



CEPEO Working Paper No. 25-04

The Medium Term Impact of the Pandemic on Pupils with SEND

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This report examines how the COVID-19 pandemic affected students in England with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), particularly those with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). Drawing on national and local authority-level data from 2015–2022, it highlights three key findings and offers policy-focused insights, focussing on widening gaps in absence and achievement, geographical inequities (the ‘SEND lottery’) and the role of pre-pandemic funding. These findings underscore the urgency of sustained, targeted policy responses and funding allocations that support the most vulnerable learners and mitigate long-term disruptions to their education. Specifically, they suggest the importance of: increasing baseline SEND funding in underfunded areas and align resources with local needs; provide enhanced tutoring, mental health support, and specialised training to address the significant rise in both absence and achievement gaps between pupils with EHCPs and their peers; and, since pupils eligible for free school meals also displayed heightened vulnerability, prioritise initiatives such as free digital tools, nutrition programmes, and community-based academic support to reduce economic barriers.

VERSION: April 2025

Suggested citation: Benhenda, A. (2025). *The Medium Term Impact of the Pandemic on Pupils with SEND* (CEPEO Working Paper No. 25-04). UCL Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities. <https://EconPapers.repec.org/RePEc:ucl:cepeow:25-04>.

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Highlights

- Prior to the pandemic, pupils with EHCPs had an absence rate around 4 percentage points higher than pupils without SEND. Post-pandemic, this gap grew to 6 percentage points, representing a 50% increase.
- Before COVID-19, pupils with EHCPs scored, on average, around 35 points behind their peers without SEND in their GCSE exams. This gap increased to around 38 points post-pandemic, a 10% increase. In contrast, the test score gap between pupils on SEN support and pupils without SEND remained stable.
- Substantial regional disparities exist in per-pupil SEND funding. London and the South East had significantly higher per pupil funding levels than most other areas; the South West and East Midlands lagged behind.
- Absence rate gaps between pupils with EHCPs and all pupils were also geographically uneven. London recorded the smallest gap (about 2 percentage points), while the South West and East Midlands showed the largest gap (about 4 percentage points).
- Higher baseline SEND funding lessened the pandemic's impact on attendance. An additional £10,000 per pupil with SEND (pre-pandemic) was associated with a 0.3 percentage point reduction in the increase in the absence gap between pupils with EHCPs and all pupils.

Why does this matter?

These findings underscore the urgency of sustained, targeted policy responses and funding allocations that support the most vulnerable learners and mitigate long-term disruptions to their education.

The Medium Term Impact of the Pandemic on Pupils with SEND¹

Asma Benhenda

April 2, 2025

¹The authors are grateful to the Nuffield Foundation for funding this work. The Nuffield Foundation is an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. It funds research that informs social policy, primarily in Education, Welfare, and Justice. The Nuffield Foundation is the founder and co-funder of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, the Ada Lovelace Institute and the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory. The Foundation has funded this project, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation. Bluesky: @nuffieldfoundation.org. LinkedIn: Nuffield Foundation. Website: nuffieldfoundation.org

Executive Summary

This report examines how the COVID-19 pandemic affected students in England with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), particularly those with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). Drawing on national and local authority-level data from 2015–2022, it highlights three key findings and offers policy-focused insights.

1. Widening Gaps in Absence and Achievement

Absences: Prior to the pandemic, pupils with EHCPs had an absence rate around 4 percentage points higher than pupils without SEND. Post-pandemic, this gap grew to 6 percentage points, representing a 50% increase.

Test Scores: Before COVID-19, pupils with EHCPs scored, on average, around 35 points behind their peers without SEND in their GCSE exams. This gap increased to around 38 points post-pandemic, a 10% increase. In contrast, the test score gap between pupils on SEN support and pupils without SEND remained stable, indicating that learners with more severe or complex needs were hit hardest.

2. Geographical Inequities (the ‘SEND Lottery’)

Substantial regional disparities exist in funding per pupil with SEND. London and the South East had significantly higher per pupil funding levels than most other areas; the South West and East Midlands lagged notably behind.

Absence rate gaps between pupils with EHCPs and all pupils were also geographically uneven. London recorded the smallest gap (about 2 percentage points), while the South West and East Midlands showed the largest gap (about 4 percentage points).

3. Role of Pre-Pandemic Funding

Higher baseline SEND funding lessened the pandemic’s impact on attendance. An additional £10,000 per pupil with SEND (pre-pandemic) was associated with a 0.3 percentage point reduction in the increase in the absence gap between pupils with EHCPs and all pupils.

Policy Implications

1. *Address Regional Disparities:* Increase baseline SEND funding in underfunded areas to tackle the ‘SEND lottery’ and align resources with local needs.

2. *Targeted Support for Pupils with EHCPs:* Provide enhanced tutoring, mental health support, and specialised training to address the significant rise in both absence and achievement gaps between pupils with EHCPs and all pupils.
3. *Socioeconomic Focus:* Since pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) also displayed heightened vulnerability, prioritise initiatives such as free digital tools, nutrition programs, and community-based academic support to reduce economic barriers.

These findings underscore the urgency of sustained, targeted policy responses and funding allocations that support the most vulnerable learners and mitigate long-term disruptions to their education.

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Motivation

The Covid-19 pandemic has ushered in a series of unprecedented challenges across various sectors, with education being profoundly disrupted. Among the affected groups, pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) are particularly vulnerable. In 2019, 1.3 million pupils in England, representing 14.9% of all pupils, were identified as having SEND. These children are among the most vulnerable in the school system, as highlighted by the National Audit Office in 2019. For instance, only 30% of pupils with SEND achieved the expected standard in English reading in Key Stage 1 in 2018/19, in stark contrast to the 83% of those without SEND (DfE, 2020a).

Providing inclusive and quality education to pupils with SEND was already a formidable challenge in many Local Authorities (LAs) even before the pandemic. The 2014 Children and Families Act theoretically mandates schools to have specific arrangements for pupils with SEND. However, many LAs grapple with this requirement in practice. Despite a national average refusal rate of 6%, some Local Authorities deny up to 29% of children with special educational needs crucial support by refusing to issue or amend Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) (DfE, 2020b), highlighting significant inconsistency in the provision of essential educational support across the country.

Preliminary evidence, such as the findings by Skipp et al. (2021), suggests that the pandemic and its subsequent policy responses have had a more pronounced impact on pupils with SEND. These pupils can be medically vulnerable, and their specific needs

might make them less adaptable to social distancing and more susceptible to disruptions in their routine. A survey involving 500 parents revealed significant concerns about children with SEND adhering to 'safe practice' in schools (TES, 2020). Furthermore, an Ofsted and Care Quality Commission's report highlighted that some pupils with SEND, due to prolonged absence from education, faced increased levels of abuse and neglect at home. The pandemic has also posed personal and professional challenges for practitioners and leaders working with pupils with SEND, primarily due to rapid changes in working practices and an augmented workload (Ofsted and CQC, 2021).

The core contribution of this research is to furnish evidence on whether the pandemic is exacerbated the pre-existing challenges faced by some LAs and the subsequent impact on the educational outcomes of pupils with SEND. In terms of existing work, this project's contribution is twofold:

1. It aims to provide robust evidence on how resources, both in terms of funding and staff, translate into educational outcomes for pupils with SEND. While there are some studies on pupils with SEND, such as Keslair et al., (2012), they do not cover the period after the 2014 Children and Families Act, which significantly increased LAs' and schools' responsibilities regarding pupils with SEND. This research seeks to address this gap and the issue of geographical disparities in resources and their impact on educational outcomes.
2. The project will offer new insights into the medium-term impact of the pandemic on the educational outcomes of pupils with SEND across England. Most existing studies, like Skipp et al., (2021), focus on the immediate effects of the pandemic. However, understanding the medium-term impact is crucial as the pandemic's significant disruptions are likely to have long-lasting consequences.

1.2 Research Objectives

The overarching goal of this research is to equip policymakers, educational practitioners, and the public with insights on:

- The extent to which pupils with SEND were impacted by the pandemic and whether they need prioritisation for future intervention;

- The necessary resources, both in terms of funding and staff, required to mitigate the pandemic’s adverse effects on pupils with SEND.

With the government increasing LAs’ high needs funding by £780 million in 2020/21, a 12% boost, bringing the total to over £7 billion for 2020/21 (DfE, 2019b), it is imperative to provide robust evidence on the pandemic’s impact across the country. This research will also inform policy on how SEND funding can be effectively translated into improved educational outcomes.

The research questions are:

- What is the impact of the pandemic on pupils with SEND education outcomes across England?
- How do pre-pandemic resources, such as staffing levels, specialist equipment, and access to therapies like speech and language support, influence the educational outcomes of pupils with SEND during the pandemic?

The objectives are to:

- Provide evidence-based insights for education policy on the pandemic’s medium-term impact on pupils’ educational outcomes;
- Guide education leaders and teachers on the role of local funding in mitigating the pandemic’s impact on vulnerable children.

1.3 Results

Our analysis explores differences in absence rates during and after the pandemic, as well as attainment gaps after the pandemic, for pupils with SEND. During the pandemic, attendance breakdowns are only available for children with Education, Health and Care plans (EHCPs), typically awarded to those with the most severe needs. After the pandemic, we are able to additionally consider children who are recognised as having special educational needs but do not have an EHCP - those with ‘SEN support’.

During the pandemic, national daily attendance figures, aggregated monthly, show a significant increase in absentee rates — defined as the percentage of students absent from school on a given day— for all students during school closures, with pupils with

EHCPs experiencing a lower increase in absences - consistent with their prioritisation for in-person attendance during school closure periods - but still having a high absentee rate of around 70%. Outside of school closures, the average absence rate was about 10% for all pupils and 15% for pupils with EHCPs, indicating pupils with EHCPs were more likely to be absent. The analysis also notes geographical variations in these rates, with disparities across regions and the smallest gap between all pupils and pupils with EHCPs in London (around 2 percentage points) and the largest in the South West and East Midlands (around 4 percentage points), suggesting a non-uniform distribution of absentee rates across the country.

