



Reading Information Advice and Support Service for SEND

Annual Report, Academic Year 2021-2022

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.

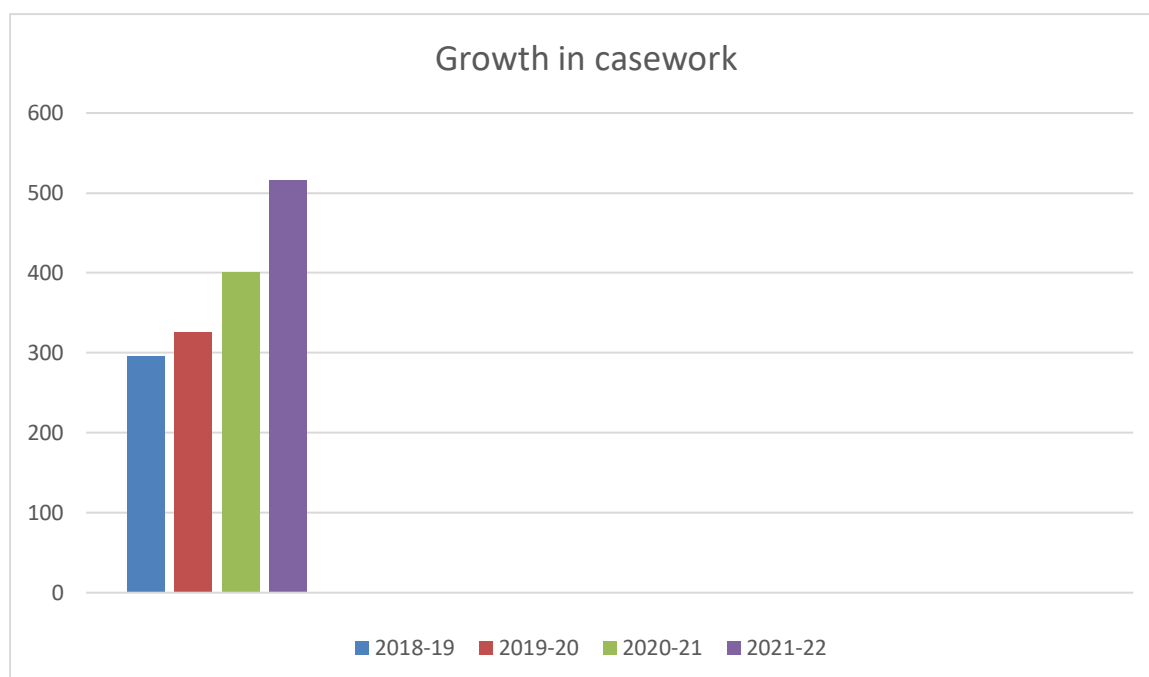
For the period from April 2021 to March 2022, a fund of £10,000 was granted on a payment by results basis, linked to a task order and our operational plan for the year. The funding was used for staff costs to enable us to carry out the work, which involved further work on our social media page and work to continue to expand the reach of the service by way of videos and webinars. This funding continued to meet staff costs and the £10,000 was received in full, following the reporting cycles. There was no further funding available for the financial year 2022-23.

The service was also supported by a single contribution to funds by the NHS Berkshire West Clinical Commissioning Group. The contribution was £10,000.

Successes this academic year

Casework data

In terms of our core work, we have supported service users with a total of 516 new cases and enquiries 1 September 2021 to 31 August 2022 as against 400 for the same period in the last academic year, representing an increase of 29% from the previous year. The chart below shows the progressive increase in casework over the last four academic years.



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.

