

Survey Report

Introduction

Thank you to everyone who took the time to respond to the 2024 Buckinghamshire SEND Survey.

This is the fourth annual survey organised by Families and Carers Together (FACT) Bucks as part of the Buckinghamshire Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) strategy. The aim of the survey is to capture the overall opinions and experience of families with children with special educational needs in the county. It does not aim to find out data which is readily available in council records (e.g. the proportion of children that have EHC plans) or NHS databases (e.g. the length of waiting list). To keep the length of the survey manageable it does not probe deeply into families experience with particular services such as the CAMHS, schools or pupil transport. Instead FACT Bucks works with these services to encourage and help them to carry out their own user experience and satisfaction surveys.

FACT Bucks are grateful to the Buckinghamshire SEND Information, Advice and Support (SENDIAS) Service for their help by 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.

This year's survey was carried out at the time of the second anniversary of the inspection of SEND provision in Buckinghamshire by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission. To address the three main areas where the inspectors noted that improvement was required, Buckinghamshire Council and the local NHS created a "written statement of action" that sets out how the problems will be addressed. The results of this year's survey will be studied carefully by Buckinghamshire Council, the Department for Education and NHS England to look for signs of improvement as a result of the actions in the written statement.

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. Readers unfamiliar with the terms and abbreviations used in this report may find it helpful to refer to the new SEND Jargon Buster available on the Local Offer, FACT Bucks and SENDIAS websites.

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

Summary

The number of responses (438) was very pleasing, up significantly from 2023 and second only in number to the 2021 survey. It is a large enough sample for conclusions to be drawn even among subgroups. The patterns in the data are strikingly consistent with those from the previous three surveys which gives assurance that the numbers are robust.

The survey was available to complete between the 6th of February and the 4th of March, 2024. The average time taken to answer the complete survey was 19 minutes and 26 seconds.

This year we have four years of comparable data so trends are becoming clearer. These three years which include the COVID pandemic and the cost of living crisis 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 2024 survey answers show no improvement in a difficult situation for families. Most of the detailed data shows how little things has changed from year to year. Individual families do not feel this on a personal level: 31% feel support has worsened over the year while only 19% think it has improved, but overall the 23% to 59% split between those who think that their child is receiving the correct support and those who think that the support is not correct is almost unchanged from 2023 (23% vs 60%).

Despite more families knowing of and using the Local Offer overall, Parents and Carers accessing help for the first time feel ever less well-informed. SENDIAS reach far more families applying for EHC Plans than those asking for SEN Support. Only 14% of families with a SEN support plan feel that it is sufficient.

The number of families reporting that their child regularly misses school because of mental or physical health problems has increased to 45%. More than two thirds of those families attribute their child's absence to EBSA. The education of those children is suffering as few receive remote or home-based tutoring.

Most of the parents choosing new schools for their children would still prefer a mainstream place. However parents are increasingly unhappy about the schools offered when their preferences are refused. Parents and carers of pupils in special schools remain significantly happier with the welcome and level of support at special schools than in mainstream.

Net ratings of EHC Coordinators continued to improve, though still overall negative for keeping in touch. Respondents' judgements about the quality of Education, Health and Care plans remained broadly neutral. The ratings of how "SMART" EHC outcomes are declined further. Ratings of the specialist teaching teams, and to a lesser extent the educational psychology teams remain positive.

The HAF program has proved popular with families of children with SEND, and now supports more children than the Bucks Activity Project and overnight respite centres. Very few children and young people with SEND receive help to access universal leisure activities and clubs.

Stresses on the NHS remain evident. Fewer therapists are attending annual reviews. Only 13% of parents were confident that adult health services would appropriately support their child..

Nearly half of all respondents added general comments in the free text box at the end of the survey, and unsurprisingly those were again 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 the iSEND service; the challenges in mainstream schools; and a lack of support from services. There are also 40 specific references to the impact of these struggles on families both in terms of their wellbeing and in terms of their finances. This is an area that has grown over the last four years.

