local authorities that we spoke to charge families between £380 and £1,050 a year.²⁷
- **Families facing significant transport costs for children younger than compulsory school age in reception year, particularly those with SEND.** Where these costs are unaffordable, families may need to reduce their working hours and children may miss days or even entire terms of reception, potentially losing out on special educational support.
- **Young people being held back from accessing education, or parents needing to give up work or work fewer hours to take children to school or college.**

²⁷ This range reflects the lowest published charge in cases where fees vary by distance. Charges may also vary depending on the circumstances of individual applications.

3.5 The Department for Education (DfE) acknowledges that transport costs can be a significant barrier to participation, particularly for young people with SEND, and that scaling back discretionary transport may contribute to more young people not being in education, employment or training (NEET). The NEET rate has been rising since the COVID-19 pandemic, and the government has committed to reducing it. The impact may be felt more by disabled children and young people, who tend to travel further to their educational setting, often cannot travel independently and may need to be in education or training for longer. For example:

- A December 2024 survey by Natspec (a membership association for organisations offering specialist further education and training to students with learning difficulties or disabilities aged 16 to 25) found that for 65% of the specialist colleges that responded to its survey, transport issues had resulted in some learners with SEND being unable to attend college or attending intermittently. It found that for 67% of the colleges responding, changes to post-16 transport had reduced access to learning for some students.
- The charity Contact found that 40% of parents had to work fewer hours or give up work to transport their child themselves and 44% reported that the cost of transport (often private taxis) has put them in financial difficulty.

Improving the cost efficiency of routes

3.6 Local authorities consider a range of factors when deciding on what arrangements to make for each child who needs transport. These include the needs of the pupil and whether, for example, they need a specialist vehicle or travel assistant; whether public transport or a school bus may be available and suitable; how many other children travel similar routes and whether there are options for them to travel together. Local authorities have been seeking ways to deliver these services more cost-effectively. Some are reviewing transport routes and seeking options for carrying more pupils per journey. Several authorities told us that they used specialist software to identify the most time- and cost-effective routes and plan journeys to enable more sharing and fewer separate journeys. For example, by coordinating transport to collect pupils from more than one school, drivers can make staggered drop-offs along a single route and reduce the number of separate journeys.

3.7 Local authorities told us that they review routes regularly to minimise solo journeys and identify the most cost-effective options for travel. We spoke to several authorities that have reduced costs by combining single-occupancy routes or finding lower-cost alternatives that still meet pupils' needs. One authority told us that this process had also provided them with a clearer understanding of pupils' needs, which helped them plan more appropriate transport. ADEPT reported in 2023 that one council saved £21,280 on average for each single-occupancy route that it decommissioned by re-allocating the pupil to a shared route. However, some local authorities told us that parents can prefer single-occupancy travel, especially where a child is vulnerable.

Managing the local market

3.8 Local authorities are adapting how they procure home to school transport services to increase market competition and secure better value for money. A number of authorities we spoke to told us that they had introduced dynamic purchasing systems (DPS) that allow suppliers to bid for available contracts at any time assuming they meet quality thresholds. In addition, two authorities told us they had further lowered prices by combining DPS with reverse auctions, where suppliers compete to offer the lowest price for a service. One of these authorities said it had tripled its number of suppliers and halved its expected costs by introducing DPS. However, another authority we spoke to had moved away from a DPS to a purchasing framework that enabled it to control cost variations by keeping increases for fuel prices and driver costs within an agreed limit. It estimated that this had saved around £13 million in 2024-25.

3.9 Local authorities are working more closely with the market to encourage more bids and attract new suppliers. They are doing this by improving communication with suppliers, alerting them to relevant opportunities and offering larger and longer-term contracts to create economies of scale.

3.10 Two local authorities we spoke to reported expanding their in-house fleets to reduce their dependence on external suppliers. When not required for home to school transport, these vehicles are repurposed for other services (such as adult social care or demand-responsive transport), helping to deliver broader cost savings. Although this model involves substantial up-front investment, it can lead to long-term financial benefits. For example, one authority reported saving £870,000 after bringing its entire minibus fleet in-house. Local authorities report that an in-house approach is not always viable though, as it was difficult or inefficient to maintain, staff, and store a fleet, particularly if the vehicles are only used for home to school transport.

Providing alternative travel options to children and young people

Independent travel training

3.11 Local authorities are increasingly using independent travel training as a means of promoting independence among children and young people with SEND and achieving cost savings. Travel training aims to equip participants with the skills needed to travel safely and independently, either on public transport or dedicated home to school services, which is a key element of preparing young people with SEND for adulthood. Many of the local authorities we spoke to talked enthusiastically about independent travel training.

