

The BIG Conversation : SEND Workforce Survey

Analysis and Recommendations

September 2025

Background and Context

This research was conducted to develop a better understanding of the SEND Workforce in the South East Region. The survey was carried out during July 2025, with the report finalised and published in September 2025. The purpose of this survey is to use the feedback collected to inform future improvement work at both a local and regional level.

Survey Participants

The SEND Workforce survey was completed by 320 colleagues from across all 19 local authorities in the South East Region. The survey also captures colleagues working in Schools (25%) and in Health (17%).

Executive Summary

This report presents a comprehensive analysis of the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) workforce in the South East. It includes data on workforce composition, caseload pressures, staff wellbeing, digital infrastructure, AI readiness, and cross-sector partnership working. The data reflects a system under pressure, with high caseloads, inconsistent digital infrastructure, and mixed reports concerning wellbeing. However, there is also optimism and readiness for improvement, including openness to AI, stronger partnership working, and a committed permanent workforce base.

The findings are supported by visual data and are accompanied by practical recommendations for the South East Sector Led Improvement Programme (SESLIP) to address priority issues regionally.

Key Themes

The following five cross-cutting themes emerged from the data:

1. High caseloads are widespread, especially among statutory teams and Educational Psychologists.
2. Workforce stability is generally good, but vacancies and agency use remains concerning. Persistent issues with staffing, including high caseloads, vacancy rates, and inconsistent supervision prevail.
3. Staff wellbeing and psychological safety are mixed — some teams thrive, others are under strain.
4. Digital systems are often outdated; there is a readiness for AI but gaps in infrastructure exist.
5. Partnership working with health and education is improving, though still inconsistent, particularly around the EHCNA and transition to adulthood processes.

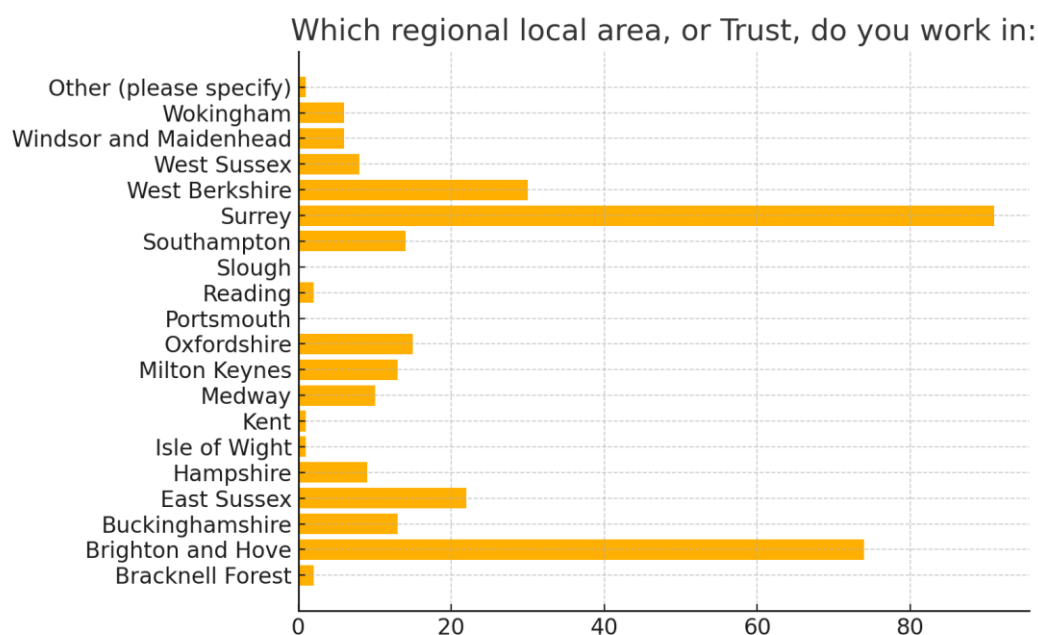


1. Regional Workforce Overview

Reported staffing levels varied significantly. The most common response ranges indicate that many teams operate with between 5 and 30 FTE staff. Given the size and complexity of SEND caseloads, this level may be insufficient in some areas. Workforce planning should take these trends into account.

- **Geographic Representation:** 94.1% of survey respondents (301) were based in the South East, with highest representation from:
 - **Surrey (29.45%)**
 - **Brighton & Hove (23.95%)**
 - **West Berkshire (8.41%)**
 - **East Sussex (7.12%)**

The workforce in the South East reflects a broad distribution across local authorities and trusts. Most respondents are permanently employed, with a strong presence in statutory roles such as EHCP coordination, review, and casework. A notable minority work through fixed-term or agency contracts, suggesting ongoing recruitment or retention challenges.



2. Contractual and Employment Models

The vast majority of respondents (nearly 70%) are in permanent positions, which is a positive sign for workforce stability. However, a meaningful portion of staff are employed on fixed-term or agency contracts. This reveals an element of workforce

fragility which may impact continuity of service and institutional knowledge. Strengthening employment pathways may help secure long-term capacity.

- **Employment Type:**

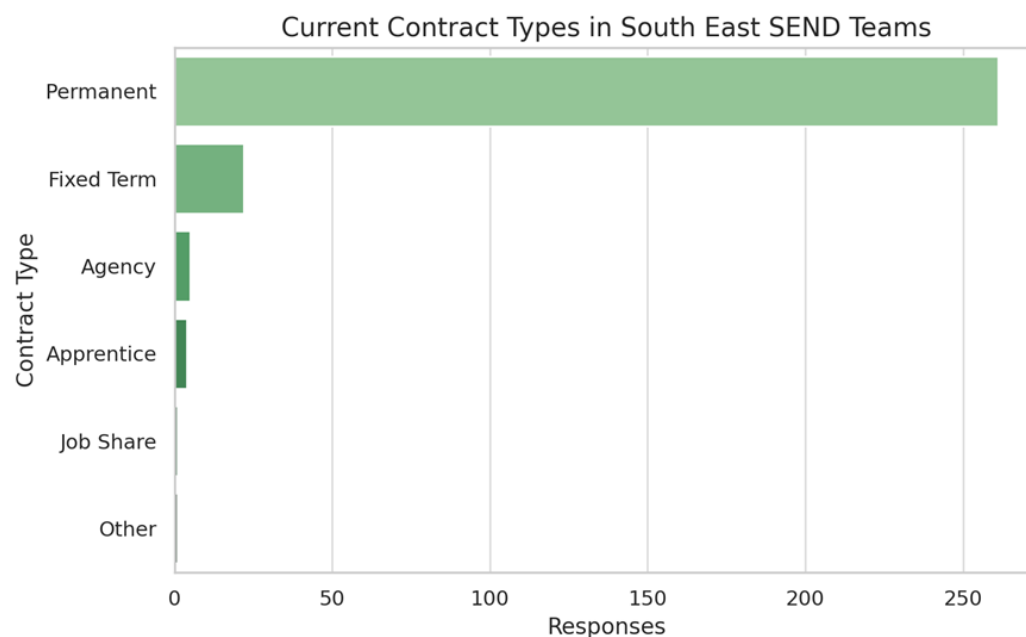
- **Permanent contracts dominate** (88.8%), suggesting a relatively stable core workforce.
- Minimal reliance on agency staff (1.7%) or apprentices (1.36%).

