

# Buckinghamshire SEND Survey 2023



## Survey Report

### Introduction

Thank you to everyone who took the time to respond to the 2023 Buckinghamshire SEND Survey.

This is the third of the revamped annual Surveys organised by Families and Carers Together (FACT) Bucks as part of the Buckinghamshire SEND strategy. This year we undertook the survey independently of the Buckinghamshire SEND Information, Advice and Support (SENDIAS) Service because procedures at the local authority have changed. However, FACT Bucks are grateful to SENDIAS for publicising the survey among their clients.

FACT also acknowledge the help of Buckinghamshire Council with publicising the survey. It is important to stress that the council did not choose the topics or wording of the questions, nor did they have any control of our analysis of the results.

Last year's results were keenly studied by the Inspectors from Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission whose inspection of SEND provision in Buckinghamshire took place just after our 2022 survey. The feedback from parents and carers was evident throughout the Inspectors report, mirroring the themes promoted to the Inspectors by FACT reps, all of which culminated in three areas in particular where improvement is required. Those three areas are now the subject of a "written statement of action" produced by Buckinghamshire Council and the local NHS that sets out how the problems will be addressed, and again clearly uses parent and carer feedback. The results of this year's survey will be studied carefully to look for signs of improvement as a result of the actions in the written statement, but realistically it is probably too soon to see any significant impact.

The overall sentiment of the survey is reflected by a 21% to 60% split between those who think that their child is receiving the correct support and those who think that the support is not correct, and 35% feel support has worsened over the year while only 19% think it has improved.

This document sets out a summary of the results. Links to the full results in tabular form and a PDF report of comments made (with some redactions to prevent identification of individuals) will be available on both the FACT Bucks and the SEND IAS websites.

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

## Summary

The number of responses (272) was again pleasing, down slightly from 2022 but still a large enough sample for conclusions to be drawn. The patterns in the data are strikingly consistent with those from the 2021 and 2022 surveys which gives assurance that the numbers are robust.

The survey was available to complete between the 6<sup>th</sup> of February and the 8<sup>th</sup> of March, 2023. This year a new software package was used which allowed more flexibility in routing respondents to the relevant questions and omitting inappropriate options. Inevitably some teething problems were experienced with this new system, but these have not impacted the data.

This year we have three years of comparable data so trends are becoming clearer. However these three years, which span from before the start to (we all hope) after the end of the COVID pandemic, have been turbulent times for children with SEND and their families. The answers to some questions, e.g. about numbers of GP visits, will have been temporarily impacted by lockdown effects, and in other areas the effects will be longer lasting.

In general the 2023 survey answers point to a difficult situation for families. In most aspects there is no improvement since the 2022 survey, and areas of deterioration outnumber the few areas where change has been positive.

Parents and carers accessing help for the first time feel ill-informed. More families have used the Local Offer but find it no more helpful. SENDIAS is rated more highly.

Despite the easing of pandemic anxieties, a larger fraction of families reported that their child with SEND missed school at least weekly because of mental or physical health problems. At one in eight children, this remains a major area of concern.

Parents and carers of pupils in special schools remain significantly happier with the welcome and level of support at special schools than in mainstream. Four fifths of families on SEN support feel that the support given is inadequate.

Respondents' judgements about the quality of Education, Health and Care plans remained critical in all aspects other than the involvement of the children and young people in their drafting. The ratings of how "SMART" EHC outcomes are declined for the third year. More than a third of families feel that the provision in plans is insufficient to meet the needs of their child. Net ratings of EHC Coordinators rebounded from 2022 lows but were still negative. Personal budgets were more broadly offered.

One of the most striking results is that only 13% of respondents feel that there is enough emphasis on preparing for adulthood, and only 10% of older children received any careers advice.

More respite care is needed, mainly short breaks during the day.

Stresses on the NHS are evident from the result that more families now report having used private speech and language and/or occupational therapists than having used the NHS service. Average opinions of GPs fell from positive to neutral.

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 language used by some is a testimony to the strain placed on families by a system that is not operating well. The most common areas of specific criticism relate to therapy

provision; the struggle to secure assessments across the board; lack of post diagnosis support for specific conditions; inappropriate school placements 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. There is also an increase in the number of specific concerns expressed about children and young people with mainstream school places who are not attending.

