

**Northumberland
Information
Advice &
Support
Service**

Annual Report

1 September 2022 – 31 August 2023

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Information, Advice and Support Service Manager

Overview of service delivery

The Northumberland IASS (Information Advice and Support Service) is an arm's length service which provides free, confidential and impartial information, advice and support (IAS) about education, health and social care for children, young people and their parents on matters relating to SEND (special educational needs and disabilities). This is offered in a range of ways which includes face to face, a telephone helpline, email, website and social media.

The service is for children and young people aged 0 – 25 years with SEND and their parent/carers who are normally resident in Northumberland. It is a self-referral service and covers the full range of education, health and social care as defined in the SEND Code of Practice 2015. The service operates in line with the national [Minimum Standards for Information, Advice and Support Services](#).

Staffing:

- The service staffing structure comprised Alison Bravey, the IASS Manager; Vicki Graham, IASS Officer and Julia McCormack, IASS administrative assistant.
- The IASS administrative assistant post was initially externally funded from September 2021 through the national IAS (Information, Advice and Support) Programme, which commenced in June 2018 and ended on 31 March 2022. The IAS Programme aimed to ensure that IAS services met the strategic and operational requirements of the IASS minimum standards. The additional staffing capacity enabled innovative work within the service, including the development of the service website, Facebook page and newsletter. The post was retained on a temporary basis when the IAS Programme ceased in April 2022, pending decisions around the joint commissioning of the service by education, health and social care, in accordance with the Children and Families Act 2014, to ensure that it is fully compliant with the IASS minimum standards. Julia McCormack retired at the end of September 2022 and, to date, has not been replaced.

Service Budget

The service has a dedicated, ring-fenced budget held and managed by the service manager. The budget allocated by the Local Authority for staffing and operational costs in the financial year 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023 was £94,880, with £92,450 allocated for 2023/2024.

Reflections on the Year

Specific challenges

The main challenges for the service continued to be managing the peaks and troughs of demand regarding casework throughout the year within its staffing capacity, particularly during unforeseen periods of staff absence, and ensuring that the service offer continued to meet the requirements of the IASS minimum standards. Casework can require significant time commitment, and this can conflict with staff capacity for other areas of work at any given time. For example, our Facebook reach of 2667 (compared with 6722 last year) reflected the lack of staffing capacity for this area of work.

The service relocated from where it was based in the Northumberland Skills, Morpeth Learning Centre building to County Hall in April 2023. A challenge with being based in the main Local Authority building is whether we are seen by service users as 'arm's length' from the Local Authority. We are exploring alternative, more 'neutral' venues to meet with service users, including the use of Family Hubs.

Progress with Service Development objectives

Promotion of the service

- Raising awareness of the service with service users and stakeholders is an on-going process, and all opportunities for this are taken. Aside from strategic meetings routinely attended, staff have attended a parent drop-in hosted by Calmer Therapy, a grandparents' support group run by The Toby Henderson Trust and a Carers Northumberland networking event. We have also met with colleagues from Early Help to explain our role and find out more about the work of the Education Early Help Workers. We also attended a SEND Parent Network conference organised by the Parent Carer Forum and the Northumberland College 'Your Future Choices' SEND Support and Progression Fair.
- The service newsletter and social media enable sharing of information and promoting the service to service-users and stakeholders. The newsletter has 198 subscribers (97 parents, 82 practitioners and 19 special schools). The [service website](#) had 3300 users this year (compared with 2500 last year) and 6895 views (compared with 5860 last year) and the service [Facebook page](#) had 403 followers (compared with 304 followers last year) and 331 likes (compared with 221 likes last year).
- Data collected through referrals regarding how service users heard about the service indicates that a wide range of services and organisations are signposting service users to us.

Work with Children and Young People

- Our aim has been to increase the number of children and young people we engage with and support as part of our remit as a service, but we still have a very small number of referrals from children and young people.
- We have explored ways of taking this forward through a consultation with children/young people at the SEND Careers event in November 2023 which aimed to raise awareness of the service and how they would prefer to get in contact. They told us that their preferred way of engaging with us would be getting to know service staff and what the service offers through direct contact with them in school, e.g., through drop-in, assemblies, etc. Unfortunately, it would be difficult to accommodate this in terms of staffing capacity.
- We flag up to parents our offer for children and young people, where appropriate, and this tends to be our main way of engaging with them. We always emphasise in our work how essential it is for child/young person's 'voice' to be at the centre of any SEND (special educational needs and disability) processes.

Development of Service Database

- A bespoke SharePoint database has been developed by Information Services which enables referrals to be logged more easily, stored centrally, and linked electronically to an ongoing record of case notes. Use of the database has been monitored and any issues/suggestions for improvements flagged up. So far, the database has proved to be an efficient and effective way of recording casework in line with data protection requirements.