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. 419 eligible respondents completed at least part of the survey, a further 19 ineligible respondents were excluded.

The ages of the children covered by the survey reverted to a more representative pattern in 2024 after an unusually young group was represented in 2023. This suggests that the changes observed in 2023 and attributed to the changed sample could in fact be real trends.

Approximately 10%¹ of the children do not attend a setting (nursery, school or college). Of the school-aged children attending a school 70% were in mainstream, 24% in special schools and 6% in an ARP or PRU. 65% 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-twelve had accessed the First Tier SEND Tribunal or the local government ombudsman. The reduced proportion of our respondents that have gone to tribunal during the year may be because of the broadening of the sample base rather than fewer families going to appeal.

Bucks Local Offer

For the first time more than 70% of respondents said that they had heard of the Local Offer (58% in 2023). 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 2.8 on a scale of 1 ("not helpful at all") to 5 ("very helpful")², up from previous year (2.5) but below 2021 (3.1).

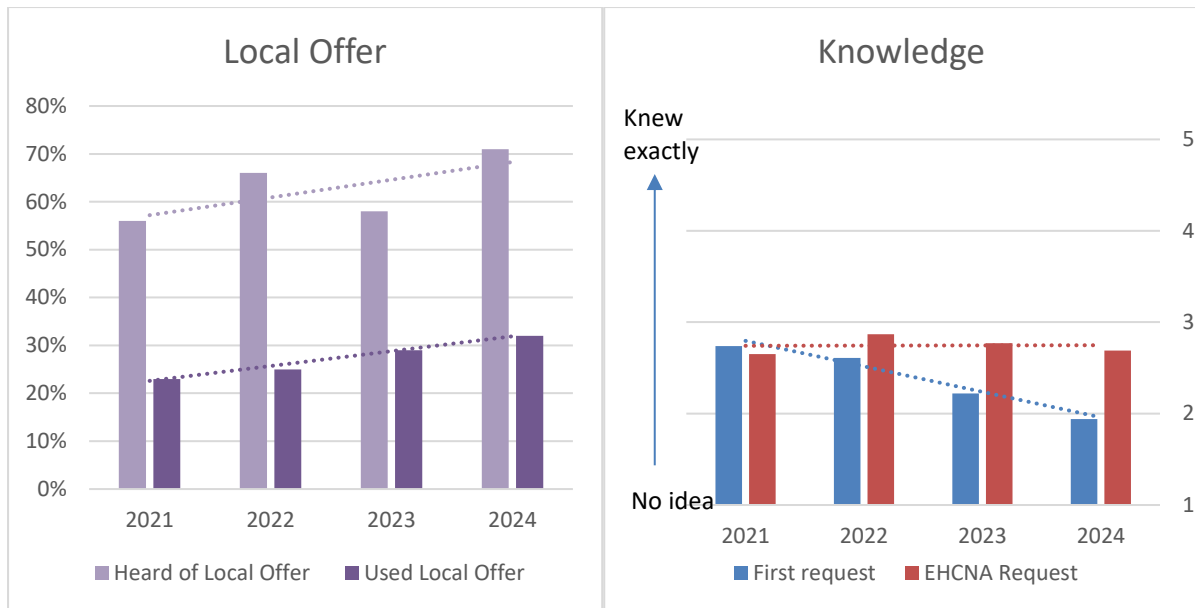
Initial support

Despite increasing awareness of and use of the Local Offer, 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 SEND has dropped from 2.7 to 1.9 over the past four years.

In contrast those families who decided to apply for an EHC needs assessment or received their first EHC Plan during the last 12 months were more confident in their knowledge with an average rating of 2.7, roughly steady over the period.

¹ 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.

² The *neutral* score on the 1 to 5 scales used in this report is 3 – so an average of 2.8 is below neutral.



