



Reading IASS for SEND

Annual Report 2023-4

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Summary

- There were 662 new cases in 2023-4, compared to 592 in 2022-3. This represents a 12% increase in cases. Enquiries are now being recorded – numbering 115.
- Email contacts appear to be increasing.
- The team, on average, attends approximately seven meetings per week (total). Online meetings are preferred, for caseload reasons.
- Response times have been maintained at two working days, meaning we are often able to respond to urgent situations, such as school exclusion.
- Concerns around placement represent over 20% of casework. There has been a 50% increase in casework around transport and EHCPs this year.
- Emotional-based school attendance cases continue to rise and are particularly complex and can be distressing.
- Data analysis indicates that the most complex cases have increased by 40% on 2022-3.
- Appeals to tribunal continue to absorb much time and resource, but numbers of appeals (57) are stable this year compared to last year (56). IASS advisors have attended five video hearings with parents this year. Appeals are now taking approximately one year to be heard.
- IASS advisors have successfully delivered presentations on the SEND system, effective communication and transition this year.
- 66% of referrals come from previous service users. After this, schools and Early Help/Children's Social Care account for the highest numbers of referrals.
- Outcomes indicate that parents are supported to make informed decisions.
- Feedback was received from 76 service users. The average response is 4.85 out of 5. Qualitative feedback in the form of comments is overwhelmingly positive.
- The long-standing team manager retired this year, and was replaced from within the team. A new all-year-round staff member has joined the highly experienced existing team.
- Training has been extensive and ensures staff are on top of both administrative functions (eg GDPR, cyber security) and SEND issues.
- The service is significantly bolstered by the efforts of an average of five volunteers, providing an additional four hours per week (total).

Background

Reading Information Advice and Support Service for SEND (Reading IASS) is a statutory service offering information, advice and support about education, health and social care to parents, carers and young people.

In Reading, the service is hosted by 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, according 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
- 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 with additional funding from Berkshire West NHS.

Data storage and confidentiality

In line with the requirement to operate at arm's length from BFfC, Reading IASS has a stand-alone database sourced externally and stored on the cloud. All staff benefit from BFfC training on data protection, including GDPR and cyber security.

At times service users wish us to liaise with others working with them (schools, Early Help, Children's Social Care, for example). In these cases they give us permission to share information with those agencies. If a parent has not given permission to share information, then no case details are shared with professionals, including BFfC staff, unless there is a safeguarding concern or a legal obligation to share.

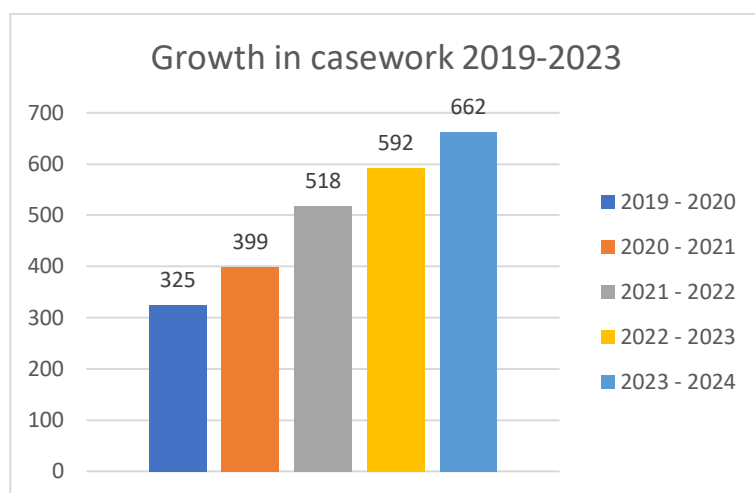
Caseload

This year we have supported service users with a total of 662 new cases 1 September 2022 to 31 August 2023 as against 592 for the same period in the last academic year. This represents an increase of over 12% from the previous year. The chart below shows the progressive increase in casework over the last five academic years.

In addition to these 662 cases that are recorded on our database, we have received an additional 115 enquiries via our helpline and email. This takes the total number of cases and enquiries to 777. This is the first year where we have implemented systems to count these less complex enquiries which do not require ongoing, tailored support (and are therefore not recorded on our database).

Key points

- 662 new cases
- 12% annual increase
- 115 additional enquiries
- 777 cases and enquiries (total)



It is important to consider the cumulative effect of our caseload – 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.

