



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

### **Annual Report, Academic Year 2022-2023**

#### **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.

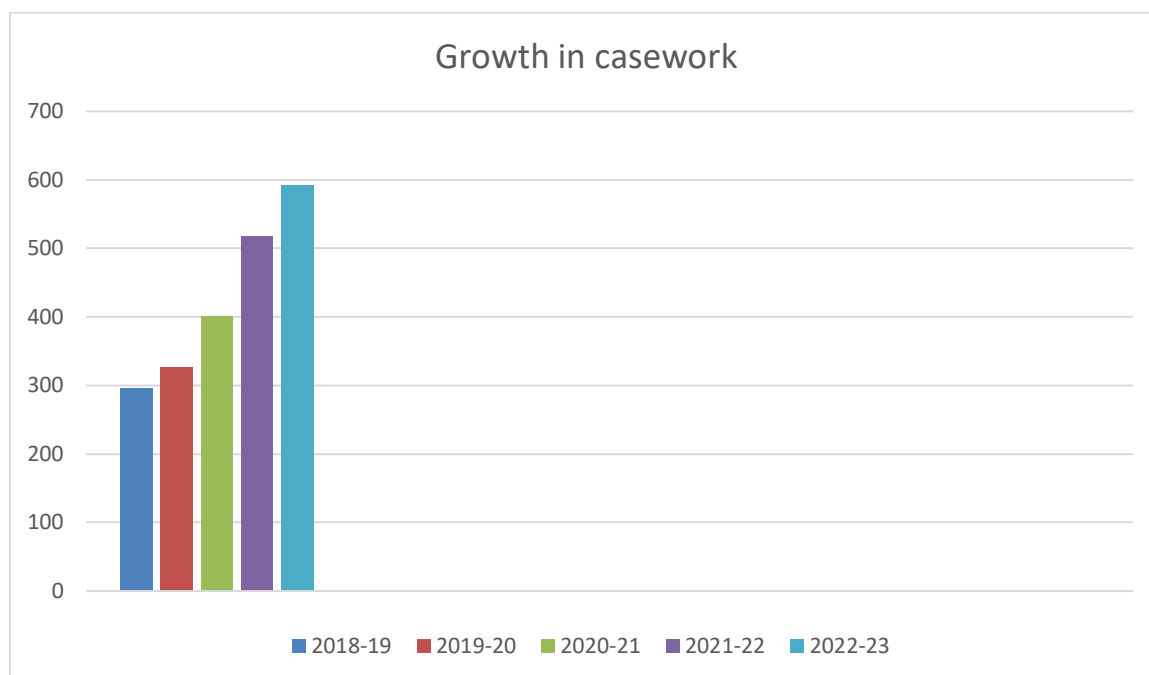
#### **Funding**

During this academic year, the core service has been funded by BFfC.

#### **Successes this academic year**

##### **Casework data**

In terms of our core work, we have supported service users with a total of 592 new cases and enquiries 1 September 2022 to 31 August 2023 as against 518 for the same period in the last academic year, representing an increase of over 14% from the previous year. The chart below shows the progressive increase in casework over the last five 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.

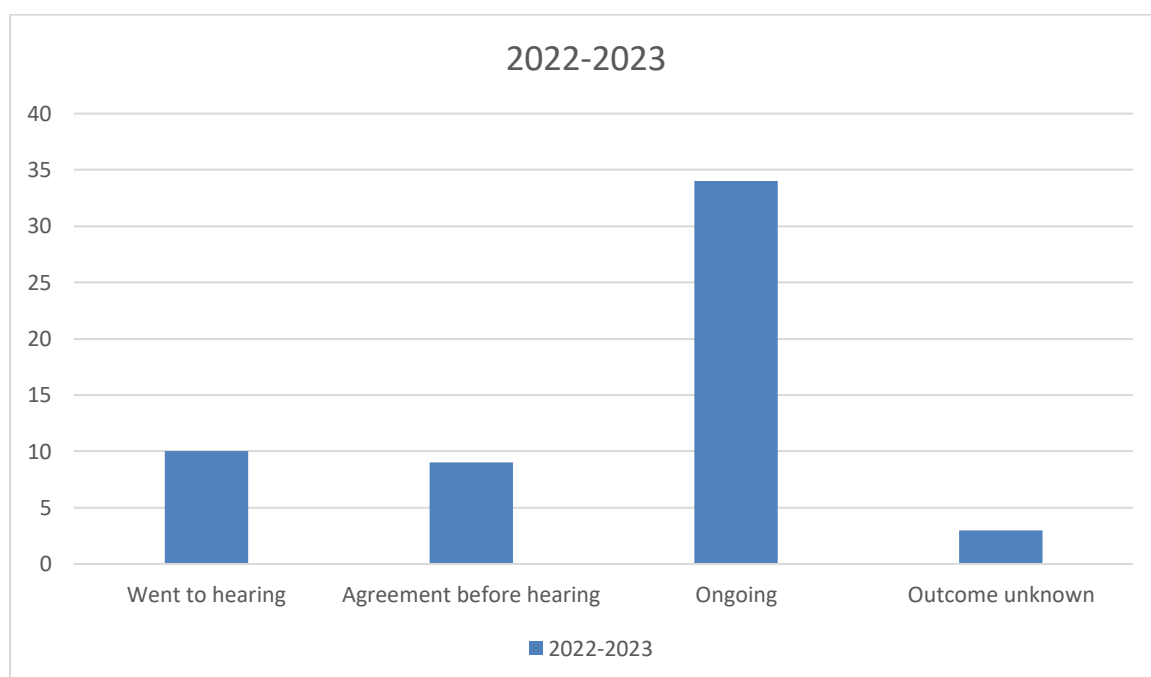
It is important to consider the cumulative effect of our case load – many of our cases involve matters that can take many months, or even years to reach a resolution, so new cases are not simply replacing old.