SENDIAS

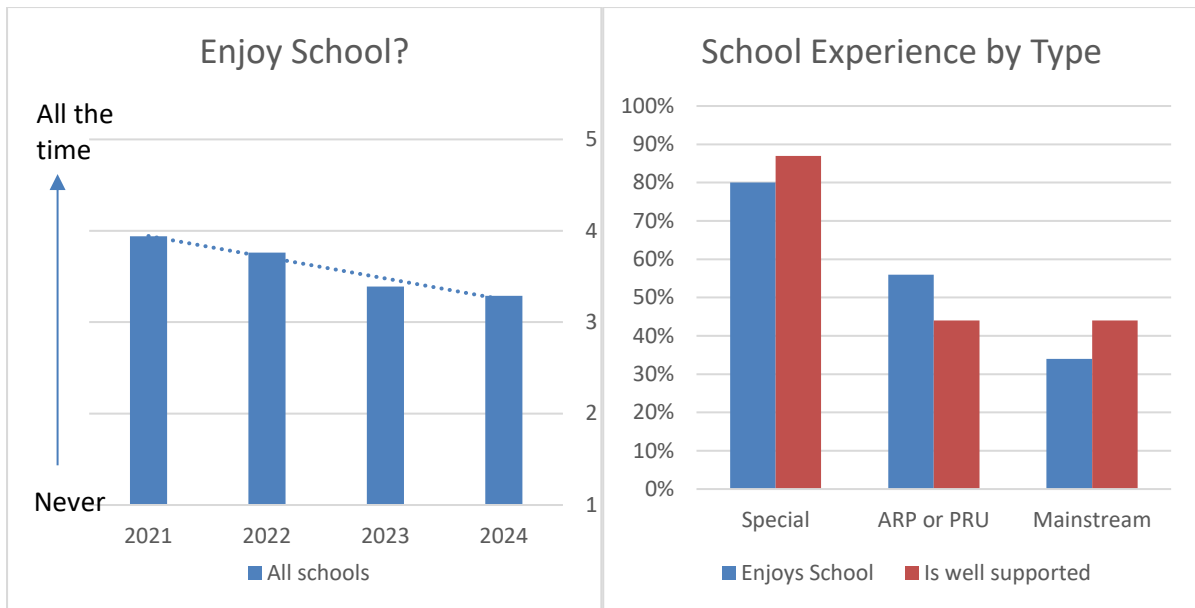
SENDIAS were consulted by 17% of those seeking out help for their child for the first time and 31% of those applying for an EHC needs assessment or plan. 51% of respondents had made use of at least one of the services provided by SENDIAS, and those 44% rated the helpfulness of the SENDIAS service a positive 3.5 on a scale of 1 to 5. Since the SENDIAS Service distributed the survey to their mailing list the sample here may not be representative.

Schools

The settings (pre-school, school or college) of 77% of respondents were rated as welcoming to the children with SEND, including 72% [76%] of mainstream schools and 94% of special schools.

The reporting of how much children enjoy their school is showing a steady downward trend.

The overall rating hides a large and growing discrepancy between school types of how much children enjoy their settings: 80% 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 34% 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. Of concern is that on 44% of families with children at ARPs and PRUs rated support as good, the same as those at mainstream schools and down from 60% in 2023 (though this is on a relatively small sample size of 18 families).



Alternative Provision and Reduced Timetables

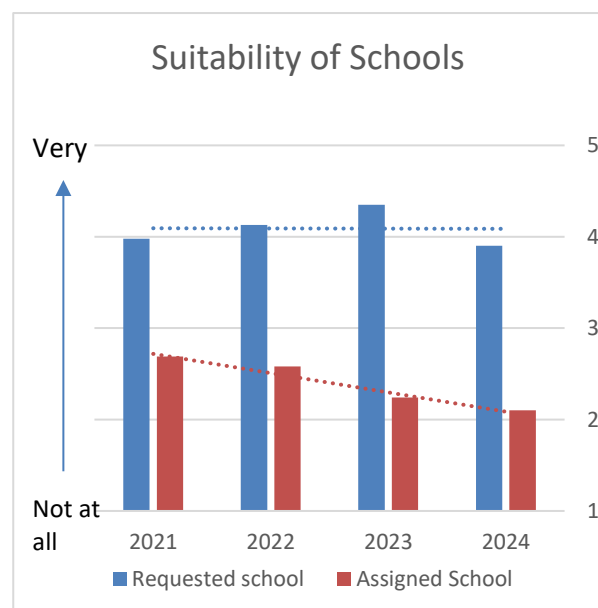
10% of school children in the survey had alternative provision for at least part of their school week. A quarter had been receiving AP for over a year, two thirds for more than a term. 12% of respondents replied that their child was on a reduced timetable at school, most of these for more than a term.