Comparing a different, less detailed, source of attendance data which is available both before and after the pandemic, our analysis indicates a stable pre-pandemic absence rate for pupils with EHCPs at around 7%, higher than that of pupils with SEN support (at around 5%) and those without SEND (around 3%), reflecting greater challenges faced by pupils with SEND and with EHCPs in particular. After the pandemic, the absence rate gap between pupils with EHCPs and pupils without SEND widened from 4 percentage points before the pandemic to 6 percentage points after, marking a 50% increase. Similarly, GCSE scores before the pandemic showed pupils with EHCPs scoring 35 points lower, on average, than pupils without SEND. This gap increased to around 38 points post-pandemic, around a 10% rise, highlighting the pandemic's pronounced impact on the most vulnerable pupils. However, while the absence rate gap between pupils with SEN support and those without SEND also rose by about 50%, the gap in GCSE scores between these groups remained stable, indicating that the adverse effects were particularly concentrated on pupils with EHCPs.

Finally, analysis of pre-pandemic data showed significant geographical disparities in funding per SEND support pupil, with London and the South East having notably higher funding levels than other regions, supporting the notion of a 'SEND lottery'. A statistically significant negative correlation was found between pre-pandemic SEND funding levels and the pandemic-induced absence gap for pupils with EHCPs relative to all pupils. Specifically, an additional £10,000 in pre-pandemic SEND funding per pupil was associated with a 0.3 percentage point decrease in the absence gap, suggesting that higher initial funding levels could mitigate adverse effects on pupils with SEND during the pandemic.

Chapter 2

Institutional Context

2.1 SEND Definition

According to the SEND Code of Practice (2015), a child or young person aged 0 to 25 years is identified as having Special Educational Needs or Disability (SEND) if they:

1. Experience a learning difficulty or disability that significantly impedes their learning compared to peers of the same age.
2. Necessitate special educational provisions tailored for them

Furthermore, the Equality Act 2010 defines a person as having a disability if they possess a physical or mental impairment that substantially and persistently hinders their ability to perform routine day-to-day tasks.

There are four areas of need according to the SEND Code of Practice, which align with the subcategories provided by the Department for Education (DfE) in the National Pupil Database:

1. Communication and Interaction Needs: Subcategories in the DfE dataset may include speech and language difficulties, autistic spectrum disorder (ASD), or social communication needs.
2. Cognition and Learning Difficulties: Subcategories in the DfE dataset may include specific learning difficulties (e.g., dyslexia, dyscalculia), moderate learning difficulties (MLD), or severe learning difficulties (SLD).

3. Social, Emotional, and Mental Health Difficulties: Subcategories in the DfE dataset may include social, emotional, and mental health needs (SEMH) or emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD).
4. Sensory and/or Physical Needs: Subcategories in the DfE dataset may include visual impairment (VI), hearing impairment (HI), or physical disabilities.

In England, pupils with SEND are safeguarded and supported by legal provisions under the Equality Act 2010 and the Children and Families Act 2014. The former ensures that discrimination against individuals, including pupils with SEND, is prohibited. It mandates schools to implement reasonable adjustments, promoting equal access to education and minimizing disadvantages.

Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). The Children and Families Act 2014 amplifies these protections. It obligates schools to modify their policies, practices, and infrastructure to guarantee that pupils with SEND can access education on par with their peers. This encompasses the provision of necessary support and accommodations tailored to their unique needs. A pivotal introduction by this Act is the Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). These are legally binding documents specifying the precise support a pupil with SEND requires. Typically reserved for pupils with profound or intricate needs, EHCPs are formulated through a structured assessment involving local authorities, schools, parents or guardians, and pertinent professionals. These plans elucidate the pupil's distinct needs, requisite support, and any essential health or social care involvement. Subject to annual reviews, the provisions within EHCPs are consistently assessed and modified to ensure the pupil's sustained growth and welfare. They allocate additional resources and support, potentially encompassing specialist placements, extra therapies, or dedicated support.

SEN Support. For pupils recognised with special educational needs but not qualifying for an EHCP, there's SEN Support. This level of assistance offers a spectrum of interventions and strategies, customised to the pupil's needs within a mainstream educational context. Typically orchestrated by the school's Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO), this might involve modifications to teaching methodologies, individualized learning blueprints, and partnerships with external experts or organizations.

Special Schools. Certain pupils with pronounced or multifaceted needs might

necessitate enrollment in a specialised or special educational institution. Tailored for pupils with distinct SEND categories like autism, hearing or visual impairments, or learning disabilities, these institutions offer a specialised, supportive milieu. They often feature a team of multidisciplinary experts, specialised tools, and a curriculum adapted to the pupils' needs. Admission to such schools usually follows a thorough assessment, gauging the pupil's needs and capabilities to ascertain if a special school is the optimal educational environment.

2.2 Funding

The funding mechanism for SEND diverges from a straightforward per-pupil allocation. Instead, it's enveloped within the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) – a distinct grant awarded to each local authority to bolster their school budgets. This DSG is compartmentalised into four distinct blocks: the Schools Block, the High Needs Block, the Early Years Block, and the Central Schools Services Block.

Schools Block constituted 78% of the total DSG for 2020/21. It typically allots an average of around £4,000 for each pupil. However, for those with SEND necessitating augmented support, this can reach up to a further £6,000 per pupil.

High Needs Block, making up 13% of the DSG, finances placements in special schools and alternative provisions. It also furnishes supplementary funding for mainstream schools that surpass the additional £6,000 per-pupil benchmark.

Early Years Block accounts for 8% of the DSG, while the **Central Schools Services Block** comprises a mere 1%.

In the context of mainstream schools, the funding structure for SEND is as follows: an average allocation of roughly £4,000 per pupil, which can rise by up to an additional £6,000 for those with SEND necessitating enhanced support. If a school's expenditure exceeds this additional £6,000 threshold, they're eligible to request additional 'top-up' funding from their local authority.

To elucidate, consider two scenarios:

Example 1: Pupil A, equipped with an EHCP, is enrolled in a mainstream school. The cumulative cost to cater to Pupil A's needs amounts to £15,000. Here's how the funding is distributed:

- £4,000 is sourced from the school block funding for standard education.

- An added £6,000 is allocated for SEND-specific costs from the school block funding.
- The remaining £5,000 is procured as top-up funding from the High Needs Block.

For **special schools**, either maintained institutions or academies, their funding is derived entirely from the High Needs Block. They're granted a more substantial sum of £10,000 for each SEN pupil. Should there be a need for additional resources, 'top-up' funding is facilitated by the local authority.

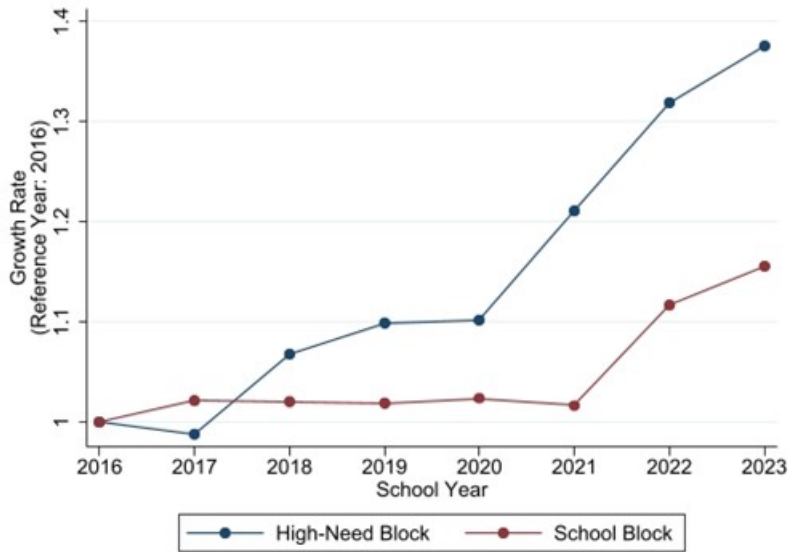
Example 2: Pupil B, possessing an EHCP, is a student at a special school. The comprehensive cost to address Pupil B's needs is £21,000, which is entirely funded by the High Needs Block.

The Chancellor announced as part of the 2021 spending review that he was “more than tripling the amount” invested in special education needs. The 2021 Budget detailed “£2.6 billion of new funding across the next three years for new school places for children with special educational needs and disabilities” (p.166). This amounted to a yearly increase in high-need funding by around £867m per year for the next three years. The announcement represented a substantial increase in funding and accelerated an upward trend. As shown in Figure 2.1, the upward trend in the High-Need block funding continued, with a nearly 40% growth between 2015 and 2023 compared to only around 15% growth for the Schools block. The 2021 Budget announcement was a substantial acceleration of this upward trend as it represented a 13% increase over the 2021-2023 period. Despite the significance of this additional funding, it remained unclear whether it would be enough to keep pace with the rise in the number of pupils with SEND and/or in special schools. [Benhenda \(2022\)](#) shows the additional funding in 2022/23 is barely enough to maintain high needs funding per pupil constant.

