



Reading IASS for SEND

Annual Report 2024-5

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Summary

- There were 922 new cases in 2024-5, compared to 662 in 2023-4. This represents a 40% increase in cases. Including enquiries, the total is 1125 compared to 777 in 2023-4.
- Staffing is at 2.5 full-time equivalent, and has not changed significantly since 2014. The disparity with the increasing case load means that service users are having to wait longer for support, and difficult decisions have to be made about the level of support we are able to provide.
- The team benefits from a supportive, highly experienced staff team.
- The team, on average, attends nine meetings per week (total). Online meetings are the only practicable way we can offer face-to-face support in the vast majority of cases.
- Response times have increased to three working days.
- Concerns around placement represent almost 20% of casework. There has been a 250% increase in casework around formal complaints this year, and a doubling of request to assess cases.
- The most complex cases have increased by 34% on 2023-4 figures.
- Appeals to tribunal continue to absorb much time and resource and have increased by 25% on the previous two years. IASS advisors have attended 10 video hearings with parents this year. Appeals are still taking approximately one year to reach a hearing meaning that placement concerns continue whilst an appeal runs its course.
- We established a new online training offer in March 2025, delivering tailored presentations to parents of children of different age groups.
- 61% of referrals come from previous service users. After this, schools and Family Support Workers/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 82 service users. The average response rating is 4.85 out of 5. Qualitative feedback in the form of comments is overwhelmingly positive.
- Training has been robust 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).
- The next year will likely bring change as we adapt service delivery to address unrelenting need for the service.

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 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. In October 2025, following the reintegration of children's services into Reading Borough Council, the service will be line managed by the Strategic Customer Experience Lead in Corporate Improvement and Customer 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. The service privacy notice is reviewed annually by the Management Group.

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.

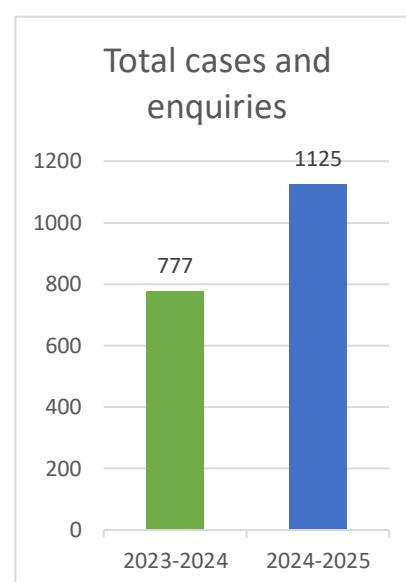
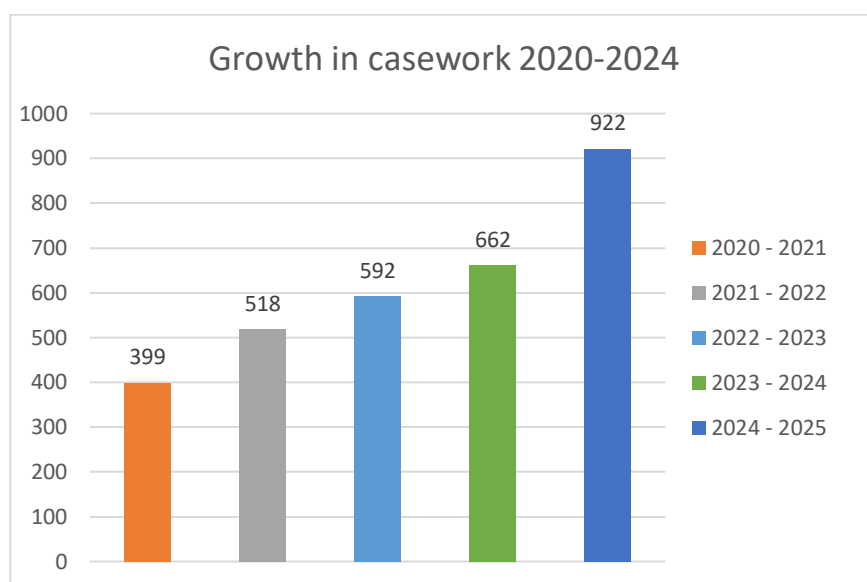
Caseload

This year (1 September 2024 to 31 August 2025) has seen an explosive increase in need for the service: we have supported service users with a total of 922 new cases, compared to 662 for the same period in the last academic year. This represents an increase of nearly 40%. The chart below shows the progressive increase in casework over the last five academic years.