Absence and EBSA

Families were also asked about school attendance. The number saying that their child attends school every day (other than days missed for typical short-term illnesses or scheduled medical appointments) has dropped to 55% (from 69% in 2023). Of the families who say that their child is missing some school, 70% agreed with the statement that their "child is displaying Emotional Based School Avoidance (EBSA), because they can't attend school due to negative feelings such as anxiety?". Only 20% of families whose child misses some school feel well supported by the school, and only 11% ever receive tutoring (on line or in person) at home.

Choosing and changing schools

More than a quarter of the respondents' children had changed schools in the sample year. Most (51%) hoped for their child to have a place a mainstream school on in an ARP within a mainstream school. 29% of families say that they requested a special school place, down from a high of 53% in the 2022 survey. However 18% of parents state that they were not asked for their preference in the type of school. Parents who were not offered their chosen school showed a decreasing estimation of the offered school.



SEN Co-ordinators

Mainstream school SENCos seem to be better known (only 11% said that they didn't know their SENCo) and more active (only 12% of parents reported that they hadn't met the SENCo during the previous year, down from 21% in both previous years). The ratings of the knowledge and the effectiveness of SENCos rebounded from dips in the previous years.

SEN Support Plan

68% of respondents' children with SEN but without an EHC plan are on SEN support, most of these (71%) have been on SEN support for more than a year. Only 14% of respondents that feel that the SEN support plan is enough to meet their child's needs, with approximately the same number saying that it is not helpful at all, leaving 70% saying that their SEN plan is partially meets need but more help is needed.