The increase in new referrals by 12% has kept the service very busy. Online meetings, and the support of volunteers, has helped mitigate this.

Route of access

Our database does not allow us to monitor numbers of telephone vs email approaches, but anecdotally we can report an increasing number of contacts via our email and web routes this year. This is not to suggest that telephone enquiries are dropping off – this is certainly not the case – but some service users do appear to prefer to reach out by email. A very small number of service users approach us via social media.

Meetings attended

Data capture revealed that the team attends a total of approximately seven meetings per week. Typically these meetings consist of:

- Annual reviews
- Therapeutic Support Plan meetings
- Early Help/Social care-led meetings (TAF/TAC/CiN)
- Attendance panels
- “Next steps” – Refusal to Assess meetings
- Mediation
- Tribunal hearings or pre-hearings (JADR)

Since the pandemic, a large number of meetings take place online and this supports us enormously to manage a growing caseload. This year we have found that there has been more of a move back to face-to-face meetings, particularly Early Help and School meetings. Most settings are able to facilitate a hybrid meeting so that we can still join virtually by MS Teams, and this is now our default way of working. That being said, there are times when face to face presence is necessary due to tech blackspots, or where the relationship between the parent and the school is particularly fragile, and we accommodate this wherever possible.

Response times

We aim to respond to all queries – however they are received – within two working days. We have managed to maintain this standard this year and have not needed to implement a waiting list or booking system. Some of the situations that arise 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.



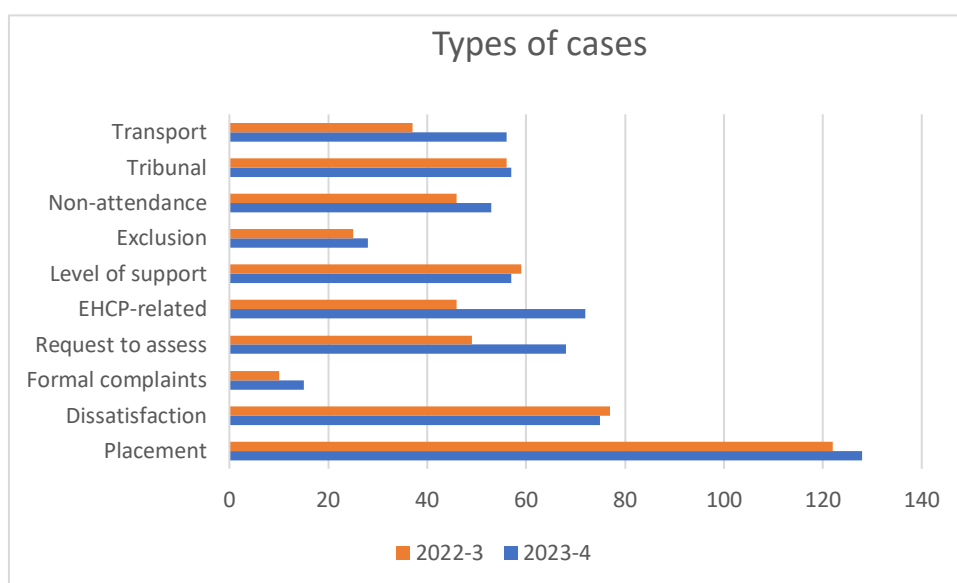
Some informal benchmarking with seven other local services indicates that we compare favourably in terms of response times:

- Two working days (three services)
- Five working days (three services)
- Triage and waiting list (one service)

Casework trends

Concerns around placement continue to dominate our casework and accounts for just over 20% of cases in both this and the previous academic year. Many parents report concerns about a lack of special school places. This year has seen a notable increase in Additional Resourced Provisions (ARPs) also known as resource bases, or units, in mainstream schools, a strategy led by BfFC to increase support for high needs children in Reading and ensure inclusion in their local communities. Whilst some parents are pleased to have a link to a mainstream school, we have found that other parents lack confidence about the ability of ARPs to meet their children's needs and so placement cases often precede an appeal to tribunal. Also contained within the category of placement are issues around alternative provision (where part or all of a child's education is delivered other than in a school).

The table below demonstrates the most common concerns that parents report this year compared to the previous year. This year (the blue bars) has seen a notable increase in transport cases (51% increase – 37 to 56 cases), as well as requests for EHC Needs Assessment and EHCP-related concerns (refusal to assess, refusal to issue, or content of the EHCP) (up by 57% from 46 to 72). This may reflect changes in local policy, with BfFC this year reviewing its transport policy as well as decoupling funding for EHC Needs Assessments to support more short-term support for early years SEND funding.