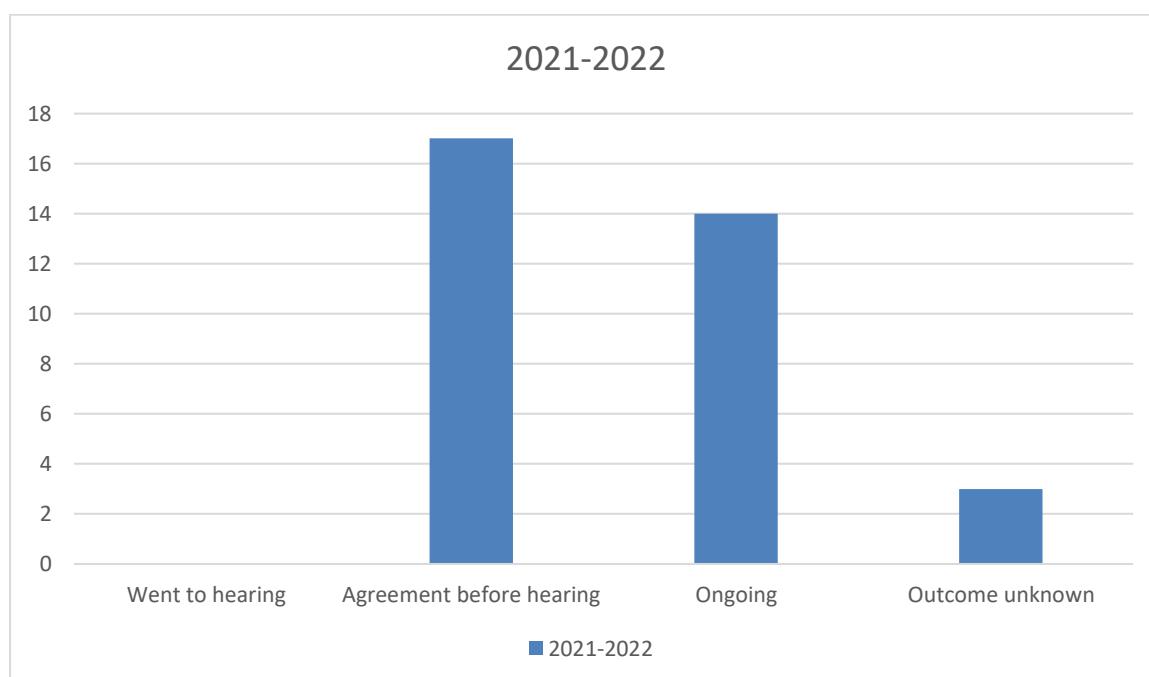
This year there have been many more service users wishing to take a legal route to resolving their issues. If you analyse the cases where we have supported with tribunal applications the majority are mainly concerned with school placement, where the service user is seeking a special school place or

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. Many parents and carers have children who are working in informal resource bases within mainstream schools and have been waiting a long time for a special school place to become available. We had hoped that an increase in specialist provision would reduce the number of cases, but this has not happened, perhaps partly because there was a delay in opening a new special school.

Our hope is always that tribunal cases will be settled without the need for a hearing. Of the tribunal cases registered this year, none have resulted in a hearing. In 17 cases agreement was reached just before proceedings were issued or after proceedings had been issued but before the hearing. 14 were ongoing at time of writing. In 3 cases we are unaware of the outcome.



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 2021-31 August 2022 was 583. 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 BfC 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. Again 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 a 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 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.

Communication

We have added information to our website to make it more accessible. This includes video content and webinars, including information for children and young people. The content has been well-received by our stakeholders, and we signpost to the webinars when we are supporting people who have little or no knowledge of the SEND system. The website is regularly improved and updated, with bright and engaging photographs to make the site visually appealing. Over a period of 12 months, we had over 3,500 visits to our site.

Our Reading IASS Facebook page has steadily increased likes and follows and we continue to use the visually appealing standard Facebook posts created with the Communication and Marketing Team to help to increase engagement.

Feedback from service users

We use Microsoft Forms for obtaining feedback from service users when a piece of work has come to an end.

Our Forms data to date (checked 21 September 2022) shows that parents are very satisfied with the service that we give (4.93/5 average rating) and feel that our information, advice or support has made a great deal of difference to them (4.87/5 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:

Always found someone there, when ever I need

Highly appreciated your service and the way you are dealing with us. Thank you 🙏

*Ever so helpful and informative and it was so easy to get in touch with and I cannot explain words how helpful and a pleasant experience ***** and ***** and her team made it..thank you so much..like I said words are not enough but a 5 star service definitely*

I wish to thank you for all the help I got from you when it was so stressful on me concerning my child, you are the best

*Thank you for you're help it was very helpfull to recive so much care and advice for whole family and special for ******

*Thank you so much ***** for your support that enabled us to be more confident and informed when dealing with the school.*

I honestly can't thank you enough. You have been incredible, well that's an understatement.

You have been such a blessing to us since you came 'onboard' our daughter's issue. It's been very difficult for me to put my thoughts into words without being stupidly emotional, so it feels good not to be misunderstood and supported.

Thanks for all your help, without your help I Don't think I would of able to do the appeal. You're doing a brilliant job, I really appreciate it, thank you for all your work that you put in.

Strategic input

The IASS Team Manager has contributed strategically through participation in the SEND Communications Group (and working sub-group) SEND 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.

Use of technology to support service delivery

Service users have been supported in virtual formal and informal mediation meetings with the SEND Team and in school meetings, including annual review meetings and meetings for resolving disagreements, pastoral support plan meetings and team around the child meetings. 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 as good outcomes for the people that we support as face-to-face meetings, so this is now our default way of working in order to manage our increasing numbers of new referrals. In a limited number of cases, we will carry out face –to-face meetings if there is a compelling reason to do so because of the needs of the service user or the nature of the meeting.