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 generally around refusal to assess or refusal to issue a plan. This year we have registered 56 new cases involving tribunal work. The figure for the academic year 2021-22 was 35, so this is a significant increase. This type of work is some of the most labour-intensive work that we do, particularly where parents have no access to IT except their phones, perhaps speak little English or have their own additional needs. In this situation parents can express their views as strongly as any other but need a very high level of support to exercise their rights. In these cases, we are liaising with the legal team and the tribunal on behalf of the parents. It is important that these parents have an equal opportunity to access their legal rights as others do who are more able to represent themselves.

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. We had hoped that there would be less cases this year given the new educational providers that have been entering the system, but so far this has not translated into a reduction. Service users seem less confident about the ability of mainstream schools to meet their children's needs and less willing to trust in the system to provide a solution within a timeframe that is acceptable to them. Some 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.

Our hope is always that tribunal cases will be settled without the need for a hearing. Of the tribunal cases registered this year, 10 went to a hearing. This did not necessarily mean that we attended the hearing. Some cases were managed by parents and support was not required; some hearings were paper hearings. In 9 cases agreement was reached just before proceedings were issued or after proceedings had been issued but before the hearing. 34 were ongoing at time of writing which reflects the length of time it takes for a hearing date and also the fact that there was a rush of cases in the last term. 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:

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, Admissions and Portage. Some have come because of finding our website. 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, 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 (usually at transition into primary) 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 adding pictures to our easy read policies. We have added important links to our page for children and young people and added more engaging material to our page for volunteers.

We continue to use the visually appealing standard Facebook posts created with the Communication and Marketing Team to help to increase engagement. We share information that may be of interest to our followers.

## **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 1 September 2023) shows that parents are very satisfied with the service that we give (4.96/5 average rating) and feel that our information, advice or support has made a great deal of difference to them (4.88/5 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:

1.This service is incredible, I couldn't have got through the EHCP Needs Assessment Request process without the advice and support from [ ]. And [ ] has also been phenomenal at giving help and advice about my son with SEN and issues with his school. I would highly recommend this service!

2.We have sought advice since September 2021 from IASS about making a parental request for an EHC needs assessment, and also how to work with school to make sure our son gets the SEN support he needs. [ ] supported us throughout and she was brilliant, guiding us through the process, advising how to approach each setback, sending resources as appropriate, always replying to our queries in a timely manner. An EHC needs assessment is now being carried out. We wouldn't have reached this outcome now without the support of IASS

3.We, parents of R express our gratitude to the IASS team, especially [ ] for the support and guidance that she had offered throughout my son's admission to school, applying for EHCP and then most importantly the application to special needs school. We had seen her tremendous knowledge and her willingness to support throughout.

4.The advice and information received has made a huge difference to a very difficult, time consuming and stressful process and we have been able to achieve a successful outcome without needed to take the process further.

5.I was advised to contact IASS due to mainstream school complications. From the second I got in touch I received the best support, guidance and advice. Following on from this I managed to get my son an EHCP and also a place in a special needs school. Without IASS I don't think I would have got this far. I can't thank them enough, they are simply amazing and I would highly recommend.

6.Having [ ]support has made a big difference to the progress I needed from my child's school.

7.Thank you so much for all of your help! Thank you for the meeting with [ ] School, thank you for help out with the EHCP, thank you communicate with [ ] School, council and [ ] college!

Thanks a million!