There has also been an increase in non-attendance cases this year, and this issue – which frequently encompasses emotionally-based school avoidance – represents some of our most distressing and complex cases, with parents struggling to access mental health support for their children, and schools, parents and external agencies (such as Early Help and Education Welfare Services) unsure how to support children back into school. This type of case has increased steadily since the pandemic and is compounded by long waiting lists for ASD and ADHD assessment.

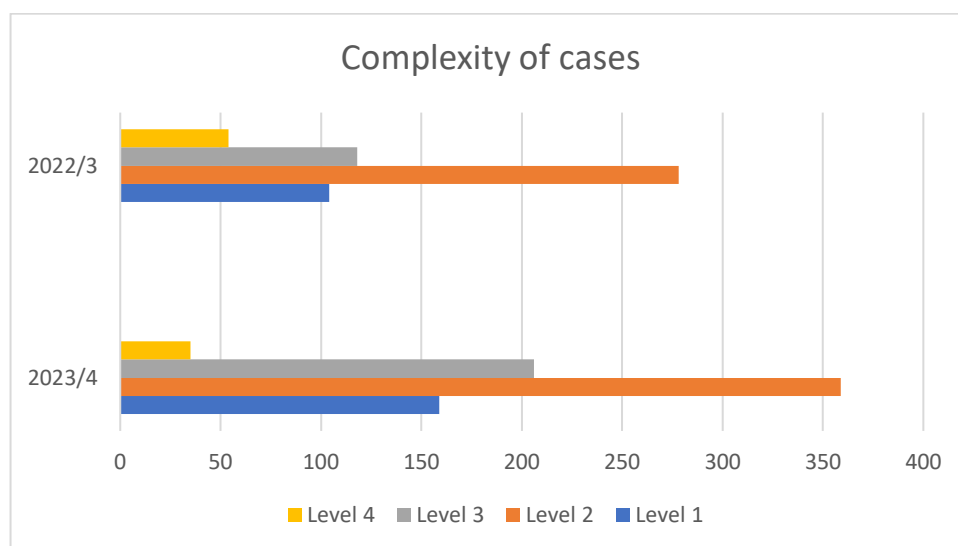
Complexity of cases

Following a request from the IASS Network for closer monitoring of the complexity of cases, we now grade our cases from 1-4. Data analysis (explained below) indicates that there has been a 40% growth in Level 3 and 4 cases this academic year.

The IASS Network has issued guidance about grading cases as follows:

- Level 1: Information, generic advice and signposting
- Level 2: Information and tailored advice and support
- Level 3: Tailored advice and significant support
- Level 4: Intensive support including representation

The majority of our caseload is level 2 – tailored advice and support.



The graph shows an increase in Level 1-3 cases this year, and a reduction in Level 4 cases. But the data must be read with caution for the following reasons:

Level 1

We started recording numbers of Level 1 enquiries that do not merit a database entry part way through 2023/4. These form part of the Level 1 data for this year. In the previous academic year, this data was not being captured. Hence the large apparent increase in level 1 cases this year may not be a true reflection of the situation.

Level 4

Surprisingly, the graph indicates that level 4 cases were lower in 2023/4 than the previous year. This may reflect further IASS Network guidance that only the most complex cases involving representation should be categorised at this level. Previously we had recorded all tribunal cases as level 4, even if we were not providing representation.

It is perhaps more indicative to consider the sum of Level 3 and Level 4 cases when assessing complexity: 241 in 2023/4 compared to 172 in 2022/3 – a 40% increase.

Appeals to tribunal

This year has seen no let-up in the number of service users wishing to take a legal route to resolving their issues. The majority of appeals are driven by concerns over 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, for the first time, we have had a service user wish to include in their appeal the tribunal's extended powers to make recommendations about health provision.

This year we have registered 57 new cases involving tribunal work – an increase of just one case from 2022-23 year, indicating, perhaps, that this aspect of our work may be stabilising.

Tribunal has seen a huge increase in cases nationally and as a result lengthy time frames (up to a year) are the norm, meaning that these cases are rarely resolved swiftly. 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. The support needs of these families are intensified by their dissatisfaction with the current provision, where their children may remain while the appeal makes its way through the system.

