



Buckinghamshire SEND Survey 2021



Survey Report

Introduction

Thank you to everyone who took the time to respond to the 2021 Buckinghamshire SEND Survey.

Families And Carers Together (FACT) Bucks and the Buckinghamshire SEND Information, Advice and Support Service (SEND IAS) first carried out a county-wide survey of families' experiences of provision for children with SEND in 2015 following the changes made in the Children and Families Act 2014 and the 2015 SEND Code of Practice. This became an annual survey that investigated the impacts of the reforms in Buckinghamshire. After a disrupted year in 2020 in which no survey was carried out, it was decided that the survey for 2021 would be reinvented, leaving out questions comparing experiences before and after the reforms, and instead focusing on a broader range of aspects of SEN provision for children and young people (up to 25) in the local area.

FACT and SEND IAS are grateful for the help of Buckinghamshire Council with publicising the survey. We are also pleased that the council has promised to review what the survey shows and take action on it. It is important to stress that the council did not have any input into the choice or wording of the questions, nor any editorial control over our analysis of the results.

This document sets out an initial summary of the results. Links to the full results in tabular form, and as an Excel spreadsheet (with some redactions to prevent identification of respondents) are available on both the FACT Bucks and the SEND IAS websites. We plan to carry out further analysis of the data, including looking at sub-groups, over the coming months. As this is shared with the Buckinghamshire Council and Local Health Providers it will be made available to the public. We expect that the council will publish a response in due course.

Thank you for your interest in this survey, and again to those who participated in it.

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Summary

The number of responses to the survey was very pleasing, and gives a large enough sample for conclusions to be drawn. The sample also included a good range of child ages, levels of need and school types.

Because this is the first year that these questions have been asked in this format it is not possible to make comparisons with previous years and to determine the direction and pace of change. Inevitably the COVID pandemic may also have skewed this year's responses.

The survey was available to complete for three weeks between the 1st and 22nd of March, 2021.

The survey answers revealed some positives. Parents overwhelmingly feel that their children with SEN are welcome at Buckinghamshire's schools. Parents in mainstream schools know their SENCOs and generally regard them highly. Other good news from the data includes that most annual reviews have gone ahead despite the lockdowns, and that the voice of the child was heard in those reviews. And despite the challenges of the pandemic, on balance parents and carers feel that their own health is good enough to look after their families.

The numbers also highlight areas for improvement. The Local Offer is not widely used. Levels of SEN Support are viewed as inadequate. Outcomes in EHC Plans are seen as vague. The Integrated SEND Service is criticised for not keeping in touch, for not making changes to EHC plans promptly, for poor handling of disputes and for sending officers to mediation without the authority to make decisions. The Preparing for Adulthood process is regarded as inadequate. More short breaks are needed.

A third of the respondents added general comments in the free text box at the end of the survey, and unsurprisingly those were dominated by parents driven to share their frustration; annoyance and deep concern that children and young people are not receiving the provision they require to meet need and secure outcomes. The most common areas of specific criticism relate to poor communication; the struggle to secure assessments; lack of post diagnosis support for specific conditions and of a system seemingly operating to restrict access to save money. There are also numerous references to the impact of these struggles on families both in terms of their wellbeing and in terms of their finances. A number of families reported spending considerable sums of money on accessing private reports or advocates in order to further the case of their child or young person.

The overall sentiment of the survey is reflected by a 36% to 44% split between those who think that their child is receiving the correct support and those who think that the support is not correct. A further 20% are undecided.

Part 1: The Quantitative Detail

Respondents

The survey was open to those who live in Buckinghamshire and have a child with Special Educational Needs aged 25 or younger. 530 eligible respondents completed the survey. A further 102 clicked to start the survey but were ineligible or did not complete any questions.

Most of the children covered were of school age, with only 5% aged 4 or less and 8% aged between 18 and 25. Of the school age children there was an almost even split between primary- and secondary-ages. Approximately 5% of the children do not attend a setting (nursery, school or college). Of the school-aged children attending a school 49% were in mainstream, 38% in special schools and 10% in an ARP or PRU. 72% of children had an EHC plan, and most of the rest receive SEN support.