General Challenges this academic year

Staffing challenges

In a small team with a high caseload any staff sickness or other absence creates challenges in terms of managing casework and particularly new cases coming in.

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

Caseload

The increase in new referrals by 29% 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.

Many of the situations that arise for the parents that we support require a very swift response. This includes matters involving statutory deadlines and emergency situations such as permanent exclusion and children who are out of school. This can put pressure on a small service, requiring us to triage and prioritise our workload to ensure that those who are most in need of intensive support receive it.

Increase in tribunal work

The level of tribunal- related work set out above continued to be 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. We always work with the SEND Team to see if there is any way that the matter can be resolved in advance of an appeal being lodged. However, the pressure on special school places means that an offer can rarely be made until the matter has progressed further.

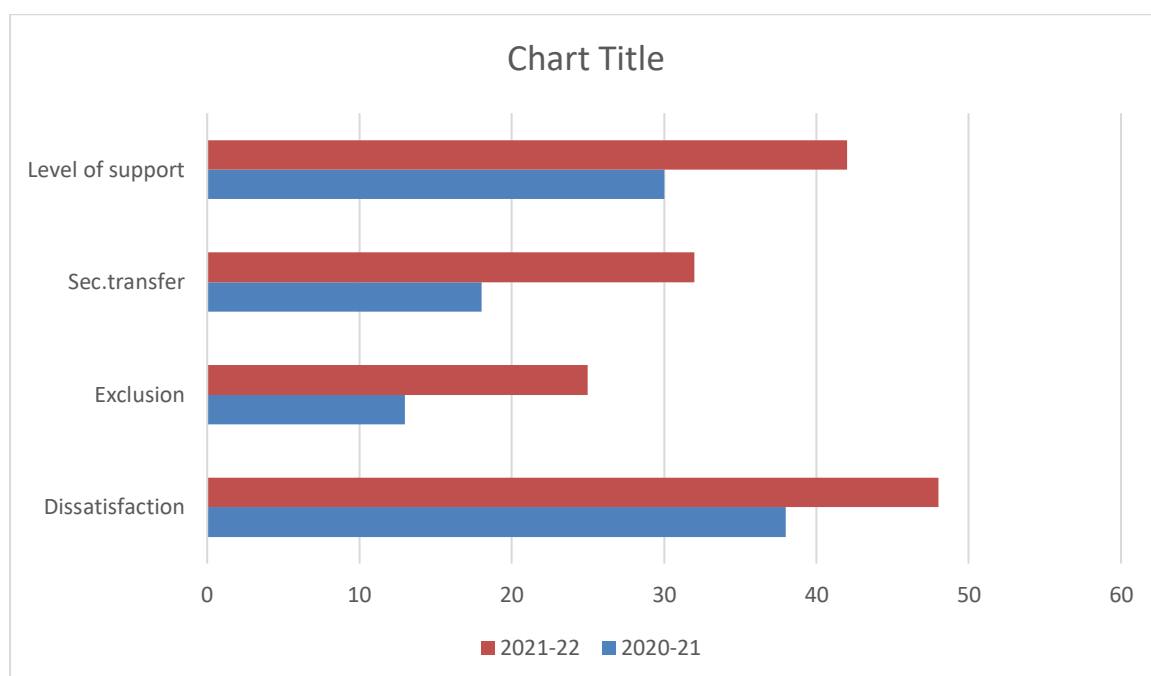
Some parents can be determined to take this path but also need a lot of help to navigate the system. For those without recourse to private legal advice and not eligible for legal aid, we are often the only service able to support. We clearly explain to parents what they can expect from our service. We 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 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. We have many categories of case recorded on our system and have already considered tribunal cases above. The following exercise has considered some of the categories where we have seen a larger increase than might have been expected.

This year we have seen a significant increase in cases involving dissatisfaction, 48 cases compared with 38 the previous year. Cases opened under the category of exclusion have increased from 13 last year to 25 this year and cases around secondary transfer from 18 to 32. Cases involving the level of support in education have increased from 30 to 42.



Our approach is, as always, to try to work with the educational setting and/or BfC 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 pleased that we are reaching more people, both in terms of direct casework but also through our digital resources. Although we face time pressures, we still respond within two working days. Our feedback remains strong and our database records good outcomes for many children and young

Classification: OFFICIAL

people. We are pleased to provide high quality information, advice and support to our service users and to continue to improve our service.

Lesley Chamberlain

IASS Team Manager

September 2022