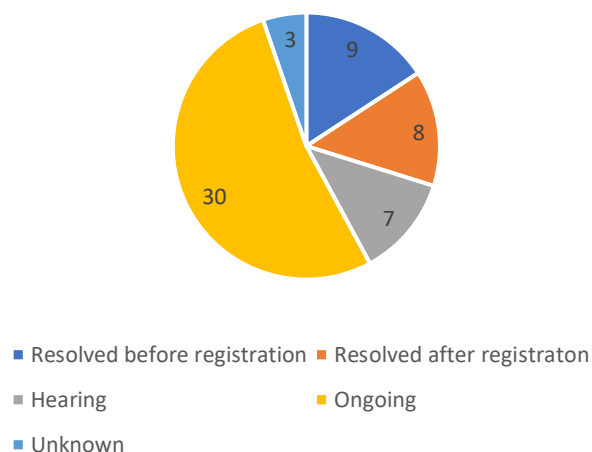
In appeal cases parents often need a very high level of support to exercise their rights as they may not understand the intricacies of the legal tests that tribunal will apply. In these cases, we liaise with the legal team and the tribunal on behalf of the parents. It is important that these parents have an equal opportunity to access their legal rights as others do who are more able to represent themselves. 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.

Our hope is always that tribunal cases will be settled without the need for a hearing.

Of the tribunal cases registered this year, seven went to a hearing. It is important to note also, however, that hearings took place this academic year for cases registered in 2022-23, so the total number of hearings where we have in some way supported is more than seven.

Tribunal cases 2023-4



Some of these hearings were on paper, and some were managed by the parents alone. IASS officers have attended five video hearings with parents this year.

In nine cases, agreement was reached just before proceedings were issued (before registration) and in other eight before the hearing (after registration).

Thirty tribunal cases are ongoing at time of writing which reflects the length of time it takes for a hearing date. In three cases we are unaware of the outcome.

Outreach

We have continued to deliver talks to groups of parents, working with BFFC and Parenting Special Children (PSC) according to request. This year we have delivered:

- Living with Autism – SEND and effective communication sessions (BFFC)
- Transition – preparing for adulthood (PSC)
- SEND presentation to a parent support group (PSC)

Feedback from these sessions has been positive, with the PSC coordinator stating:

"I just wanted to say a massive thank you for Friday. The information you gave was so valuable to all of our parents/carers that attended and very much appreciated. It was so nice for the parents to have the freedom to ask questions and get the answers immediately."

Web and social media presence

Our website now includes three webinars, enabling parents to access information in a format other than the written word. Downloadable factsheets on a number of issues are also available and work is under way to embed this information into the body of the website, which will make them more accessible for those using mobile phones, as well as for those who use text-to-speak technology.

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, such as posts from Reading Families Forum, the Local Offer and other BFFC teams.



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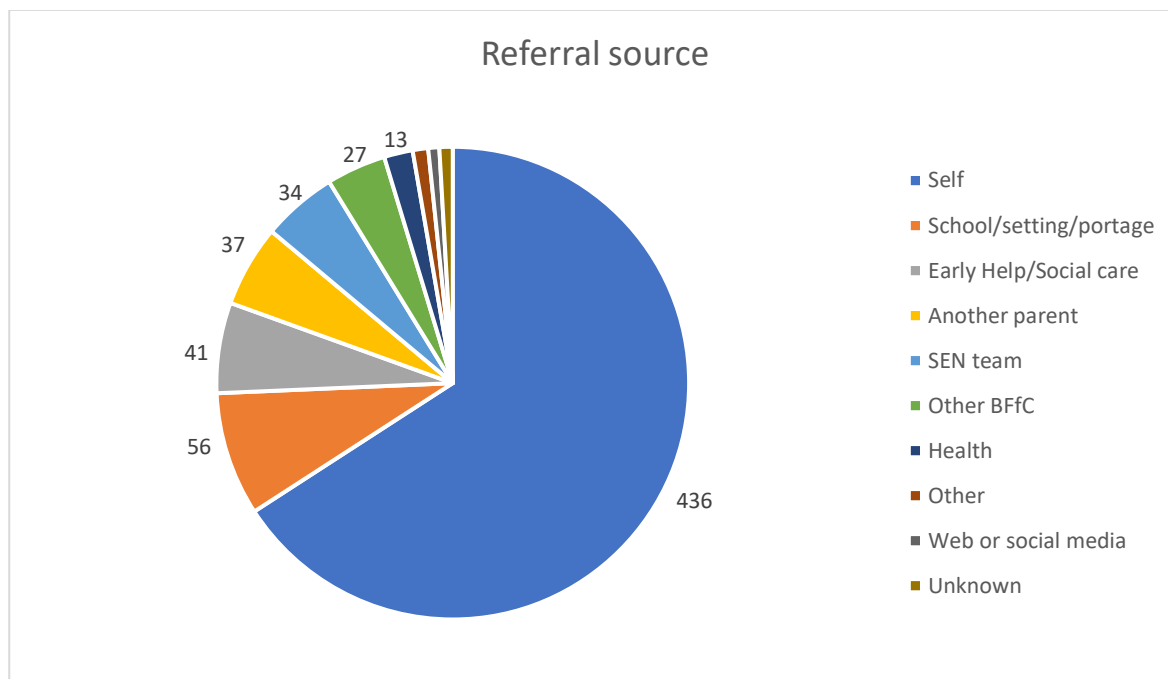
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Referral source