2.3 School Closure Timeline

Figure 2.2 shows the timeline of school closures in England during the pandemic. On March 20, 2020, the UK Government implemented a closure of educational establishments for the majority of pupils, with exceptions made for children of critical workers and vulnerable children. Vulnerable children included those with an EHCP and the government temporarily relaxed the EHCP laws under the Coronavirus Act 2020. This meant that Local Authorities (LAs) were encouraged to make their “best endeavours” to provide the specified education, health, and care support outlined in pupils' plans,

Figure 2.1 – Evolution of High-Needs Block Funding (2016 - 2023)



Source: Author’s computations using DSG budget sheets

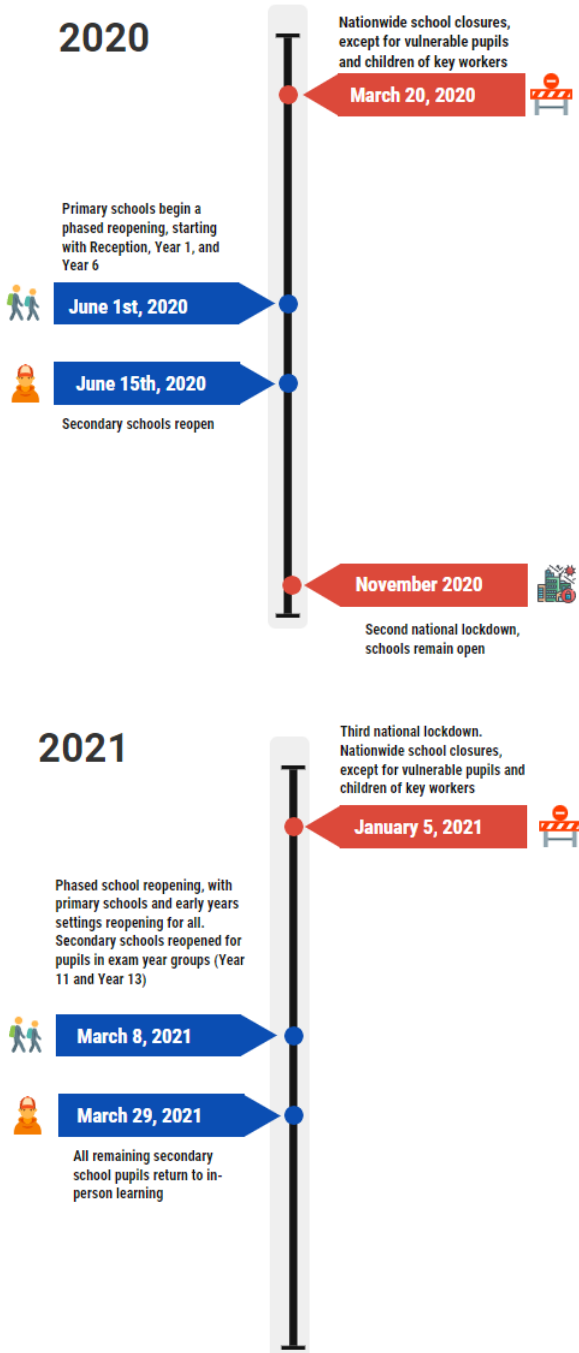
but they were not legally obligated to do so.

However, the reality on the ground differed from the theoretical framework. [Skipp et al. \(2021\)](#) conducted a qualitative survey of special providers during the first lockdown, revealing that headteachers were concerned about the initial government announcement, which seemed to imply that special schools and colleges should provide in-school places for all their pupils with EHCPs. This created an expectation among parents to have a place for their child. Only 10% of schools reported being able to operate at near-full normal capacity between March and July 2020. Availability of teaching staff (80% of providers) and support staff (79% of providers) were identified as major considerations influencing capacity.

From June 1st, 2020, the DfE guidance changed, and schools and colleges were asked to offer places to more pupils. Mainstream schools were advised to do this by year group, but special provision was advised to decide for themselves which pupils should have priority for returning to education.

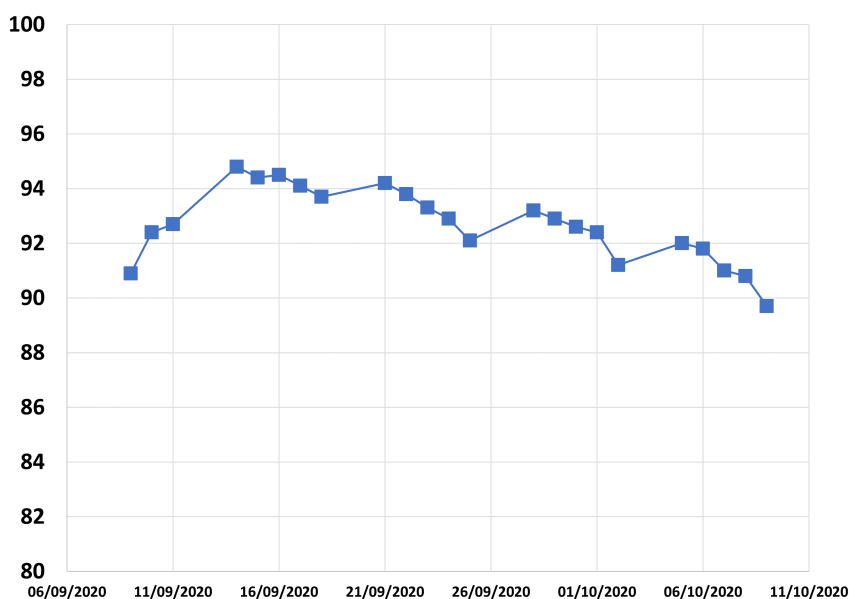
In June 2020, Gavin Williamson, Secretary of State for Education, said that all children would be back to school full-time in September. Available data from DfE shows that this did not happen on the ground.

Figure 2.2 – School Closure Timeline during the Pandemic



Data on the proportion of open settings - encompassing all schools, early years providers and colleges - is only available from September 2020. Figure 2.3 shows that it never reached 100% and peaked at 95% in early September, then continuously declined throughout the month to reach below 90% in early October before the second national lockdown.

Figure 2.3 – Proportion of Open Settings (all schools, early years providers and colleges) in September and October 2020



Therefore, in 2020, a significant share of schools were not open. The proportion of open schools for the years 2021 and 2022 remains uncertain. This limitation means that our findings might not capture the full picture of educational outcomes during this period, as a segment of schools remains unaccounted for in our dataset.

On January 5, 2021, a third national lockdown was imposed, leading to nationwide school closures, except for vulnerable pupils and children of key workers. Subsequent to this, a phased reopening of schools was initiated. On March 8, 2021, primary schools and early years settings reopened for all, and secondary schools resumed for specific exam year groups, notably Year 11 and Year 13. By March 29, 2021, all remaining secondary school pupils were permitted to return to in-person learning.

Chapter 3

Descriptive Statistics

3.1 Evolution of number of pupils with SEND

Figure 3.1 depicts the proportion of pupils with SEND categorised by their support level from 2015 to 2022. Throughout this period, the percentage of SEND support pupils consistently hovered around 12% of the population. In contrast, the proportion of pupils with EHCPs remained steady until 2020, after which it saw an uptick, rising from 3% to 4% between 2020 and 2022.

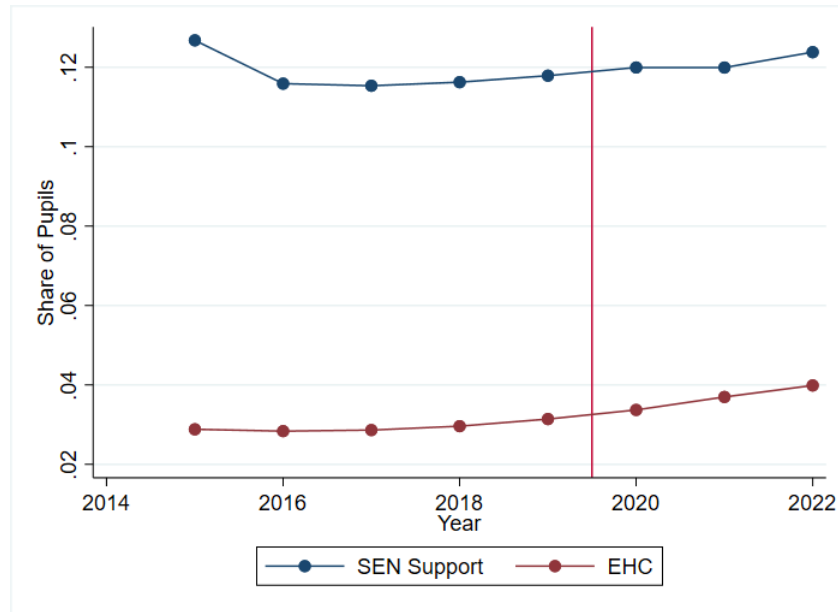
We now break down the evolution of the share of pupils with SEND by level of support from 2015 to 2022 by school phase (Table 3.1).

Table 3.1 – Evolution of the share of pupils with SEND (2015–2022)

School Phase	Year/Period	% on SEND Support	% on EHCPs
Primary & Secondary	2015	13%	1%
Primary & Secondary	2022	13%	2%
Special	2015	10%	88%
Special	2022	5%	94%

During this period, the percentage of pupils on SEND support in primary schools remained consistent at approximately 13%, whereas in secondary schools it was slightly lower at around 12%. However, the pandemic seemed to influence trends in special schools significantly. Prior to the pandemic, around 10% of students in special schools were on SEND support. By 2022, this figure had dramatically reduced to 5%. This drop in SEND support in special schools appears to correlate with a shift towards the use of

Figure 3.1 – Evolution of the Share of Pupils with SEND (2015-2022)



