



Reading Information Advice and Support Service for SEND

Annual Report, Academic Year 2019-2020

Background

Reading Information Advice and Support Service for SEND (Reading IASS) is a statutory service. In 2014 the remit of the service expanded to cover families with children or young people aged 0-25 (instead of 0-19 as previously), to include information, advice and support about some elements of health and social care and to cover the offering of information, advice and support to children and young people directly, as well as to parents and carers. In Reading, the service is delivered as part of Brighter Futures for Children (BFFC) and managed by the Head of Communications and Marketing. This ensures that the service is managed entirely separately from the SEND Team and other education services. Each local authority has an IASS, approximately three quarters of which are in-house, but working at arms' length to Department for Education (DfE) approved Minimum Standards. Reading IASS has a Management Group with a wide range of representation including service users, BFFC staff, Reading Families Forum and the voluntary sector. The Management Group reports to the SEND Strategy Group at BFFC.

Funding

During this academic year, the core service has been funded by BFFC. Since 2014, the DfE arranged for short-term funding to be offered to services via the Council for Disabled Children (CDC). Reading IASS bid for and was granted this funding each year. For the period from April 2019 to March 2020, a fund of £42,650 was granted on a payment by results basis, linked to a task order and our operational plan for the year. The funding was used for staff costs to enable us to carry out the work.

Until 1st July 2019 Reading IASS operated term time only, with four members of staff on term time contracts, one full time and three on part-time hours, each working 3 or 4 short days per week. From 1st July 2019 (and following a consultation) contracts were changed to allow the service to open all year round. Members of the team remain on term time only contracts but have a pot of annualised hours from which they cover busy times in term time and cover the school holidays on a rota.

In March 2020, we were informed that the service had been granted the maximum available sum of £27,882.35 for the financial year 2020-2021, subject to meeting key performance indicators, set out in the agreed task order. This funding continues to meet staff costs. We do not currently know what funding will be available for 2021-22.

Successes this academic year

1. In terms of our core work, we have supported service users with a total of 305 new cases and enquiries 01/09/2019-31/08/2020 as against 296 for the same period in the last academic year. This is quite surprising given that schools were closed for most children during the main lockdown period in March to June and this impacted on the number of new cases in that period. What it does reflect is that we were exceptionally busy from the start of the academic year, up to lockdown and we have also been very busy in July.

Most of our cases have involved one or more of the following: serious breakdown in communication with education provider, safeguarding/child protection issues, families with complex difficulties, repeated exclusion from school, part-time timetables or students proving hard to place in an appropriate setting. It is important to consider the cumulative effect of our case load – many of our cases involve matters that can take many months, or even years to reach a resolution, so new cases are not simply replacing old.

As in the previous year, there have been many service users wishing to take a legal route to resolving their issues. Service users are often coming to us better informed about their rights and wanting help to exercise them. We support and encourage service users to try to come to an agreement with BfFC, but this is not always achieved at the time of the deadline for appeal. One consequence of the increased tribunal work is that the team is better informed about how to support service users with such cases. As part of the consultation process last year, one member of the team is now our Tribunal Lead, tasked with keeping the team informed on developments and ensuring that we have relevant training. All members of the team can therefore carry out this type of work. We have recently added an extra category to our database. This allows us to record as a new case if we start a formal tribunal application and whether it is advice and support only or representation (which is offered if the parent is not able to manage the process themselves). We have also opened a separate category where we support with formal complaints (either against the education provider or BfFC).
2. Our website remains a valuable resource and an important way for us to demonstrate that we are an arm's length service. In February 2020 our new refreshed website launched, and it has had a lot of positive feedback. It is helpful for us to be able to direct service users to our resources page which provides them with basic information about SEN Support, EHCPs etc. We have added information for young offenders, advice on choosing a school and a glossary of terms. We will be working on the website to consider feedback received and we will also add a page for children and young people who are looked after.
3. In February we launched our Reading IASS Facebook page. This has steadily increased likes and follows and is a useful way to spread the word about our service offer and share information relevant to the SEND community.
4. Reading IASS has a stand-alone database as our service is confidential. Data is not shared with Brighter Futures for Children staff unless there is a safeguarding concern or a legal obligation to share. We now routinely use an initial data capture sheet when taking a first phone call from a new service user. This prompts us to ask key questions

which ensure more consistency of data on our database. Key data from our database reports this year includes the following information:

