



Education, Health and Care Needs Assessment (EHCNA) Improvement Plan



Contents

1. Purpose of the report	3
2. Foreword from the Bristol Local Area Partnership	4
3. Summary and background information	5
4. Understanding the current assessment backlog	7
5. Immediate improvement action that has been taken	10
6. Performance trajectory and forecast	12
7. Approach to prioritisation of new needs assessments	13
8. Quality assurance of new assessments	14
9. Communication	15
10. Monitoring and governance	16
11. Strategic Oversight and Leadership	16
12. Monthly Performance Reporting	17
13. Corporate performance reporting	17

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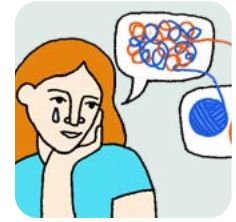
1. Purpose of the report

This report provides an update on the current position and improvement plan for Education, Health and Care Needs Assessments (EHCNAs) in Bristol.

It outlines the scale and drivers of recent rise in EHCNA requests, actions taken to improve performance against statutory timeliness, and the strategic and operational steps underway to reduce the backlog and increase the quality and timeliness of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs).

This report has been developed in collaboration with our local area partners which include,

- Bristol City Council;
- NHS BNSSG (Bristol, North Somerset, South Gloucestershire); and,
- Bristol Parent Carer Forum (BCPF).



2. Foreword from the Bristol Local Area Partnership

We want to openly recognise that for many families in Bristol, the experience of navigating the Education, Health and Care (EHC) needs assessment process has been difficult, confusing, and at times deeply frustrating.

We have heard clearly that the system has not consistently delivered timely, transparent, or supportive processes, and that this has impacted families' wellbeing, trust, and belief in the system.

While significant progress has been made, through collaboration with services, schools, families and the BPCF; we know we are still some way from delivering the system that children and families in Bristol deserve.

This plan, alongside our [SEND and Inclusion Strategy 2024-2028](#), [Bristol Co-Production Charter](#) and [Memorandum of Understanding](#) marks our collective commitment to not only improving delays and processes, but to creating a system that is co-produced, relational, inclusive, and delivers better outcomes for all.





3. Summary and background information

In January 2025, the local area partners launched a new SEND and Inclusion Strategy, developed in partnership with key stakeholders including health services, social care, schools, families and the BPCF. We listened to more than 1,500 responses from children and young people, 2,000 responses from parent carers, and 750 responses from our schools. We also heard from all of our teams across education, health and social care, who support children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

Our *SEND and Inclusion Strategy 2024-2028* sets out how our local area SEND partnership will make things better for children and young people with SEND. The strategy describes six clear priorities which include:

1. Understanding needs
2. Listening to families
3. Right help right time
4. Inclusive educational provision
5. Preparing for the future and
6. Feeling safe and included

The number of pupils with EHCPs rose by 16 per cent in the South West of England (and 11 per cent nationally) in 2024. This marks a doubling of the national cohort of children and young people since 2016 and reflects a significant increase in identified needs such as autism, SEMH (social, emotional and mental health), and speech and language difficulties being experienced.

In Bristol, this trend is reflected in a 35 per cent increase in requests for EHCNAs. The key drivers of this include:

- **Withdrawal of non-statutory Top-Up funding** in February 2024, which previously enabled schools to support children with SEND without requiring an EHCP.
- **Rising levels of identified need**, including increases in recognition of autism, SEMH, and speech, language and communication needs.
- **Wider funding pressures in schools**, which have reduced their ability to meet need from within existing resources, leading to a greater reliance on statutory support.

Non-statutory Top-Up funding previously supported children with SEND without requiring a formal EHCP. With its removal, many schools have applied for EHCPs to ensure continued support for their students. This has placed considerable pressure on the statutory SEND services and supporting professionals such as educational psychologists and health and social care professionals.

As a result of this rise in local need, there is currently a high number of assessment requests waiting to be processed, resulting in significant delays.