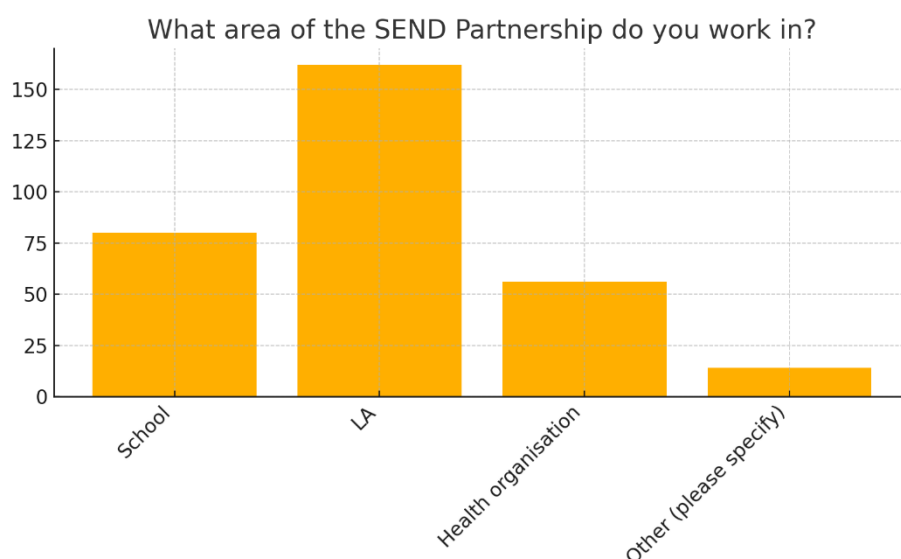
- **Statutory Teams Composition:**

- SEND Case Workers account for a significant share (29.6%).
- Only **15.2% are managers**, suggesting a potential gap in leadership capacity.
- **53.6% reported "Other" roles**, indicating unclear or fragmented job definitions.

Regional Variation:

- Some local authorities rely more on agency staff (e.g. Medway, West Sussex) while others have stable internal teams (e.g. Surrey).
- Staffing models and vacancy levels vary significantly, affecting caseload and quality of service.





What area of the SEND Partnership do you work in?

Answer Choices	Responses	
School	25.64%	80
LA	51.92%	162
Health organisation	17.95%	56
Other (please specify)	4.49%	14
Answered		312

Other responses from Specialist Information Officer, respite care and charity.

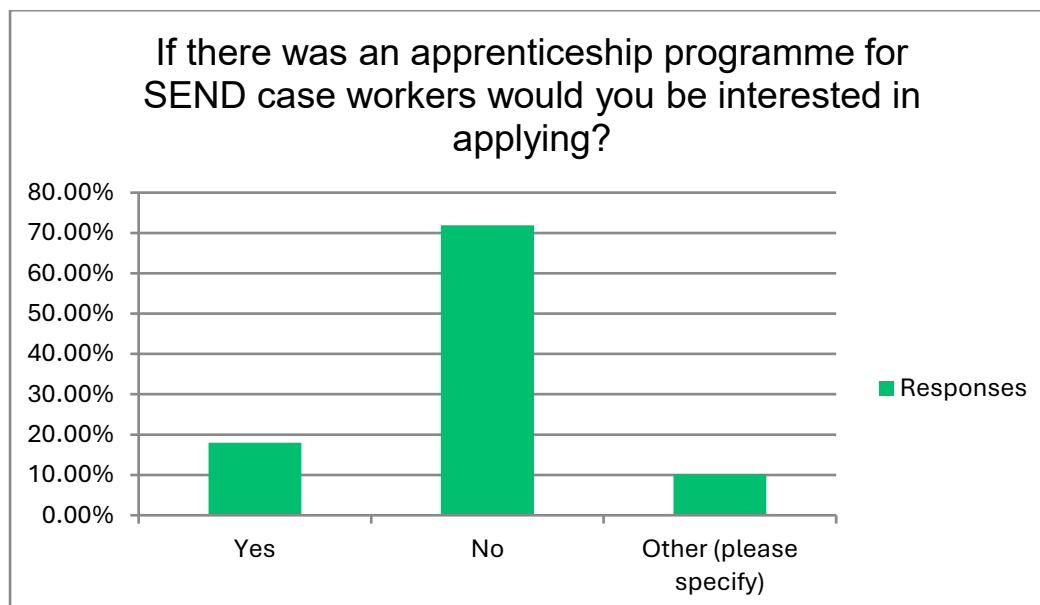
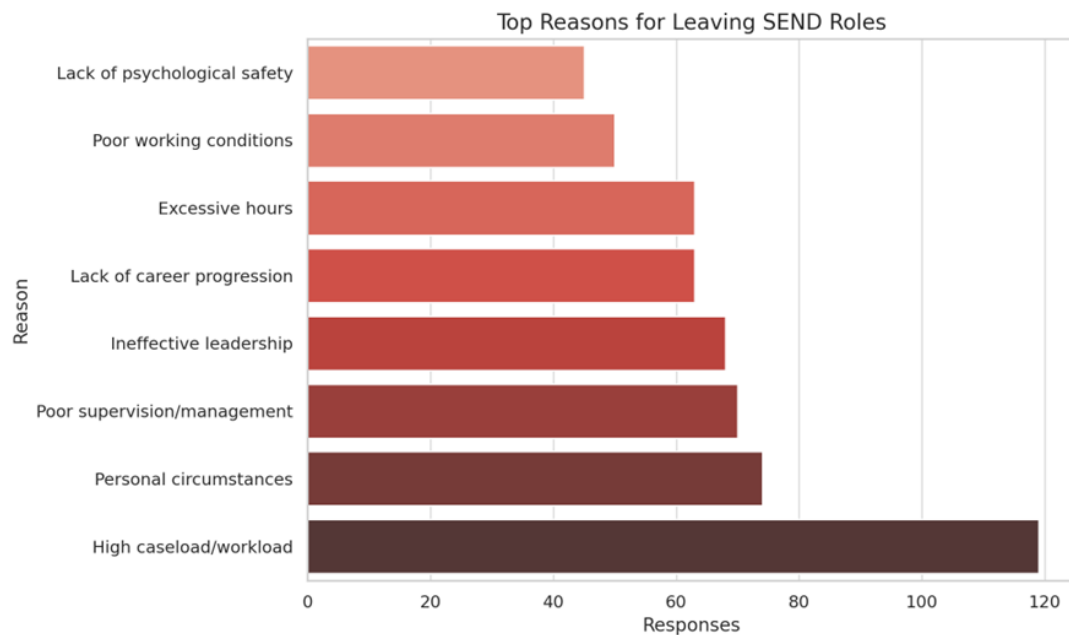
3. Team Capacity and Workforce Pressure

