



Reading Information Advice and Support Service for SEND

Annual Report, Academic Year 2018-2019

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. Each local authority has an IASS, approximately three quarters of which are in-house, but working at arms' length from the local authority to Department for Education (DfE) approved Minimum Standards. Reading IASS has a Management Group with a wide range of representation including service users, local authority staff, Reading Families Forum and the voluntary sector. The Management Group reports to the SEND Strategy Group at Brighter Futures for Children/Reading Borough Council.

Funding

During this academic year, the core service has been funded by Reading Borough Council through Brighter Futures for Children. 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 July 2018 to March 2019, a fund of £32,000 was granted. This was granted on the basis that the service carried out a self-review exercise. The funding was used to continue with two additional part-time posts; a Volunteer Coordinator and an IASS Adviser.

During most of 2018-19 Reading IASS operated term time only, with four members of staff on term time contracts, one full time and three on part-time hours, each working 3 or 4 short days per week. There were some temporary increases in hours for two members of the team. This was grant funded to allow the IASS Team Manager to carry out the contractual work.

In February 2019, we were informed that the service had been granted £42,650 for the financial year 2019-20, subject to meeting a number of Key Performance Indicators, set out in an agreed Task Order. This funding continues to meet staff costs. We do not currently know what funding will be available for 2020-21.

Successes this academic year

1. In terms of our core work, we have supported service users with a total of 279 new cases and enquiries 01/09/2018-24/07/2019 as against 316 for the same period in the last academic year. We are pleased to see a slight reduction in cases as potentially indicative of an improving situation in Reading schools and services. Equally it may represent the fact that the only full time member of the team has been carrying out limited case work and also that we have done quite a lot of group work, the aim of which is to give service users the tools to manage their own situations where possible.

The service certainly does not feel less busy. 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. As in the previous year, there has been an increase in service users wishing to take a legal route to resolving their issues. 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 the local authority, but this is not always achieved at the time of the deadline for appeal. During this year it has often been difficult to arrange meetings with the SEND Team as there were staff shortages in that team. Towards the end of the academic year this has been addressed and there has been more opportunity to try to resolve issues face to face. One consequence of the increased Tribunal work is that the team is better informed about how to support service users with such cases.

2. Our website remains a valuable resource and an important way for us to demonstrate that we are at arm's length from the local authority. A stand-alone website is now a requirement of the Minimum Standards. As at 1st August 2019 we had recorded 2596 visitors to the site since it opened just over three years ago. Google analytics tells us that, in the academic year 2018-19, 84.3% of users have been first time visitors to the site and that our busiest time for website visits was September to December. It is helpful for us to be able to direct service users to our resources page which provides them with basic information about SEN Support, EHCPs etc. During the year we have been working on some extra resources that are due to be added to the website in the summer. This includes information for young offenders, advice on choosing a school and a glossary of terms.
3. Reading IASS has a stand-alone database as our service is confidential. Data is not shared with Brighter Futures for Children/Reading Borough Council staff unless there is a safeguarding concern or a legal obligation to share. This is the third year of using this database. We now routinely use an initial data capture sheet when taking a first phone call from a new service user. This prompts us to ask key questions which ensure more consistency of data on our database. Key data from our database reports this year includes the following information:

- The number of service users accessing the service in the period 1/9/18-24/7/19 was 335. This shows that a number of 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 SEN team, Schools, Health, Family Support Workers, and other Brighter Futures for Children/ Reading Borough Council services (such as Family Information Service and the ASD adviser). 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, with slightly more primary than secondary. We support a smaller number of parent/carers of pre-school children and few in the 16-25 age range.
 - We are also working to improve our ethnic monitoring. Where this data has been recorded, we can see a good spread of service users identifying as being from a black/Asian/mixed heritage group.
4. We have worked with Reading Families Forum to deliver, on request, talks to Parent Groups. We had a stall at the Forum Information Event in South Reading and at a Transition event, held at The Avenue School. We also had a stall at a Parenting Special Children conference on PDA. Throughout the year we have spoken to groups of parents attending the Living with Autism course. In July we trialled a preventative piece of work with this group, running a version of our Effective Communication course. Feedback forms returned showed a high level of satisfaction with the course.
5. Our Survey Monkey data to date (checked 1st August 2019) shows that parents are very satisfied with the service that we give (96.25 %) and feel that our information, advice or support has made a great deal of difference to them (86.28 %). They are extremely likely to recommend the service to others (97.5 %). We have an extensive bank of compliments for this academic year via Survey Monkey and from parent emails. Some anonymous examples from 2018-19 can be seen below:

I couldn't do this without the support and backup from your organisation and you are amazing. I know many more parents will benefit from your skills in handling their issues and I'm glad you guys are there

Thank you for your time today, it was really good to talk to someone with so much knowledge of the education system

Just a quick line to thank you very much for attending the meeting today. It was really helpful to have your advice and input.

[About a volunteer] Perfectly happy with this. Do pass my thanks to Hazel. She was a great support and such a nice lady

[About a volunteer] Please thank the other Sarah for the brilliant notes and support she gave me during the AR

Thank you very very much. Your advice has helped so much with helping me form questions and has given me lots to think about. It all means a lot to us.

[From a SENCo] Thank you for all your hard work supporting our parents this term

Lesley was helping me with my daughter for many years. I found her advice invaluable . She was always happy to help and supported me and my daughter at numerous meetings at school.