The local area partners are taking decisive action in response to this sharp rise in the number of children and young people (CYP) requiring SEND support. The service has improved processes, recruited additional staffing and is progressing assessments as quickly as possible, prioritising the most vulnerable children and keeping a focus on the quality of plans. To meet this rise in need and strengthen the support available, the local area partnership has delivered a number of targeted improvements:

- **An additional £1m investment into the Educational Psychology (EP) service**, led to 150 assessments being completed in May 2025 — the highest number recorded in a single month and the best performance achieved in the 2023-2025 period.
- **A £1 million investment in the SEND service**, with a new structure implemented in February 2025 to reduce individual case officer workloads from over 220 to an average of 180, supported by improved supervision and clearer roles.
- **A 50 per cent increase in the completion of EHCPs** compared to the same period last year (May 2024). Productivity levels already achieved by May 2025 took until July, two months longer, to reach in 2024 and 2023. This is a positive rise in the number of assessments being completed.
- **A new £1 million Inclusive Learning Service**, set to launch in September 2025, to provide support to school leaders and SENDCOs to improve inclusion across schools in Bristol.
- **Extending non-statutory top up funding:** In March 2025, schools and families were informed that the council would extend the non-statutory Top Up period for children with SEND who don't currently have an EHCP, until their EHC needs assessment is completed. This was to alleviate the pressure on schools where children were in receipt of funding that was supporting them in school whilst they were in assessment, and to avoid any gaps in their provision.
- **Backdating funding to protect provision:** Where there have been delays in issuing EHCPs, funding is being backdated to the date by which the plan should have been finalised. This ensures that schools are not financially penalised and that support for children is maintained without disruption.



4. Understanding the current assessment backlog

As of 20 June 2025, there were 1,322 children and young people awaiting an EHCNA, representing a 31 per cent increase compared to June 2024. The majority of these children (54 per cent) are of primary school age. Additionally, 23 per cent of those awaiting an assessment are already in receipt of Top-Up funding, this means their educational setting has an understanding of their needs and is providing additional support through funding received outside of the EHCP process.

It is typical for the service to be working with a significant number of CYP undergoing assessment (c. 500-600) at any given time. This reflects both the volume of requests received and the statutory 20-week (approximately five-month) timeframe for completing each assessment as part of the service's routine operations.

