



## **Reading Information Advice and Support Service for SEND**

### **Annual Report, Academic Year 2020-2021**

#### **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 line managed by the Head of Corporate Communications & 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, Health 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 2020 to March 2021, a fund of £27,882.35 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, which involved planned activities including agreeing a service level agreement, further work on our website and social media, work to continue to expand the reach of the service, developing our knowledge of tribunal work and building on our work with children and young people.

In March 2021, we were informed that the service had been granted the maximum available sum of £10,000 for the financial year 2021-2022, 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 may be available for 2022-23.

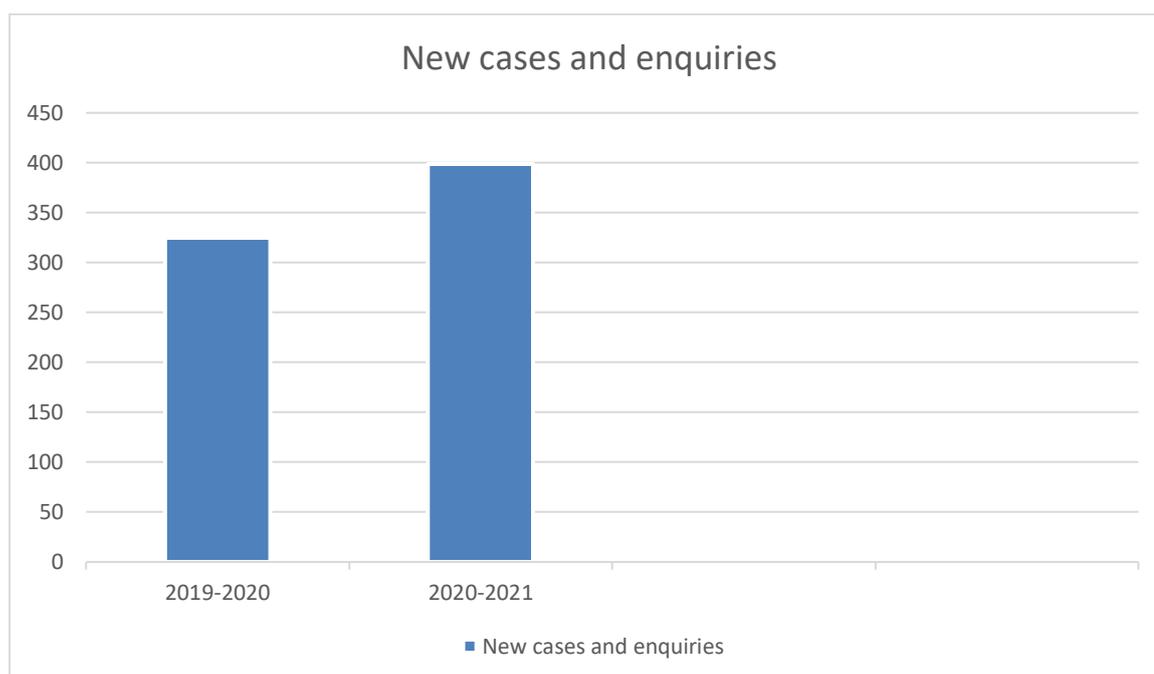
Following the successful funding bid and since the start of the new financial year in April 2021, the IASS Team Manager has been working on the agreed tasks that form part of the Operational Plan 2021-22 produced for the funding bid. These are all based around digital resources, including videos and on-demand webinars.

After successful reporting on outcomes, all the funding for the financial year 2020-21 was received without deductions.

## Successes this academic year

### Casework data

In terms of our core work, we have supported service users with a total of 399 new cases and enquiries 1 September 2020 to 31 August 2021 as against 325 for the same period in the last academic year, representing an increase of nearly 23%.



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.