Bucks Local Offer

Most respondents (77%) had never used the Local Offer, though just more than half (56%) had heard of it. Those who had used the Local Offer at least once gave mixed responses about the helpfulness of the information in it. When asked to rate on a scale where 1 was “not helpful at all” and 5 was “very helpful”, 29% rated it 1 or 2 and 35% gave a rating of 4 or 5.

Initial support

There was some lack of knowledge about what to do in order to get extra support for their child.

29% of those who first asked for help for their child’s SEN during the last 12 months said they “had no idea what to do” in order to get extra support for their child in contrast with 18% who “knew exactly what to do”. Half (53%) said that they had help or advice about how to get support for their child from their child’s setting. An equal number (22%) mentioned receiving help from “friends or family” and “SEND IAS Service”.

Of those families who decided to apply for an EHC need assessment or received their first EHC Plan during the last 12 months 38% said that they “had no idea what to do” (here only 13% felt fully confident).

Schools

The school experience appears positive for most. The majority of respondents felt that their child with SEND is welcome at their setting (pre-school, school or college) (88%), and that their child enjoyed it all or most of the time (66%). 45% felt that the setting supported their child’s SEN “very well”.

Among those parents whose child has changed setting in the last 12 months, just over half (51%) initially expected to prefer a special school for their child, 8% an ARP and 37% a mainstream school. By the time they made the request, presumably after having researched the schools’ offers and availability, the balance changed with more parents applying for a mainstream school (45%) than special schools (43%), with ARPs unchanged at 8%. 78% of children were offered a place at their first choice school. Of the remaining 22% opinions were evenly split on the suitability of the school offered.

There were mixed views on how easy it is to research schools – 35% found it difficult or very difficult and 35% found it easy or very easy. Looking for schools is an area that may have been impacted by the pandemic.

In exactly half of cases parents reported that the change of schools went smoothly or very smoothly, but a quarter of children experienced a bumpy change.

SEN Co-ordinators

Among those whose child attends a mainstream setting or an ARP, four fifths (83%) knew who the SENCo is, though even among those parents a third (32%) had not met with the SENCo in the last year. Perhaps COVID has some bearing on this. SENCos are regarded as understanding children’s SEN (73% neutral or better) and effective (again 73% neutral or better).

SEN Support Plan

59% of respondents’ children with SEN but without an EHC plan are on SEN support, most of these (69%) have been on SEN support for more than a year. Unfortunately 84% of parents do not feel that the SEN support plan is enough to meet their child’s needs.

EHC Needs Assessment and the first EHC Plan

Only 58 of the respondents’ children have had an EHC plan for less than one year. Of these three-quarters (74%) recalled being asked for their views at the start of the assessment process. More than two fifths (43%) commissioned independent reports from professionals and more than a half (55%) were not given the opportunity to review all the professionals’ reports before the decision was made as to whether or not a plan would be issued.

The survey then asked the same respondents about co-production, in particular “which of the following best describes how you contributed to the wording of the EHCP?”. Only a quarter (24%) recalled being fully involved, selecting “I helped draft the EHCP”, “I attended a co-production meeting to help draft the EHCP” or “I was asked for my views before the EHCP was written”. The remainder were asked to comment on a draft (30%), asked for comments on the completed document (20%) or just presented with a finished document (26%).

When parents did make suggestions for the plans 30% reported that their suggestions were ignored without explanation.

Parents also reported on the level of child involvement; 61% report that their child was not at all involved and 17% asked but could have contributed more. Less than one quarter (22%) of parents felt that their child was involved about the correct amount.

Views on the EHC Coordinators who drafted plans were mixed and negative about keeping in touch.

	Agree or Strongly Agree %	Disagree or Strongly Disagree %
They kept in touch well	29	54
They were knowledgeable	31	35
They were helpful	32	39

EHC Plans

Section B of EHC plans (the child's special educational needs) is generally regarded as completely (43%) or mostly (45%) accurate. Section F (special education provision) is a little less well-regarded by parents: completely sufficient (34%) or mostly sufficient (41%) to meet their child's needs.