Regional Training for Parents

- We have been working with regional IASS colleagues to plan and commission training events for service users and develop resources. Progress has been slower than anticipated because the main focus of all services is on casework, which limits the time spent on other activities, including training. The initial plans were to develop a series of film clips on different SEND topics, but discussions have moved away from this to look at commissioning face to face and virtual training. This is still in the very early stages of planning.
- We have moved our local focus to developing in-house training resources. A starting point has been writing a training module covering the content of EHC Plans in response to a request from the North Northumberland National Autistic Society

branch. We are also planning for training which will cover the SEN Graduated Approach and ordinarily available provision.

Service website

- The IASS information on the Northumberland County Council/SEND Local Offer pages has been checked to ensure that service users can self-serve for information they might require.
- We are working with Potts, our website designer, to improve the IASS website through improvements identified by service users.

Networking and training

The service engages with regional and national strategic planning and training and works with regional IASSs through the North-East SENDIASS group to inform service development. We also work with local partners to inform and influence policy and practice in the local area. The IASS Manager is a member of the Autism Partnership Board and the SEND Network, facilitated by the Northumberland Parent Carer Forum. The IASS officer attends the Post-16 Preparing for Adulthood Network meetings, the Children and Young People Strategic Participation Group and the CHSWYG (Children's Hearing Services Working Group).

Anonymised casework data is provided to Local Authority colleagues, and feedback from service users through casework and service evaluations is shared through the service steering group meetings, through bi-monthly meetings with SEND Strategic leads and through relevant networks.

Networking and training events attended by service staff this year have included:

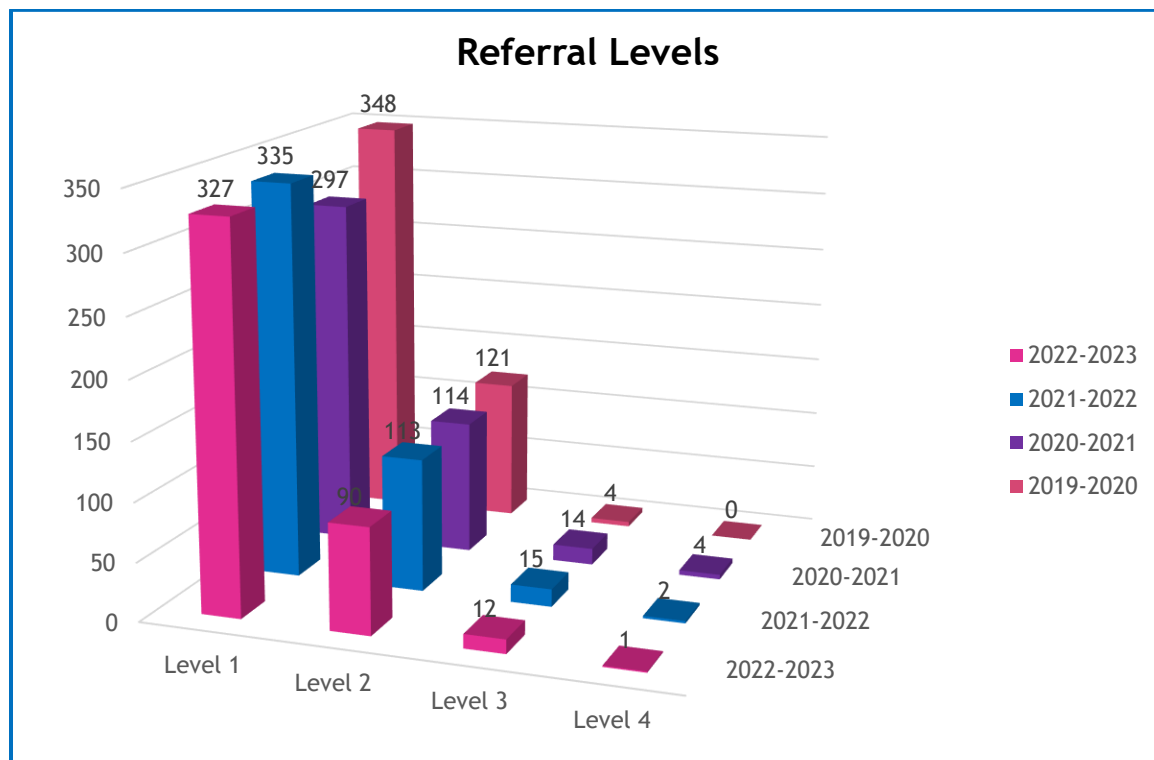
- The annual SEND Careers events organised by the Careers Guidance Team
- The Northumberland Parent Carer Forum SEND Network conference for parents
- The annual Northumberland SENCO conference
- NIES (Northumberland Inclusive Education Service) Away Day
- NIES Safeguarding training
- National IASS Network training covering: IPSEA refresher course, Exclusions, SEND Tribunal
- Regional SENDIASS Away Day covering the IASSN Intervention Levels and Emotional Based School Avoidance
- Eating Disorders Awareness session delivered by Eating Distress North-East
- Calmer Therapy parent and practitioner event