## Part 1: The Quantitative Detail

This report discusses the responses to questions that reveal important information about families' experiences in Buckinghamshire. It also highlights where responses have changed from the previous survey in a way that shows a significant shift in opinion or might signify the start of a trend. The full responses are presented in the Data Tables which accompany the report.

### Respondents

The survey was open to those who live in Buckinghamshire and have a child with special educational needs or a disability aged 25 or younger. 272 eligible respondents completed at least part of the survey, a further 5 ineligible respondents were excluded.

The age of the children covered by the survey was younger in 2023 than in 2022. In 2023 60% of respondents' children attended a primary or pre-school, up from 46% in 2022, and 32% attended a secondary school, down from 49% in 2022. Since the experience of children with SEND often changes as they age this could affect the interpretation of trends in the other responses.

Approximately 10% of the children do not attend a setting (nursery, school or college). Of the school-aged children attending a school 76% were in mainstream, 19% in special schools and 5% in an ARP or PRU. 59% of children had an EHC plan, and most of the rest receive SEN support. As in previous years approximately one-third of the respondents had experienced some disagreements with the local authority during the previous year, one-in-ten had accessed the First Tier SEND Tribunal.

### Bucks Local Offer

The proportion of respondents that had heard of the local offer, 58% was in line with previous years<sup>1</sup>. The number that has used the local offer has increased steadily, from 23% in 2021, 25% in 2022 to 29% in 2023. Those who had used the Local Offer at least once gave an average rating of its helpfulness of 2.5 on a scale of 1 ("not helpful at all") to 5 ("very helpful")<sup>2</sup>, in line with the previous year.

---

<sup>1</sup> For ease of reading where percentages have not changed materially from previous years the numbers for the previous years are not given in this report but can be found in the data tables.

<sup>2</sup> The *neutral* score on the 1 to 5 scales used in this report is 3 – so an average of 2.5 is below neutral.

## Initial support

The proportion of families who initially did not know what to do in order to get extra support for their child continues to increase. The average self-rating of the knowledge of those Respondents who first asked for help for their child’s SEN during the last 12 months dropped from 2.8 to 1.9 on a scale of 1 to 5.

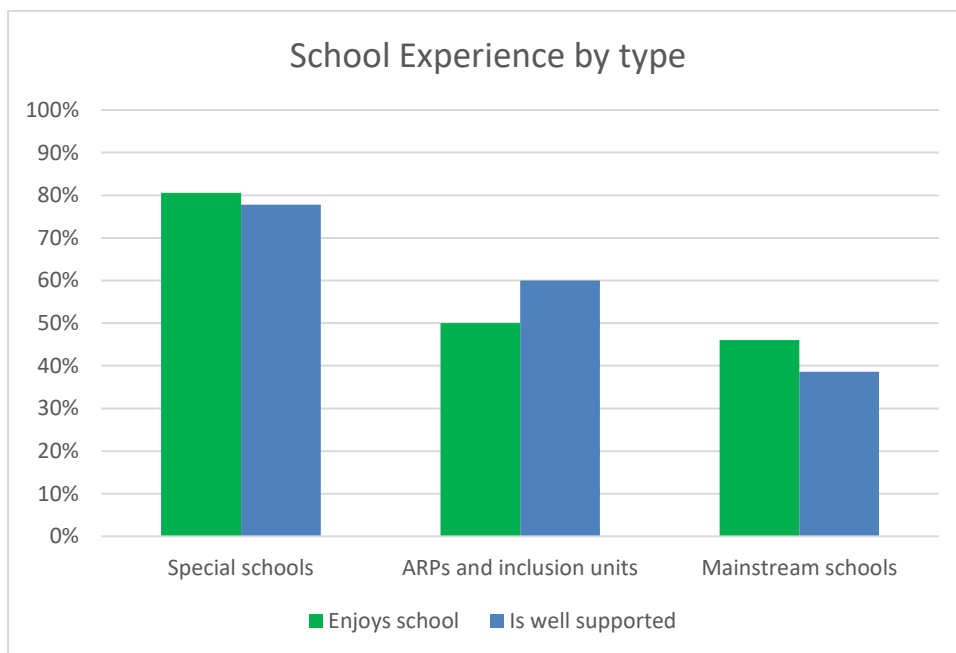
In contrast those families who decided to apply for an EHC needs assessment or received their first EHC Plan during the last 12 months seem better informed with an average rating of 2.8.