Key points

- 922 new cases
- 40% annual increase
- 203 additional enquiries
- 1125 cases and enquiries (total)

In addition to these 922 cases that are recorded on our database, we have received an additional 203 enquiries. These less complex enquiries do not require ongoing, tailored support (and are therefore not recorded on our database). The total number of cases and enquiries in 2024-25 is 1125.



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 team have felt the impact of the increase, with staff describing the influx of cases as “unrelenting” and the helpline as “upsettingly busy”. It is clear that the service has reached capacity and that we will need to consider the level of service that we are able to continue to provide.

Route of access

This year we have seen service users reach out equally through e-mail and telephone. Most service users send an e-mail or leave a message on our answerphone. In theory we have been offering a live phone line on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, but in reality, as lines are so busy, most users have to leave a message. As we enter the new academic year, we are already planning to stop trying to live answer calls altogether, to ensure that calls are fairly triaged and/or dealt with according to when they were received. A very small number of service users approach us via social media.

Meetings attended

Data capture revealed that the team (including volunteers) attends a total of approximately nine meetings per week, up from seven in the previous academic year. This does not reflect the number of meetings we are asked to attend: we frequently have to turn down requests for support and are prioritising service users with the greatest need. For example, we tend to avoid offering support at mediation meetings, as we take the view that the mediation service itself provides a high level of support to ensure that the parent's voice is heard. Instead, we focus on preparing the service user ahead of the mediation meeting. This is not a blanket policy and we will always consider individual situations according to need.

Typically the meetings we attend consist of:

- Annual reviews
- Early Help/Social care-led meetings (TAF/TAC/CiN)
- Attendance panels
- "Next steps" – Refusal to Assess meetings
- School/LA meetings
- Tribunal hearings or pre-hearings (JADR)

We are able to manage this level of face-to-face support only because we attend the vast majority of meetings by MS Teams. Most settings are able to facilitate a hybrid meeting, if need be, and this is now our default way of working. Most settings and key colleagues such as family workers and the SEN team understands that this is the way that we work and are able to accommodate us. Very occasionally, where there is an evidenced need for our presence in person, we will make an exception. This may be due to tech blackspots, or where the relationship between the parent and the school is particularly fragile, or if the parent has learning difficulties which would make it hard to establish a relationship over Teams.

Response times

We started the year with an aim to respond to all queries within two working days. By February, it was clear that the team were feeling the pressure and it felt unrealistic to maintain this expectation. Following a meeting of the management group it was agreed to reset this expectation to three working days. We do not have a formal triage system but we do prioritise calls so as to ensure that those involving statutory deadlines, and emergency situations such as placement breakdown or permanent exclusion, get the rapid response that they need. As we enter the new academic year, it is likely that we will take steps to implement a triage system.