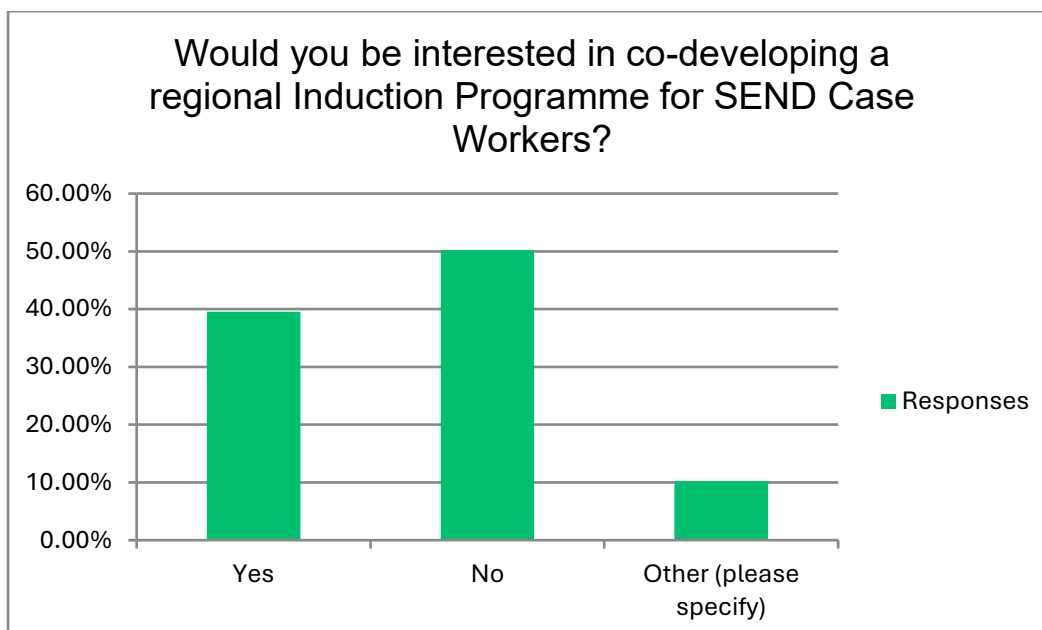
Survey data shows significant variation in team size and staffing levels. A large number of SEND workers manage caseloads of 200–300 children, with some reporting even higher figures. Many areas report under 30 FTEs in key SEND roles. High vacancy rates, particularly among Educational Psychologists and statutory teams, are evident. Agency usage and inconsistent pay scales further complicate workforce stability.

These caseloads far exceed recommended levels in many professional standards. Excessive caseloads can lead to burnout, errors, and delays in statutory processes.

- **Vacancy Rates:**
 - Educational Psychology Services: Data from only 17 respondents, but several report **critical shortages**.
 - Statutory SEND teams: Responses suggest **moderate to high vacancy levels**, indicating workforce strain.
- **Agency Workers:**

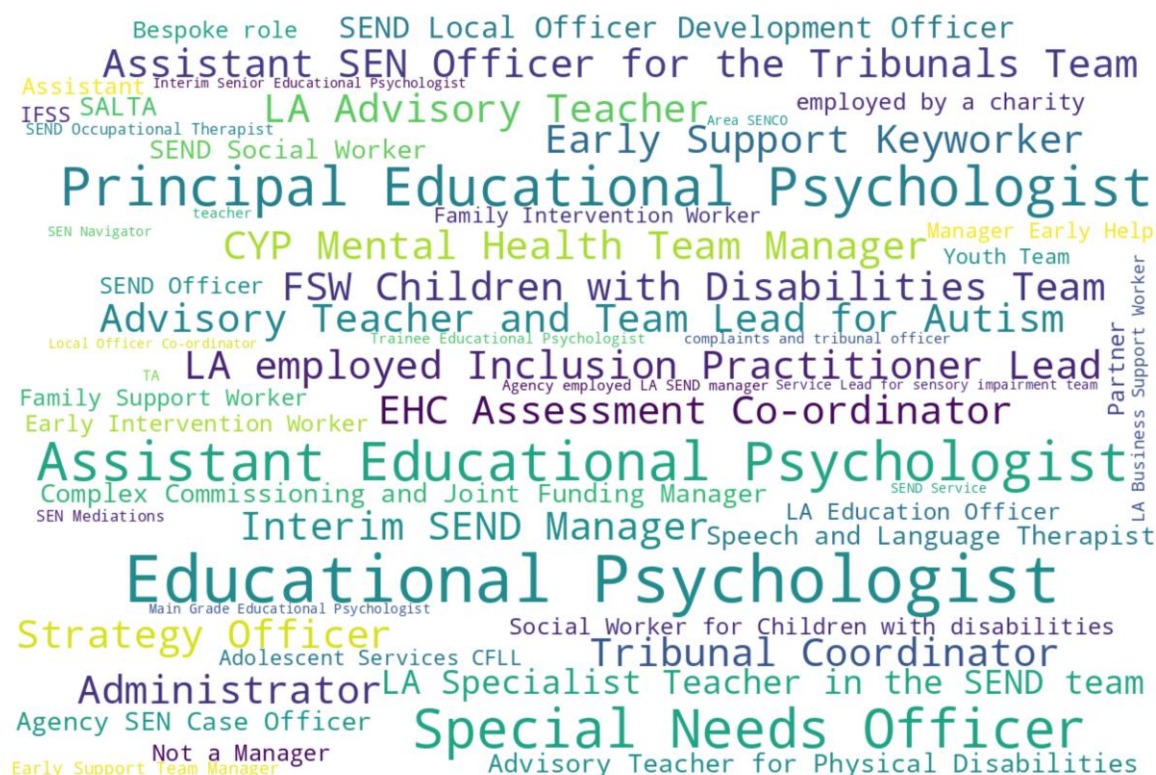
- Daily rates range widely; **35% report under £400/day**, with **32% unsure of pay levels**, showing a lack of transparency.
- **Caseloads:**
 - Average caseloads reported in the range of **20–30+**, often perceived as **unmanageable**.
 - **57.5% cite high workload as a key reason to leave** their role.