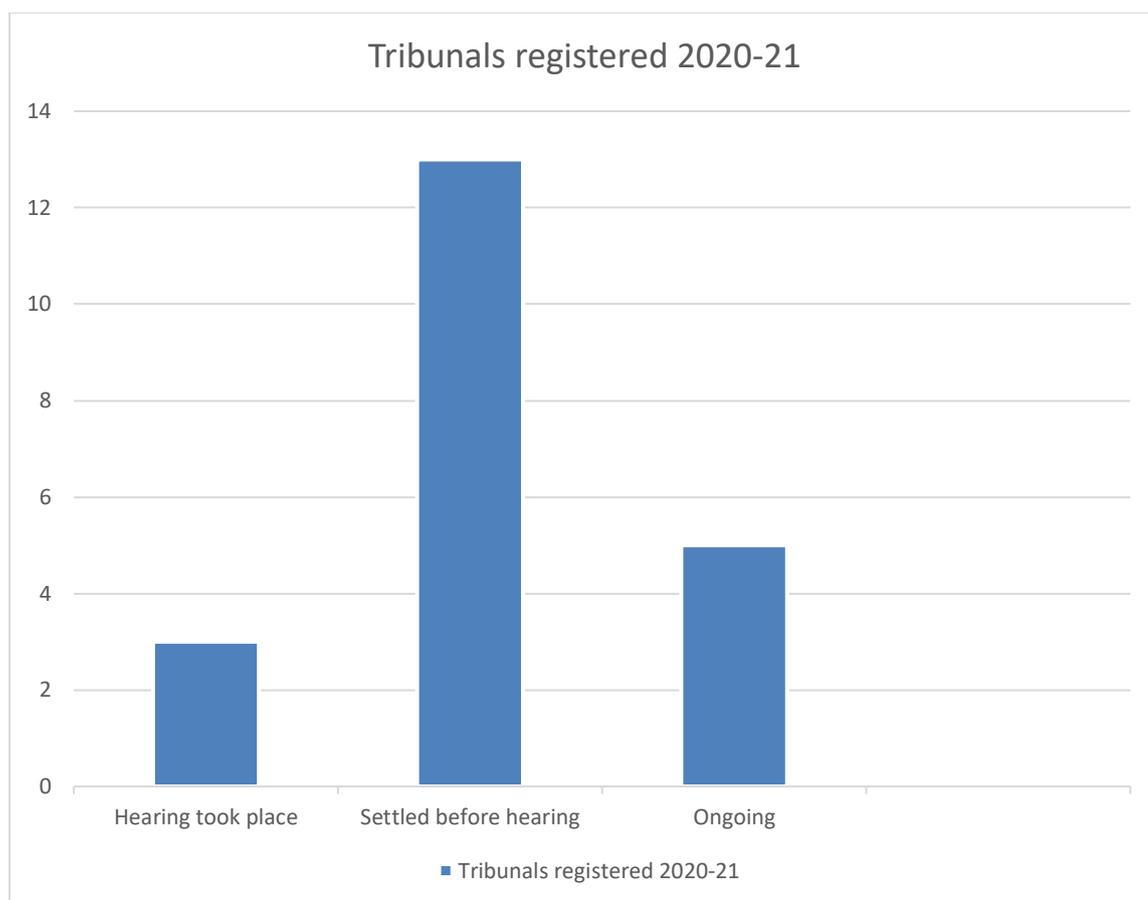
It is important to consider the cumulative effect of our case load – many of our cases involve matters that can take many months, or even years to reach a resolution, so new cases are not simply replacing old.

This year there have been many more service users wishing to take a legal route to resolving their issues. If you analyse the cases where we have supported with tribunal applications the majority are mainly concerned with school placement, where the service user is seeking a special school place or a different special school place from the one named by BfFC. The rest of the cases are around refusal to assess or refusal to issue a plan.

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, either through informal meetings or mediation, but this is not always possible to achieve at the time of the deadline for appeal.

Tribunal work has been high due to the lack of special school places locally and we hope this will ease as more provision is expected to be available over the coming year. Our tribunal lead has offered peer support and kept us up to date with the National Trial and how it may be relevant to our casework.

Our hope is always that tribunal cases will be settled without the need for a hearing. Of the tribunal cases registered this year, 3 went to all the way to a hearing; 2 where agreement could not be reached and the third where agreement had been reached but too late to avoid a brief hearing for the consent order. In 13 other cases agreement was reached after proceedings had been issued but before the hearing. 5 were ongoing at time of writing.