As for the drafting of plans, co-production experiences are reported as mixed. Half (49%) of parents said that the outcomes were a mix of those provided by the families and by professionals. But 41% said that all the outcomes were written by professionals without their input, and only 4% of parents thought that they or their child wrote all the outcomes in Section C.

Parents generally do not regard the outcomes in EHC plans to be "SMART". Only 13% of parents thought that the outcomes had clear deadlines, 28% thought that outcomes were specific and 30% thought they were measurable. A more reassuring 57% of parents thought outcomes were relevant and 41% that they were achievable.

Annual reviews of EHC Plans

Annual reviews have generally continued despite COVID, with 82% of respondents who have had a plan for over one year reporting that they had had a review within the last 12 months. 85% of these parents said that they understood the annual review meeting well or very well.

Although the child only attended 25% of EHCP annual reviews, 73% felt that a good effort was made to listen to the views of the child.

85% of the meetings agreed changes in the EHC plan, but in more than half of those cases (45% of all meetings) the revised EHC plan has not yet been issued.

Personal Budgets for Education

Only 19% of families of children with EHC plans felt knowledgeable enough about personal budgets, while 24% had never heard of them. Four-fifths (80%) had not been asked about or offered a personal budget in the last year. Half of the 8% who requested a personal budget were successful.

Preparing for Adulthood

Three-quarters (74%) of parents did not feel that there was enough emphasis on preparing for adulthood at their last annual review, including nearly half (45%) that said that there was no discussion at all. Only 22% of parents of children in year 9 or above recalled any advice from a careers advisor in the last year. More than half (51%) of parents whose child is between 13 and 16 years old are not confident that their child will receive appropriate education and/or training post 16.

Disputes

Families were asked about their experiences with resolving disputes concerning their child's SEN provision. 69% had experienced no disputes and only one fifth (20%) of the respondents had used one of the dispute resolution routes included in the survey. This created small sample sizes for the questions about experiences of dispute resolution.

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Satisfaction with how well the disputes were handled increased as the disputes were escalated, as can be seen in the table below. It is of concern that 62% of formal complaints were regarded as having been handled “not at all well” while the same percentage thought that the Local Government Ombudsman had done “very well”.

	Not at all well			Very well		Number of responses
	1	2	3	4	5	
SEND Resolutions Team	50%	17%	21%	6%	6%	52
Formal Complaint	62%	21%	8%	4%	4%	24
Mediation	33%	0%	14%	33%	19%	21
Tribunal (SENDIST)	17%	17%	25%	8%	33%	12
Local Government Ombudsman	0%	8%	15%	15%	62%	13

This pattern was repeated with the proportion of disagreements resolved to the respondent’s satisfaction at each stage.

				Number of responses
	No	Partially	Fully	
SEND Resolutions Team	69%	17%	13%	52
Formal Complaint	83%	17%	0%	24
Mediation	87%	4%	9%	23
Tribunal (SENDIST)	25%	25%	50%	12
Local Government Ombudsman	15%	38%	46%	13

Families were not asked in detail about their experiences with each level of dispute resolution. However, those who had attended mediation were asked if the Buckinghamshire Council representative in the meeting was able to take the decisions required to resolve the issues. In 86% of mediations parents reported that this was not the case.

Social care

Those whose child is aged 18 or under were asked about social care. About one in seven (14%) families had a social worker, and a slightly higher proportion (18%) had been subject to a social care assessment in the last year. 8% receive direct payments.

Of those with EHC plans more (33%) families thought that the social care needs in section D were wholly or partially incorrect than thought that they were incorrect. 28% of families felt that their child had no social care needs. Similarly, one third (32%) of families thought that the social care provision detailed in Sections H1 and H2 of the EHC plan is missing, inappropriate or inadequate with only 15% saying that provision is correct.

There was a clear desire for more short break services, with nearly half (47%) of the respondents saying that their child does not currently access any form of short breaks but that they would like them to attend. This is a more than five times the number of respondents (9%) whose children attend “specialist” short breaks at The Vines, Merryfield or The Grove or the “targeted” short breaks with Bucks Activity Project.