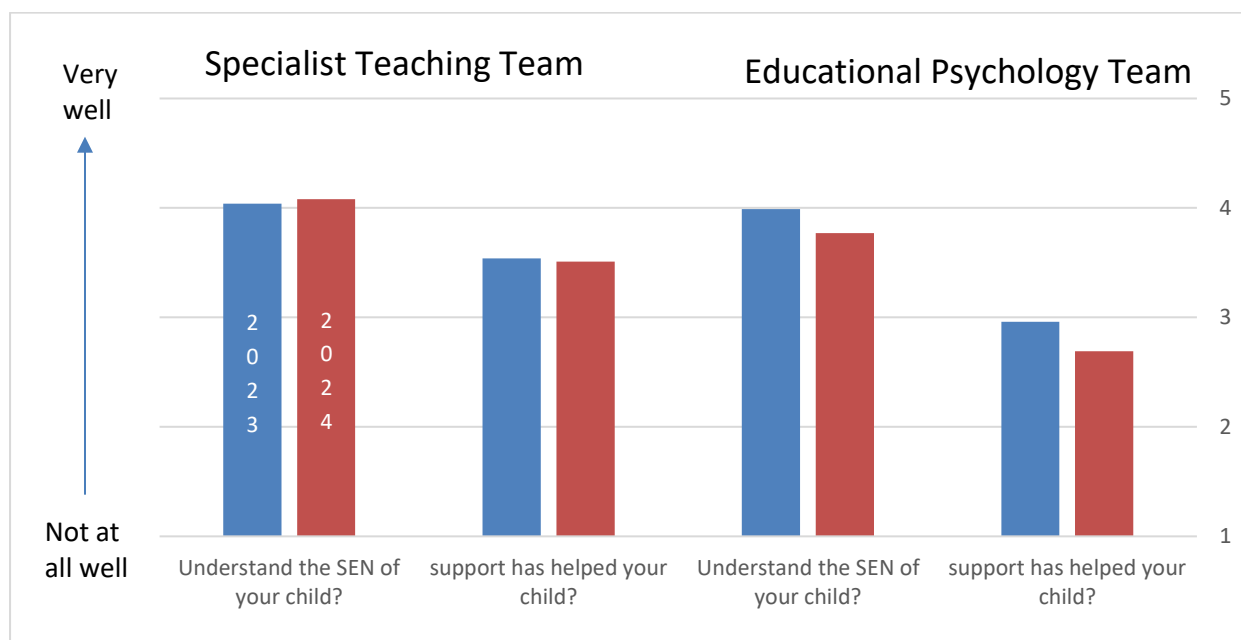
Boarding

Excluding those whose children already boarded (fewer than 3% of respondents), 10% would like their children to be able to board now or in the future and a further 26% 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. None of these figures have changed meaningfully over the year.

Specialist Teachers and Educational Psychologists

Both these services are quite well used by the respondents, with 21% having had support from the Specialist Teaching Team during the year and 20% from the Educational Psychology Team. Nevertheless a substantial 14% of families had felt it necessary to seek support from a private Educational Psychologist during the year.

The local services are generally well regarded by the families that they help:

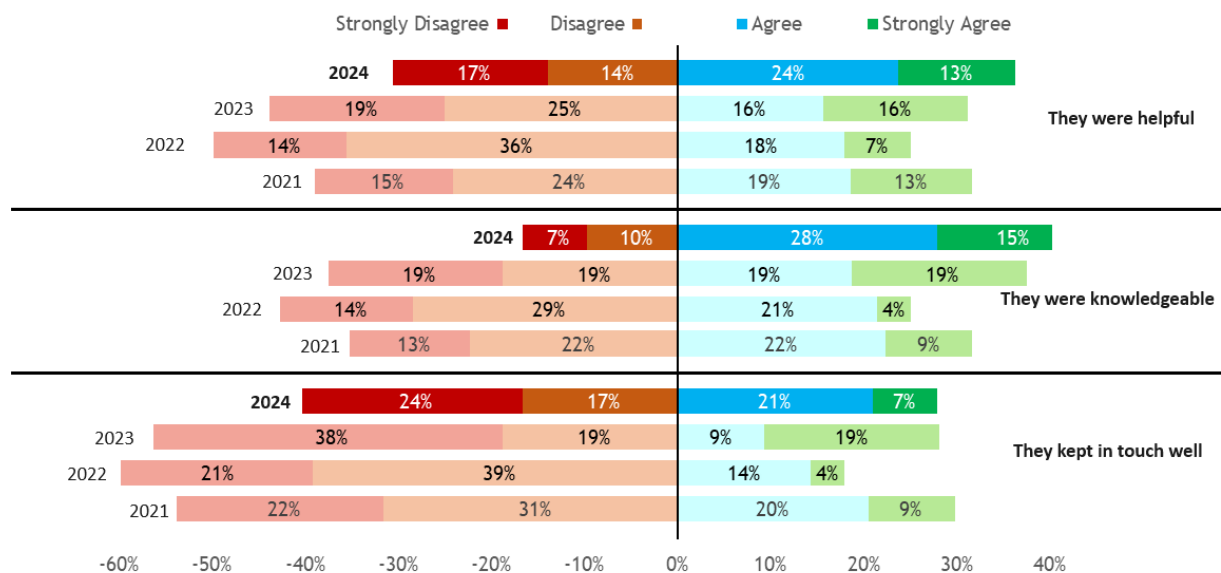


EHC Needs Assessment and the first EHC Plan

74 of the respondents' children underwent an EHC needs assessment during the previous year. As in the previous year half (47%) of these families commissioned independent reports from professionals. More than half (52%) 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.