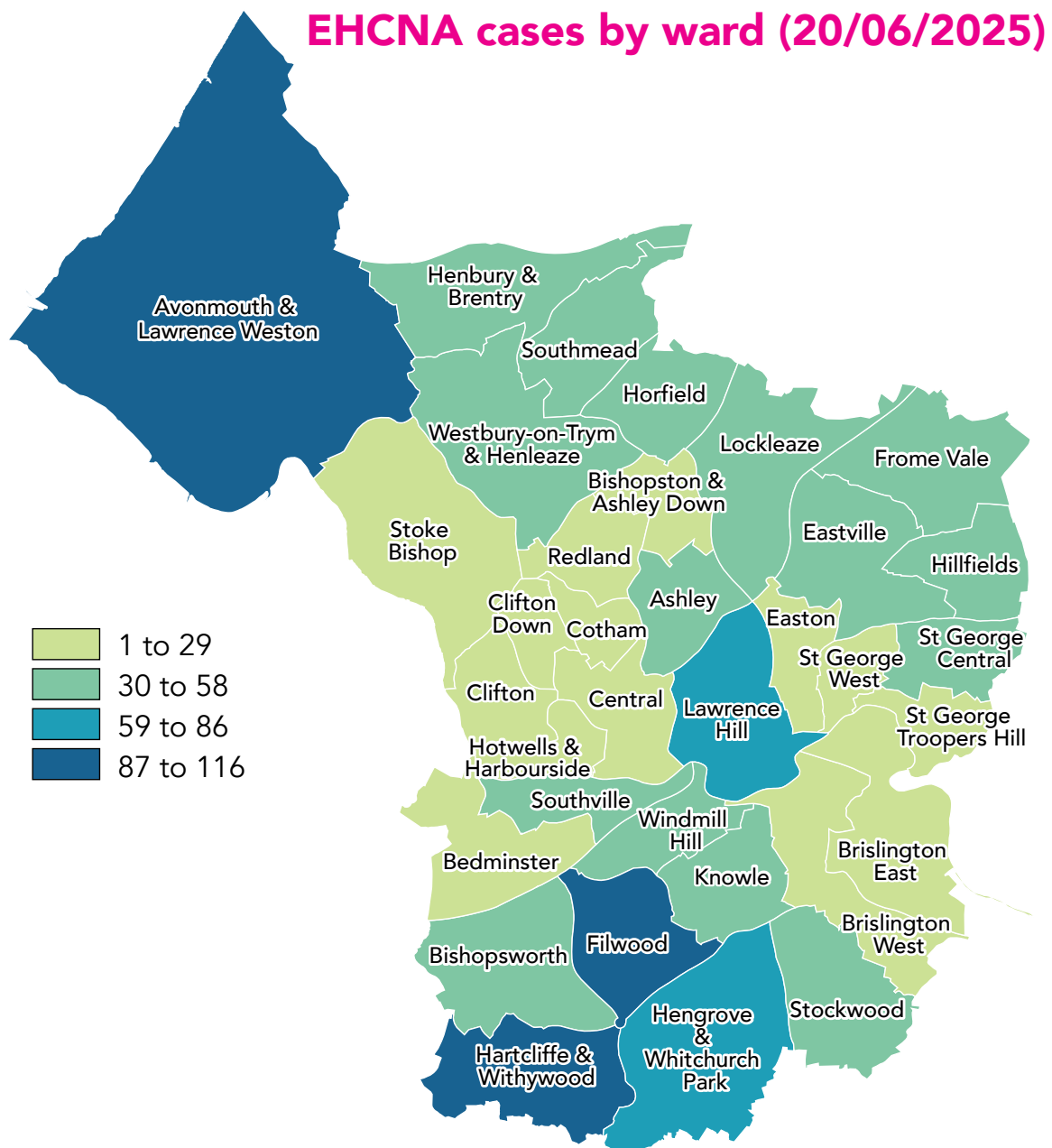
EHCNA cases by ward

This map shows the number of EHCNAs across Bristol by electoral ward, as of 20 June 2025. It categorises wards into four bands based on the number of cases:

- Light Green: 1–29 cases
- Medium Green: 30–58 cases
- Medium Blue: 59–86 cases
- Darkest Blue: 87–116 cases

Wards with the Highest EHCNA Volume (87–116 cases): Avonmouth & Lawrence Weston, Filwood, Hartcliffe & Withywood.

Wards with Moderate to High Volume (59–86 cases): Hengrove & Whitchurch Park, Lawrence Hill.