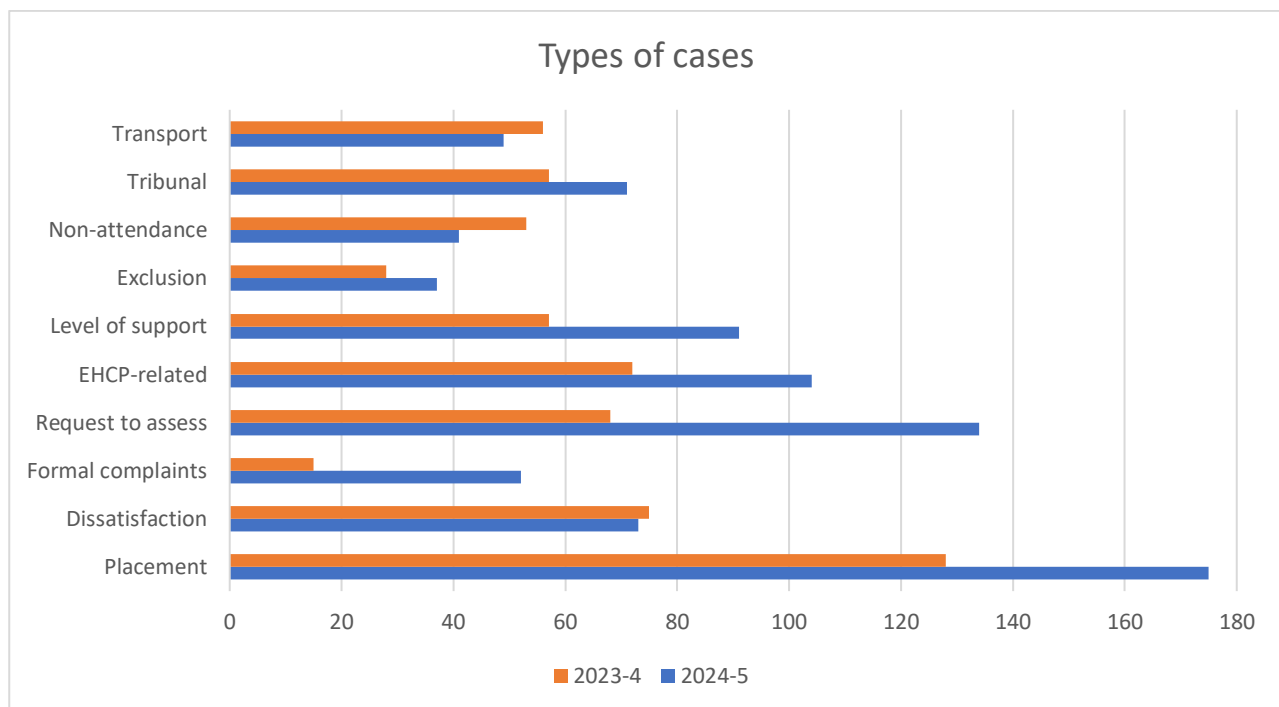
We have so far resisted implementing a waiting list or a booking system, although it will be important to consider all options for managing increasing demand for the service.

Casework trends

Concerns around placement continue to dominate our casework and accounts for just over 19% of cases – a very slight drop from the previous academic year – but this apparent slight drop is offset by an increase in tribunal cases.

The table below demonstrates the most common concerns that parents have presented with this year compared to the previous year. This year (the blue bars) has seen a notable increase in tribunal cases, as well as concerns about level of support in school. EHCP-related concerns (refusal to assess, refusal to issue, or content of the EHCP) also feature highly. This category also covers plans being ceased, which has seen a significant increase this year, with some young people being left abruptly without placements.

A very significant increase is a doubling in request to assess cases. But the exponential growth has been in formal complaints: an increase from 15 to 52 cases – an increase of nearly 250%. These formal complaints are equally distributed between those made against the school, and those made against BfC. Overall, the casework indicates a significant increase in the level of dissatisfaction with how special educational needs provision is being delivered in Reading.



Many parents report concerns about a lack of special school places. Parents of children with severe learning difficulties are not always happy to accept places in Additional Resource Provisions, or less formal SEN classrooms, in mainstream schools for their high-needs children, even where these places can be found.

Other parents are seeking more specialist therapeutic provision for their children, particularly those experiencing anxiety or emotional-based school avoidance. Autism or other neurodiversity is often a factor in such cases. Such placements are hard to source and, if a placement is offered, expensive to fund, often requiring protracted negotiations with the SEN team and, ultimately, formal complaints or an appeal to tribunal.

We have observed that as the year has progressed parents have presented with an increasing number of parents who feel that their children's educational placement, or package, is not delivering the full scope of their child's EHCP and/or is not able to provide them with a suitable full-time education. This in part accounts for the very sharp increase in formal complaints this year.