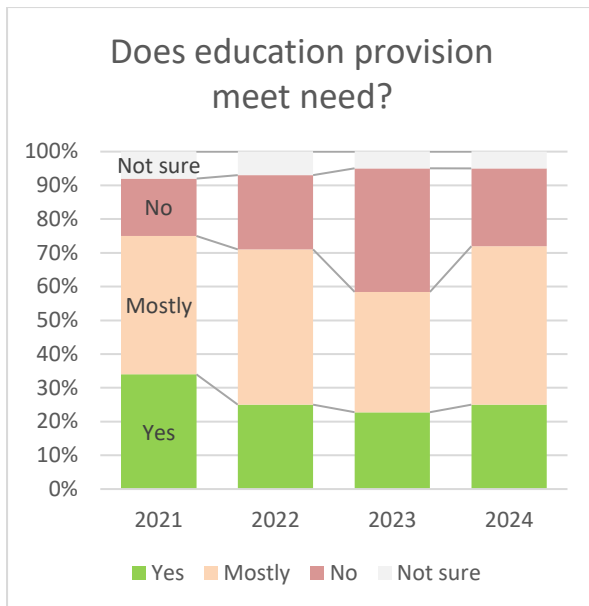
Levels of co-production with families changed little over the year, with a roughly even split between those families that contributed to the creation of the draft plan (33%), those who were given a draft plan to review (29%) and those who only saw the final plan (29%). The proportion of children and young people reported to have had no input into the drafting of their plans rose from 41% to 57%.

Views on the EHC Coordinators who drafted plans were much improved, and for the first time were positive about knowledge and being helpful.



EHC Plans

Views on the content and quality of EHC plans has remained quite steady. Section B of EHC plans (the child's special educational needs) is generally regarded as accurate, with only 13% stating that it was not. Views on section F rebounded from a critical consensus in 2023 to a neutral perspective with about one quarter saying that the provision is insufficient, one quarter saying that it is adequate, and half saying that it meets most but not all needs.

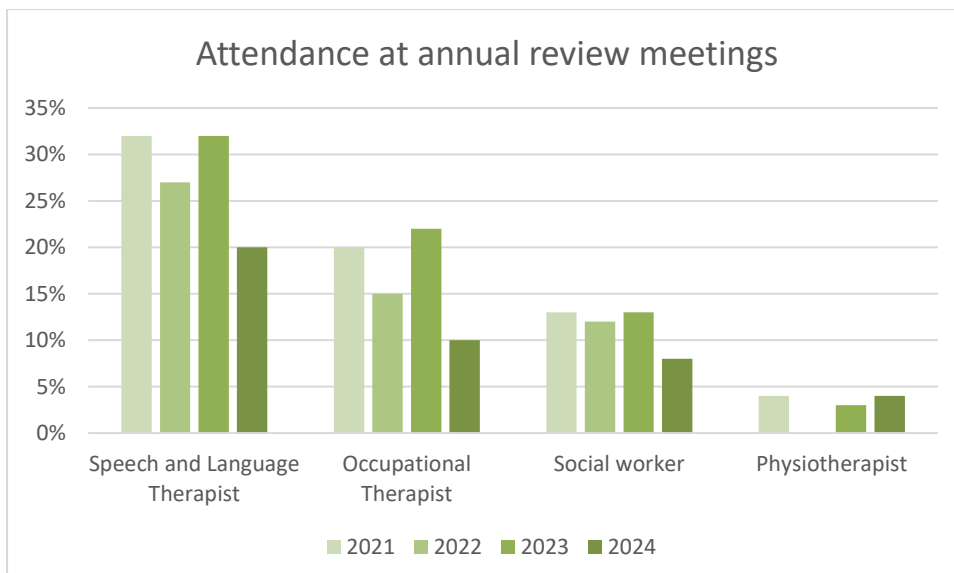


Respondents generally do not regard the outcomes in EHC plans to be “SMART”. Only 5% of parents thought that the outcomes had clear deadlines, 17% thought they were measurable and 18% thought that they were specific. These opinions have generally declined year-on-year.