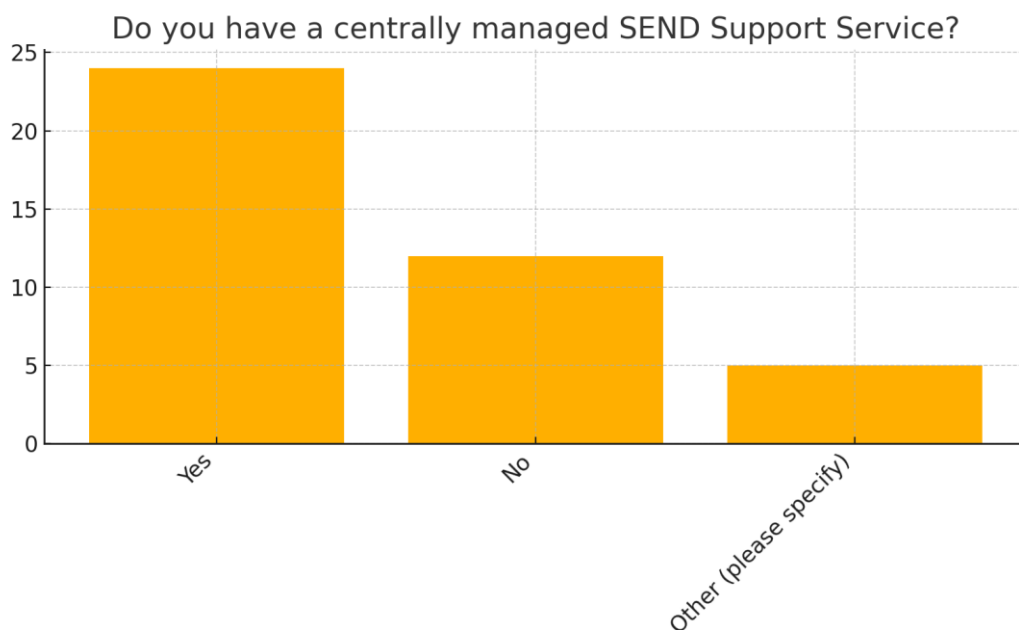


4. Organisational Structures and Service Models

The survey responses indicate a huge difference in service operating model administration with 31% describing themselves as LA employed SEND Case Workers, 14% as LA employed SEND Manager and 53% described their role as 'Other'. The respondents working to deliver outcomes on SEND caseloads include the roles below.



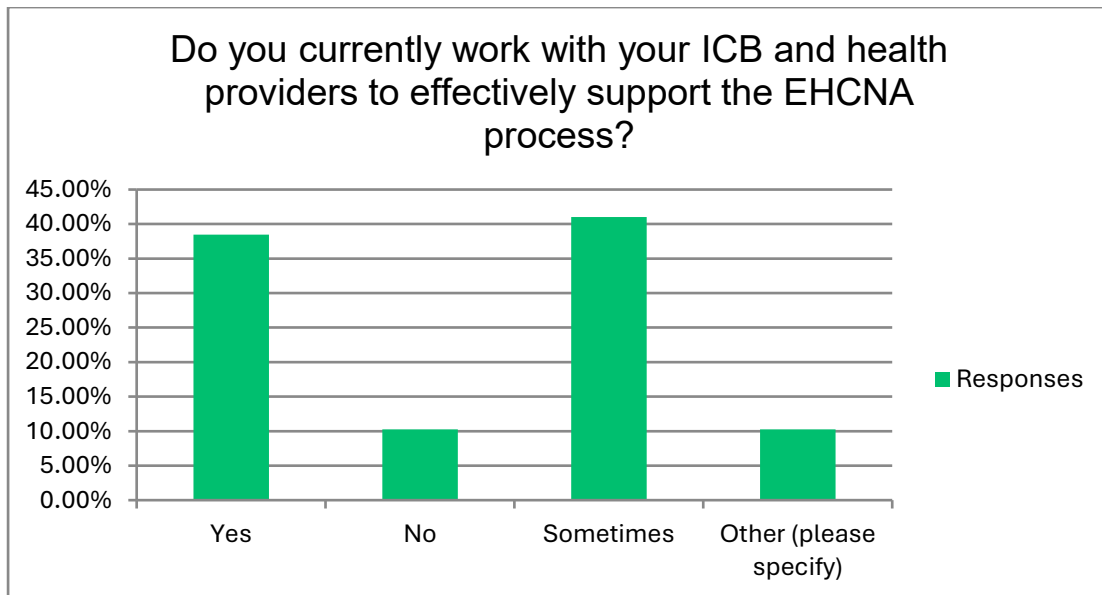
- **Centrally Managed SEND Support Services:**
 - **59% reported having one**, indicating a split in how support is coordinated across authorities.
- **Appeals and PFA (Preparing for Adulthood):**
 - Caseload of **ongoing appeals varies**, with inconsistent management roles.
 - **Only 53% have dedicated PFA roles**, despite known issues with transitions for young people aged 16–25.