3.12 Local authorities have reported financial savings from independent travel training. In 2019, the Local Government Association cited one council that achieved savings of £300,000 in a single year through implementing independent travel training. One authority told us that additional long-term savings may also arise across other services, such as adult social care, as individuals gain greater independence. Although independent travel training is not suitable for all young people, local authorities and parents report benefits for participants, including greater confidence, independence and the ability to take part more fully in their community.

3.13 Local authorities can face challenges in delivering independent travel training. Many report that limited capacity and resources are barriers to both expanding and sustaining these programmes. In particular, the availability of public transport in rural areas and the capacity to appoint and train suitable staff were highlighted as significant constraints. Additionally, parental consent is typically required before travel training can be provided, which can further limit uptake. Despite these challenges, more local authorities are seeking to extend travel training provision.

Personal travel budgets

3.14 Local authorities are also offering personal travel budgets (PTBs) as an alternative to providing home to school transport directly, especially for post-16 learners with SEND. PTBs give families a payment, often based on mileage, to arrange their child's travel in a way that meets their needs. Local authorities report that PTBs can offer families greater flexibility and control and are often more cost-effective than dedicated transport services. Taxis procured through the local authority can cost more than standard taxi fares, in part due to safeguarding requirements. One local authority told us that a privately ordered taxi would cost around 60% of what the local authority pays. One authority estimated that PTBs were around three times cheaper than traditional home to school transport.

3.15 However, parent groups and the LGSCO have raised concerns about the adequacy and practicality of PTBs. In some areas, payments are set at a minimum of 45p per mile, which may not cover the full cost of transport. In one case highlighted by the LGSCO, a mother was offered a PTB that fell short by over £11,800 of covering the actual cost of getting her child to school. It can also be difficult to arrange alternative transport, especially where public transport provision is poor and parents do not have access to a car.

Local authority organisational changes

3.16 Some local authorities reported making organisational changes to improve coordination and collaboration between their SEND and transport teams, and with pupils with SEND and their families. While there is no one-size-fits-all approach, involving transport teams earlier in the planning process for education, health and care (EHC) plans can ensure there is more consideration of transport needs and costs when deciding school placements. This can support more financially sustainable transport arrangements and help to build more constructive relationships between families and local authorities within a process that can otherwise be complex and contentious. Approaches taken have included creating dedicated transport roles to improve collaboration with schools, families and internal teams; establishing brokerage teams to coordinate transport more effectively across services; placing home to school transport teams within education or children and families' departments to support better decision-making; and seconding staff from the transport team to the SEND team to build mutual understanding. For some local authorities, it can be beneficial to integrate transport services; for example, across home to school transport and social care (paragraph 3.10).

Sustainable travel

3.17 Home to school transport can impact on the government's objectives around net zero and sustainable travel. The Education Act 1996 places a duty on local authorities to promote sustainable travel to schools. However, reduced discretionary travel, cuts to bus services and high 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, which include optimising travel routes and maximising passenger numbers, could help to combat these negative consequences. Additionally, Department for Transport (DfT) activity on the local transport market could also help to reduce carbon emissions and congestion. For example, measures under the planned Bus Services Bill to prevent new non-zero emission buses being used on local services and planned measures to improve walking routes to schools.

How DfE is responding

SEND reforms

3.18 DfE believes that forthcoming SEND reforms will help to reduce the cost of home to school transport, but acknowledges that it may be some years before any savings start to materialise. Through the reforms, DfE aims to create a more inclusive education system where the needs of more pupils with SEND are met in mainstream settings. Additionally, by addressing needs earlier and more effectively within local settings, DfE expects fewer children to need specialist transport to distant specialist provision.

Guidance

3.19 In June 2023, DfE updated its statutory guidance on home to school transport for children of compulsory school age to support local authorities in fulfilling their legal responsibilities.²⁸ The update followed consultation with parent groups and stakeholders who had identified inconsistencies in local authority transport policies. DfE is also developing supplementary partnership guidance for local authorities, schools and health bodies to facilitate more joined-up decision-making and ensure that travel arrangements meet needs while limiting costs.

Improving its understanding of home to school transport provision

3.20 Responding to a Public Accounts Committee recommendation to improve its data to support system-wide reforms to the special educational needs (SEN) system,²⁹ DfE has been working to improve its data on home to school transport. It received responses from 75% of local authorities in its February 2025 data collection (paragraph 2.2), though not all responded to all questions. DfE plans to share the outputs with local authorities and is working towards enabling them to benchmark, learn lessons from one another and inform local decision-making. Local authorities we spoke to had mixed views on the collection; some told us that they welcomed the chance to benchmark and compare approaches, while others said they lacked the capacity or time to submit data.