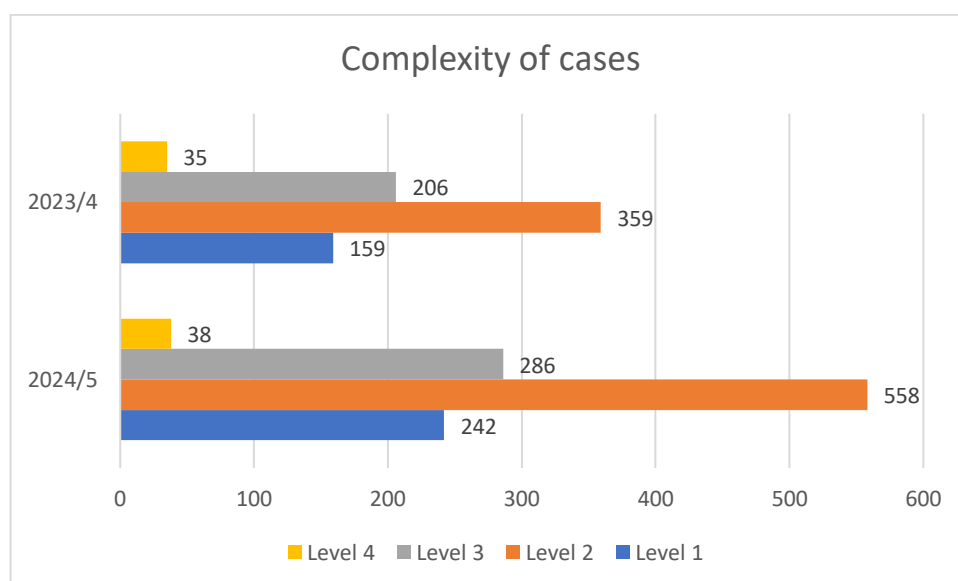
Complexity of cases

We grade all our cases according to their complexity from 1-4. Data analysis indicates that there has been a 34% 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 all levels of cases this year. The most significant growth in terms of numbers, as we would expect, is with Level 2 cases. However, the slightly smaller growth in Level 3 cases is more significant in terms of hours of support. These cases require at least 2 hours input each from staff and some ongoing cases require many more.

These figures should always be read with caution as intervention levels do not update automatically on our database so staff must actively remember to update them as the case progresses. For this reason it is possible that some Level 3 cases are incorrectly logged as Level 2. However, this is no different to the way that data was captured the previous year, so year on the year the figures provide a reasonable representation of the state of things.

It is helpful to consider the sum of Level 3 and Level 4 cases when assessing complexity: 324 compared to 241 in 2023/4– a 34% increase (similar to the previous year’s percentage increase – 40%).

Appeals to tribunal

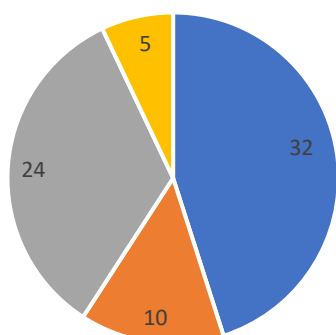
This year has seen no let-up in the number of service users wishing to take a legal route to resolving their issues. The majority of appeals are driven by concerns over school placement, where the service user is seeking a special school place or a different special school place from the one named by BFFC. The rest of the cases are around refusal to assess, or occasionally refusal to issue a plan.

This year we have registered 71 new cases involving tribunal work – a 25% increase from 2023-24 (57 cases) and the highest we have ever experienced.

Tribunal has seen a huge increase in cases nationally and as a result lengthy time frames (a year or sometimes even longer) 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.

Tribunal cases 2024-5



■ Resolved after registration ■ Hearing ■ Ongoing ■ Unknown

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 IAS Services focuses mainly on tribunal work.

Our hope is always that tribunal cases will be settled without the need for a hearing and this does happen in many cases.

Of the tribunal cases registered this year, 10 have so far reached a hearing. Some of these hearings were on paper, and some were managed by the parents alone. IASS officers have attended 10 video hearings with parents this year (NB, some of these hearings will be for cases registered in the last academic year), as well as a number of JADR hearings (Judicial Alternative Dispute Resolution – pre-hearings that inform the final hearing and sometimes result in resolution).

In 32 cases, agreement was reached before matters progressed to a hearing.

24 tribunal cases are ongoing at time of writing which reflects the length of time it takes for a hearing date. In five 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), and Reading Families Forum, according to request.

Additionally, we prepared and ran three new presentations (see flier, right) each 60 minutes in length, for each of the pre-school, primary and secondary age groups, explaining the SEND system. These were well attended (38 attendees across three sessions) and very well received.

SEN support in Reading schools

Training for parents/carers who live in Reading

These sessions will be held online via MS Teams and will cover:

- The legal framework
- SEND support in schools – what to expect
- EHCPs – what they are and when they are needed

Session dates:

● For pre-school	Tuesday 18 March 2025, 10-11am
● For primary	Thursday 20 March 2025, 10-11am
● For secondary	Wednesday 26 March 2025, 10-11am

For more information and to book, please email iass@brighterfuturesforchildren.org
Please include your name, home address and your child's date of birth.



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Also this year, following a number of referrals to our service from the Adult Social Care team around educational provision for post-18s and transport, we also offered some introductory training to the ASC team covering these topics in December 2024.