Other responses included services which consist of Educational psychologists, Specialist Teacher Advisors, SALTs, OTs, Primary Behaviour Service, and Inclusion Support officers (attendance/exclusions).

- **Partnership Working:**

Engagement with health (ICBs) and education partners is generally strong across the region. Most staff report joint work around EHCNA processes. However, practice is not yet consistent. Respondents desire improved data-sharing, joint panels, and clarity of roles between agencies.

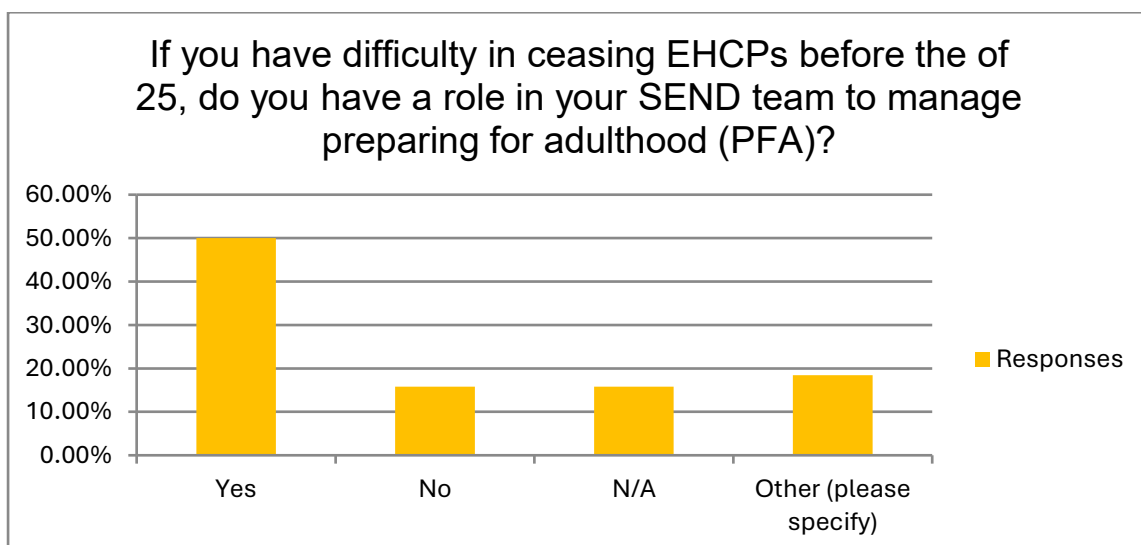


- Other responses include: -

'We work closely with our DCO and have recently formalised our Local Area Partnership to ensure strategically we are exploring this further. ICB jointly chairs this'.

'As part of our Quality Assurance work, we have recently created further links within the ICB. However, we already try to liaise effectively with Health colleagues'.

- Only **38% report effective collaboration with ICBs and health providers.**
- **43% say collaboration happens "sometimes"**, revealing room for improvement.



- **Other response include :-**

'Our EEO also assists with complex cases. Our Post 14 team as a whole has a good understanding of the areas we (SEND) can support and can signpost if needed'.

'We have a 14-25 SEN Casework team'.

'PFA strategic lead'.

5. Staff Experience and Wellbeing

Approximately 60% of respondents felt psychologically safe in their workplace. However, nearly 1 in 4 reported feeling unsafe or unsure. This affects morale, retention, and culture and signals a need to build more inclusive and supportive team cultures where staff can share concerns and contribute ideas without fear. The effectiveness of IT systems also impacts daily functioning — many staff cite partial or inadequate digital support as a barrier to their work.

- **Workload and Value:**

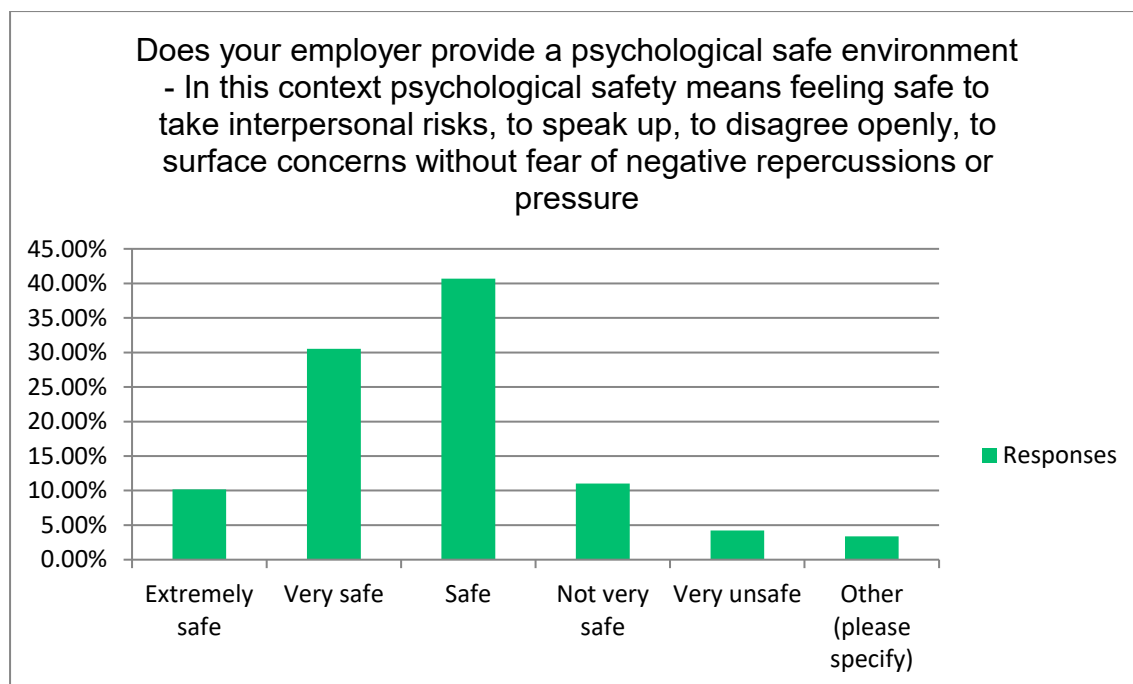
- Only **22% agree their workload is manageable.**
- Just **55% feel they are able to make a difference** in children's lives consistently.

- **Supervision and Psychological Safety:**

- **68% agree they get good supervision**, but:
 - **Only 8% feel “extremely psychologically safe”**
 - **15% feel “not very safe” or “very unsafe”**
- Reflective models are used in some LAs but are not widespread.