The vast majority of referrals into our service (66%) are self referrals, from service users who have used the service in the past. Schools or early year settings, and BFFC Early Help (in particular Family Support Workers) or Children's Social Care, are also frequent referrers. Many parents also reach us through word of mouth from other parents, from the SEN team, from other BFFC teams (such as the Family Information Service or Admissions) or from health. A few service users reach us as a result of a web search or social media.



Service user demographics

Age

Most of our cases involve school age children. 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.

Ethnicity

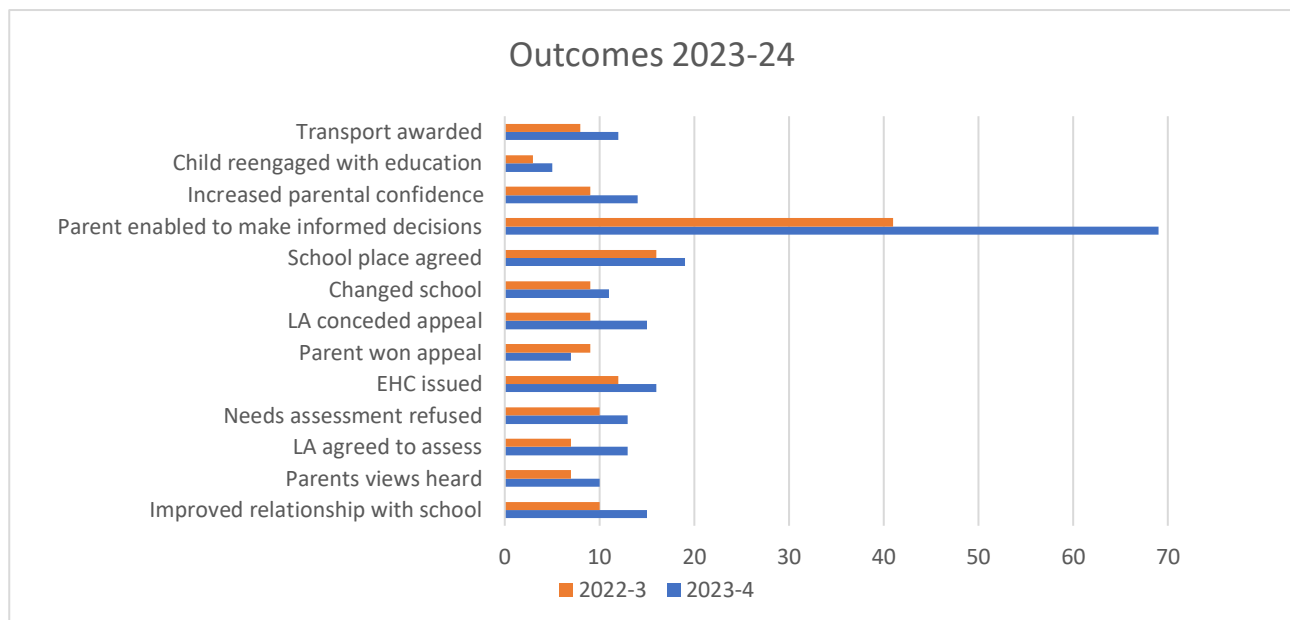
We continue to record information about ethnicity, although this information is not totally complete.