EHCNA cases by year group

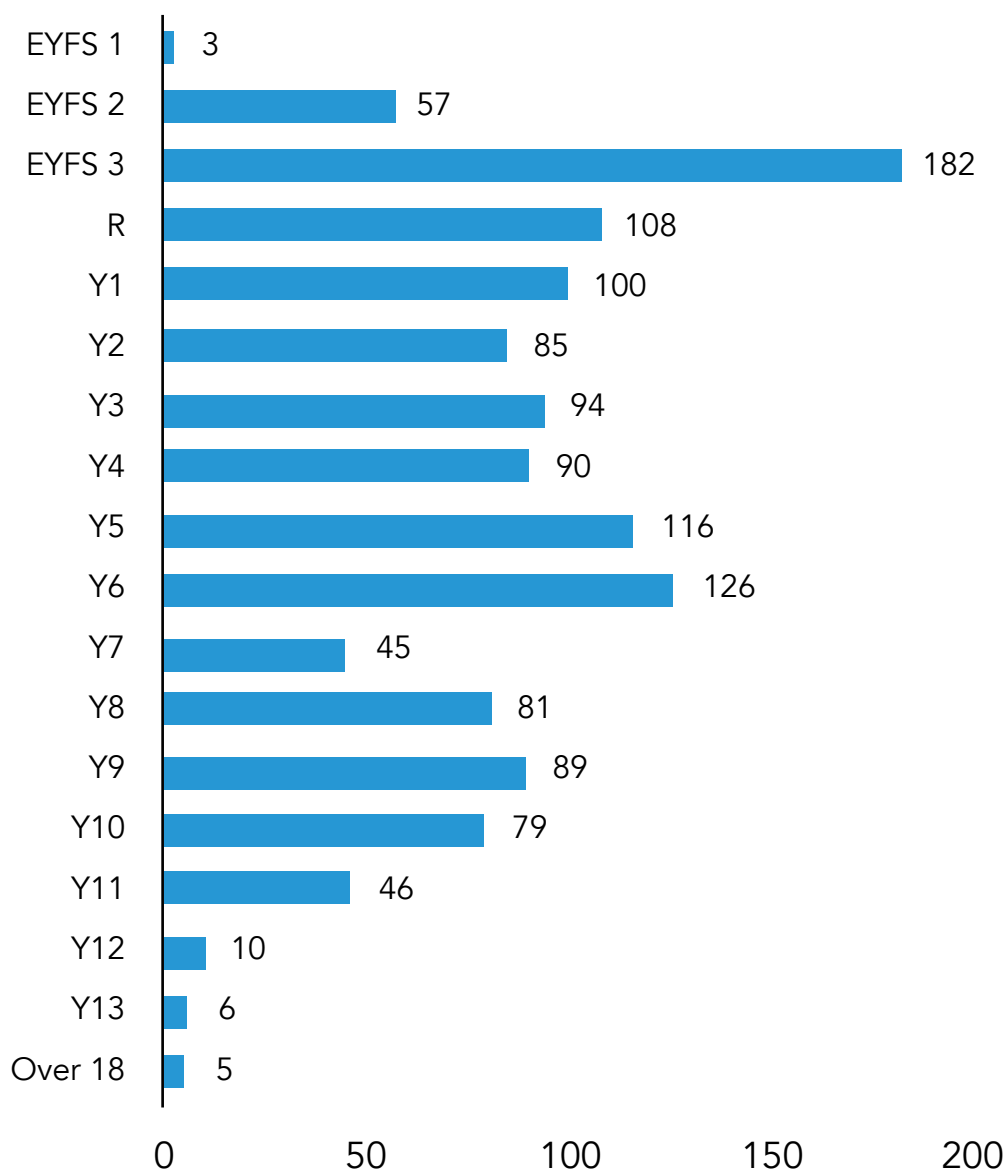
This bar chart shows EHCNAs by year group.

This shows clear patterns in demand, with notable peaks at both early years and key educational transition points.

The highest volume of EHCNAs is recorded in Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) 3, with 182 cases, indicating a strong focus on early identification and referral activity at the nursery to Reception transition stage.

This is followed by Year 6 (126 cases) and Year 5 (116 cases), reflecting increased assessment activity in preparation for the transition to secondary education.

EHCNA cases by year group





5. Immediate improvement action that has been taken

In response to the significant and sustained rise in demand for EHCNAs, a coordinated programme of immediate improvement actions has been put in place to stabilise the system, reduce delays, and improve the quality and consistency of statutory processes.

These actions have focused on expanding capacity, streamlining decision-making, and supporting children, families, and schools through a period of increased pressure.