Annual reviews of EHC Plans

85% of respondents who have had a plan for over one year reported 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.

There was a notable drop in attendance at annual review meetings by speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and social workers.



Personal Budgets for Education

Familiarity with the system of personal budgets changed little, with 31% of families of children with EHC plans felt knowledgeable enough about personal budgets, and only 16% had never heard of them. 32% of families had asked about or been offered a personal budget in the last year.

Preparing for Adulthood

There were some positive developments with half of respondents (54%, up from 38%) saying that there was discussion of PfA at their last annual review. 29% (10% in 2023) of parents of children in year 9 or above recalled their child having advice from a careers advisor in the last year. But still only 19% of respondents 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 nine families (11%) 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. 10% had received some support from family centres during the year, an increase from 2023.

38% of respondents whose children had EHC plans said that their families had no social care needs as a result of their child's SEN. Social care provision was discussed at 22% of annual reviews.

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 many times the number of respondents (7%) whose children attend "specialist" short breaks at The Vines, Merryfield or The Grove or the "targeted" short breaks with Bucks Activity Project.

The number of respondents that said that their child attends Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) sessions doubled to 9%, of whom approximately three quarters received free school meals. More children with SEND in this survey attend HAF provision than attend the specialist and targeted short breaks. 33% of respondents would be interested in attending HAF sessions. Only one eighth (13%) of families reported having any help (including signposting) for their child with SEND to attend universal services.

Healthcare

Unsurprisingly the children covered by the survey make extensive use of health services. 70% had visited their GP in the previous year. The proportions that had attended an appointment with CAMHS (34%) and community paediatrician (23%) picked up after a drop in the 2023 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 four years.

	at school	NHS	Private
Speech and Language Therapy	 25%	 10%	 8%
Occupational Therapy	 21%	 9%	 9%
Physiotherapy	 6%	 8%	 6%

The use of private therapists dropped off during the year, perhaps this could be because more children were seen by the NHS and school-based therapists, or perhaps because of financial pressures.

Families continue to worry about healthcare provision when their child reaches adulthood. Parents' average confidence rating that appropriate healthcare will be provided when they outgrow paediatric services is only 2.1 on a scale of 1 to 5.

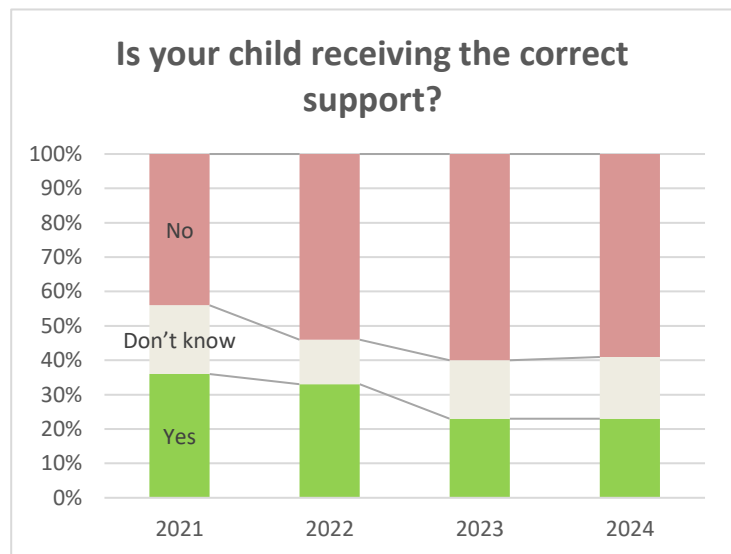
Support for parents and carers

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 steadied in 2024 after three consecutive years of decline:

Even though aggregate ratings are steady, on a personal level 31% of families thought that support had worsened, and only 19% that it had improved.



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.

iSEND service (68 mentions)

“Once again, we have had to go to tribunal to secure appropriate changes and provision in our young person’s EHCP”

“The EHCP process is overly complicated, not parent or child friendly. There is no support. I submitted amendments to a draft EHCP last October yet still don't have a final EHCP. I've no idea where to turn for help, not just advice, I need hands on help to get the EHCP finalised and implemented.”