- The number of service users accessing the service in the period 1/9/19-31/8/20 was 355. This shows that several cases from the previous year have continued into this year when you compare with the number of new cases above.
 - We have recorded referrals from a wide range of sources this year including other parents, the voluntary sector, Social Services, the SEND team, Schools, Health, Family Support Workers, the ASD Adviser, other Brighter Futures for Children services and those with whom BFfC has a service level agreement (such as the Family Information Service). Many parents return to us, having used the service in the past, so are recorded as self-referrals.
 - Most of our cases involve school age children, with slightly more primary than secondary. We support a smaller number of parent/carers of pre-school children and few in the 16-25 age range.
 - We are also working to improve our ethnic monitoring. Where this data has been recorded, we can see a good spread of service users identifying as being from a black African or Caribbean, Asian or mixed heritage group. We have this year also supported parents who have come from various European countries.
5. We had a stall at the Reading Families Forum Information Event in South Reading and at a Transition event, held at The Avenue School. Throughout the year we have spoken to groups of parents attending the Living with Autism course, running an extended session to include preventative work using a version of our Effective Communication course.
 6. Our Survey Monkey data to date (checked 9th September 2020) shows that parents are very satisfied with the service that we give (96.6%) and feel that our information, advice or support has made a great deal of difference to them (89.8%). They are extremely likely to recommend the service to others (98.3%). We have an extensive bank of compliments for this academic year via Survey Monkey and from parent emails. Some anonymous examples (taken as typed) from Survey Monkey 2019-20 can be seen below:

You guys have been amazing.

I'm now in a place where I have a diagnosis, an EHCP which is very detailed and fit for purpose, a great school and more importantly a happy child (most of the time). There is no way I would have been able to achieve any of this without Sarah's help. Without sounding dramatic she has changed our whole family's lives and given us a positive outlook again.

RISS were very helpful throughout the process of my son to secondary school . I have used them twice . Every time they made such a big difference to our lives . I don't know what would I do without you. I don't have enough words to say how thankful I am . You are the best x

It was great to have the knowledge that Lesley and Sarah and the team bring to educational challenges. They are always willing to listen and provide support via telephone and meetings. I recommend IASS Reading often.

This service is very useful to school system for parents who do know there rights about there children and to me. My son is now settled in school due to his case and is now exceeding in school. I don't know what I would of done without iass help I received.

Your help was invaluable in terms of support for me personally. I couldn't have navigated the way without your help.

As a foreigner and a single mum of two autistic children I had no idea about certain rules at school in UK. I needed some knowledge and advice. Thanks to Reading IASS I achieved it all. Most of all I am more self confident now and know what to do if there is a challenging or difficult situation. I am extremely grateful for all advice and support I have been given. I know that I can rely on IASS in the future if I ever needed any advice.

Lesley was a god send, helped me immensely

Amazing service, they have made such an impact on my mine's and my son's life, without them I don't know what I would of done there advice and support has been outstanding, until now I have not heard of IASS and I'm so grateful I was put in contact with them

This service has been extremely helpful to me. I have used the service before and was able to return and have the same person help me-which made life easier as the person was familiar with my case. They supported me above and beyond. excellent member to have on the team.

Thank you all so much for extra guidence and support. Much appreciated. I didn't feel along.

7. The IASS Team Manager has contributed strategically through participation in the SEND Strategy Group, Strand 2 and 4 Working Group, the Autism Board and working with Reading Families Forum.
8. We have four volunteers. They have different strengths and differing availability, but we use them as much as we can, taking into account their interests and their geographical location when allocating work. We have had some excellent feedback from service users and our Volunteer Coordinator makes sure that she trains/supervises and updates the volunteers.
9. Following the successful funding bid and since the start of the new financial year in April 2020, the IASS Team Manager has been working on the agreed tasks that form part of the Operational Plan for the funding bid. She was able to report in July that some progress has been made in all areas of the work, despite the challenges created by Covid-19. All the funding for the financial year 2019-20 was received without deductions.
10. From July 2019, one member of the team has been designated the Children and Young People Lead. During the last academic year, she held a session for young people in one of the Reading secondary schools, with a view to carrying out further work there. She also held a meeting with another school and had planned dates for work in the school when lockdown happened.
11. We have been widening our contacts and have joined a team meeting for one of the Children Looked After teams. We have also arranged to meet the School Nurse team and to do some work with trainee teachers around working with parents of children with SEND.