- **Pay and Remuneration:**

- Over **36% feel their pay doesn't reflect their role**, and **35% find their lifestyle “just about” comfortable.**
- Desired salaries cluster in the **£40k–59k range**, higher than current levels for many roles.



6. Recruitment, Retention, and Career Development

- **Attraction Factors:**

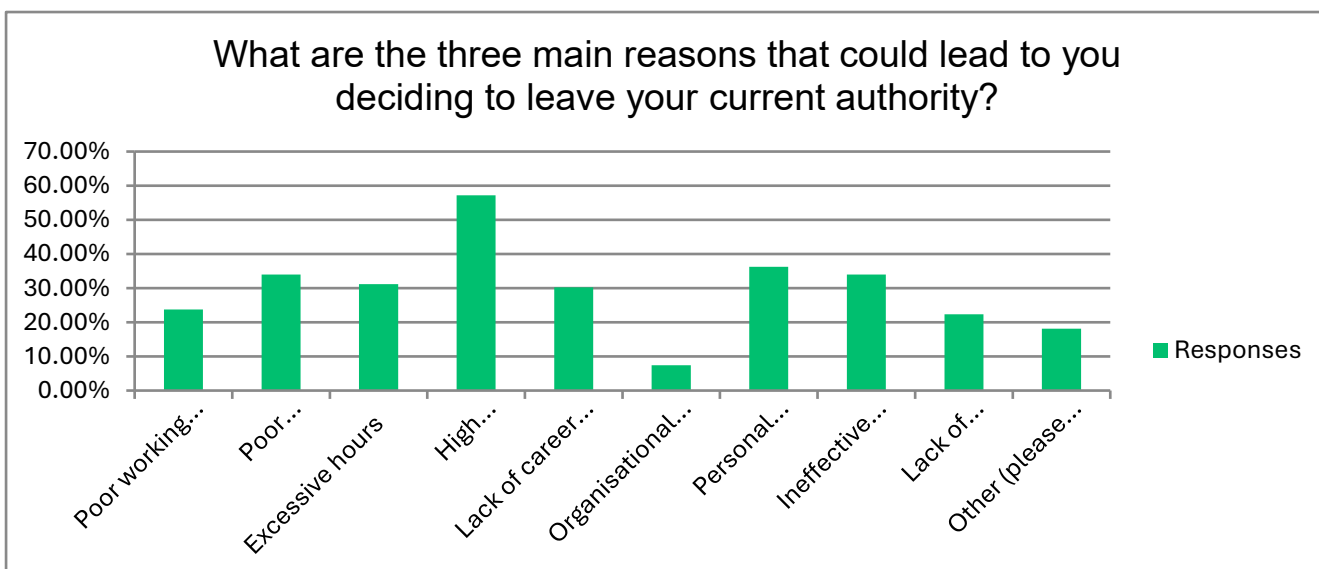
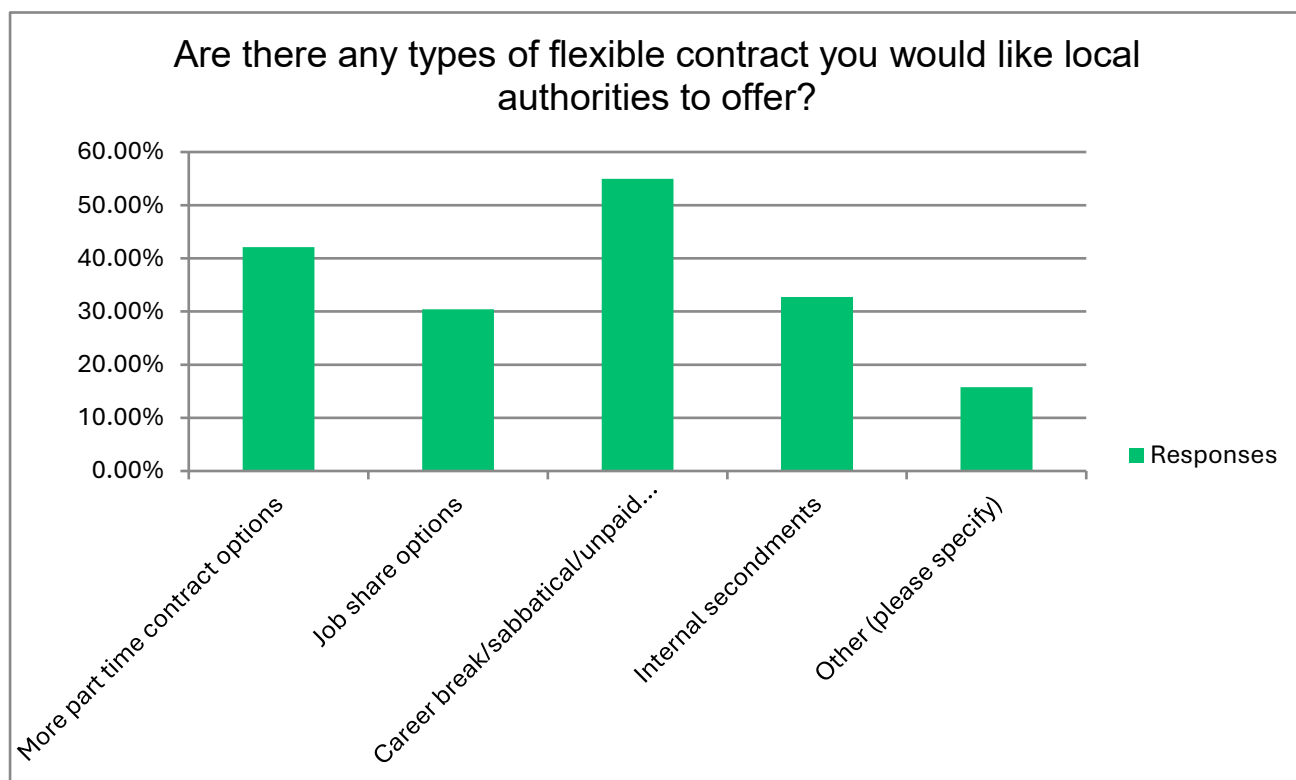
- Primary reasons for joining: **specific role (65%), location (39%), and flexible hours (34%).**

