

Survey Report

Introduction

Thank you to everyone who took the time to respond to the 2025 Buckinghamshire SEND Survey.

This is the fifth 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 seek 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 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.

The number of responses to this year's survey is down. This may be because of the time demands on families, an increase in the number of other surveys competing for attention, or because of the nationally recognised challenge in obtaining responses to surveys in general. However, FACT did have Information Technology difficulties at the time of the survey which led to delays in publicising the survey that in turn may have been the major contributor to this year's drop in numbers.

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 survey was available to complete between the 3rd of February and the 3rd of May, 2025. Though the number of responses (172) was down significantly from 2024, the patterns in the data are strikingly consistent with those from the previous three surveys which gives assurance that the numbers are robust. However, care should be taken when looking at subgroups (e.g. those that underwent an EHC Needs Analysis during the year) where the sample size is small.

This year we have five years of comparable data, so trends are clear. The first years included the COVID pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis which inevitably had impacts upon the lives of children

with SEND and their families. The last three years have seen a continuation of the trend of increasing numbers of pupils with identified SEN and those with EHC Plans on existing systems and resources, which were not reactive to rising demand.

In general, the 2025 survey answers show a worsening in a difficult situation for families. This is seen in much of the detailed data which shows slight deterioration from year to year, and it is reflected in the overall result that 31% of respondents feel support has worsened over the year for their child. Most striking is that 70% of Individual families now think that their child is not receiving the correct support, by some margin the largest negative in the five years of the survey.

The number of families reporting that their child regularly misses school because of mental or physical health problems remains high at 42%. As in 2024 more than 60% 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.

Parents and carers of pupils in special schools remain significantly happier with the welcome and level of support at special schools than in mainstream. Unhappiness with provision in mainstream schools is clear from the finding that only 7% of respondents with SEN Support plans felt that their children were receiving the right support to meet their child's needs. Views on the effectiveness of SENCos in schools continues a slow decline, with the overall effectiveness of SENCos rated below neutral for the first time. Despite this a desire for inclusion remains, with 48% of the parents choosing new schools for their children still preferring a mainstream place.

Ratings of the specialist teaching teams have declined but remain positive; ratings on the council educational psychologists has declined steeply. Net ratings of EHC Coordinators fell back in all categories. though still overall negative for keeping in touch. Respondents' judgements about the quality of Education, Health and Care plans tipped into the negative. The ratings of how "SMART" EHC outcomes are declined further.

The HAF program has proved popular with families of children with SEND, and now supports the children of twice as many respondents as 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.

The number of children reported as receiving support from therapists continued to fall in all therapies (physio-, speech-and-language and occupational) and from sources (school, NHS and private).

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 delays in drafting EHCPs, communication challenges with the local authority, lack of access to therapies and the financial burdens on families. Schools are criticised for lack of inclusion and understanding of children with SEN. Respondents bemoan a lack of provision for older children. Most distressing are the reports of the mental health and emotional impact on families of what are reported as confrontational and legally non-compliant processes within the council requiring mediation, tribunal challenges and LGSCO referrals.

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 surveys in a way that shows a significant shift in opinion or a trend. The full responses are presented in the Data Tables which accompany the report.

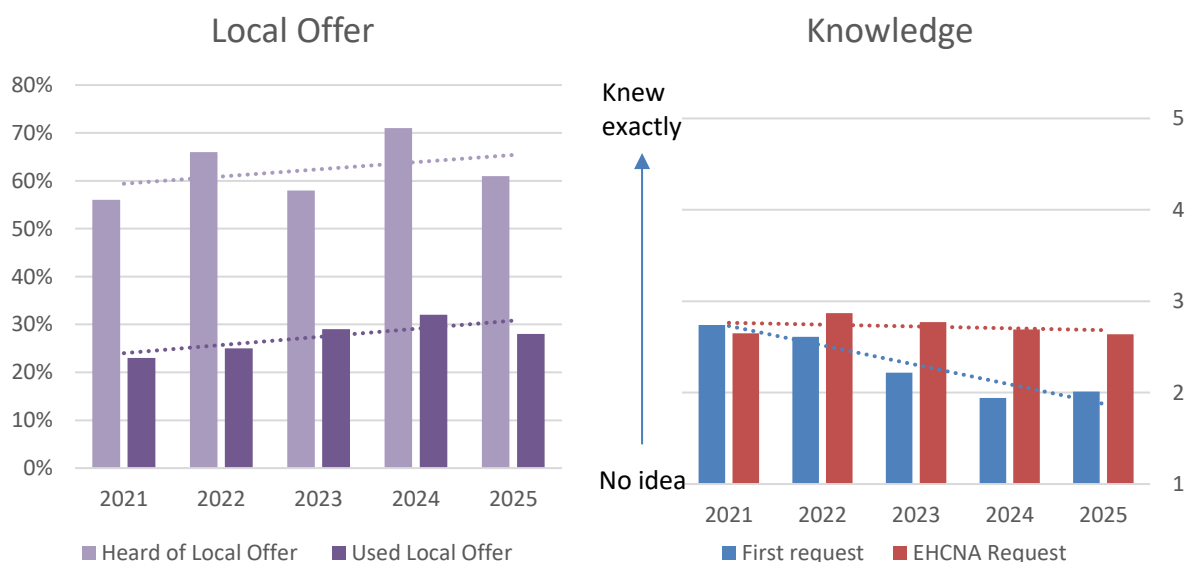
Respondents

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. 172 eligible respondents completed at least part of the survey, a further 6 ineligible respondents were excluded. FACT Bucks had IT challenges during the time of the survey this year which led to delayed promotion of the survey amongst members and could have contributed to the reduced response numbers compared to some previous years.