²⁸ Department for Education, Statutory guidance: *Home-to-school travel*, January 2024 – originally published in July 2014 then updated in June 2023 and again for minor clarifications in January 2024.

²⁹ HM Treasury, Treasury Minutes, Government Response to the Committee of Public Accounts on the First to the Fourth and Sixth to the Ninth reports from Session 2024-25, April 2025.

3.21 DfE acknowledges that differences in how local authorities record data on home to school transport can make it difficult to make comparisons or draw firm conclusions. DfE asked local authorities to categorise spending, pupil numbers and modes of transport according to the grounds on which a pupil was eligible for transport, but some only hold this data by the type of setting a pupil attends. DfE told us that it was working with local authorities to improve the accuracy and comparability of data and the systems they use. It aims to make the collection mandatory in future years, but it is not yet known whether home to school transport metrics will feature in the local government outcomes framework – designed to measure progress against national priorities – which the government is currently consulting on.

3.22 In 2024, DfE commissioned desk-based research to understand how other countries approach home to school transport, to inform potential policy options that could reduce costs. It considered variables such as eligibility criteria for free or subsidised transport, responsibility for arranging transport, the policy objectives for providing transport (e.g. to support school choice or support low-income families), and parental contributions. The research focused on comparable countries chosen due to their cultural and geographic similarity to the UK, or high-achieving countries on education which provide a useful point of comparison.

3.23 The research concluded that most countries adopted similar approaches to the UK, providing transport for pupils who meet specific criteria – usually around distance or SEND. Most required the student to live in the same district as the school they are attending. Few offered support to pupils over aged 16 and, similarly to England, modes of transport used included school bus services, taxis or free or subsidised public transport. Common challenges were around service quality, financing, meeting the complex needs of students and recruiting drivers.

Other government department initiatives

3.24 Home to school transport is relevant to several government objectives, so decisions taken by other government departments can have an impact.

Funding home to school transport

3.25 Currently, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) uses a general formula, the Foundation Formula, to determine how much each local authority receives for home to school transport within the Local Government Finance Settlement. However, MHCLG's analysis shows that the proportion of funding allocated under this formula does not align with local authority spending on pre-16 home to school transport. This is because the Foundation Formula is based on residential and workplace population densities, older people's relative deprivation and the proportion of households with children. These variables are not aligned with the cost drivers for home to school transport.

3.26 As the government seeks to reform how local authorities are funded, it is aiming to update the way funds are allocated to better reflect local need. As part of this, DfE is working with MHCLG to develop a new funding formula for pre-16 home to school transport, which will form part of the 2026-27 Local Government Finance Settlement. The new formula would be based on pupil populations and distances travelled to school. Over time, DfE hopes that its new data collection will help improve and refine the assumptions used for the new formula. The government proposes that post-16 home to school transport continues to be covered by the Foundation Formula.

Improving transport routes

3.27 The Bus Services Bill aims to provide further powers to local transport authorities to improve bus services and grow usage. DfE expects this Bill to make it easier for local authorities to integrate home to school transport with public transport and provide the opportunity to increase the service provision of bus routes in rural areas. At the same time, DfE is working with DfT to ensure that the Integrated National Transport Strategy, a national plan to coordinate all modes of transport around the needs of users, considers home to school transport.

3.28 The government is also investing in safer walking routes which it expects will reduce the number of children and young people requiring home to school transport due to an unsafe walking route. In July 2025, the mayors of England's combined authorities committed to working with Active Travel England and DfT to create 3,500 miles of safer routes to schools, shops and high streets, workplaces and transport hubs.

Appendix One

Our audit approach

Our scope

1 This report builds on our 2024 report *Support for children and young people with special educational needs* and our 2025 report *Local government financial sustainability*. It looks at local authority spending on, and delivery of, home to school transport in England. It sets out:

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

2 The Department for Education (DfE) sets national eligibility criteria and issues statutory guidance 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. Local authorities are responsible for arranging transport services, normally by commissioning 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.

3 This report does not assess the value for money of DfE's, or local authorities' approaches to home to school transport. It does not examine the school or college places allocation process, nor does it look at local authority spending on concessionary fare schemes or costs met by parents or guardians where their children do not meet the eligibility criteria for free home to school transport.

Our evidence base

4 We based our findings on triangulated evidence gathered through document review, interviews, case studies and quantitative analysis of financial data.