The Impact of Covid-19

1. In terms of our response to COVID-19, all members of the team have laptops with remote access, and all have mobile phones, so we were well placed to operate from home. The helpline for the service is operated on a rota, so the only change was that we needed to operate on a call back basis. We took part in some training from Global Mediation about how the company would conduct virtual mediation and members of the team attended virtual training around the legal changes enacted as a result of the pandemic. Service users have been supported in virtual formal and informal mediation meetings with the SEND Team and in school meetings, including annual review meetings, exclusion hearings and meetings to resolve disagreement. One parent has been supported in a virtual 1st Tier Tribunal hearing and two in virtual transport appeals. The message on our helpline and given out via social media and through the local offer is that it is business as usual. In terms of challenges, there were some around outdated technology, but they have gradually been being resolved over lockdown.
2. It has been necessary to reconsider our development of our children and young people work, as our CYP Lead was unable to meet groups of young people in schools as she had planned. We have developed a CYP survey through SurveyMonkey and this is being shared by education providers and other local routes. The idea behind this is to gather information to inform service delivery, but also to raise awareness of our service.
3. For nearly 2 months we had one less member of the team available for work.
4. We do not yet know when and how we will return to the office, or indeed to face to face meetings in schools. For the moment, we are managing with a combination of creative approaches and these still produce outcomes for the people that we support. We have had lots of positive feedback during lockdown.

General Challenges this academic year

1. In common with other services, there has been ongoing pressure on the service this year due to Covid-19, as set out above.
2. The work that we do can be emotionally demanding, requiring a high level of peer support. We juggle and triage casework so that it does not become overwhelming and to ensure efficient management. Many cases do not have a clear path and we work with service users and take advice from other team members to find the best way forward. This has been slightly more challenging with remote working, but we have managed to keep in constant contact, so nobody is left unsupported with a case.
3. As has always been the case, we do not advertise ourselves as offering an emergency service, but many of the situations that arise for the parents that we support require a very swift response. This is particularly true of permanent exclusion cases but can also be the case when a parent has experienced a breakdown in their relationship with their educational setting or if they contact us very close to a legal deadline. This can put pressure on a small service. Many service –users who contact us for advice have also wanted to discuss their general concerns about Covid safety in the educational setting.

4. The level of tribunal- related work remains a concern. Some parents can be determined to take this path but also need a lot of help to navigate the system. For those without recourse to private legal advice and not eligible for legal aid, we are often the only service able to support. We are now much clearer in explaining to parents what they can expect from our service, as we have to concentrate the most support on those who have the greatest need. Although tribunal work can put pressure on a small team, it is an important part of our work. IASS Network legal advice makes it clear that this this type of work is expected of IAS services and the government funded Level 3 training for IASS Services focuses mainly on tribunal work.
5. We still find it difficult to fully engage with children and young people directly, although we hope to be able to return to more of this type of face to face work as schools fully reopen.

Service trends

As we come to the end of the academic year, it is a good time to reflect on any trends we have seen in our casework. This year has been largely in line with previous years in that many of our cases have been where parents have been expressing a high degree of dissatisfaction and where there have been issues of breakdown in communication with education providers.

This year there were 58 cases put under the category of dissatisfaction. There has been an increase in refusal to assess cases (23, compared with 19 the previous year) but cases around non-attendance have decreased slightly (12 where this has been entered as the main reason for the referral, compared with 17 the previous year). These are usually where a child or young person has become too anxious to attend school. The decrease might relate to the fact that many children remained at home during lockdown. We had 23 requests for help with a request for a needs assessment, which is probably a fraction of those received by the SEND Team. 20 cases were around helping with secondary transfer and 15 were changing school (which would be in-year). 15 were around exclusion and 13 issues to do with transport. The rest of the cases were spread across a variety of our other categories. There are several of these, including bullying, discrimination, home education and managed move.

Our approach is, as always, to try to work with the educational setting and/or BFFC to build bridges and negotiate solutions acceptable to all. Sometimes service users do not wish to engage with that process and then we will advise them of their rights and options and support them with what they wish to do.

Conclusion

We are proud of what has been achieved this year. In the face of challenging circumstances, we have adapted our service delivery and maintained our usual response times. We have kept service users informed via our Facebook page. Our feedback remains strong and our database records good outcomes for many children and young people. We are committed to providing high quality information, advice and support to our service users and to continue to improve our service.

Lesley Chamberlain

IASS Team Manager

September 2020