- **Retention Challenges:**

- **Top 3 reasons for leaving:**
 1. **High caseload/workload (57.5%)**
 2. **Poor management (33.8%)**
 3. **Personal circumstances (35.8%)**

- **Career Development:**

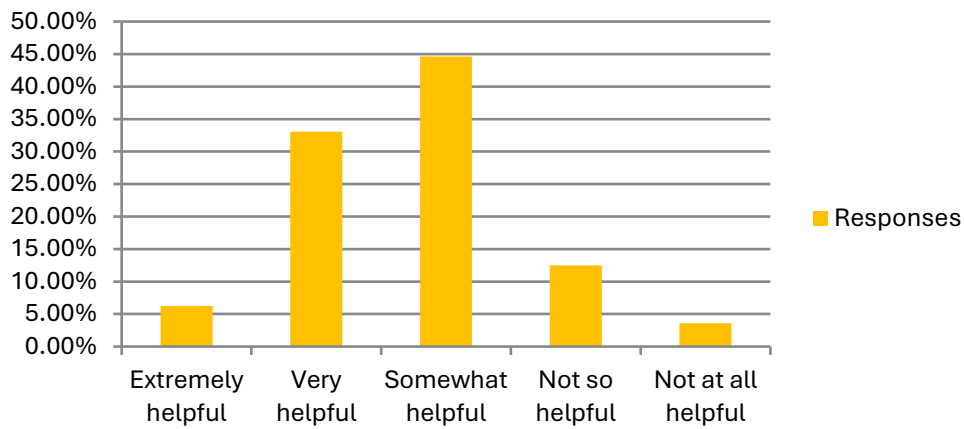
- 78% say **career progression and specialism matter** to them.
- 41% support regional induction programmes, yet 51% are **not interested** or unsure.



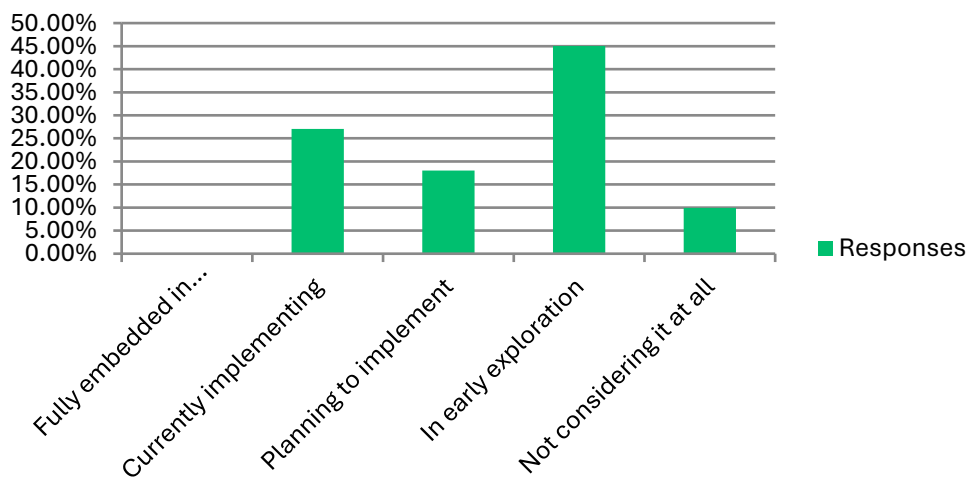
7. Digital Tools and AI Readiness

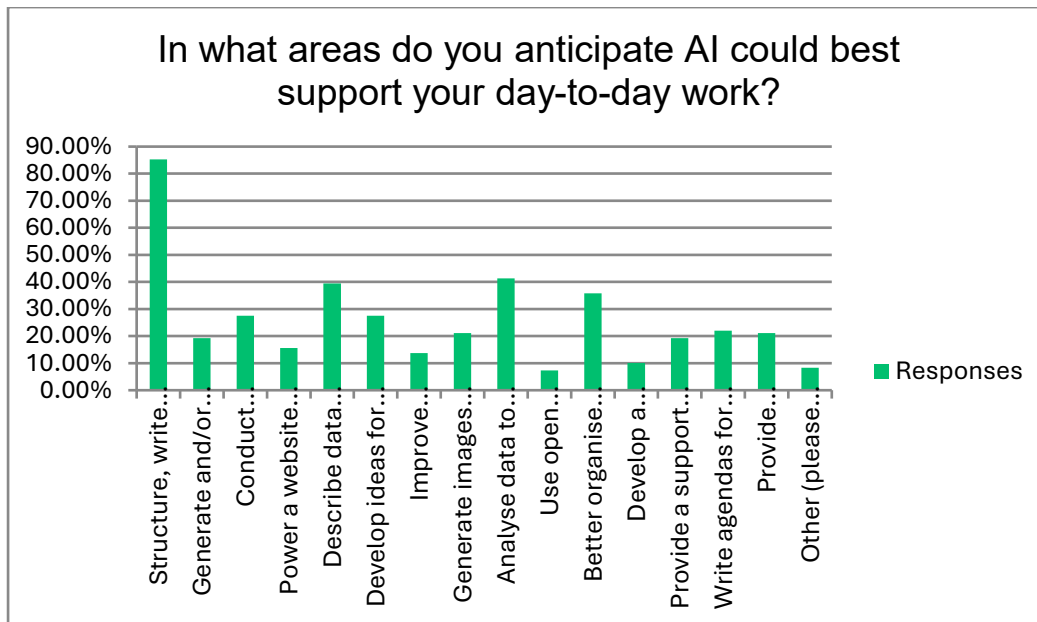
There is a strong appetite for exploring the use of AI to assist with routine administrative tasks, triage, and initial assessments. This signals readiness for innovation and presents a valuable opportunity for the SESLIP to coordinate regional pilots and knowledge exchange, ensuring responsible and effective implementation. However, clarity on AI governance, training, and risk management will be essential for safe implementation.

How well do information technology communications and other systems support you in your work?



At what stage is your organisation in, in exploring generative AI tools for your SEND workforce?