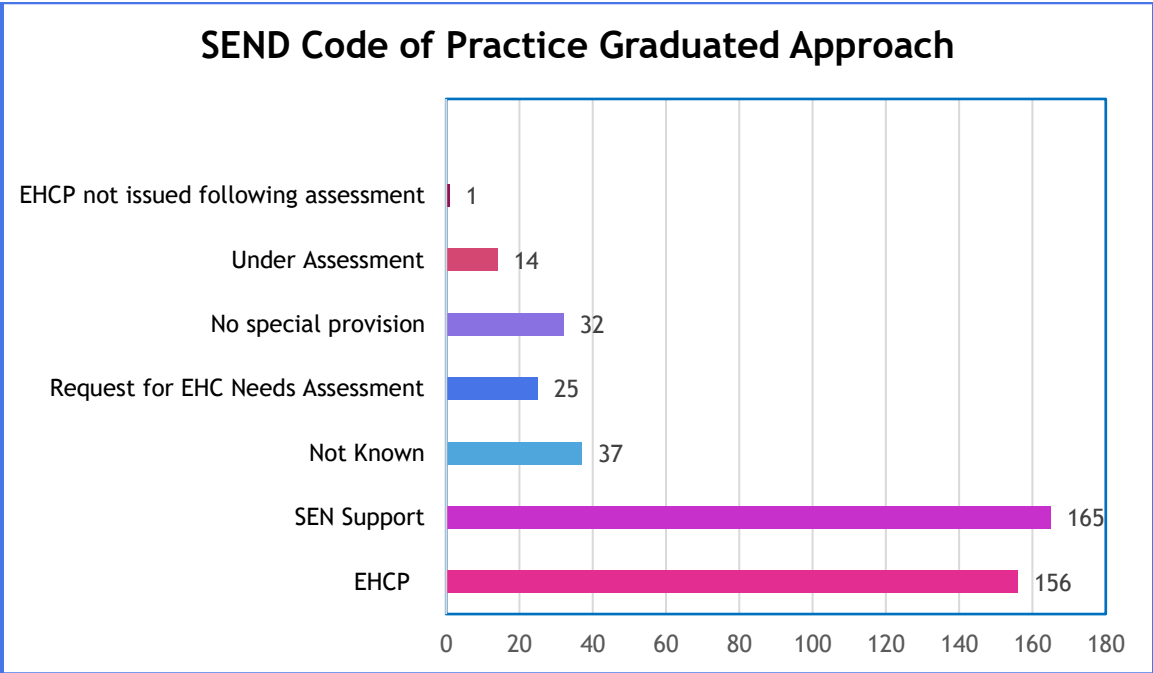
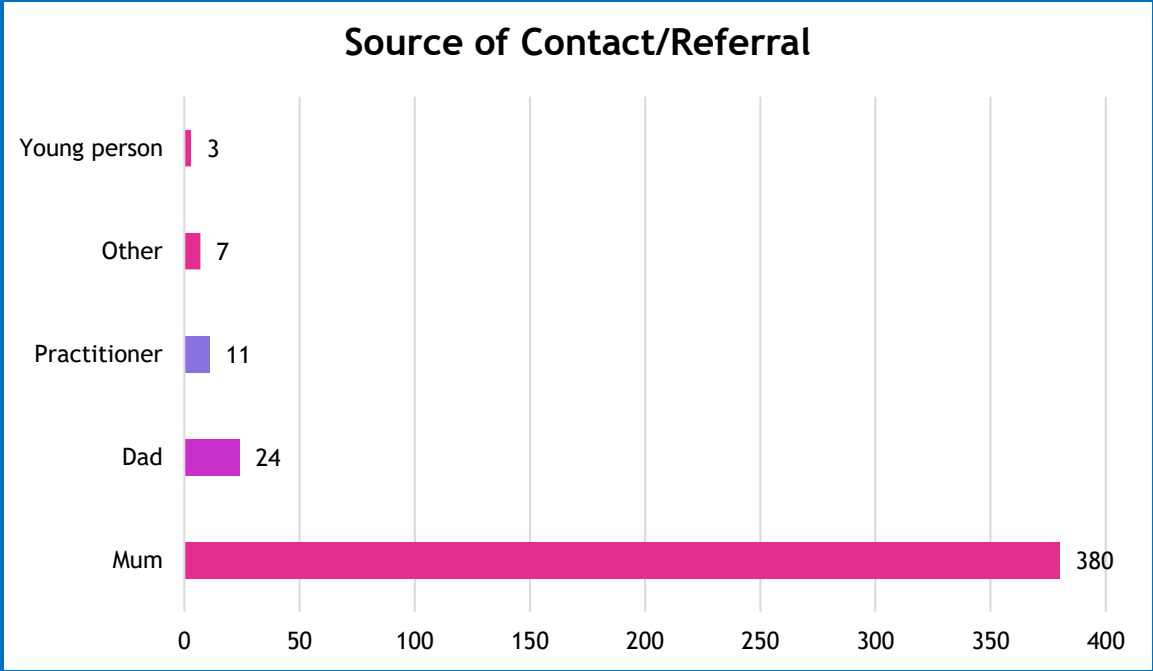
Casework data