We were asked to deliver a talk on preparing for adulthood with Parenting Special Children, but due to insufficient bookings this did not go ahead. We're hoping to run it in the autumn under our own banner instead.

To summarise, this year we have delivered:

- **With BFFC, online and in person** – Living with Autism – SEND and effective communication sessions (throughout the year)
- **With PSC, in person** – Understanding SEND for ethnically diverse communities (Feb 25)
- **With PSC, in person** – Understanding SEND for Hong Kong families (Jun 25)

- **With RFF, online** – Life after an EHCP (Mar 25)
- **IASS-led, online** – SEND support in school (pre-school) (Mar 25)
- **IASS-led, online** – SEND support in school (primary) (Mar 25)
- **IASS-led, online** – SEND support in school (secondary) (Mar 25)
- **IASS-led, online** – Introduction to IASS for Adult Social Care (Dec 24)

Feedback from these sessions has been positive, with professionals stating:

“I think the parents really appreciated your information and advice, delivered in such an approachable way.” (PSC coordinator)

“What a wow session that was! I actually found it quite moving. They were really able to open up - so thanks so much for that.” (Autism Advisor)

And from parents:

“Great introduction, feel like I more understand the purpose/structure/roles of the SEND/educational setting responsibilities”

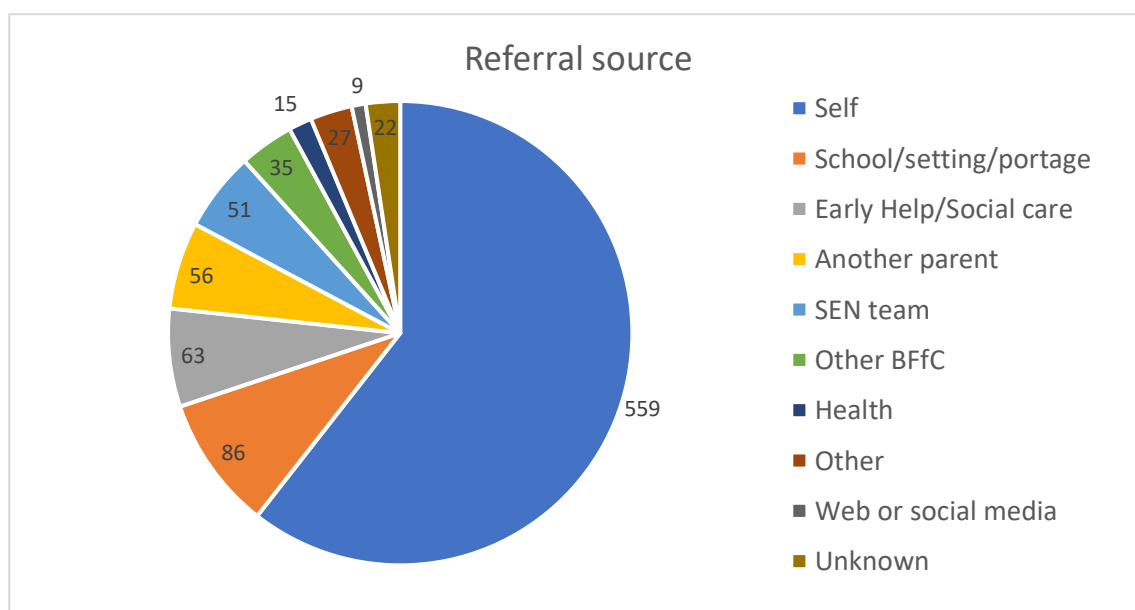
“Helpful and informative”

“Explained very well in detail”

“Explanation of terms and processes in a clear way”

Referral source

The vast majority of referrals (61%) 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.



Web and social media presence

Our website 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. Work has taken place this year, thanks to the BFfC Communications and Marketing team, to embed this information into the body of the website, which makes it 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, as well as promoting our online training.

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 an increasing number in the 16-25 age range, linked to the number of cases this year around ceasing of EHCPs.

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, Black African, White Other, and Asian Pakistani.