Where this data has been recorded, we can see that the largest group is those identifying as White British. The next largest group that we support has been those from mixed backgrounds (particularly White & Black Caribbean), followed by Asian Indian, White Other, and Asian Pakistani.

Outcomes

We record outcomes wherever possible. However, the complexity of cases means that some situations do not readily resolve. Equally, some parents, having achieved their goals, do not always report back to us. Where outcomes have been recorded in the year 2023-24, they are shown below. The data suggests an increase in reported outcomes this year, which is consistent with increasing case numbers.

In some cases, although a tangible outcome (such as an EHCP issued, or school place agreed) may not yet have arisen, we are able to demonstrate that parents have at least been able to exercise their rights and have understood the options open to them. This explains the large number of outcomes recorded as “parents enabled to make informed decisions”. For example, a case opened in the category “Primary placement” may conclude under this outcome, where a place has not yet been agreed, but the parent has been made aware of, and chosen to exercise their rights to request Needs Assessment, or possibly to appeal.



Strategic input

The IASS Team Manager has contributed strategically through participation in the SEND Communications Group (and working sub-group), CAMHS 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 as well as meeting with other officers within BfC, including from School Transport, Children Missing Education and the BfC Autism Advisor.

Feedback from service users

We use Microsoft Forms for obtaining feedback from service users. In recognition of the fact that many cases we support take a long time to reach completion, we have started to send surveys in response to contacts that we have had with service users, rather than waiting until our work with the service user has ended. This has resulted in a recent increase in surveys sent and responses received.

In the year 2024/5 we sent surveys to 141 service users.
76 responses were received, a response rate of 54%.

The questions we ask, and the average response rating (out of five) are as follows:

Question	Average response rating (out of 5)
How easy was it to get in touch with us?	4.8
How helpful was the information, advice and support we gave you?	4.9
How neutral, fair and unbiased do you think we were?	4.9
What difference do you think our information, advice or support has made for you?	4.8
Overall how satisfied were you with the service we gave?	4.9
How likely is it that you would recommend the service to others?	4.8

This encouraging data indicates that the service makes a positive contribution to the lives of families with SEND, that they are able to reach us when they need us and they have found us to be impartial. We have not received any complaints this year or any feedback that has resulted in a need to review the way we deliver the service.

The data is reflected in an extensive bank of compliments for this academic year. Some anonymous examples (taken as typed) from this academic year can be seen below:

1. Such an invaluable service. We were completely lost and felt hopeless before speaking to you and you were there to help and guide us every step of the way. My son is now thriving.
2. Our advisor has been a pillar of strength to us during the period of understanding what we need to do. She held us up all through providing amazing support to us, attending meetings with us and helping us draft letters where needed! It was an amazing journey with all of her help.
3. Thanks to the support I was given I felt empowered to push for my son to be placed in the setting he really needed. As a SEN parent you often feel isolated with nowhere to turn without judgment but I never felt that once.
4. My son would not have got the help he needed without you guys.

5. Reading IASS was extremely helpful. Without them I would have not know where to start with filing for a tribunal.
6. I was completely unaware about how things work but recommended by my Portage worker about this service, I am very glad the way I was helped by Reading IASS.
7. We are happy that with the help of IASS, we finally manage to get our daughter enrolled in college and have transportation.
8. The service and advice I receive from IASS is always amazing. I can't help my two children the way I do without the help from IASS. They are a phenomenal team, I can't thank them enough how much they have helped me.
9. Our IASS advisor has changed our and our son's life. We will always be very grateful for all her help and advices.
10. Our IASS advisor has been amazing throughout all interactions I've had with her. I've never felt judged, never felt she was biased and I've always felt she was understanding and knowledgeable. Even if we hadn't got what we wanted, I felt she was there to offer advice and am incredibly grateful to her.
11. My advisor took time to listen to me and gave me great advice which has been extremely helpful. I have managed to make a more informed decision due to her advice.
12. My advisor provided the information without overloading me and helped to put my mind at ease.
13. I am very grateful for all the amazing support I have received during such times of frustration and uncertainty. It's so relieving and gives hope knowing you are not alone.
14. It was helpful to have someone there who could confirm what we were saying was correct, advise and talk about processes and the law.