## SENDIAS

SENDIAS were consulted by 26% of those seeking out help for their child for the first time, and the same proportion of those applying for an EHC needs assessment or plan. 44% of respondents had made use of at least one of the services provided by SENDIAS, and those 44% rated the helpfulness of the SENDIAS service a positive 3.8 on a scale of 1 to 5.

## Schools

The settings (pre-school, school or college) of 77% of respondents were rated as welcoming to the children with SEND, including 76% [70%] of mainstream schools. However the rating of how much children enjoy their settings varied noticeably by type of school: 81% of respondents with children at a special school said that their child enjoys school (4 or 5 on a 1 to 5 scale) and only 46% of respondents with children at mainstream schools gave the same ratings. A similar pattern emerged when respondents were asked about how well their child was supported.



For the second year families were asked about school attendance. Responses were little changed from the previous year: that 7% of children rarely attend school, and a further 5% miss some school each week. This remains a cause for concern.

### Choosing and changing schools

Perhaps because the effects of the pandemic are receding, the average rating for how easy it is to find out about schools increased from 2.6 to 3.2 (on a scale of 1 to 5). The first choices expressed by families during 2022 were significantly less for special schools (32% vs 53%) than in the last survey. This result is one that could have been particularly skewed by the younger age of this year's participants' children.

### SEN Co-ordinators

The ratings of the knowledge of SENCOs in mainstream settings and ARPs declined over the year to 3.2 (on a 1 to 5 scale, from 3.6), and the rating of the effectiveness of the SENCOs also fell from 3.5 in 2021 to 2.9 in 2023.

### SEN Support Plan

69% of respondents' children with SEN but without an EHC plan are on SEN support, most of these (72%) have been on SEN support for more than a year. The proportion of respondents that feel that the SEN support plan is enough to meet their child's needs almost doubled to 20%, but that still leaves 80% that feel more support is needed.

### Boarding

For the first time in 2023 respondents were asked about boarding at school. Excluding those whose children already boarded (fewer than 3% of respondents), 10% would like their children to be able to board and a further 25% were uncertain. The most cited reason that parents would like their children to have the opportunity to board was the development of personal independence and life skills (88%) with only 53% saying that family respite was a reason. Most would prefer a boarding pattern of one or two nights per week.

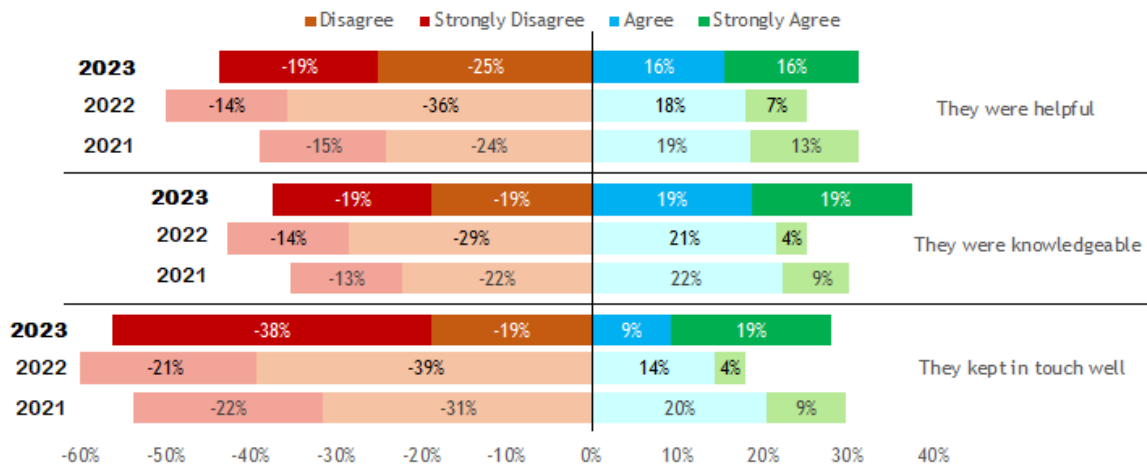
### **EHC Needs Assessment and the first EHC Plan**