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. Key data from our database reports this year includes the following information:

The number of service users accessing the service in the period 1 September 20-31 August 21 was 453. 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. This year there were nearly double the number of primary cases compared with the number of secondary. We support a smaller number of parent/carers of pre-school children and few in the 16-25 age range.

We continue to improve our ethnic monitoring, although this information is not totally complete. Where this data has been recorded, we can see that after the largest group (those identifying as White British), the next largest group that we support has been those who are Asian or Asian British, followed by Mixed White and Black Caribbean and then Black or Black British.

Our data shows that we continue to use our volunteers to support parents and they provide valuable assistance to the operation of the service.

Our CYP Lead has started to do some direct work with two children, and she is hoping that this work will contribute towards a process of re-engagement with school.

### **Communication**

We have added information to our website to make it more accessible, with easy read versions of our policies and factsheets. We also made some changes based on feedback from stakeholders. The website is regularly improved and updated, with bright and engaging photographs to make the site visually appealing.

Our Reading IASS Facebook page has steadily increased likes and follows and we have worked with the Communications and Marketing Team to create some visually appealing standard Facebook posts to help to increase engagement over the coming year.

### **Feedback from service users**

This year we stopped using SurveyMonkey and have moved to Microsoft Forms for obtaining feedback from service users.

Our Forms data to date (checked 10 September 2021) shows that parents are very satisfied with the service that we give (5/5 average rating) and feel that our information, advice or support has made a great deal of difference to them (5/5 average rating). They are extremely likely to recommend the service to others (5/5 average rating).

We have an extensive bank of compliments for this academic year via our survey and from parent emails. Some anonymous examples (taken as typed) from this academic year can be seen below:

*I found [ ] advice really helped me understand more about the EHCP, which was so helpful and it was impartial. It has really made a bit difference and helped us know what to do.*

*Really helpful and gave me the confidence to submit my EHCP request*

*I recommend your service to parents on a weekly basis!*

*You are making quite a daunting and lonely journey feel less frightening and so much more supported*

*I think you're both truly awesome!*

*We just cannot thank you enough for your tireless support, it has been such amazing support.*

*I take this opportunity to thank you very much again for the valuable support you are providing to us.*

### **Strategic input**

The IASS Team Manager has contributed strategically through participation in the SEND Strategy Group, the SEND Communications Group (and working sub-group), Strand 2 and 4, the Autism Board and working with Reading Families Forum. She has also held regular update meetings with the SEND Team Manager.

### **The Impact of Covid-19**

In terms of our response to COVID-19, all members of the team continue to work from home. During this year there has been a change in the technology available to us, enabling us to answer our landlines via our laptops. This has enabled us to live answer calls to our helpline again.

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. We have been able to offer support in First Tier Tribunal hearings and transport appeals.

The use of virtual meetings and hearings has the advantage that we can do more because we do not have to factor in time for travel. It has also helped us to manage the increase in case load this year. Some meetings are hybrid, with parents either present in school or on the phone and others joining virtually.

These meetings can produce good outcomes for the people that we support. We have had plenty of positive feedback during this year that supports our view that this is an effective way to work.

### **General Challenges this academic year**

#### **Staffing challenges**

For personal reasons one member of the team had to take several weeks off work. In a small team this creates challenges in terms of managing casework and particularly new cases coming in.

The need for some members of the team to juggle COVID-related childcare issues with their workload meant that we all needed to take a flexible approach. The combination of this with people's part-time working patterns meant that it could be difficult to find a time when we were all available to meet as a team. This situation has now eased, and we are able to meet regularly.

The work that we do can be emotionally demanding and complex, requiring a high level of peer support. We supported each other through email and telephone calls throughout the year.

### **Caseload**

The increase in new referrals by nearly 23% has kept the service very busy. We have been able to manage this through use of our volunteers for some meetings and because we have not had to travel to join meetings, thus freeing up more time in the working day. Two members of the team have been permitted to temporarily increase their hours to help manage the caseload.