When given a menu of options for short breaks only one third (32%) said that they would not want their child to attend any more sessions. The most attractive options were short breaks during school

holidays (34% would like more of these), weekend short breaks (32%), evening youth clubs (32%), full-day respite breaks (25%) and overnight respite (12%). There are signs of success from efforts to enable children with SEN to access universal services: one in six (16%) families had received some support to access such services, and one in four (23%) successfully access universal activities or private sector clubs for children with SEN.

Healthcare

Unsurprisingly the children covered by the survey make extensive use of health services. Half (52%) had visited their GP in the previous year, a quarter (24%) had attended an appointment with CAMHS, and nearly a quarter (22%) had seen a community paediatrician.

The children also receive high levels of therapy input, at school, via the NHS and privately.

	at school	NHS	Private
Speech and Language Therapy	38%	10%	6%
Occupational Therapy	30%	11%	9%
Physiotherapy	9%	9%	4%

Other health services used included the Priority Dental Service (10%), Community OT equipment service (9%), learning disability healthchecks (6%), and the community nursing team (6%).

Opinions were mixed on the service offered by GPs, with just more than half (55%) saying that their GP had treated their child's health needs well or very well. A quarter (23%) said that the GP had treated their child not well or not well at all.

One third (34%) of parents felt that Section C of their child's EHC Plan did not correctly identify their child's health needs, while 42% thought that Section C was complete. Similar proportions (36%) of families felt that healthcare provision in section G is partially or completely inadequate or incorrect, while 48% thought that their child had no health needs or that those needs were provided for.

Support for parents and carers

Parents and carers who reported being in generally good enough health to care for the child with SEN (54%) outnumbered those with health concerns (20%). There was an even split among parents when asked whether they have enough time to look after themselves and their families: 39% had enough; 38% not enough, and 23% in the middle.

The Young Carers' service had been offered to 31% of siblings between 6 and 16, with 14% using the service.

Overall Support

The final question asked was "Overall, is your child receiving the correct support for all his or her needs?" The answers were

Yes	36%
No	44%
Don't know	20%

Part 2: Free text comments

The Survey offered those who completed it the opportunity to record an open comment. 167 respondents took this opportunity and the text of those comments (redacted only to remove the names of individuals or schools) is available at the FACT and SEND IAS websites. A selection of comments are set out by topic below.

General

"I feel children with SEND, and their families, are often forgotten and/or brushed off in Bucks. Housing and transport policies are particularly harsh leaving families to cope with little support in very difficult circumstances."

"It seems to me that services are underfunded, clunky and too stretched to be useful to any but the most urgent need. Information and support are not freely available. I feel very alone, and not even sure what to ask for as I don't know what can be provided."

SEND Support (27 mentions)

"I'm not sure what she's entitled to at school. I'm told they are paid £6000 per SEND child but no money at all is spent on her. I've bought her a laptop myself. The teachers don't do anything more to help her. I don't know where to go to for advice. The advice I have sought is all expensive."

"Dyslexia provision at my child's school involves asking if an overlay might help, and not much else, as far as I am aware. Very little communication or feedback received from them."

"Our school will not provide additional tutors/support despite receiving funding because our child is adopted. He is under the 'school monitoring' system but not classed as special needs however we feel he needs extra help to achieve his potential. He struggles in the classroom and we have asked for the money the school receives to be put towards helping him but we are not getting anywhere which is frustrating."

Commissioned Services (Children's Therapies/ CAMHS / Short Breaks) (37)

"Our 12-year-old son is on a two-year waiting list to find out if is autistic. He satisfied the initial CAMHS assessment but now has to wait for a proper assessment. He is losing his childhood. He is now a school refuser and has no friends. His anxiety is getting more and more serious, and his family is struggling to cope. Why on earth is the waiting list so long? Why are children having to endure their situations for so long?"

"Appointments constantly being cancelled 'due to covid' yet phone appointments are made when convenient. Constantly having to chase speech and language and paediatrician for updates as I've had little to no contact from either!"

“Ideally my daughter would benefit from more physiotherapy as the therapy given at school is not enough. Also occupational therapy is limited at school. She is on waiting list for CAMHS referral and community nurse referral as she has anxiety and doesn't sleep at all well.”