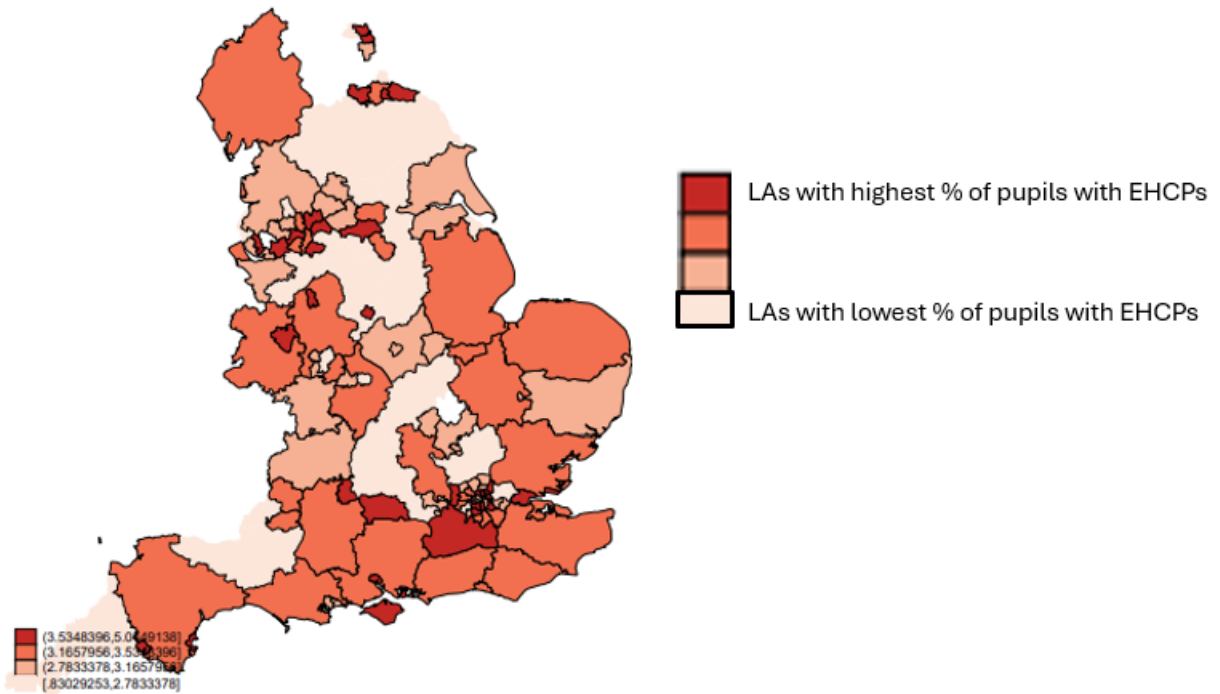
Source: National Pupil Database (2015 - 2022)

EHCPs. The share of pupils on EHCPs in special schools surged from approximately 88% pre-pandemic to about 94% post-pandemic. Another notable trend is seen in other types of schools, especially primary schools. Here, there was a substantial increase in the share of pupils on EHCPs, with the percentage doubling from 1% in 2015 to 2% in 2022. These trends are aligned with 2021 report by the National Audit Office which found that the number of pupils with EHCPs increased by 16% between 2019 and 2020.

Figure 3.2 illustrates the variation in the percentage of pupils with an EHCP across local authorities in England, with local authorities split into quartiles on the basis of these figures and darker colours indicating a higher percentage of pupils with an EHCP. As this figure shows, Inner London and major metropolitan areas like Manchester have the highest concentrations of pupils with EHCPs, suggesting pronounced disparities in EHCP accessibility.

It's important to highlight that the provided numbers don't represent the entirety of pupils with EHCPs, as a growing proportion are now home-schooled. According to official statistics from the DfE, there's been a rapid increase in the number of pupils with EHCPs transitioning from mainstream and special settings to home-schooling over the past decade. Specifically, the count rose from approximately 100 in 2015 to

Figure 3.2 – Share of Pupils with EHCP by Local Authority



Source: National Pupil Database

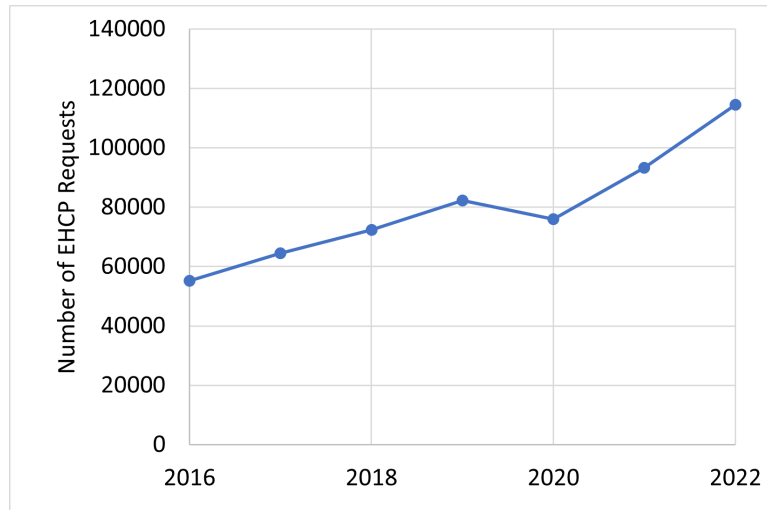
about 1,000 in 2021 (DfE, 2022).

There are a number of potential reasons why the share of pupils with EHCPs has increased during and post-pandemic. The reason that is the most well-documented is that the pandemic has exacerbated the needs of some pupils with SEND. For example, pupils with anxiety and mental health problems have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. **A 2021 survey by the National Association for Special Educational Needs** found that 60% of parents of pupils with SEND reported that their child’s mental health had deteriorated during the pandemic. This has led to an increased need for support for these pupils, and this has been reflected in an increase in the number of EHCPs. **A 2021 NHS Digital survey** (reported in DfE, 2022) shows an overall increase in probable mental disorders post-pandemic in the overall pupil population, with SEND students being particularly at risk.

DfE data¹ confirms this trend. Figure 3.3 displays the trajectory of EHCP requests

¹<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/>

Figure 3.3 – Evolution of the Number of EHCP Requests



from 2016 to 2022. In 2016, the number of EHCP requests was slightly above 60,000. By 2019, it had increased to just below 80,000, marking a growth rate of approximately a third over these three years. There was a noticeable slowdown in the trend in 2020, likely due to disruptions in SEND identification services during the initial pandemic year. However, post-2020, there's a pronounced surge in requests. By 2022, the number reached nearly 140,000, reflecting a significant 75% growth rate from 2020, showcasing a clear acceleration in the upward trend.

Second, the pandemic has also led to a backlog of assessments for EHCPs. This is because schools and LAs have had to prioritise other activities during the pandemic. As a result, many pupils who are eligible for an EHCP have not yet been assessed. This is likely to lead to a further increase in the number of EHCPs in the future. The House of Commons Education Committee (2022) Special Educational Needs and Disabilities report found that there was a backlog of over 25,000 assessments for EHCPs in 2022. The report also found that the average waiting time for an assessment was over 12 months. Official DfE statistics² also show that the share of EHCP requests processed in 20 weeks or less has decreased from more than 62% in 2015 to 48% in 2022.

education-health-and-care-plans

²<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/education-health-and-care-plans/2023?subjectId=1a4fc5d4-6b8d-4347-386e-08dbb9c3c5d0>

3.2 Characteristics of Pupils with SEND

Male pupils are disproportionately represented among pupils with SEN support (Figure 3.4). Specifically, while only 49% of pupils without SEND are male, this figure rises significantly to 63% for those with SEN support.

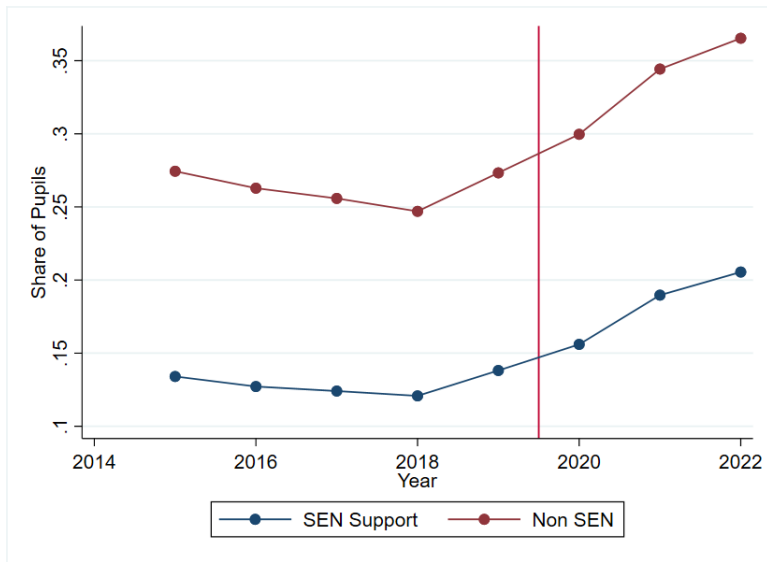
Pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) consistently appear more frequently among pupils with SEN support. Over the period from 2015 to 2022, the over-representation hovers around 15 to 17 percentage points. Within this time frame, there's also a marked uptrend in FSM eligibility for both pupils with and without SEND.³

Among all SEND categories, pupils with EHCPs have the highest proportion of both FSM-eligible pupils and male students. The data shows that the percentage of pupils with EHCPs on FSM grew from 32% in 2015 to 40% in 2022. Meanwhile, the proportion of male pupils with EHCPs remained consistent at 72% over the same period.