Only 43 of the respondents' children underwent an EHC needs assessment during the previous year (2022). Almost half (47%) of these families commissioned independent reports from professionals, up from a third (31%) in the previous survey. More than half (57%) reported not having been 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?". This year only 28% (down from 43%) 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". A correspondingly larger share (35% up from 21% in 2022) were not asked for comment until the document was complete. More positively the proportion of children and young people reported to have contributed to the plan rose from 35% to 50%.

## Buckinghamshire SEND Survey 2023 - Report

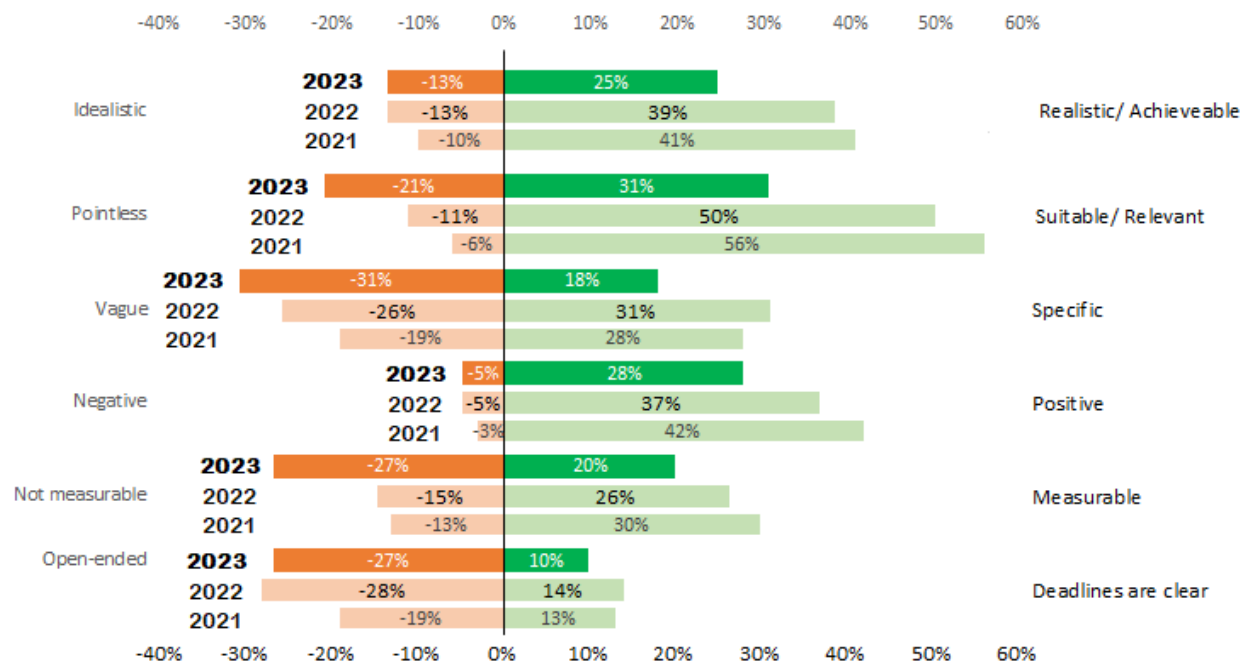
Views on the EHC Coordinators who drafted plans were negative about keeping in touch, knowledge and being helpful. However these figures recovered to approximately the levels of 2021.



### EHC Plans

Section B of EHC plans (the child’s special educational needs) is generally regarded as accurate, with only 22% stating that it was not. However Section F (special education provision) causes more concern, with 37% of respondents (up from 22%) saying that the provision is insufficient to meet the child’s needs.