8.I would just like to say thank you for attending today meeting it like you waved a magic wand and everything I been asking for and they had said no to previously there now saying yes to.

9.I am so so happy and I never would have had the details without your help. So thank you so so much!!

10.I want say thank you because with your help Spourt and hard work today M start [school]. Today his first day .

Stay blessed.  
Thanks once again.

11. Again so thankful for so many things I was not aware of you put them in perspective for me. The department is truly lucky to have such an empathetic person who actually speaks to parents with concerns at such a humble and human level.

12. You have been such a blessing to us since you came 'onboard' our daughter's issue.

13. 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.

14. You came to my rescue when I was so broken. You are such an amazing person and a great asset to your team.

I had no idea how or where to get support with these issues and after speaking to you the first time myself, I knew you were sent by God to help us.

### **Strategic input**

The IASS Team Manager has contributed strategically through participation in the SEND Communications Group (and working sub-group), Berkshire Healthcare Keyworking Programme and Specialist Mental Health Learning Disability Stakeholder Steering Group 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, therapeutic 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. In those situations (which have arisen during this academic year), we work hard to maintain service standards, but this can take its toll on remaining staff.

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 over 14% 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**

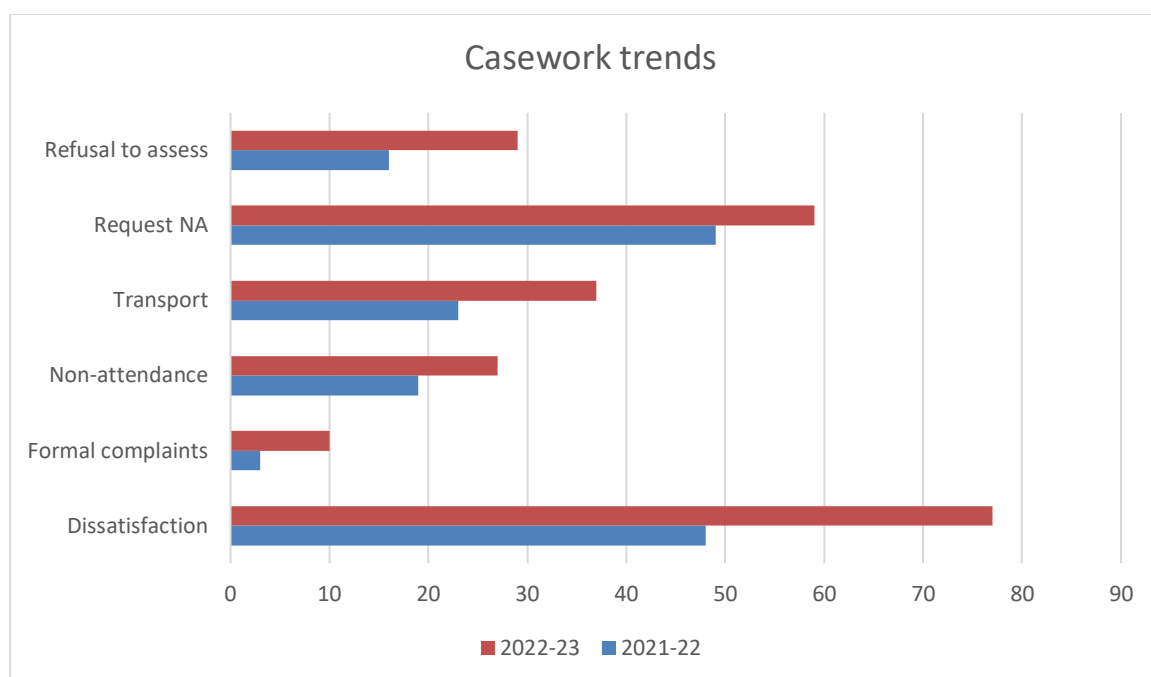
The level of tribunal- related work set out above has been a major concern this year. For those without recourse to private legal advice and not eligible for legal aid, we are often the only service able to support. We clearly explain to parents what they can expect from our service. We cannot make decisions 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. 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, 77 cases compared with 48 the previous year. Formal complaints have increased from 3 last year to 10 this year. Cases opened under the category of transport have increased from 23 last year to 37 this year. Requests for a needs assessment have increased from 49 to 59 and correspondingly refusal to assess from 16 to 29. Non-attendance cases have gone up from 19 to 27.



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

It is a positive thing that we continue to reach increasing numbers of people each year and that we continue to maintain service standards. Our feedback remains strong and our database records good outcomes for many children and young people. We are pleased to provide high quality information, advice and support to our service users but continual rises in new referrals year on year may make this unsustainable long term.

**Lesley Chamberlain**

**IASS Team Manager**

**September 2023**