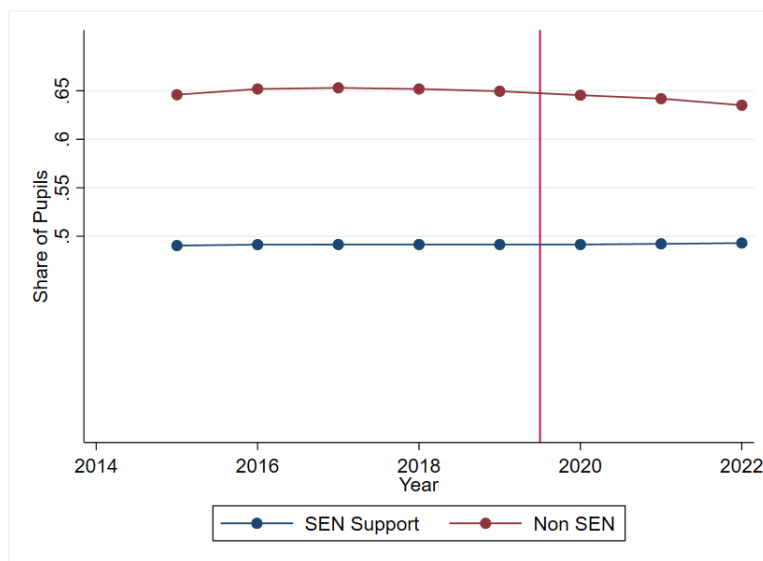
³<https://ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/2021/10/how-free-school-meal-eligibility-has-been-cha>

Figure 3.4 – Evolution of Characteristics of Pupils with SEN Support (2015-2022)

Proportion of Pupils Eligible for Free School Meals



Proportion of Pupils who were Male



Source: National Pupil Database (2015 - 2022)

Chapter 4

The Causal Effect of the Pandemic on Pupils with SEND

This research question aims to delineate the ramifications of the pandemic on the educational trajectory of pupils with SEND, specifically examining absence rates and test scores across various stages of the pandemic.

Our emphasis on the absence rates of pupils with SEND, in conjunction with test scores, stems from prior evidence highlighting that absence rates were already significantly higher for pupils with SEND than for all pupils, even before the pandemic's onset (DfE, 2019). Existing literature underscores the profound influence of pupils' absenteeism on their academic performance (Sims, 2020). Moreover, the repercussions of missing school are particularly pronounced for children with SEND, affecting their learning support, daily structure, routine, and behaviour. The abrupt alteration in routine due to lockdown measures can be especially detrimental for children with SEND, potentially intensifying behavioural challenges (Lee, 2020). Initial findings from the Children's Commissioner's report (2020) indicate that the pandemic has amplified these concerns in the short term for the broader student population. Consequently, this research seeks to ascertain if a) the challenges are more severe for pupils with SEND and b) if these challenges persist in the medium term.

To answer this research question, we employ two complementary time analyses using distinct data sources. The publicly available data survey specifically covers the pandemic years, spanning from 2020 to 2022, offering a detailed insight into the immediate and short-term effects of the pandemic. In contrast, the administrative data provides

a more extended view, covering the period from 2015 to 2022. While this longer-term perspective captures overarching patterns and trends, it lacks the granularity to provide a detailed account of events during the specific months of the pandemic. By integrating these two sources, our research aims to present a comprehensive understanding, juxtaposing the immediate impacts of the pandemic with the broader time trends.

4.1 Immediate Insights: The Pandemic Years 2020-2022

4.1.1 Data

Pupil Absence Data. In this section, we delve into the publicly available Department for Education (DfE) absence survey data titled "Attendance in education and early years settings during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic". As per the DfE's methodology documentation, the response rates for state-funded schools during the Autumn term of 2020/21 ranged from 75-85%. This rate dipped to 70-80% in the Spring term and further to 60-70% in the Summer term. At the onset of the 2021/22 academic year, the response rate, at 45-60%, was lower than the previous year, especially after schools resumed post a brief phase of staggered returns.¹

Our analysis draws from two distinct datasets within this survey, each offering different observational levels:

1. National Daily Data (2020-2022): The national file from the aforementioned DfE survey provides daily attendance data for state-funded education starting March 23, 2020. This data offers a breakdown by pupils' EHCP status and has been adjusted for non-response, ensuring national representativeness.
2. Local Authority Weekly Data (2020-2022): The LA level file from the same DfE survey offers weekly attendance data for state-funded education settings, recorded every Thursday since September 10, 2020. This dataset, which covers all 152 LAs and maintains an average school response rate of around 80%, provides data

¹<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/methodology/attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak-m-content-section-0-content-10>

for each local authority, further segmented by school phases. It also includes a breakdown by pupils' EHCP status.

Due to the nature of the data, attendance information is only available for SEND pupils with an EHCP; it does not provide breakdowns for those with SEN support. The sample includes all school types.

A significant constraint of this data lies in its observational level. Given its aggregated nature, the data doesn't permit a granular breakdown by individual pupil attributes. For example, we're unable to differentiate the pandemic's impacts on pupils with EHCPs receiving Free School Meals (FSM) from pupils with EHCPs who don't. Such aggregation restricts our capacity to derive detailed insights about specific sub-groups within the SEND cohort.

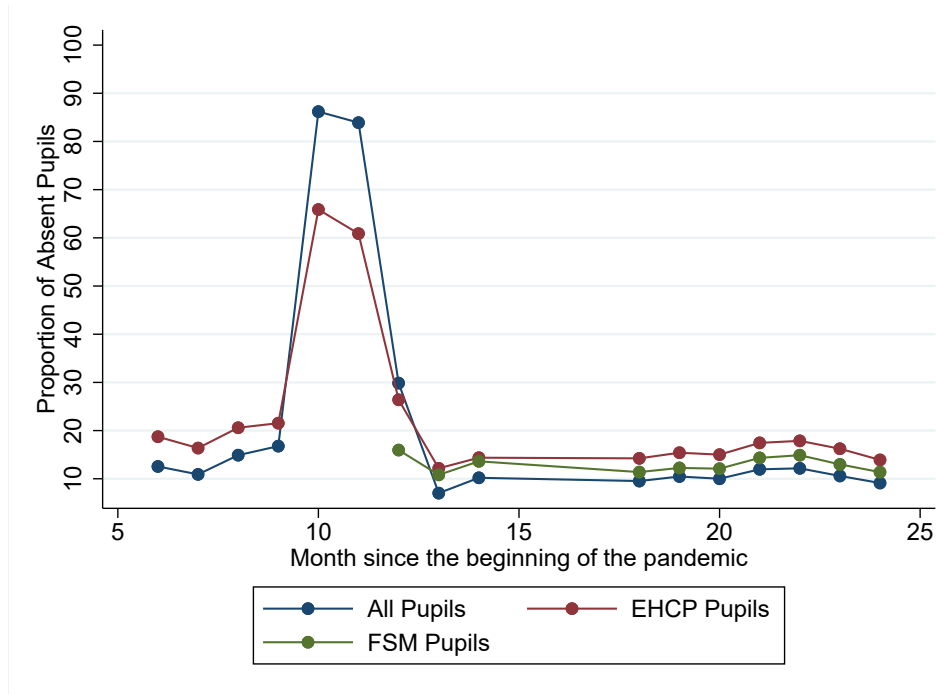
Nevertheless, despite these limitations, the DfE absence survey data remains an indispensable tool. It facilitates the identification of evolving trends and enables comparisons of absence rates among broadly defined pupil groups.

Covid Incidence Data. We utilise comprehensive publicly accessible data on COVID-19 incidence from the UK Health Security Agency, covering the period from 2020 to 2022. This data presents the COVID-19 rate per 100,000 individuals. Our analysis takes advantage of the variations in this rate both over time and across different local authorities. We rely on this data to investigate the correlation between the gap in the risk of absence between pupils with SEND and all pupils on one hand, and Covid incidence on the other hand. We run this analysis at the local authority level. The aim of this analysis is to know whether pupils with SEND were more impacted by local surges in Covid rates compared to the average pupil.

4.1.2 Absence Trends during the Pandemic

Figure 4.1 shows the progression of absent pupils in open educational settings during the pandemic months, with specific focus on pupils with EHCP and FSM status, as compared to the total pupil population. This representation draws on national daily figures, which are aggregated on a monthly basis to enhance clarity. It's important to highlight that weeks 9 to 14 correspond to school closures weeks. During these weeks, there was a marked rise in the absentee rate for all students, including those with EHCPs. Notably, pupils with EHCPs experienced a lower surge in absences compared

Figure 4.1 – Evolution of the Percentage of Absent Pupils



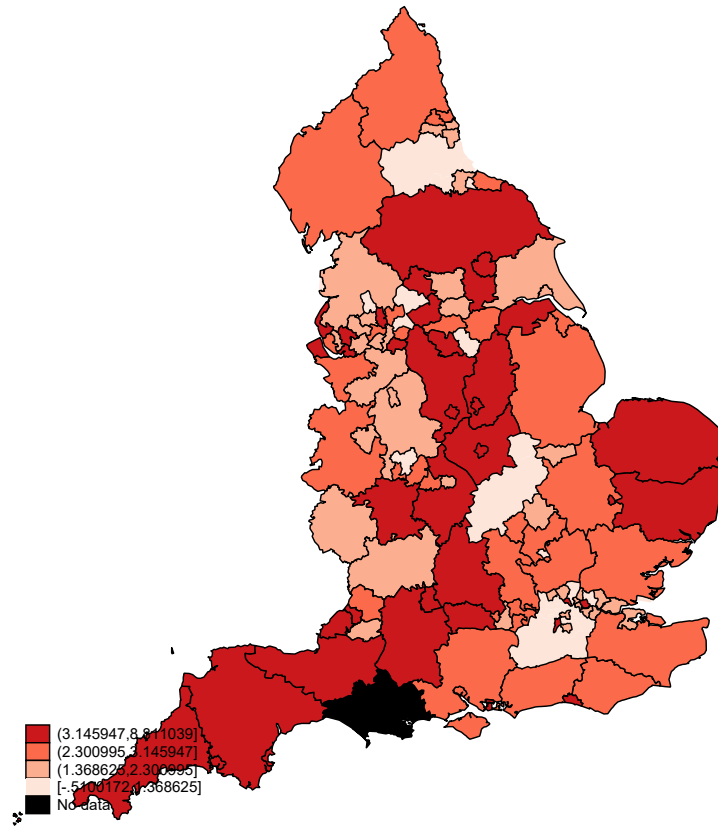
Source: DfE Weekly Attendance Pandemic Survey (2020-2022)

to the overall student population which is consistent with their prioritisation for in-person attendance during school closure periods. Yet, the absentee rate for pupils with EHCPs remained considerably high, hovering around 70%. This suggests that despite this prioritisation, pupils with EHCPs were still heavily disconnected from school during school closure periods.