Respondents generally do not regard the outcomes in EHC plans to be “SMART”. Only 10% of parents thought that the outcomes had clear deadlines, 18% thought that outcomes were specific and 20% thought they were measurable. Opinions on each measure declined over the year.



### Annual reviews of EHC Plans

84% of respondents who have had a plan for over one year reported that they had had a review within the last 12 months. 79% of these parents said that they understood the annual review meeting well or very well.

84% of the meetings agreed changes in the EHC plan, and in half of those cases (43% of all meetings) the revised EHC plan has been issued – a noteworthy increase on the 27% in 2021.

In most annual reviews achievements were reviewed (71%), progress towards outcomes considered (70%) and the continuing relevance of outcomes reviewed (76%). However in fewer than half of reviews (41%) were interim targets set.

### **Personal Budgets for Education**

Familiarity with the system of personal budgets increased, with 33% (up from 22%) of families of children with EHC plans felt knowledgeable enough about personal budgets, and only 11% [19%] had never heard of them. 38% of families had asked about or been offered a personal budget in the last year. 15% of families requested a personal budget though only one third of those (5% of the total) were successful.

### **Preparing for Adulthood**

Only 13% of respondents (down from 26% in 2021) felt that there was enough emphasis on preparing for adulthood at their last annual review, with 62% saying that there was no discussion at all. Only 10% of parents of children in year 9 or above recalled any advice from a careers advisor in the last year. Only 18% of respondents (down from 27% in 2021) are confident that their child will receive appropriate education and/or training post 16.

### **Social care**

Those whose child is aged 18 or under were asked about social care. About one in eight families (12%) had a social worker, and one in ten had been subject to a social care assessment in the last year. These proportions are in line with previous years. 8% had received some support from family centres during the year.

40% of respondents whose children had EHC plans said that their families had no social care needs as a result of their child's SEN, up from 28% in both 2021 and 2022. This could be because of the younger cohort in the current survey.

Social workers attended 13% of the annual reviews of this cohort. Social care provision was discussed at 27% of annual reviews.

Of those with EHC plans a steady proportion (40%) thought that the social care needs in section D were wholly or partially incorrect and one third (36%) of families thought that the social care provision detailed in Sections H1 and H2 of the EHC plan is missing, inappropriate or inadequate. This year only 4% said that the social care provision detailed in sections H1 and H2 in good.

### **Short Breaks**




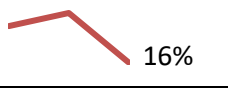
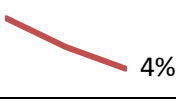
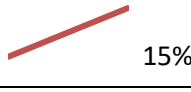
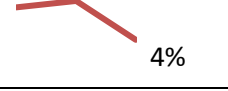
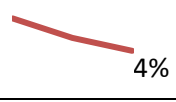
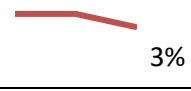
As in previous years there was a clear desire for more short break services, with nearly half (45%) of the respondents saying that their child does not currently access any form of short breaks but that they would like them to attend. This is five times the number of respondents (9%) whose children attend "specialist" short breaks at The Vines, Merryfield or The Grove or the "targeted" short breaks with Bucks Activity Project.

Just 4% of respondents said that their child attends Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) sessions, of whom approximately half received free school meals. 27% of respondents would be interested in attending HAF sessions.

## Healthcare

Unsurprisingly the children covered by the survey make extensive use of health services. 71% had visited their GP in the previous year. The proportions that had attended an appointment with CAMHS (30%) and community paediatrician (21%) dropped back to 2021 survey levels after a spike in the 2022 survey.

The children also receive high levels of therapy input, at school, via the NHS and privately. The table below indicates the ways in which that has changed over the past three years.

	at school	NHS	Private
Speech and Language Therapy	 28%	 9%	 13%
Occupational Therapy	 16%	 4%	 15%
Physiotherapy	 4%	 4%	 3%

It is noteworthy that in 2023 for the first time more respondents had used privately funded speech and language- and occupational- therapies than NHS equivalents. The reasons for this are often the subject of the free text comments provided.