- **Adoption Levels:**

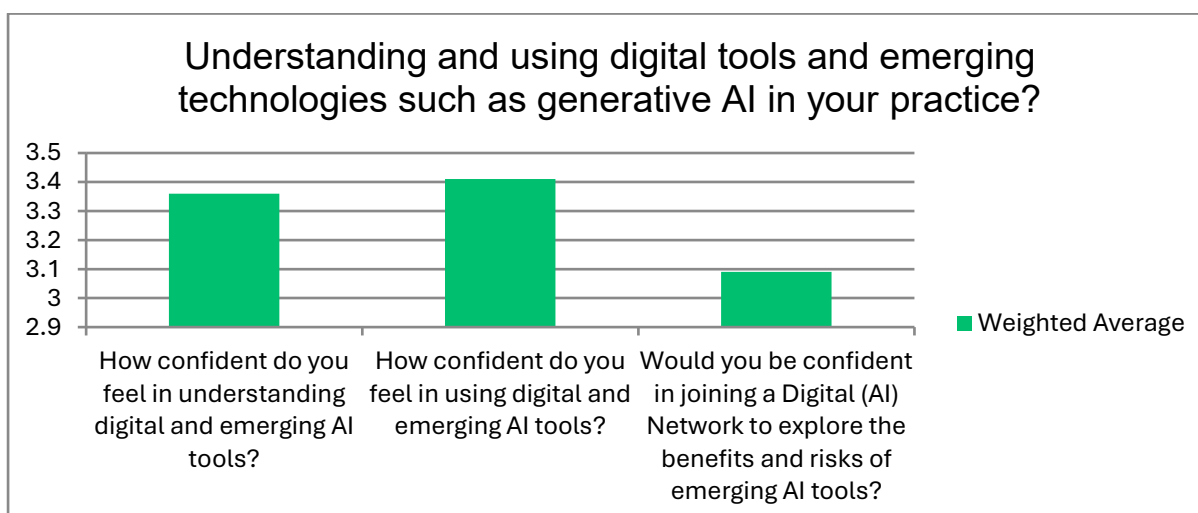
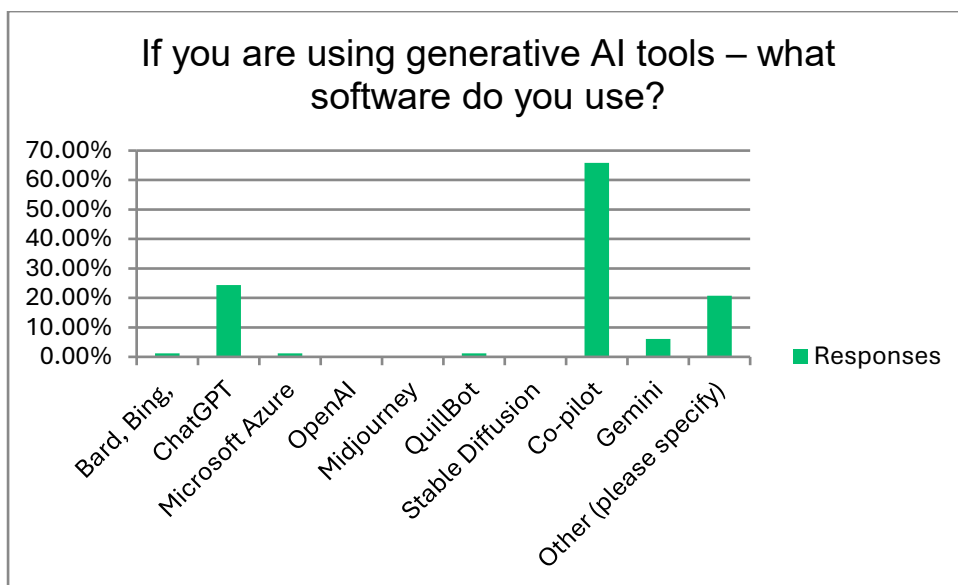
- Only **26% are actively implementing AI**, mostly in **document support and data analysis**.
- Low confidence: over **50% report limited or no confidence** in using AI tools.

- **Most-valued AI use cases:**

- Document drafting/editing (85%)
- Describing data & trends (41%)
- Summarising open text (35%)

- **43% exploring generative AI, mainly for:**

- Writing reports
- Analysing data
- Supporting communication
- Confidence remains low, with over half not confident using digital tools.



8. Overall Similarities Across the Region

- Commitment to working with families
- High workload and staffing pressures
- Inconsistent IT systems but openness to improvement
- High value placed on supervision, development, and flexible working
- Shared frustration with pay, recognition, and caseload burden

9. Overall Regional Differences

Surrey	Largest workforce presence, likely stronger central model
Brighton & Hove	High participation, mix of LA and school-based staff
West Berkshire	Reported positive practices, but smaller scale
Medway/Kent	Higher agency use and workforce gaps
Isle of Wight	Minimal representation, potential resourcing issues

10. Conclusion

The SEND workforce in the South East is committed and resilient. A coordinated regional approach to workforce planning, retention, and digital transformation will help reduce variation, support frontline staff, and improve outcomes for children and families.

11. Recommendations for Regional Improvement

A. Strengthen Workforce Planning

- Develop a **regional FTE and vacancy benchmark** to manage caseload and recruitment needs.
- Encourage cross-border workforce sharing (e.g. specialist staff, EPS support).

B. Standardise Supervision and Induction

- Implement a **regional supervision framework** (e.g. Reflective Practice Model).
- Develop a **regional induction programme**, focusing on role clarity and caseload management.

C. Invest in Retention

- Develop a **flexible contract model** regionally (e.g. part-time, job shares, sabbaticals).
- Improve career pathways with access to **training and specialism development**.

- Convene cross-area learning sets focused on reducing caseloads and boosting retention

D. Enhance Collaboration with Health and Social Care

- Strengthen **joint commissioning and integrated EHCNA pathways** with ICBs and NHS partners.
- Lead **cross-agency workforce planning forums** with health and education partners
- Assign dedicated roles for **Preparing for Adulthood** in every authority.

E. Embrace Digital Transformation

- Offer **AI literacy workshops** for staff across the region to support digital transformation strategies with regional diagnostics and investment templates.
- Pilot **secure generative AI-enabled tools** across 2–3 local areas with structured evaluation and shared learning to support admin-heavy workloads and reduce burnout

F. Support Organisational Culture

- Convene workforce learning collaboratives focused on **wellbeing, retention, and psychological safety**.
- Create **peer-led regional networks** for managers and caseworkers.
- Develop a **regional wellbeing framework** to improve psychological safety and staff satisfaction.