Excluding school closure weeks, the average absence rate was around 10% for all pupils, against 15% for pupils with EHCPs. Pupils with FSM status were slightly more absent than the general pupil population but their absence rate is still lower than that of pupils with EHCPs. Throughout the pandemic, the disparity in absence rates between pupils with EHCPs and the general pupil population remained relatively constant. Excluding the weeks of school closures, pupils with EHCPs were, on average, 4 percentage points more prone to be absent than their peers.

We also observe large geographical variations in this absence rate gap. Figure 4.2 shows how the gap in absence rates between pupils with EHCPs and all pupils varies across local authorities. Darker shading represents a larger absence rate gap.

Figure 4.2 – Difference in absence rates between pupils with EHCPs and all pupils, by Local Authority



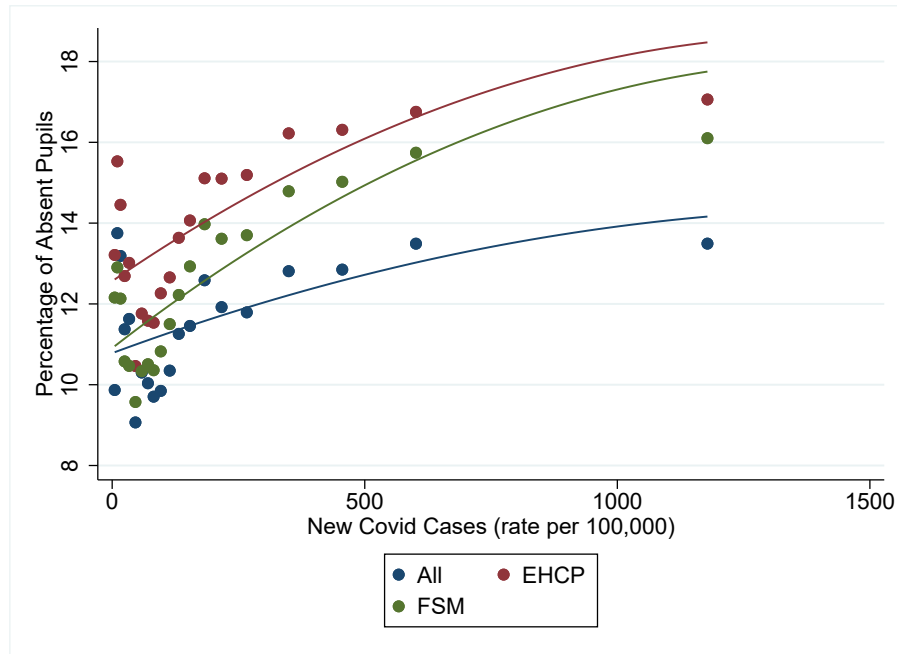
Source: DfE Weekly Attendance Pandemic Survey (2020-2022)

This map suggests that, during the pandemic, the absence rate gap between all pupils and those with EHCPs was not uniformly distributed across the country. We observe significant disparities in this gap across regions. London has the smallest gap (around 2 percentage points) - meaning that there is a relatively smaller divergence between the absence rates of pupils with EHCPs and the pupil population as a whole - while the South West and the East Midlands have the highest gap (i.e. the greatest divergence in absence rates - around 4 percentage points).

4.1.3 Covid Incidence and Pupil Absence Rates

We now shift our focus to examining the correlation between COVID-19 incidence and absence rates for the average pupil, pupils with EHCPs, and those eligible for Free

Figure 4.3 – Correlation between Local Covid Incidence and Pupil Absence Rates

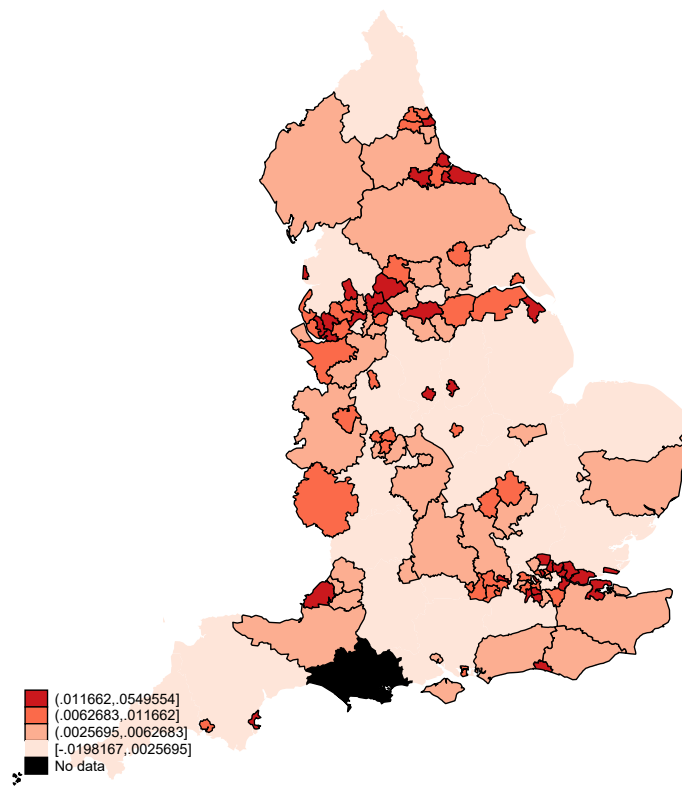


Source: DfE Weekly Attendance Pandemic Survey (2020-2022) and Covid incidence data. Each bin represents a group of 20 schools within each respective subgroup.

School Meals (FSM).

Figure 4.3 illustrates the relationship between COVID-19 incidence and pupil absence rates using information on each of these factors for different groups of schools (the dots), and additionally plots the average relationships for particular groups of interest (the lines). It shows that for all categories of pupils - be it all pupils, pupils with EHCPs, or FSM-eligible pupils - there's a discernible positive link between absence rates and COVID-19 incidence. This indicates that as COVID-19 cases rise, absence rates also tend to increase. Furthermore, the intensity of this relationship, as depicted by the steepness of the trend line, is more pronounced for pupils with EHCPs and those eligible for FSM compared to the average pupil. This suggests that pupils with EHCPs and those eligible for FSM may be more sensitive or affected by spikes in COVID-19 cases than their counterparts. Interestingly, the strength of this relationship is bigger for FSM-eligible pupils than for pupils with EHCPs, suggesting that economic deprivation is a strong underlying factor.

Figure 4.4 – Correlation between Local Covid Incidence and Pupil Absence Rate Gaps between All Pupils and Pupils with EHCPs



Source: DfE Weekly Attendance Pandemic Survey (2020-2022) and Covid incidence data.

Figure 4.4 illustrates how these relationships vary across the country, showing significant geographical differences across Local Authorities in the relationship between absence rate gaps between all pupils and pupils with EHCPs, and COVID-19 incidence. Darker shaded areas in this case indicate a stronger correlation between absence rate gaps and COVID-19 incidence. A handful of deprived local authorities, primarily in Outer London and the Midlands, predominantly drive this correlation. This underscores that deprivation plays a pivotal role in this observed trend. Deprived areas often have higher population densities and poorer housing conditions, increasing the risk of virus transmission. Additionally, these areas may have limited access to health-care and educational resources, further compounding the challenges faced by vulnerable pupils (Morrison et al., 2020).

4.2 Medium-Term Insights: Before to After the Pandemic

4.2.1 Methodology

In this analysis, we employ the difference-in-differences (DiD) approach, a widely recognised econometric technique. This methodology is designed to estimate causal effects by comparing the changes in outcomes over time between a treatment group and a control group. Specifically, the DiD estimator captures the differential change in outcomes (in our case, pupil absence rates or GCSE scores) between the two groups before and after a particular event or intervention (here, the onset of the pandemic). The assumption fundamental to the validity of this approach is the parallel trends assumption, which posits that, in the absence of the treatment, the difference between the treatment and control groups would have remained constant over time. In our context, this implies that the difference in absence rates or GCSE scores between pupils with and without SEND would have persisted in a stable manner had the pandemic not occurred. This rigorous approach allows us to isolate and attribute changes in the absence or attainment gap directly to the effects of the pandemic, eliminating confounding time-variant factors that might have affected both groups equally.

4.2.2 Data

4.2.2.1 Pupil Absence Data

For both the pre-pandemic years (2015-2019) and the year 2022, our analysis draws from the National Pupil Database (NPD). This dataset provides pupil-level data, covering approximately 600,000 pupils per cohort. It offers granular insights into pupils' absences, categorising them by reasons such as authorised absences (like illnesses) and unauthorised absences. Additionally, the dataset furnishes detailed data on the SEND status of pupils, including specifics like EHCP status and types of needs, ranging from speech and language challenges to moderate learning difficulties. We do not include data from the 2019/20 and 2020/21 school years in this analysis, during which different information on school closures and absences was collected (and analysed above).

4.2.2.2 Pupil Test Scores

For our analysis, we turn to the NPD, which encompasses pupil-level data on Key stage assessments and GCSE exam grades, specifically for the years before the pandemic (2015-2019) and the year following it (2022). The years 2020 and 2021 saw significant upheavals in pupils' assessments due to lockdowns. Notably, most Key stage assessments were canceled during these years, and GCSE grades were supplanted by teacher predictions. A study by [Anders et al. \(2023\)](#) indicates potential biases in these predicted grades. Pupils more likely to be low achievers, such as those from disadvantaged backgrounds or pupils with SEND, appeared to receive overestimations, while high achievers were often under-predicted. Given the variance in how these predicted grades impact different pupil subgroups, the results, especially for pupils with SEND, pose challenges in interpretation. Consequently, our research emphasises 2022 exam grades to better understand the pandemic's medium-term effects.