The service supported 430 service users during the academic year. We use a solution focused approach, working in partnership with the service user and involved parties to try to achieve best outcomes for the child/young person, with an emphasis on promoting independence and self-advocacy. Appendix 1 provides further information about referrals to the service and an example of a typical referral.

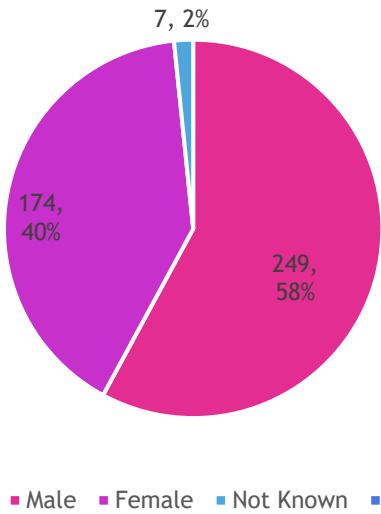
Casework is categorised according to the amount of service time spent on each case:

- Level 1 - less than 2 hours as part of a single intervention 327 (76% of cases),
- Level 2 - between 2 hours and 2 days within a 6-month period 90 (21% of cases)
- Level 3 - more than 2 days in any 6-month period 12 (2.5% of cases)
- Level 4 - more than 3 days intervention in any 6-month period 1(0.5% of cases)

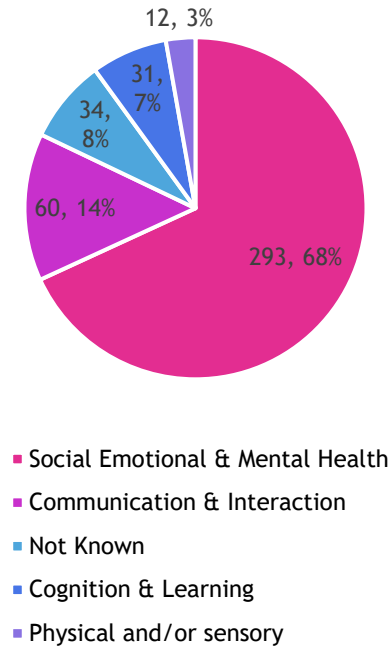




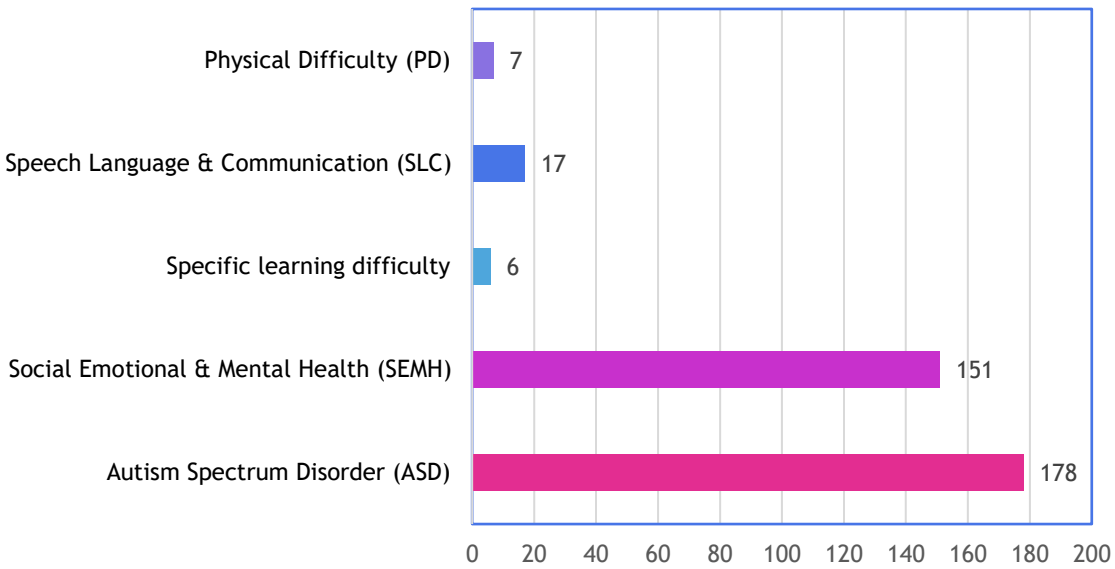
Gender of child/young person - 430 responses