Scoping

5 We carried out initial scoping between April and May 2025 to refine the study's focus and inform our methodology. We held meetings with officials from DfE and MHCLG, and with sector bodies including the Local Government Association, the County Councils Network and the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy. These discussions helped us understand the policy context, identify key issues, and shape our audit questions.

6 We also carried out a document review of relevant research and publications on home to school transport. This included previous National Audit Office reports, academic studies, and publications from charities and interest groups. This supported the development of our audit scope and informed our approach to interviews, quantitative and qualitative analysis and the selection of case study authorities.

Fieldwork

7 We carried out fieldwork between May and July 2025. It involved interviews with government departments and wider stakeholders, document review, case studies, and quantitative analysis.

Interviews

8 We carried out interviews with officials from central government departments, local authorities, and other stakeholders. We selected participants based on their roles and relevance to the audit. Interviews were conducted online between May and July 2025, typically lasting around one hour. We took detailed notes and tailored questions to each participant's role.

Interviews with DfE officials

9 We carried out five interviews with officials from DfE, selected to participate because of their job roles and their relevance to the audit. We selected these officials because they were involved in, and were therefore able to provide insights about, home to school transport. We tailored questions to participants' roles and focused on:

- roles and responsibilities;
- context and challenges for DfE and local authorities;
- the data environment;
- future challenges and opportunities; and
- the government's response to home to school transport pressures.

Interviews with MHCLG officials

10 We held two interviews with MHCLG officials, selected to participate because of their job roles and their relevance to the audit. We selected these officials because they were involved in, and were therefore able to provide insights about, home to school transport. We tailored questions to participants' roles and focused on:

- funding for home to school transport;
- how financial pressures on home to school transport fit within broader local government funding challenges; and
- MHCLG's engagement with DfE and local authorities on this issue.

Interviews with local authorities

11 Between May and July 2025, we interviewed representatives from 10 local authorities. We conducted interviews remotely and focused on:

- how home to school transport is delivered locally;
- key challenges and cost pressures;
- engagement with DfE and MHCLG; and
- local initiatives to manage demand and cost pressures.

12 We selected local authorities using sampling criteria to ensure a broad and balanced mix. These criteria were as follows:

- **Regional spread:** We selected authorities from different regions across England.
- **Type of authority:** We included at least one London borough, metropolitan district, unitary authority, and county council.
- **Spending levels:** We included authorities with high spending on home to school transport, based on our analysis of DfE's Section 251 data.
- **Response to rising demand and pressures:** We included authorities that had implemented initiatives to manage rising costs or improve delivery. We identified these through our scoping work, literature review and discussions with sector stakeholders.

13 We also engaged with the Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport (ADEPT) and the Association of Transport Co-ordinating Officers (ATCO). Following our initial meeting with ADEPT, we informed its members about the study, which helped identify potential participants. Some interviews served dual purposes: for example, our discussion with Devon County Council was also with the ATCO chair, and our interview with Cheshire West and Chester Council included ADEPT representation.

14 We invited representatives from both school transport and SEND teams, where these were separate. The local authorities we met with were:

- Kent County Council;
- Hampshire County Council;
- Birmingham City Council;
- Suffolk County Council;
- Durham County Council;
- Sheffield City Council;
- North Somerset Council;
- Devon County Council;
- London Borough of Enfield; and
- Cheshire West and Chester Council.

Interviews with other stakeholders

15 We also interviewed representatives from His Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service to understand the appeals and tribunal process. This helped us explore how families challenge local authority decisions and the types of issues that reach tribunal.

16 We also engaged with Contact, a charity for families with disabled children, and the National Network of Parent Carer Forums. These organisations shared their views on the challenges that families face in accessing home to school transport, as well as the benefits it can provide when delivered effectively. Their insights helped us understand the parent and carer perspective and informed our assessment of how transport arrangements affect families' experiences.

Analytical approach

17 We collated all interview notes in a shared document. We summarised key points at the top of the notes to support internal discussion and to refine our interview questions and drafting. We did not carry out formal thematic coding or structured qualitative analysis. Instead, we used interview insights to:

- inform our understanding of departmental, local authority and stakeholder perspectives;
- identify recurring themes and issues raised across different groups;
- triangulate findings from other evidence sources, including document review and quantitative analysis; and
- illustrate key points in the report using direct examples from interviews.

Document review

18 We reviewed a range of documents to define the parameters of the audit and deepen the study team’s understanding of the topic. The review was conducted between May and September 2025. This included:

- documents relating to MHCLG’s and DfE’s “need to spend” analysis and zero-based review;
- DfE’s internal research outputs, including interviews with local authorities and international comparisons; and
- documents relating to DfE’s 2025 data collection.