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 can put pressure on a small service, but we successfully triage and prioritise our workload.

### **Increase in tribunal work**

The level of tribunal- related work became a concern this year, with many parents wanting to appeal for places at special schools. Often these were parents who had been waiting for a place for their child for some time.

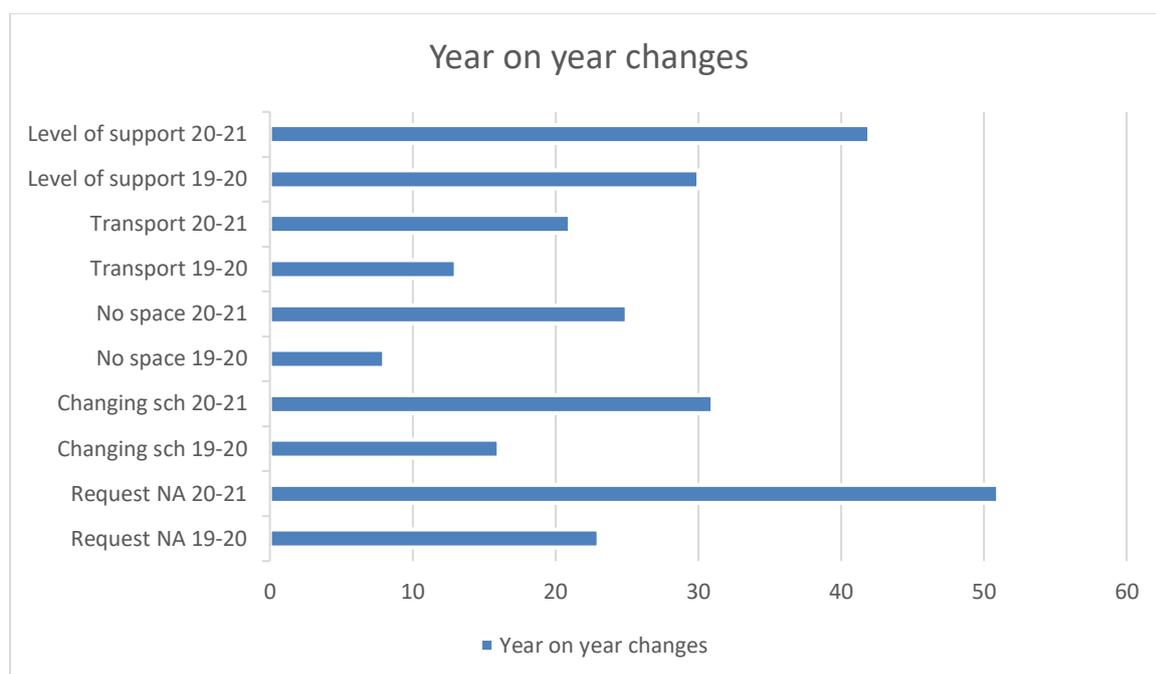
Some parents can be determined to take this path but also need a lot of help to navigate the system. For those without recourse to private legal advice and not eligible for legal aid, we are often the only service able to support. We clearly explain to parents what they can expect from our service. We cannot make decisions for them, and we are not acting as legal advisers. Even those parents who have the greatest need must be actively involved in their case.

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 type of work is expected of IAS services and the government funded Level 3 training for IASS Services focuses mainly on tribunal work.

### **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 we have seen a significant increase in requests for a needs assessment, 51 cases compared with 23 the previous year. Cases opened under the category of changing school have increased from 16 last year to 31 this year and cases where there is no space at special school have seen a large increase from 8 last year to 25 this year. Transport cases have increased from 13 to 21 and cases involving the level of support in education have increased from 30 to 42.



The rest of the cases were spread across a variety of our other categories. There are several of these, including bullying, discrimination, home education, managed move and tribunals (discussed above).

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 that our service continues to develop and grow, supporting more service users both directly and indirectly via our website and Facebook. We are responsive to the individual needs of the people that we support and keep to our response times. 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 2021**