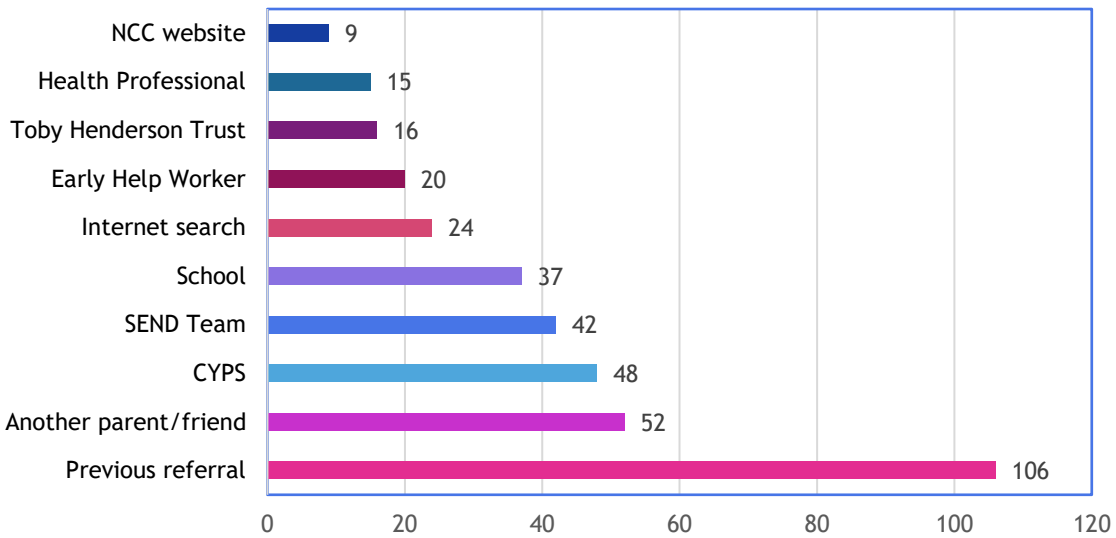
SEN Category



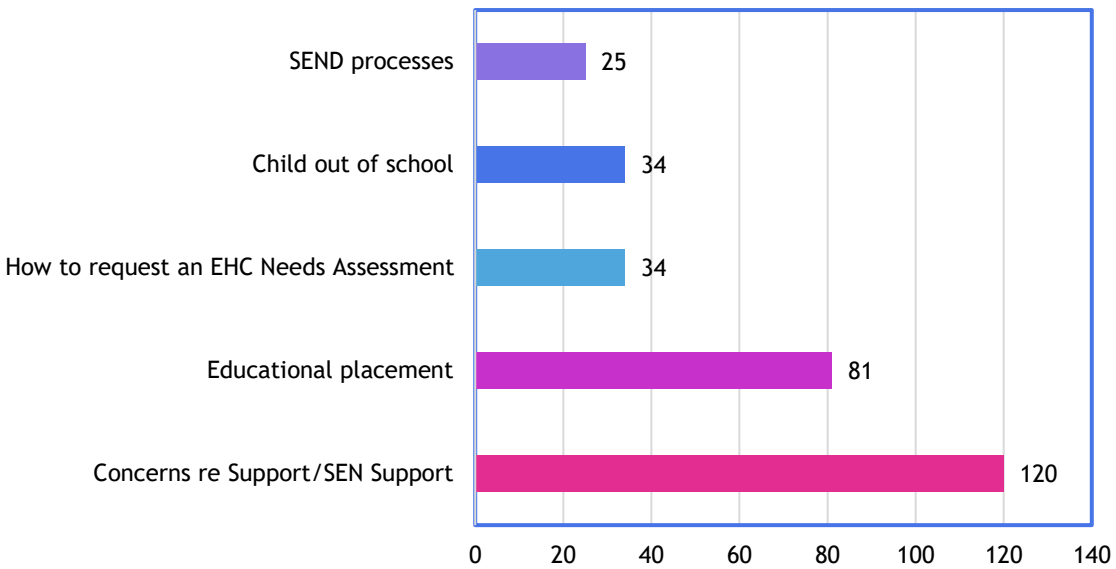
SEND Primary Need (where known) - Top 5



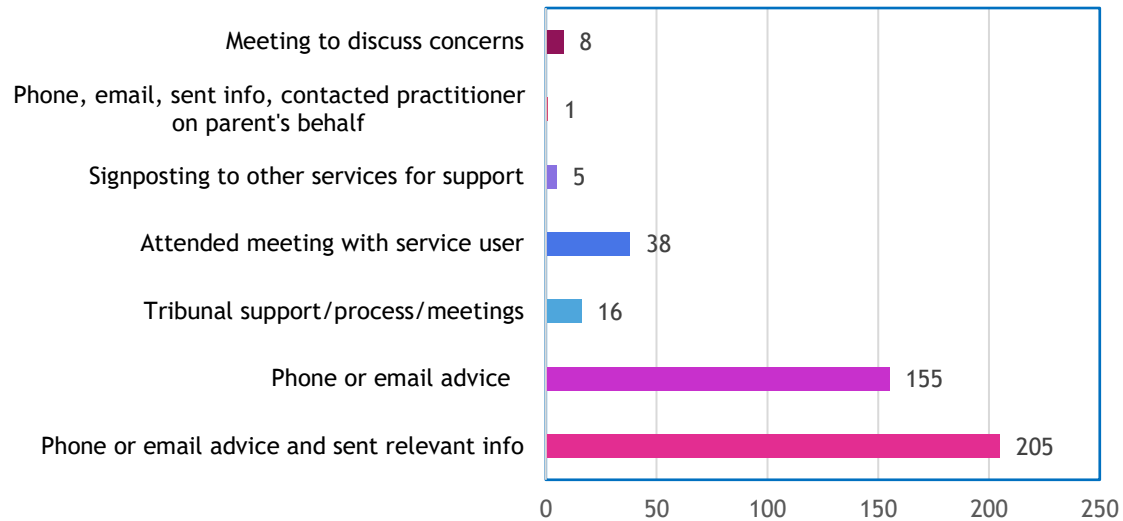
Where Heard About Service (top 10)



Reason for referral or contact (top 5)



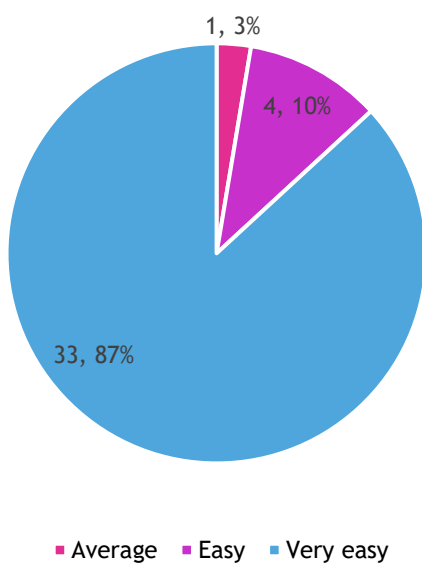
Information, advice and support provided at initial contact