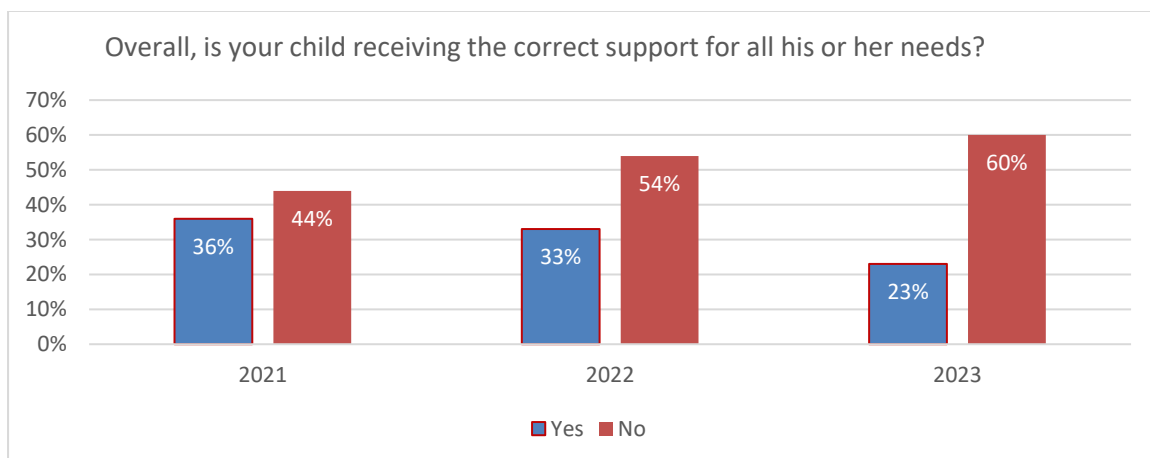
Opinions of the service offered by GPs worsened, with the average rating of how GPs had treated respondents' child's health declining to a neutral 3.00 on a scale of 1 to 5.

## Support for parents and carers

Parents and carers ratings of their own health stayed steady at 3.5 on a scale of 1 to 5. Ratings of whether respondents have enough time to look after themselves and their families also were steady at 2.9.

## Overall Support

The final questions asked families to sum up the overall support received. This has declined significantly over the three years of the survey:



Only 19% of respondents said that the support for their child has improved, and 35% said that it has worsened.



## Part 2: Free text comments

The Survey offered those who completed it the opportunity to record an open comment. 111 respondents took this opportunity and the text of those comments (redacted only to remove the names of individuals or schools) will be available at the FACT and SEND IAS websites. A selection of comments are set out by topic below.

### General (30 mentions)

“It feels like we are constantly having to fight to get the right support for our child - it’s exhausting and feels like the council really doesn’t care”

“It’s a fight. It’s always so stressful and there is a blame the parents mentality. When there is one child with Extra needs in the family, there is often siblings with extra needs. Until things go wrong - the child struggles enough, that’s when EHCP are finally issued - not before. Never preventative in bucks, always in retrospect.”

“I have 4 autistic boys and none of them are getting the help support and provision they need and I am exhausted battling my own mental health and fighting and advocating for them. the system is beyond broken.”

“Will always be so grateful to you for my son’s Specialist teachers and the fantastic EHCP. Thank you”

### SEND Support (12 mentions)

“Diagnosis was private and since then we’ve been on our own. School Sendco is unmotivated and lacking in empathy. Chair of school governors refused to acknowledge issues unless formal complaint made. SENDIAS advice is lodge formal complaint. But does anyone really understand what that means, to be lodging complaints in a small village primary where everyone knows everyone, staff and pupils are related? Why should Sen parents have to become pariahs to get the help we deserve?”

“The school provides poor support. We have been waiting three years for SALT and OT referral. School have told us for the last two years that they will complete EHCP application. This has never been done. GP has no appointments - 6 week wait to speak to someone. No support from anywhere or anyone, I am trying to google and think of strategies to support her on my own. Complained to the school and they were very rude to me. Staff constantly leaving the school so continually having to 'retell' her story and her needs. Support plans never shared with me, I have to request them. SEMH worsening in my daughter.”