Vulnerability

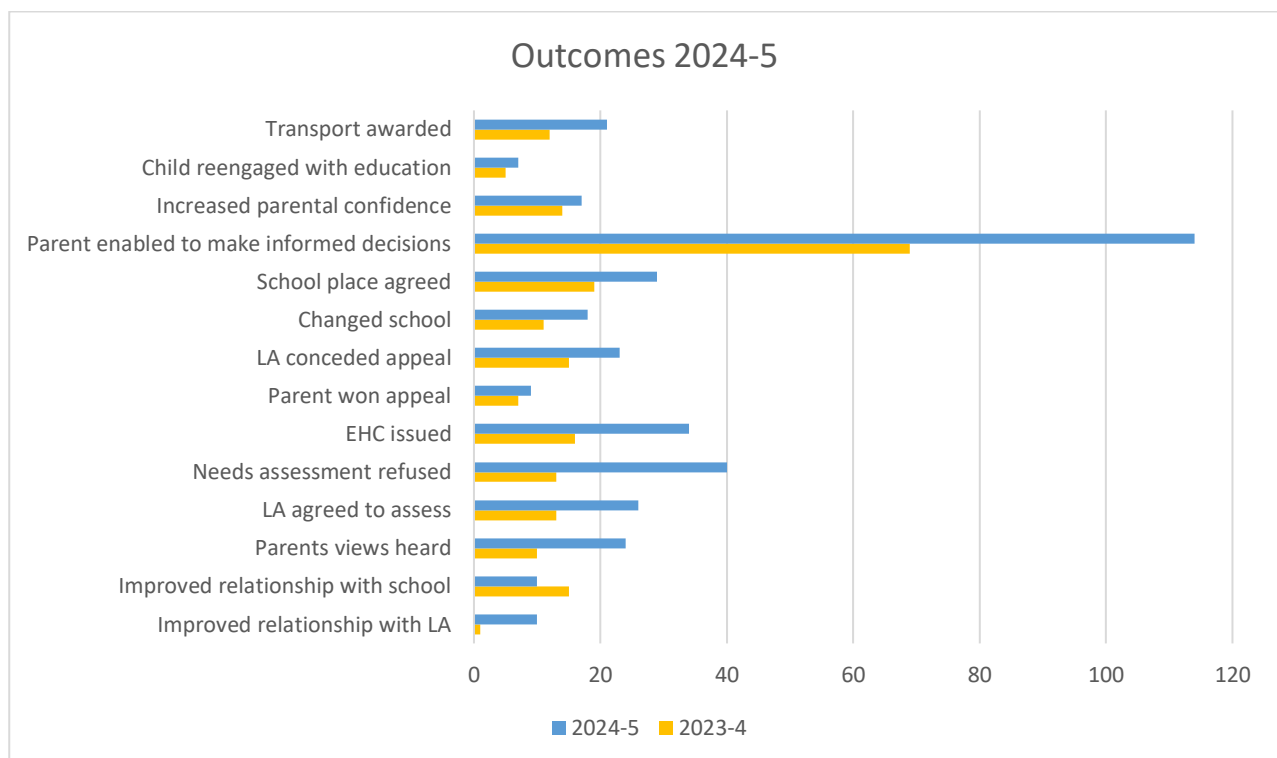
Whilst we do not capture data on this, anecdotally, many of our service users do not speak English, have learning or mental health difficulties of their own, or lead complex lives. Some are new to the UK. Many are parenting alone. We are mindful of ensuring that those who need it most have the most access to our service.

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 2024-25, they are shown below. The data suggests an increase in reported outcomes this year, which is consistent with increasing case numbers.

It is noticeable that there is a sharp increase in cases where EHC Needs Assessment has been refused. This is perhaps unsurprising given the equally sharp increase in request to assess cases (see p7).

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 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), 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 BfFC, including from The Rise Team and the BfFC 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 now 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 more consistent numbers of surveys sent and responses received.

In the year 2024/5 we sent surveys to 182 service users. 82 responses were received, a response rate of 45%.

A further 38 surveys were sent to those who attended our training, with 14 responses (37% response rate).

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?	4.9

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, although one parent whose query was beyond our remit commented as follows: "Got a really prompt callback but no help available for the issues we are struggling with."

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. I couldn't have asked for a more efficient and helpful service.
2. Thank you for getting back to me. The information you gave me was very valuable. You made me feel at ease
3. Very pragmatic and realistic advice provided. I was very confused with the whole EHCP and secondary schools and [my advisor] has provided great pointers and alleviated all confusion and any anxiety I had.