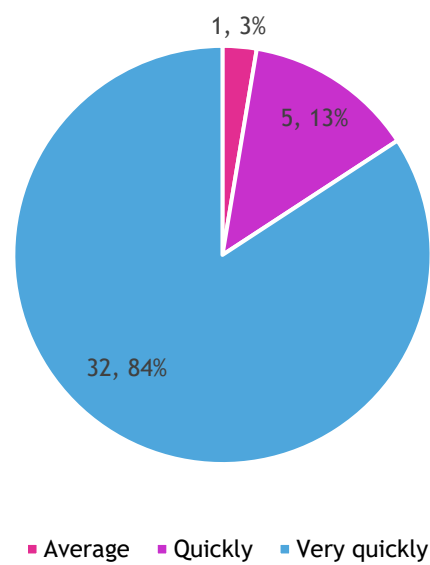
Service User Feedback

Feedback is obtained through an evaluation form sent to services users who received Level 2 intervention and above. 38 responses were received, representing a 38% return.

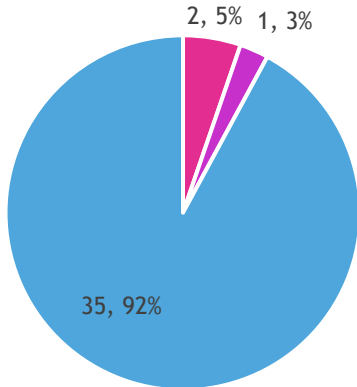
How easy was it to get in touch with us?