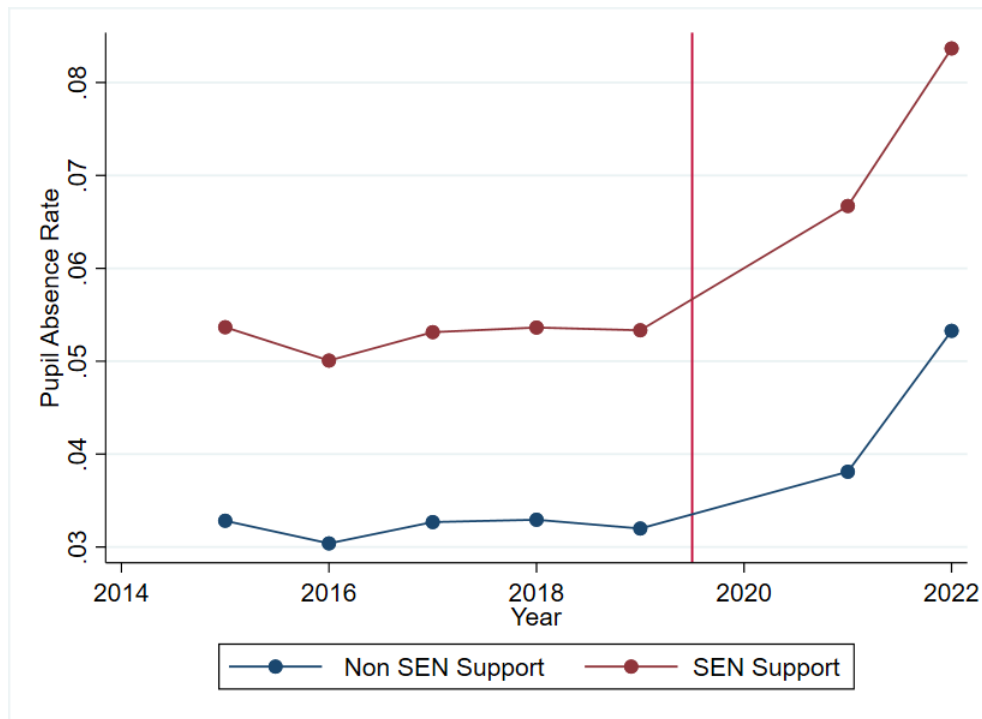
4.2.3 Impact on Pupil Absence

The evolution of pupil absence rates by SEND support status from 2015 to 2022 offers insights into patterns both pre- and post-pandemic (Figure 4.5). Between 2015 and 2019, the parallel trend assumption is confirmed, which underscores the validity of the difference-in-difference approach during this period.

Before the onset of the pandemic, absence rates were consistent and exhibited a

specific pattern based on SEN support status. Pupils with SEN support had an absence rate of approximately 5% between 2015 and 2019, which was consistently higher when compared to their counterparts without SEND, who had an absence rate around 3%. This created a noticeable absence rate gap of 2 percentage points between the two groups.

Figure 4.5 – Pupil Absence Rate by SEN Support Status (2015-2022)



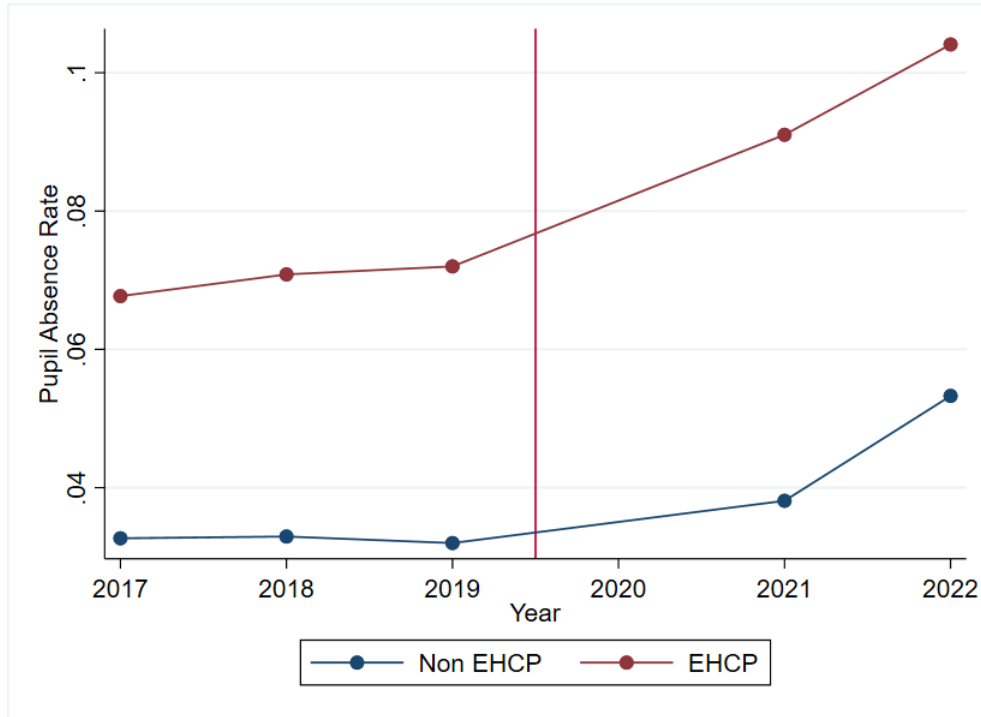
Source: National Pupil Database

However, the post-pandemic era brought about significant changes. Absence rates surged for both groups: those without SEND saw their rates rise to more than 5%, while the rate for pupils with SEN support increased to over 8%. This means that the gap in absence rates between the two groups widened post-pandemic, increasing by 1 percentage point. To put this into perspective, considering the pre-pandemic gap was 2 percentage points, this denotes a 50% increase in the disparity post-pandemic.

The subsequent figure provides an analysis of pupil absence rates, focusing this time on students with an EHCP, as opposed to SEN support (Figure 4.6). Analysing the period from 2015 to 2022, the data mirrors some of the trends observed for the SEN

support group.

Figure 4.6 – Pupil Absence Rate by EHCP Status (2015-2022)



Source: National Pupil Database

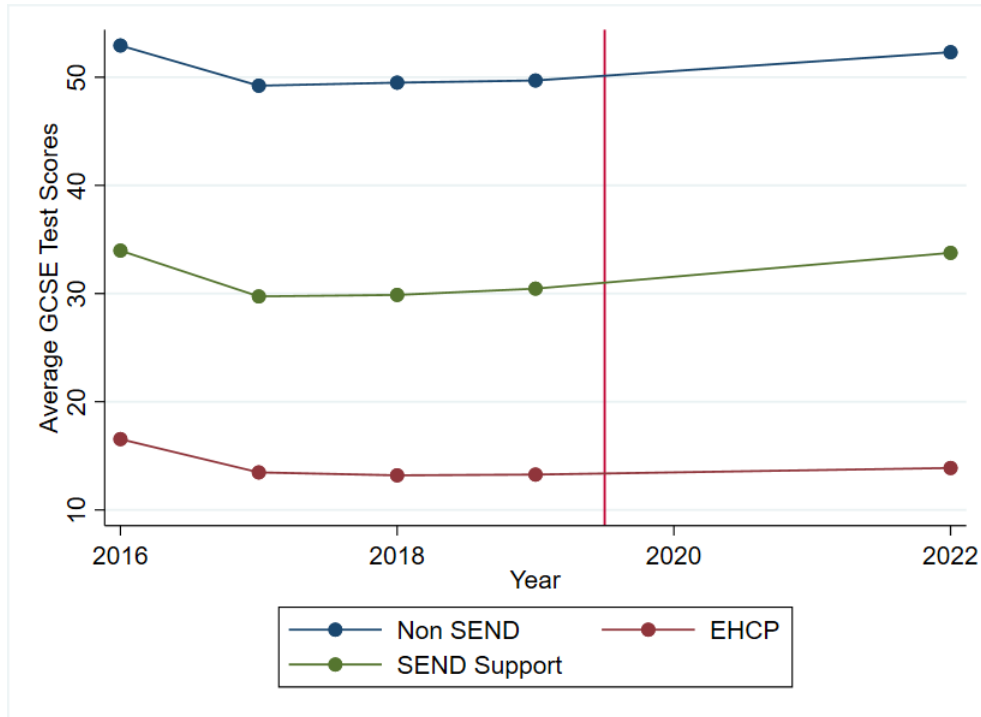
Initially, a parallel trend is evident in the graph, similar to the pattern observed for pupils with SEN support. Before the pandemic hit, pupils with EHCPs had a stable absence rate hovering around 7%. This rate is notably higher than that of the pupils with SEN support, which is indicative of the greater level of needs and challenges typically associated with pupils with EHCPs.

Drawing comparisons between pupils with EHCPs and those without any special educational needs (pupils without SEND), a gap in absence rates is evident. Prior to the pandemic, this gap stood at 4 percentage points. However, in the aftermath of the pandemic, the gap broadened to 6 percentage points. This shift confirms a trend similarly noticed with pupils with SEN support: the post-pandemic period saw a 50% increase in the absence rate gap between pupils with EHCPs and pupils without SEND.

4.2.4 Impact on Test Scores

Moving on to the examination of pupil test scores, Figure 4.7 plots average GCSE scores over time of pupils with EHCPs, those receiving SEN support and those without SEND. It shows some similarities and some differences in patterns compared to the analysis of absence rates.

Figure 4.7 – Pupil GCSE Test Scores by SEND Status (2015-2022)



Source: National Pupil Database

Just as with absence rates, the parallel trend assumption is upheld in the pre-pandemic era for test scores. A significant disparity was evident between pupils with SEND and pupils without SEND even before the pandemic, with the gap almost twice as large for pupils with EHCPs as for pupils receiving SEND support. Specifically, there was a 35-point gap between pupils with EHCPs and pupils without SEND, compared to around a 20-point gap between pupils with SEN support and those without SEND.