Staffing

Key points

- Retirement of long-standing team manager
- New team manager appointed from within the team
- Highly experienced staff
- New all-year-round staff member

This year has seen the biggest change to our staff team since 2015. The long-standing team manager, Lesley Chamberlain, retired in December 2023 after running the service for over 14 years. A new manager, Sarah Bamford, was appointed from within the team. The transition has been smooth. Between December 2023 and May 2024 we were reduced from a team of four, to three. This was in part offset by the new team manager taking on full time hours.

Despite that, staffing remains a challenge within the service. The current team has three staff members who have been with the service for nine years (each) and who have therefore accrued extensive knowledge and experience, and are able to handle the most complex cases. When one of this small team is absent (for reasons of health or family circumstances), the impact on the remaining team members is significant. This year has seen one period (autumn 2023) of extended absence from one member of the team, due to ill health. At these times we work hard to redistribute existing cases and attend meetings only where there is a genuine need, ensuring that we carefully manage our time to ensure an equitable service.

A hugely positive development this year has been the recruitment of a new team member in May 2024, restoring us to a team of four. The new team member is part time but works all year round, to help to meet the requirement to deliver an all-year-round service and to help address the increasing number of enquiries we receive during holiday periods, particularly summer. Her appointment has put the complexity of our current caseload into perspective. Her learning curve is particularly steep, despite her having experience with the service as a volunteer. Nine years ago, when the rest of the team were appointed, appeals to tribunal numbered maybe one a year, and emotional-based school avoidance had barely been spoken of. These days these most complex of issues are a daily reality.

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. Vicarious trauma training has also helped build resilience.

Training

BfFC sets mandatory training requirements of all its staff, so the whole team have this year benefitted from training on:

- GDPR
- Cyber security
- Safeguarding, including Prevent
- Health and safety
- Equality, diversity and inclusion
- Unconscious bias (new this year)

In addition, staff and volunteers have this year undertaken a range of SEND-specific trainings. This includes training from external providers, the IASS Network and BfFC. Some are summarised below, along with their impact on the service:

Topic	Provider	Impact on service delivery
SENDIASS and human rights	British Institute of Human Rights	Greater staff understanding of how to apply human rights law when making complaints
Health and social care law	Council for Disabled Children	Greater staff understanding of the role of health and social care in the EHCP, and duties to assess
Equality Act	Council for Disabled Children IASS Network	Greater staff understanding of how the EQA impacts on access to early years and rights to education (all years)
Emotional-based school avoidance	BfFC	Staff more knowledgeable about the psychology of school anxiety and the emotions. Staff aware of tools and approaches so they can signpost schools, or help parents to apply them to identify risk and resilience factors in non-attendance cases.
Helpline training: managing vicarious trauma	IASS Network	Staff trained in handling challenging helpline calls and managing vicarious trauma. Staff better protected from the emotional impact of complex cases.
Ordinarily available provision in the early years	Council for Disabled Children	Greater staff awareness of what universal provision looks like in the early years and exemplar statement
From Conflict to Connection	BfFC	Staff more aware of how conflict impacts families, especially those with children with SEN. Strategies for recognising and dealing with this and supporting families through conflict.

Volunteers

Volunteers continue to provide valuable assistance to the operation of the service in a mutually rewarding relationship.

Supporting the service

Over the year we have maintained an average of five active volunteers.

They have carried out 49 pieces of work, consisting of:

- 20 parental reports
- 29 school meetings



On average each activity takes approximately three hours.

Therefore, we estimate that this year volunteers have contributed:

- Total 147 hours across 38 weeks
- Average four hours per week

Their efforts significantly enhance our ability to provide support to parents.

Supporting volunteers

We remain committed to supporting our volunteers to access opportunities through the service which can serve them in their own future pathways:

- This year one of our volunteers joined us on a work placement from university where she was studying a Masters in Education. In addition to the direct work with service users, she attended training, and carried out research which enhanced the team's knowledge of areas such as the Equality Act and how conflict affects children. Her experience gave her a unique insight into the world of SEND.
- Another volunteer has also this year been recruited to the service in a paid role.

Conclusion

We continue to reach increasing numbers of people each year and maintain service standards. Our feedback remains strong and our database records good outcomes for many children and young people. We take pride in the expertise and commitment of our staff team and in the high quality information, advice and support that we supply to our service users. However, with the team working to capacity, then expansion of the staff team may need to be considered in the future if new referrals continue to rise at current rates to ensure the Minimum Standards continue to be met.

Sarah Bamford
IASS Team Manager
October 2024