How quickly did we respond?

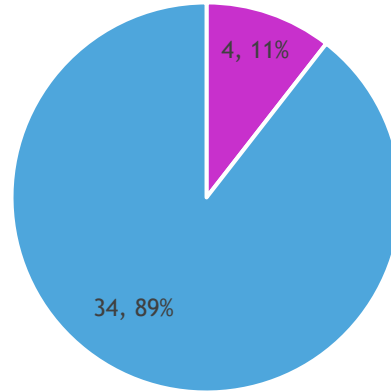


How well do you think that we understood your questions or concerns?



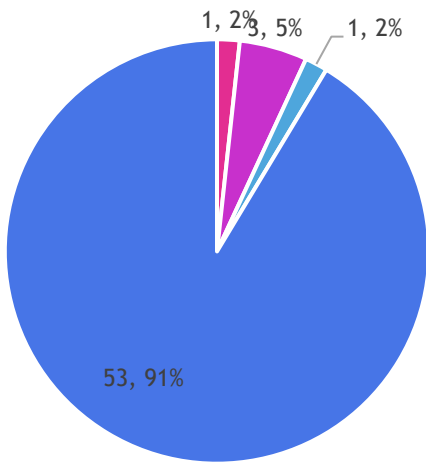
■ Average ■ Well ■ Very well

How useful was the information, advice & support we gave you?



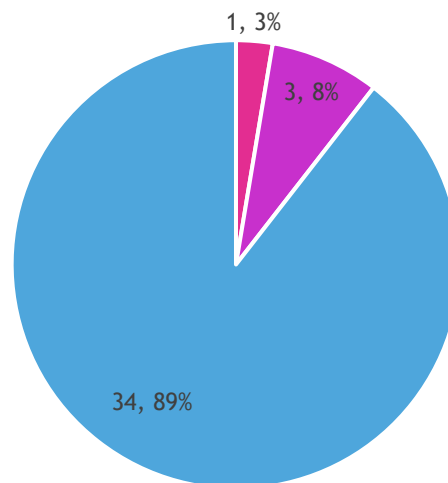
■ Average ■ Useful ■ Very useful

How impartial do you think we were?



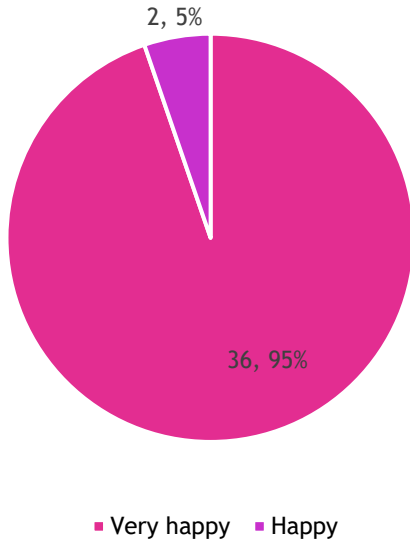
■ Not very impartial ■ Average
■ Impartial ■ Very impartial

How confidential do you think we were?

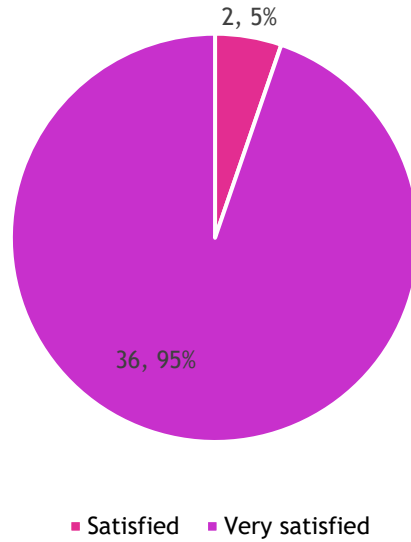


■ Average ■ Confidential ■ Very confidential

Would you feel happy to contact the service again if you needed to?

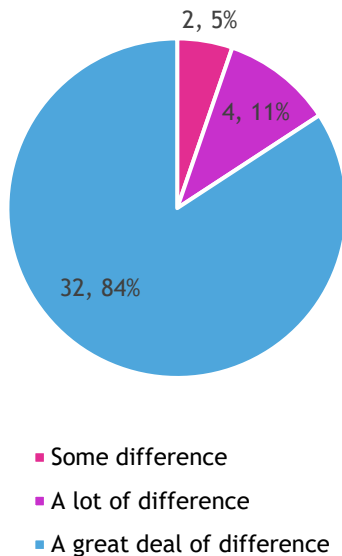


Overall, how satisfied are you with the service we gave you?