“Communication is appalling and impacts on the whole family . Listen to the parents more and have an effective complaints system”

“I am currently having to appeal my sons plan as expert advice from an Ed Psych regarding small class sizes, specialist setting, similar peer group was excluded from his plan following AR. The Ed Psych team in Bucks will apparently at some point do a review. But it’s a bit extraordinary EP time is being wasted on this when so many in Bucks are having timescales breeched due to a shortage of EPs.”

Family Strain (40 mentions)

“As a parent I feel very alone and overwhelmed trying to manage and support my child whilst working full time. I'm an exhausted single parent.”

“We as parents are exhausted with all the fights over the last 16 years , we are worn out and desperately need support for the future.”

“I feel helpless and useless. It effects my mental health but asking for help from social or gp is used against me again by social services. It is extremely lonely being a parent of sen children, especially if you have sen needs yourself. The only way to get any help is to make a fuss and fight like hell however I have lost all fight.”

“As parents we are expected to either fund or fight for everything. The impact that dealing with the county send team has on families wellbeing is unfair, I understand they are struggling to manage budgets but they also need to abide by the law.”

“Things are dire. I feel I can't carry on anymore. There is no support. Everything is a battle. Life is hard but services make it harder. We are being and have been let down by everyone. What’s the point anymore.”

Schools (50 mentions)

“The main focus of school seems to be on attendance and attainment rather than the mental health and emotional state of the child.”

“My child received unbelievable care and nurture at infant school. Unfortunately his junior school has shown very little understanding of his needs and have shown complete incompetence and lack of understanding of trauma informed teaching, despite recent training.”

“My son was being punished for stuff out of his control and told by the headteacher because he couldn’t sit still or follow the rules and kept getting removed from class, he didn’t deserve to be in her school. He is 8 years old, at the time he was 7. He has now been tarnished by the “naughty” child brush by teachers at his school because they simply don’t understand him.”

Commissioned Services (Children’s Therapies/ CAMHS / Short Breaks) (63 mentions)

“It has been impossible to find a therapist, OT, EP or any kind of support for my son who has complex SEN. Everything we do for him we have researched and had to arrange and pay for ourselves.”

“Availability of short breaks and respite is too limited. It would be helpful if Bucks had a list of direct payment carers -- it has been very much hit or miss in terms of trying to find someone suitable.”

“Community paediatricians are too quick to discharge children then parents are made to wait the 2 years to see them again in some cases they are desperate.”

“The excuse of Covid and staff is used time and time again. If you can even get an appointment at CAHMs, they are beyond harmful... the rigidity of the pathways and finances blind CAHMs. Therapies services are non existent.”

“CAMHS is overwhelmed, children are suffering for years longer than they need to whilst waiting for appointments and assessments, as a parent you feel powerless, helpless, despair, alone.”

“We have been on the waiting list for CAMHS for over 3 years now. At one point I had been told there were no under 11 assessors. Still awaiting a diagnosis.”

Family Voice/FACT/SENDIAS (6 mentions)

“FACT Bucks does not speak for all parents despite what Andrew who leads it says. Parents are not being given enough opportunities to speak about their experiences or feel they are not being listened to, in a way they are being silenced from speaking out.”

“The parent carer forum seems not to work for parents but for the LA..... Parents members are barely ever engaged with or listened to. They are not fit for purpose.”

“No one actually listens to the PCF. The people involved in the PCF are often told there needs to be more volunteers to capture a wider voice. There is hardly any parent representation within the groups as they are pointless and parents get exhausted by the lack of listening by professionals.”

“I’ve messaged SENDIAS about what to do but no one has answered my message. Webinars have been really useful, more of those and how to navigate the system would be amazing.”

General

“The service is shocking.”

“The whole system is too complicated.”

“Our child has worth, not to be thrown to the kerb.”