“Referred to CAMHS Bucks 3 years ago who wanted an ASD assessment and offered no support whilst waiting 18 months for that. ASD diagnosed and told to carry on as we were with no signposting. Children’s mental health in Bucks is not a priority at all”

“Please, please provide more overnight respite and full-day respite.”

EHC Plans (49)

“I find the SEN at county impossible to contact, we have four SEN officers in four years but never know who they are. haven’t had a final EHCP for the last two years, very dismissive when I had to change some personal details on the ECHP and refused to include them.”

“Not enough continuity of staff in the SEND team, not enough communication with parents during the draft EHCP process, no communication from the SEND team on other services or support available to the child with SEN needs or the family, there is no real collaboration with the parents and getting anywhere feels like a battle. The SEND team seem to lack any legal knowledge around the EHCP process and the rights of parents, mixed and incorrect information is frequently given and rather than a support, the whole process is draining and tiring for families who are already stretched emotionally and physically.”

“Specialist Teaching Service have been a godsend helping both ourselves as a family and school to understand and meet the needs of our son. It is really the only form of 'aftercare' we have been given following diagnosis but having completed this survey I'm now wondering if there should be more support available that we weren't aware of.”

“We have had difficulties and delays receiving the provision specified in son’s EHCP (still not receiving full provision) lack of meaningful communication with Sen officer. No annual reviews for nearly 2 years. Nobody monitoring my child’s EHCP outcomes whilst awaiting special school placement.”

“Local Authority didn’t finalise my sons EHCP following his AR in 2020, the Senco had to chase constantly but the amended plan took until October to be sent out and the AR was held at beginning of February 20 prior to Covid restrictions. We had to hold 2021 AR using the PAP from last year. Staffing levels have led to delays for many families.”

ASD/SEMH (12)

“Please sort out the provision for children who are academically able, with autism, and unable to cope in mainstream classrooms. There is nothing in bucks for them at all. This is why you spend so much money funding places at independent schools. Stop forcing parents to tribunals with illegal and illogical Panel decisions that are not compliant with SEN law. Your 2017-2020 policy of restricting placements to the most ‘severe and complex’ children is illegal. Don’t do that in your new policy. Also, your phones in the SEN team are often not answered for hours at a time, maybe staff the phone lines better. Just some helpful feedback I hope.”

“I think there needs to be transparency around the level of underfunding there is and the lack of adequate experienced and provision of SEN in ARP’s. I think “inclusion” is used as a way of saying costs by my setting up poorly resourced ARP’s. I believe real inclusion is actually accepting that SOME SEN kids eg with Autism/ ADHD would benefit from specific school and one that is not dealing with challenging behaviour. my son is in mainstream- I don’t want everyone to live along the bench to allow him a seat. I want him sat on a bench and at a table where he see’s other kids with challenges. I believe we all deserve to feel normal - life isn’t mainstream so I believe my sons esteem will be better protected being taught with other kids with similar problems. He has a TA - I don’t think it feels good for him to need support. I don’t want differentiation for him- I want a bespoke Autism/ ADHD friendly environment.”

Preparing for Adulthood (8)

“Support is non-existent for my son... Due to finish college in June and his final couple of years have been disrupted by Covid (his work experience has not been able to take place). We have no idea who to approach for support once college are no longer involved.”

“Would like to know if we are able to have a social worker and if we could ask for help with looking into assisted living for our 18-year-old daughter. She is waiting for an assessment with adult complex mental health.”

Co-Production (3)

“More dialogue with families rather than avoiding them will ultimately save money. Rather than argument and waste taxpayer’s money at tribunal and commission nonsense superficial assessments to try and withdraw support, work with families to listen and target valid relevant support.”

Local Offer (9)

“Not aware of many of the additional services mentioned in this survey, more information given would make such a difference.”

Transport (2)

“Communication is shocking especially transport team not the most helpful bunch”

Social Care (8)

“My son had a social worker until 3 years old. I can now not get one to even talk to us. We are vetted and told we don’t require support. He has PMLD I’m sure he must be a child in need.”

“Proper support for parent carers with their own physical health problems - 2 carers assessments both no help offered.”