Ref	Activity	Impact
1	Strengthening the workforce and reducing caseloads	A major restructure of the SEND service was completed in February 2025, designed to address the significant workloads and clarify roles within the team. As a result, individual case officer caseloads have reduced from over 220 to an average of 180, improving the capacity for timely and high-quality casework. Alongside this, recruitment to additional permanent roles is now complete, with improved productivity expected from September 2025 once the new staff cohort is fully inducted and embedded.
2	Expanding Educational Psychology capacity	A £1 million investment to increase EP capacity between April 2025 and March 2026. This expansion has already led to a marked improvement, with monthly EP advice reports increasing from around 70 to over 150. This is a critical component of the statutory assessment process and is directly contributing to higher numbers of completed assessments.
3	Process improvements and stronger oversight	Key processes have been reviewed to improve flow through the assessment system. Fortnightly oversight of timeliness and productivity by the service leadership team is in place, and decision-making panels are more frequent and robust. Improvements to handovers between teams have helped reduce administrative delays and avoid duplication of effort.
4	Ensuring continuity of support for children in assessment	In recognition of the challenges faced by schools supporting children in assessment without statutory plans in place, the local authority extended its non-statutory Top-Up funding offer in March 2025. This 'Waiting Well' approach ensures that children do not experience a disruption in support while waiting for an assessment to conclude.
5	Backdating funding to protect provision	Where there have been delays in issuing EHCPs, funding is being backdated to the date by which the plan should have been finalised. This ensures schools are not financially penalised and support for children is maintained.
6	Laying the foundations for longer-term inclusion	While these immediate actions focus on throughput and capacity, the council is also preparing for a shift in the system's long-term sustainability. A new £1 million Inclusive Learning Service will launch in September 2025 to support schools and SENDCOs to meet need earlier. This reflects a wider strategic commitment to build a more inclusive education system in Bristol.



6. Performance trajectory and forecast

The service is already seeing the benefits of increased capacity and process improvements, including a record improvement (see detail in section 3) on service performance in the last three years.

These gains reflect significant investment across the system, including additional staffing in the SEND team and EP service, and clearer roles and structures to manage caseloads more effectively.

Looking ahead, our forecast is based on a target output of 170 EHCPs finalised per month (on average) during school term-time, reflecting the new staffing levels and revised ways of working now in place. This assumes that all teams contributing to the statutory process, including SEND, EP, and Health and Social Care can sustain their pace of delivery to meet this productivity level.

To account for seasonal trends, a 30 per cent reduction in productivity is expected during non-term-time months of April, August, and December (therefore output is expected to be approximately 119). This reflects staff annual leave patterns and historical dips in service wide output during these periods. Mitigations such as forward planning and flexible working are being explored to reduce this impact where possible.

This performance trajectory is ambitious but deliverable, based on:

- Full induction and embedding of our new staff in September 2025.
- Continued improvement of productivity levels across our system and our partnership
- Continued oversight of timeliness and quality through leadership panels and the Quality Assurance Group
- Effective coordination of professional advice from health and care partners
- Similar, or fewer, numbers of EHCNAs to those submitted in the 2024 calendar year

If sustained, this level of throughput will reduce the current backlog significantly across 2025–26 and improve statutory compliance, while maintaining a strong focus on quality and co-production.

There are several assumptions to this model which will be reviewed regularly, and adjustments made in light of emerging evidence and national and local policy changes which could impact on the performance of the service.



7. Approach to prioritisation of new needs assessments

We are committed to equity in assessment access, with a clear prioritisation of the assessment process for CYP who are at a higher risk of vulnerability. Our focus includes – but is not limited to – the following groups:

- **Children in Care:** Ensuring stability and support for those in the care system.
- **Children Missing Education:** Addressing the needs of those who are not currently receiving education.
- **Children with Complex Health Needs:** Providing tailored support for children with significant health challenges.
- **Key Stage Transfers:** Prioritising assessments for pupils transitioning into Year R, Year 7, and Post 16 to ensure smooth transitions.

By concentrating on these vulnerable groups, we aim to provide timely and effective support to those who need it most in an equitable way.



8. Quality assurance of new assessments

Our Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) sets out how we will ensure we understand and improve our performance in these areas, specifically in relation to the quality of the EHCNA process, EHCPs and annual reviews.

To support this, we have established a Quality Assurance Group, comprising of representatives from Health, Social Care, EP, SEND service and the BPCF. This group oversees the quality assurance processes through thematic and deep dive audits that take into consideration the various sections of the plan and the professional, family and CYP's contribution.