Very good service for those who need it !

Helen has been a real lifeline to my family. Without her help, we wouldn't be in the position we are today. We have battled many years to get our voices heard and our get our daughters needs met. We continue to work with iass and are looking at a much more positive future for our daughter with the invaluable support iass offers us. Thank you so much!

Your knowledge and attention to detail and continued support I will never forget.

6. The IASS Team Manager has contributed strategically through participation in the SEND Strategy Group, Strand 4 Working Group and working with Reading Families Forum. She has also been involved in the preparation of the Self Evaluation Form and has also joined a working party considering improvements to the needs assessment process and EHCP paperwork.
7. We monitored our helpline hours to consider whether we were supporting service users at the time they needed us most. The outcome of this was that the late sessions that we ran once a week were not being used. As a result of this, we changed our hours to offer more opportunity for new service users to contact us during school hours, which is when we experience our busiest time. Our hours are advertised on the Local Offer, our website and the IASS Network website. In terms of making the best use of staff time, we are limiting meetings to the most essential and doing as much as we can via phone and email.
8. We now have four volunteers. They have different strengths and differing availability, but we use them as much as we can, taking into account their interests and their geographical location when allocating work. We have had some excellent feedback from service users and our Volunteer Coordinator makes sure that she trains/supervises and updates the volunteers.
9. Following the successful funding bid and since the start of the new financial year in April 2019, the IASS Team Manager has been working on the agreed tasks that form part of the Operational Plan for the funding bid. She was able to report in July that some progress has been made in all areas of the work, including offering an all year round service, arranging drop-in sessions for both parents/carers and children and young people, starting the process of the service being jointly commissioned by Education, Health and Social Care, joint working with Wokingham and Bracknell services and recruiting new members to our IASS Management Group.

Challenges this academic year

1. There has been some pressure on the service this year due to the IASS Team Manager having limited availability to carry out case work because of the demands of the funding bid and project managing the work related to it. The IASS Team Manager is the only member of the team who works full time hours during term time.
2. The Team has been through a Consultation due to significant changes to their terms and conditions of employment required to accommodate the all year round service. The challenge was to meet the requirements while ensuring a good use of resources and maintaining an acceptable work/life balance for staff. New contracts have now been agreed.
3. The work that we do can be emotionally demanding, requiring a high level of peer support. This has been more challenging this year due to the new office layout and the demands on the time of the IASS Team Manager. We juggle and triage casework so that it does not become overwhelming and to ensure efficient management. Many cases do not have a clear path and we work with service users and take advice from other team members to find the best way forward.
4. Just before the start of the academic year, we moved to a new office in Whitley Health and Social Services Centre. We have a small office that seats two and enables us to run our helpline in a confidential manner. It can be a challenge if more than two of us are in and we are using space in the open plan office. We have to be very mindful not to use names or identifying information if talking to service users. It is not so easy to keep a good understanding of each other's casework, as it was when we were all in the same room. There are, however, some positives about our location. The teams based there have a better understanding of our service and make referrals to us/ ask our advice. We also have an opportunity to meet with service users in meeting rooms on site.
5. As has always been the case, we do not advertise ourselves as offering an emergency service, but many of the situations that arise for the parents that we support require a very swift response. This is particularly true of permanent exclusion cases, but can also be the case when a parent has experienced a breakdown in their relationship with their educational setting or if they contact us very close to a legal deadline. This can put pressure on a small service.
6. The level of Tribunal- related work remains a concern. 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 are now much clearer in explaining to parents what they can expect from our service, as we have to concentrate the most support on those who have the greatest need. 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. We have now appointed one member of the team as Tribunal Lead, who is going to keep us up to date and provide training for team members.
7. We still find it difficult to fully engage with children and young people directly, although recently we have supported more young people by referral from their parents. In a bid to

address this, we now have a Children and Young People's Lead, who is arranging drop-ins through schools.

8. We are still awaiting confirmation of our permanent line management arrangements.
9. We are still trying to establish a social media presence, which has not been possible this year. We do, however, have a planning meeting arranged for the coming academic year.

Service trends

As we come to the end of the academic year, it is a good time to reflect on any trends we have seen in our casework. This year has been largely in line with previous years in that many of our cases have been where parents have been expressing a high degree of dissatisfaction and where there have been issues of breakdown in communication with education providers. There have, as usual, been many cases about the level of support being offered (both SEN Support and with an EHCP), school placement (at primary, secondary and college), part-time timetables and exclusion. Two areas where we have noticed an increase in the number of cases have been refusal to assess cases (19, (particularly towards the second half of the year) compared with 5 the previous year and cases around non-attendance (17 where this has been entered as the main reason for the referral, compared with 10 the previous year), usually where a child or young person has become too anxious to attend school.

Our approach is, as always, to try to work with the educational setting and/or local authority to build bridges and negotiate solutions acceptable to all. Sometimes service users do not wish to engage with that process and then we will advise them of their rights and options and support them with what they wish to do.

Conclusion

We are proud of what has been achieved this year; there has been a great deal of change for this small team and we are pleased to come to the end of the academic year with a stable workforce, under new contracts, with funding in place to continue our work that is clearly well-valued by service users. We are committed to providing high quality information, advice and support to our service users and to continue to improve our service.

Lesley Chamberlain

IASS Team Manager

September 2019