19 Documents were reviewed against our overarching audit questions. The review was used to:

- refine the scope of the study;
- identify gaps in evidence and areas requiring further investigation; and
- inform the development of other methods, including interviews and quantitative analysis.

Review of local authority documents

20 Following interviews with the 10 local authorities listed in this appendix, we conducted a systematic review of publicly available documents to assess local authority approaches to post-16 transport and discretionary transport. The review aimed to answer specific audit questions on:

- what charges are applied for post-16 transport;
- how these charges have changed over time; and
- how discretionary transport policies have changed.

The review was conducted between August and September 2025.

21 We reviewed a number of documents including:

- annual transport policy statements;
- cabinet and board minutes and decisions;
- news articles; and
- public-facing communications.

22 Findings from the document review were triangulated with interview data and used to answer our specific audit questions above. For each authority, we recorded:

- the nature of any changes;
- the year changes took effect; and
- whether changes related to post-16 or other discretionary elements.

23 We then compared findings across authorities to identify trends and determine whether changes represented a reduction in provision. Findings were synthesised and triangulated with interview data to inform our audit conclusions.

24 In some cases, documents were not readily available or did not include detailed information on discretionary elements of home to school transport. These gaps may reflect differences in publication practices or accessibility and were considered when interpreting findings.

25 We used the following definitions for our analysis:

- change to post-16 transport include any reduction in the offer and/or increases in charges year-on-year; and
- changes to discretionary transport include changes to post-16 transport and any changes to other non-statutory elements, such as removing transport for faith schools, catchment schools, siblings, or additional pick-up/drop-off services.

Quantitative data analysis

Adjusting for inflation

26 Unless otherwise stated, all financial data are presented in cash terms (not adjusted for inflation). Where financial data have been converted into real terms, we use the GDP deflator series published by HM Treasury in June 2025, with 2023-24 as the base year. This allows for a fair comparison of financial data over time by removing the effects of inflation and isolating real changes in spending or revenue. HM Treasury have created guidance on GDP deflators.

Datasets

27 Our analysis drew on two main datasets. First, we used Section 251 data, which local authorities submit annually to DfE. These returns detail planned and actual spending on education services, including home to school transport. We used this data to analyse trends in gross expenditure and budgeted spend across all local authorities between 2015-16 and 2023-24. Throughout the report, we present gross expenditure figures, consistent with DfE's approach to analysing spend data. Our analysis is based on current local authority boundaries. We did not attempt to reconstruct historical spending for authorities that have undergone structural changes since 2015-16. In such cases, we excluded these authorities from like-for-like trend analysis because their historical data do not map directly to current boundaries.

28 Second, we used DfE's new 2025 data collection on home to school transport. This dataset provides information on the number of children and young people receiving transport as of February 2025, as well as modes of transport, eligibility reasons and out-of-area placements. However, the dataset has several limitations. At most, 115 local authorities submitted responses to individual questions, and response rates varied across the dataset. Local authorities also interpret and record eligibility differently; for example, some may record a child as eligible due to special educational needs and disabilities, while DfE guidance may classify the same individual under distance. In addition, local authorities' data systems vary in structure and completeness, and some questions may have been interpreted inconsistently. Despite these limitations, this dataset represents the most recent available data at the time of our analysis.

Per-pupil costs

29 We calculated per-pupil costs by dividing each local authority's reported expenditure (from Section 251 data for 2023-24) by the number of children and young people receiving transport (from the 2025 data collection). Although the datasets do not directly overlap in time, they provide a reasonable basis for estimating per-pupil costs. To strengthen confidence in our findings, we removed outliers from the underlying data and triangulated the resulting estimates against external benchmarks from the ATCO 2024 transport benchmarking survey, which returned comparable values. The ATCO 2024 transport benchmarking survey provides per-pupil cost data for a small number of English local authorities; we then conducted separate analysis of this data to calculate a median per-pupil cost.

Validation of DfE's national estimate

30 In February 2025, DfE conducted a data collection exercise estimating the number of children and young people receiving home to school transport nationally. In August 2025, we carried out our own analysis of DfE's data collection to derive an independent estimate. We grouped local authorities according to similar population density characteristics. Within each group, we calculated the proportion of the young-person population (aged 5–25) using home to school transport, based on responses from local authorities that returned the survey. We then applied this proportion to the remaining authorities in each group to impute a national figure. Our central estimate closely aligned with DfE's own analysis.

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