This quality assurance framework is based on CLEAR principles used across our services, and the SEND Code of Practice, which are:

- **Child centred (C):** All quality assurance will include a focus on the experiences of and outcomes for CYP on their journey through the SEND system. Children and families' views and experiences are central to how we understand the quality and impact of the work we are doing and how we learn and improve.
- **Learning focused (L):** Our quality assurance work will focus on identifying and sharing areas for development and good practice. We will use this information to support the development of staff and services through support and challenge.
- **Engagement (E):** To be effective, we all need to engage with and act on learning identified from quality assurance activity. Commitment to the quality assurance framework will be modelled and prioritised by all involved.
- **Accountability (A):** All individuals and leaders across the system are accountable for their own work and ongoing improvement as part of a system wide learning culture. Leaders within the system are also accountable within SEND governance arrangements for reporting on the impact of the quality assurance framework.
- **Reflection (R):** We believe that individuals and systems improve where there is high-quality safe space for thinking and reflection, and opportunities for exploring different perspectives.



9. Communication

Effective communication is a key pillar of our SEND and Inclusion Strategy and plays a central role in building trust with families, professionals, and partners across the local area. Our approach aims to improve clarity, transparency and consistency throughout the EHCNA process.

We are working to ensure that families are kept informed at every stage of the assessment journey. When a decision is made to proceed with an EHCNA, families will receive timely notification and clear information about what to expect. Following a decision to issue an EHCP, the SEND service will contact parents or carers directly to discuss the outcome and gather their views, helping to ensure that the process remains person-centred and responsive. If delays are likely at any stage, both families and schools will be informed, along with an explanation of what this means for support and next steps.

To further strengthen communication, we are collaborating with colleagues from Social Care, EP, and the BPCF to review and improve all standard letters issued during the process. These revised communications are being designed to be more accessible, informative and supportive for families navigating the system.

Work is also underway to improve our Local Offer channels. Updates on EHCP timeliness will now align with the reporting cycle of the Children and Young People Committee submissions and will include regularly refreshed information on average waiting times for EHCNAs. This is part of our commitment to greater transparency and to supporting families with accurate and up-to-date information.

We are also taking steps to improve communication with schools and professionals. Updates and key messages are shared through established channels, including the Bristol Headteacher Newsletter, Primary and Secondary School Headteacher Forums, Family Hub network, SENDCo Clusters and SENDCo Briefings. In parallel, we are collaborating with the BPCF to disseminate family-focused communications via their website, social media platforms, and networks such as Friends of the Forum.

Together, these improvements are designed to promote confidence in the SEND system, reduce anxiety for families, and ensure that all stakeholders are kept informed and engaged throughout the assessment process.



10. Monitoring and governance

Robust monitoring and governance arrangements are in place to oversee delivery of the SEND EHCNA improvement plan and ensure accountability at each level of the system.

This approach combines operational tracking, strategic oversight and transparent reporting to senior leaders and elected members.



11. Strategic Oversight and Leadership

Progress against the improvement plan is overseen by the SEND and Alternative Provision (AP) Executive Board, which brings together senior leaders from Education, Health, and Social Care. This board is responsible for setting strategic direction, reviewing risks, and ensuring coordinated delivery across the local area partnership.



12. Monthly Performance Reporting

Key performance indicators (KPIs), including timeliness of assessment decisions, number of completed EHCPs, and contributions from health and social care, are monitored monthly. These are reported to:

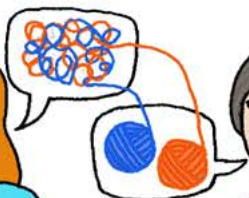
- **Quality, Improvement and Performance (QUIP) Board**, which is independently chaired and provides challenge and support to the service and our partners.
- **Children and Young People Committee**, ensuring Member oversight and transparency for elected members and the public.



13. Corporate performance reporting

SEND performance is embedded within the wider Bristol City Council corporate performance framework, with regular updates provided to the council executive leadership and the Corporate Leadership Board.

This ensures that improving outcomes for children with SEND remains a core corporate priority as set out in the council's [Corporate Plan 2025-2030](#).



We experience many of the same challenges and struggles as other children and young people.



We want, and have the right to, the same opportunities in our lives.



We have the same hopes and aspirations for our future as all children and young people in Bristol.