Mirroring the post-pandemic expansion in the absence rates gap, the test score gap between pupils with EHCPs and pupils without SEND also widened after the pandemic, growing to 38 points, around a 10% increase in this differential. However,

a notable difference from the absence rate analysis is that the test score gap between pupils with SEN support and pupils without SEND remained stable both before and after the pandemic. Importantly, these observations suggest that the impact on test scores post-pandemic is predominantly concentrated on the most vulnerable pupils, emphasising the pronounced challenges faced by students with the highest levels of need.

Chapter 5

What is the Mitigating Effect of Pre-Pandemic Resources?

We create a metric - high needs block divided by the number of pupils on SEN support - as a proxy for better understanding how SEND funding levels vary across local authorities and over time. It is constructed by dividing the total amount of high needs block funding received by a local authority by the number of pupils in the area who are receiving SEN support.

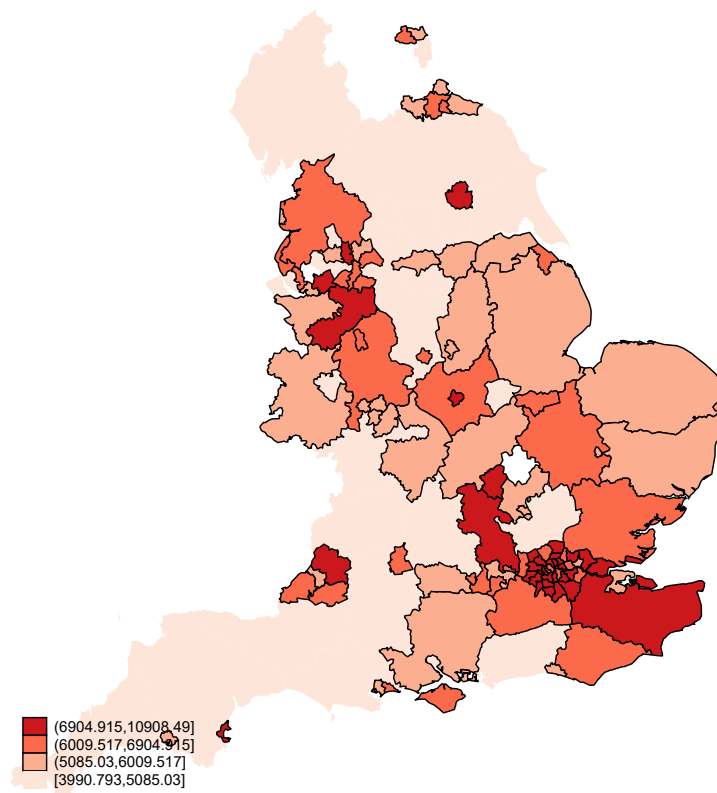
This metric has a number of advantages. First, it is relatively simple to calculate, requiring only two publicly available data points: high needs block funding and the number of pupils on SEND support. Second, it is comparable across different local authorities, as it is based on a common set of data. Third, it can be used to track changes in SEND funding over time, to see how funding levels have changed in relation to the number of pupils with SEND.

However, there are also some limitations to this metric. First, it does not take into account the severity of pupils' needs. Some pupils with SEND have more complex needs than others, and they may require more funding to meet their needs. Second, the metric does not take into account the cost of living in different areas. Some local authorities have higher costs of living than others, and they may need more funding to provide the same level of support to pupils with SEND.

Despite these limitations, this metric is a useful tool for understanding SEND funding levels across different local authorities and for tracking changes in SEND funding over time.

We first analyse the distribution of this metric across local authorities pre-pandemic (in 2019). Figure 5.1 splits local authorities into quartiles on the basis of the amount of funding they receive, on average, per student with SEN support via the high needs block, with darker shading indicating higher funding amounts.

Figure 5.1 – High Needs Block Funding per Pupil with SEN Support by Local Authority (2019)



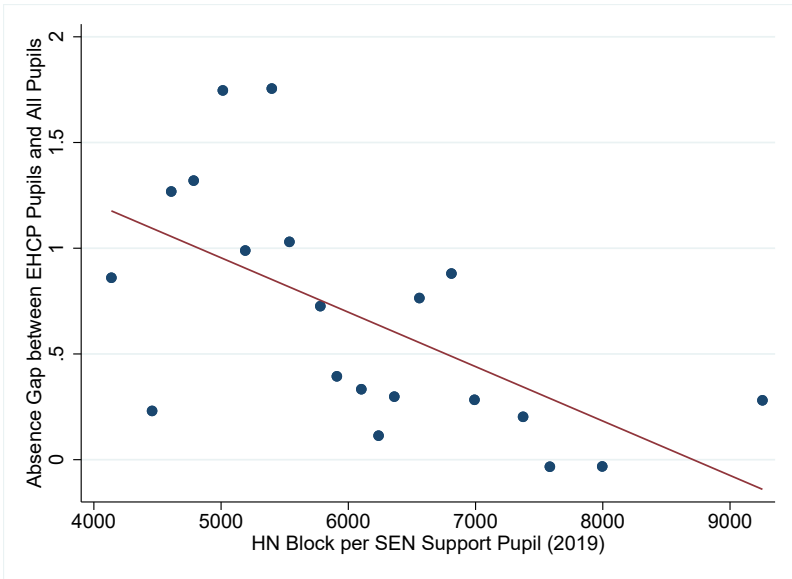
Source: DSG (2019) and National Pupil Database (2019)

Figure 5.1 shows pronounced variations across local authorities. Notably, London and the South East register a significantly higher amount of high needs block funding per SEN support student compared to the rest of England, aligning with documented geographical disparities in school funding as found in [Sibieta \(2020\)](#). Additionally, areas in the north-west, like the Greater Manchester metropolitan region, also exhibit elevated funding levels. Conversely, the south-west notably presents lower funding for this metric. While some of these differences might plausibly be attributable to different wage rates required to hire support staff across areas, it is unlikely that this

fully explains the geographical variation. As such, these findings bolster the idea that there is a "SEND lottery" - that children with similar needs receive very different levels of support in different parts of the country.

We now consider the relationship between pre-pandemic SEND funding and the absence rate gap between all pupils and pupils with EHCPs observed during the pandemic. Our hypothesis is that higher funding levels prior to the pandemic may suggest that pupils with SEND in these areas have access to more resources to support them during the pandemic, and hence that they may be more likely to continue attending school than students in areas with lower funding levels. If this were the case, then we would expect to see a negative relationship between SEND funding levels and the absence rate gap, and this is exactly what we see in Figure 5.1. This suggests that more generous pre-pandemic funding levels may have helped to alleviate the adverse effects of the pandemic on the outcomes of pupils with SEND. Specifically, regression analysis indicates that an additional pre-pandemic allocation of £10,000 for each pupil with SEN support corresponds to a 0.3 percentage point decrease in the pandemic-induced absence gap between all pupils and those with EHCPs.

Figure 5.2 – Correlation between pre-pandemic SEND funding levels the absence rate gap during the pandemic between all pupils and pupils with SEND



Source: DSG (2019) and DfE Weekly Attendance Pandemic Survey (2020-2022)

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Our analysis highlights the differences between pupils with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) and those eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), and the general pupil population. National daily figures, aggregated monthly, show a significant increase in absentee rates for all students during school closures (weeks 9 to 14), with pupils with EHCPs experiencing a lower increase in absences - consistent with their prioritisation for in-person attendance during school closure periods - but still having a high absentee rate of around 70%. Outside of school closures, the average absence rate was about 10% for all pupils and 15% for pupils with EHCPs, indicating pupils with EHCPs were more likely to be absent. The analysis also notes geographical variations in these rates, with disparities across regions and the smallest gap (between the attendance rates of all pupils and pupils with EHCPs) in London (around 2 percentage points) and the largest in the South West and East Midlands (around 4 percentage points), suggesting a non-uniform distribution of absentee rates across the country.

Our analysis also indicates a stable pre-pandemic absence rate for pupils with EHCPs at around 7%, higher than that of pupils with SEN support, reflecting greater challenges faced by pupils with EHCPs. Comparatively, the absence rate gap between pupils with EHCPs and pupils without SEND widened from 4 percentage points before the pandemic to 6 percentage points after, marking a 50% increase. Similarly, GCSE scores before the pandemic showed pupils with EHCPs scoring 35 points lower, on average, than pupils without SEND. This gap increased to around 38 points post-pandemic, around a 10% rise, highlighting the pandemic's pronounced impact on the most vulnerable pupils. However, while the absence rate gap between pupils with

SEN support and those without SEND also rose by about 50%, the gap in GCSE scores between these groups remained stable, indicating that the adverse effects were particularly concentrated on pupils with EHCPs.

Finally, analysis of pre-pandemic data showed significant geographical disparities in funding per SEND support pupil, with London and the South East having notably higher funding levels than other regions, supporting the notion of a 'SEND lottery'. A statistically significant negative correlation was found between pre-pandemic SEND funding levels and the pandemic-induced absence gap for pupils with EHCPs relative to all pupils. Specifically, an additional £10,000 in pre-pandemic SEND funding per pupil was associated with a 0.3 percentage point decrease in the absence gap, suggesting that higher initial funding levels could mitigate adverse effects on pupils with SEND during the pandemic.

Policy recommendations

Building on these findings, policymakers and educational leaders should consider targeted interventions to support pupils with EHCP and FSM status, who have experienced disproportionately high absence rates and learning gaps. First, increasing baseline SEND funding in regions with historically lower allocations could help address the 'SEND lottery' effect, ensuring resources match local pupil needs. Second, additional financial support and targeted programs — such as dedicated catch-up tutoring, mental health services, and specialised staff training — would benefit pupils with EHCPs, who faced the greatest rise in both absence and achievement gaps. Third, measures to tackle socioeconomic barriers for FSM-eligible families - like enhanced digital access, nutrition programs, and community-based academic support - could lower vulnerability to future disruptions.

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