Reading IASS for SEND Service User Feedback

* Required

1. How easy was it to get in touch with us? *

Not at all easy ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ Very easy

2. How helpful was the information advice and support we gave you? *

Not at all helpful ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ Very helpful

3. How neutral, fair and unbiased do you think we were? *

Not at all ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ Very

4. What difference do you think our information, advice or support has made for you? *

No difference at all ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ A great deal of difference

4. Good support system for the parents. Helped us a lot in understanding the whole process as we are very new in UK. We were able to file our appeal with proper guidance and support. Friendly and kind staff who understands the pain of the special kids parents. Would highly recommend to anyone who is need of the same kind of help
5. The call was extremely informative and helpful and I was totally listened to without interruption and advised on options in a very clear and informative way.
6. I struggle to word things in a productive way and the email you gave was exactly what the school needed to hear to support my child. Thank you
7. [My advisor] was able to attend one of my meetings regarding my daughters education and by the end of the meeting I felt like a weight has been lifted of my shoulders for the first time ever I often leave the meetings very upset and frustrated that nothing seems to happen regarding my daughters education but today meeting I felt very happy with the outcome
8. I really appreciate [my advisor's] straightforward approach, her patience and her clearly considerable level of experience.
9. I am so pleased to have firstly had the opportunity to have the conversation that I did which made me feel much more confident before going into a meeting with school, but also to know that this service exists which has made me feel less anxious about future scenarios that may arise. Knowing that I am able to call and talk things through with someone & get advice on often complex processes that is lead and easy to understand is invaluable.
10. Your team were wonderful, from comprehensive and informative emails helping me, to a wonderful phone call where I was truly heard and all my questions were answered clearly.

Staffing

The new team manager (Dec 2023) and new advisor (May 2024) are now embedded in their roles, and rapidly gaining in experience. It is fortunate that this is the case as it is hard to see how the service would have coped with this year's influx of caseload if only the previously year's staffing levels had been in place. We have also been fortunate this year that there has been minimal staff absence. Despite that, keeping up with caseload has been a challenge, increasingly so as the year progressed, and as I write in September 2025, it is clear that changes to service delivery are inevitable unless staffing is increased.

Two advisors and the team manager are part-time, term-time only (with some limited additional hours to be deployed during the holidays or at busy times as needed) and our new advisor is all-year round, part time. In total, we are equivalent to 2.5 full-time equivalent staff.

We are fortunate to have a highly experienced team. The current team has three staff members who have been with the service for ten years (each) and who have therefore accrued extensive knowledge and

experience, and are able to handle the most complex cases. Our newest team member has had a very steep learning curve!

A key reason for appointing an all-year round staff member was to ensure that the service meets the minimum standard to provide an all-year round service. We have found, however, that summer 2025 has been unusually busy and, therefore, almost as soon as we have increased our staffing level, it appears to be necessary to review whether this level is actually sufficient to be compliant. The team manager has worked additional hours in order to keep pace with demand – a situation which is neither desirable nor sustainable.

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, and termly in-person day-long meetings. Vicarious trauma training has also helped build resilience.

Training

BfC 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

The team manager has also attended BfC training on inclusive leadership, MS Powerpoint (to support delivery of online training), Challenging Conversations, and Crossdata (our database provider).

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 BfC. These are summarised below, along with their impact on the service:

Topic	Provider	Impact on service delivery
SENDIASS Information and Resource Refresher	IASS Network / Council for Disabled Children	Staff awareness of IASSN resources
IPSEA level 1 Face to Face element	IPSEA	Requirement of minimum standards: Enables the service to maintain strong standards of legal knowledge
Ofsted Webinar	IASS Network	IASS role in Ofsted SEND inspections
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.

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 52 pieces of work, of which just over half were supporting with parental reports, and the rest were school meetings.



On average each activity takes approximately three hours. Therefore, we estimate that this year volunteers have contributed:

- Total 156 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 was a student social worker, on a placement at BFfC. Her work with us contributed to her wider experience of SEND communities and fed into her placement report.
- We have been able to provide references for two of our volunteers this year who were applying for paid work or study.

Looking ahead

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 beyond capacity, then it will be necessary to consider expansion of the staff team if we are to ensure that compliance with the Minimum Standards is maintained. As I write, in September 2025, we are considering how we can work smarter by increasing our training and online offer. It is hard to envisage how this can be achieved without impacting on the user experience – this at a time when those navigating the SEND system are experiencing the greatest need for support.

Sarah Bamford
IASS Team Manager
September 2025