Impact of the IASS on Improving Outcomes for Children/Young people and their families

How much difference do you think our information, advice & support has made for you?



Service data and feedback from the service evaluation is used to monitor the impact of the service and inform its future improvement and development. The types of difference service users reported that the service had made (from the list of choices given) were:

- I have a better relationship with my child’s school or setting.
- I feel more confident.
- I have a greater understanding of the educational processes for children with SEN.
- I feel more involved in my child’s education.
- I feel happier/less worried about the future.
- I feel that my child has benefitted as a result of the service being involved.

Comments from service users included:

“My child was out of school and the service supported me to meet with school and help them to understand her needs better and support my child back into education. Information and advice on the EHCP process since then has been invaluable. Hopefully this will help get the right support for my child’s needs in the future.”

“I feel much better prepared going forward and actually feel like I have some level of control over my child’s education, rather than just going along with what other people are telling me.”

“I’ve felt more able to speak confidently and openly in regard to the care and education my child receives in the future. With the support of the service, I was able to actively make an informed decision in regard to my child’s future education.”

“This service has literally helped support my mental health and well-being whilst I support my daughter. I have found the staff so supportive, positive and knowledgeable that every conversation I had enabled me to feel more at ease and aware and calm.”

Service user feedback about how the service could be improved

- More staff, particularly during term time, so that service users can get a timely response when they need urgent support.
- Promoting/advertising the service more widely, including through school-based information, so that more parents, children and young people are aware of the service to access support earlier.
- Some service users reported only finding out about the service through a chance conversation with a practitioner, other parent or friend or when their child got a diagnosis through CYPS.
- Staff having a better knowledge of options other than school.

Key priorities within the Service Development Plan 2023/2024

- To introduce and embed the IASSN SENDIAS intervention levels for casework within the service.
- To ensure that the evaluation system for the service is aligned with the IASSN Intervention Levels
- To develop and roll out training resources on a range of SEND themes
- Improvements to the service website, including accessibility of information, to enable service users to self-serve more easily.

Conclusion

Progress has been made with service development activities this year, although this has been impacted by unforeseen staff absence. Feedback from service users and stakeholders has been positive and encouraging.

Future challenges will include ensuring that service capacity and resources meet the strategic and operational requirements of the IASS minimum standards.

Appendix 1

Referrals to the Northumberland IAS Service

Referrals to the IAS service are usually received by phone or email. We are a self-referral service, in accordance with our confidential, impartial and 'arm's-length' framework. If there are any barriers to a service-user getting in touch with us, we request that the person referring them 'introduces' them to us through a phone call or virtual meeting.

The main referrals to the service come from mums and then dads. We do not receive many direct referrals from children and young people but always emphasise in our work how essential it is for child/young person's 'voice' to be at the centre of SEND (special educational needs and disability) processes.

An example of a typical referral to the service would be when a parent gets in contact to say that their child or young person needs an EHC (Education, Health and Care) plan and asking for details of how to apply for one. We would talk this through with them and explore how their child or young person is currently being supported through the SEND graduated approach.

One of misconceptions we sometimes come across is that children/young people with SEND will only get support in an education setting if they have an EHC plan. We explain how the graduated approach works and about how educational settings are funded for their learners with SEND. For school-aged pupils, we would advise the parent to have a look at the SEN Information Report and SEND policy for their child's school.

We often signpost service users to other sources of information. Two of the main websites we signpost to are [IPSEA](#) and [Contact](#); independent charities that receive government funding to provide information and support for families. Both organisations have helplines. The Contact website has a summary of the graduated approach on their '[Extra Support in School](#)' webpage which is very useful as an overview. The IPSEA website provides legally based information on a range of SEND themes. We also signpost to the Local Authority's [Ordinarily Available Provision](#) document.

Once parents have a greater understanding of how the SEND graduated approach works in practice, they may either feel reassured that their child is receiving the support they require through the arrangements that the school is making, or that they need to talk to the school about their child's support and progress, and discuss what additional support can be put in place to support their needs, e.g., a referral to external practitioners.

If a parent feels that an EHC needs assessment is required, we forward them information about how to make a request. We always recommend that they speak to their child's educational setting about this and explain that the setting will be asked by the Local Authority to provide detailed information about their child's needs and how they have been supported through the graduated approach.

We encourage parents to get in touch with us if they have further questions once they have looked through the information we send or if there is anything they want to talk through in more detail. We would usually arrange a telephone or virtual meeting appointment if this is the case.

Alison Bravey and Vicki Graham, November 2023