### Commissioned Services (Children’s Therapies/ CAMHS / Short Breaks) (29 mentions)

“My child has received no speech and language support since July 2021, despite being allocated 15 hours yearly. Emails to BHT go unanswered and there is a complete lack of accountability from Bucks. Given the disruption to SALT services during both lockdowns it is appalling and completely unacceptable that children who face enough barriers already are being abandoned by SALT services.”

“My child has Autism and anxiety and has been on the waiting list for 6-9 months. His anxiety is getting worse he struggles to go to his classes he can’t face being with large groups of people or loud noises. He punched things when he gets frustrated mainly walls or if having a break down at home scratches himself to almost draw blood, yet we still have up to 20months on the CAHMS waiting list!

It's getting to the point where we need to pay for a diagnosis when he is entitled to this service. My son will end up self harming and doing something stupid if the mental health team don't hurry up and sort them selfs out. I'm really disappointed in the whole CAHMS service."

"Rejected by CAMHS for ADHD assessment despite majorly struggling at home and at school. Have had to fund private diagnosis and feel frustrated by a system that would reject assessing an obviously struggling child without ever meeting them or asking more questions of the parents/teachers."

### **EHC Plans (28 mentions)**

"The EHCCo is fully aware that our son has been illegally excluded from school due to the school not meeting his needs and no comment has been made about the school's suitability. The school is paying for our son's alternative provision, we pay for his transport. The local authority, Buckinghamshire, bury their head in the sand and leave us to fend for ourselves. Supporting discriminatory practice and allowing children to suffer. As parents, we have no choice but to cope. It is all we can do."

"Poor parental engagement, lack of transparency, very poor communication and response times. Incompetence with completing tasks-not fulfilling legal obligations or adhering to data protection and privacy rules."

"The SEN team seem poorly equipped to do their job. We've had several different people managing our son's case and for the most part they have failed to communicate with us. They give poor advice and I don't actually trust some of the information that I have been given."

### **ASD/SEMH (9 mentions)**

"There is no adequate provision for children with moderate learning difficulties and anxiety in bucks at primary/secondary level. There is one school with caters for SEMH. This is a utter diabolical situation. Parents are forced to look out of county due to the poor provision."

"Schools need more training in understanding Autism, preferably from those who are Autistic. SENCOs and teachers need better training, two half days are not enough or are in the wrong job. Actually listen to parents, after all we know our own kids, less of the gaslighting and parent blaming that goes on that schools are quick to decide upon. We need a specific secondary school for teens/ASD girls who are academically able but find mainstream school even with a PRU is the wrong environment but are too academic for SEN schools."

### **Preparing for Adulthood (8 mentions)**

"The education system for post 19 with an EHCP is absolutely appalling. The county needs to catch up with the fact that young adult with EHCP are entitled to and education if the wish, not everyone wants to go into adult social care."

"The provision for post 19 with SEN needs to dramatically improve in Bucks"

### **Schools (25 mentions)**

"Schools seem to not be able to take any responsibility for any wrong doings. They seem to get away with 'bullying' even within a Special Educational needs school. We as parents are almost always the ones to blame by social workers, as well as schools."

“The Primary mainstream school my son is at has taken too long to accept and acknowledge his need for extra support, his learning difficulties were missed for too long and as a result his confidence and mental health has deteriorated and he is significantly behind his peers academically.”

“There are no trained send TA’s available to support my child at his school and until the council agree to assess him this will not change. My child has regular issues at school that are not addressed completely correctly and I do not feel there have been enough reasonable adjustments made to support him in the learning environment.”

“My child moved from \*\*\*\*\*(mainstream) School to \*\*\*\*\* (special) school and has gone from strength to strength”

### **Social Care (7 mentions)**

“Out of the three social workers we have had only one of them that has been able to give direct answers to us regarding on what help we can receive for our child. It is disappointing and upsetting that some 'professionals' seem to be in a job that they do not understand or even care for the child's needs.”

### **FACT Bucks (4 mentions)**

“ FACT Bucks does not reliably represent the views of parents and children in Buckinghamshire. They do not challenge the local authority instead providing a tick box for the Local Authority to say - we’ve consulted with parents.”