Approximately 10%¹ of the children do not attend a setting (nursery, school or college). Of the school-aged children attending a school 73% were in mainstream, 24% in special schools and 3% in an ARP or PRU. 54% of children had an EHC plan, and three quarters of the rest receive SEN support. Nearly half of the respondents had experienced some disagreements with the local authority during the previous year, more than in previous years. One-in-eleven had accessed the First Tier SEND Tribunal or the local government ombudsman, in line with previous years.

Bucks Local Offer

The proportion of respondents said that they had heard of the Local Offer fell back to 61% (70% in 2024) but the long-term trend is still upwards. Similarly, the number that have used the local offer decreased to 28% from 31% in 2024, but the trend is upwards. Those who had used the Local Offer at least once gave an average rating of its helpfulness of 2.6 on a scale of 1 ("not helpful at all") to 5 ("very helpful")² in line with 2022 and 2023.



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.

Initial support

The proportion of families who initially did not know what to do to get extra support for their child stabilised in 2024 but the trend is still down. 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 2.0, over the past five 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 2.6, roughly steady over the period.

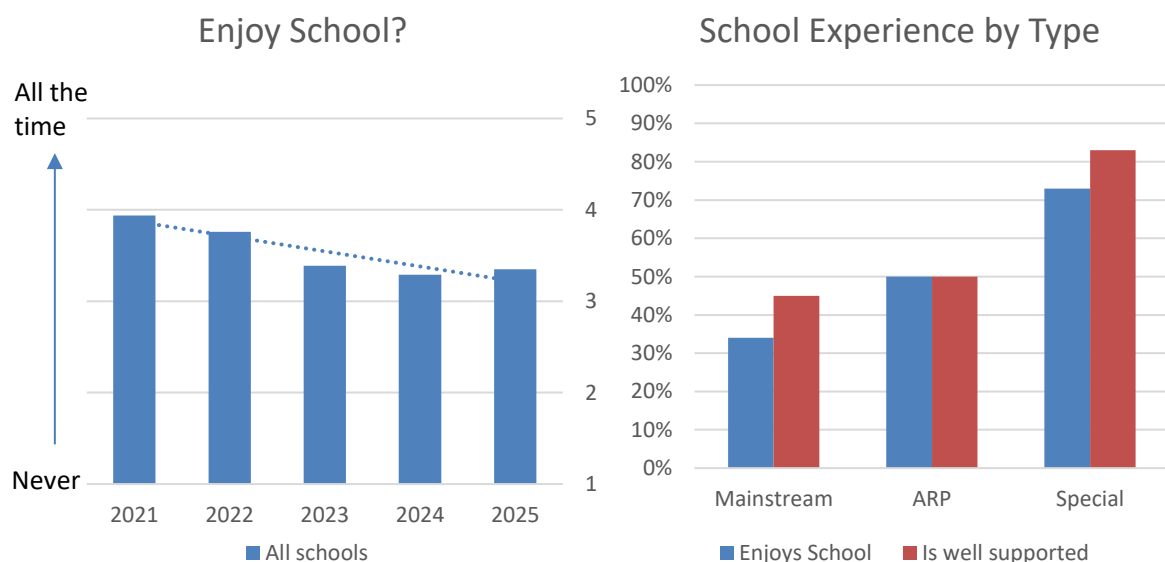
SENDIAS

SENDIAS were consulted by 17% of those seeking out help for their child for the first time and 29% of those applying for an EHC needs assessment or plan. 42% (46% in 2023) of respondents had made use of at least one of the services provided by SENDIAS, and those respondents rated the helpfulness of the SENDIAS service a positive 3.7 (up from 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 educational settings (pre-school, school or college) of 79% of respondents were rated as welcoming to the children with SEND, including 73% of mainstream schools and an excellent 97% of special schools.

The downward trend in the reporting of how much children enjoy their school may be levelling out. There was a drop in the number of respondents saying that their child in a special school enjoys school (4 or 5 on a 1 to 5 scale) from 80% to 73% this remains much higher than for mainstream schools where only 34% of respondents gave the same ratings. A similar pattern emerged when respondents were asked about how well their child was supported.



Reduced Timetables

13% of respondents replied that their child was on a reduced timetable at school, three quarters 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 recovered slightly to 58% (from 55% in 2024, but still down from 69% in 2023). Of the families who say that their child is missing some school, 61% 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 31% of families whose child misses some school feel well supported by the school, and only 19% ever receive tutoring (online or in person) at home.

Choosing and changing schools

One fifth of the respondents’ children had changed schools in the sample year. About half (48%) hoped for their child to have a place a mainstream school on in an ARP within a mainstream school, 28% of families say that they requested a special school place, down from a high of 53% in the 2022 survey. However, 12% of parents state that they were not asked for their preference in the type of school.

SEN Co-ordinators

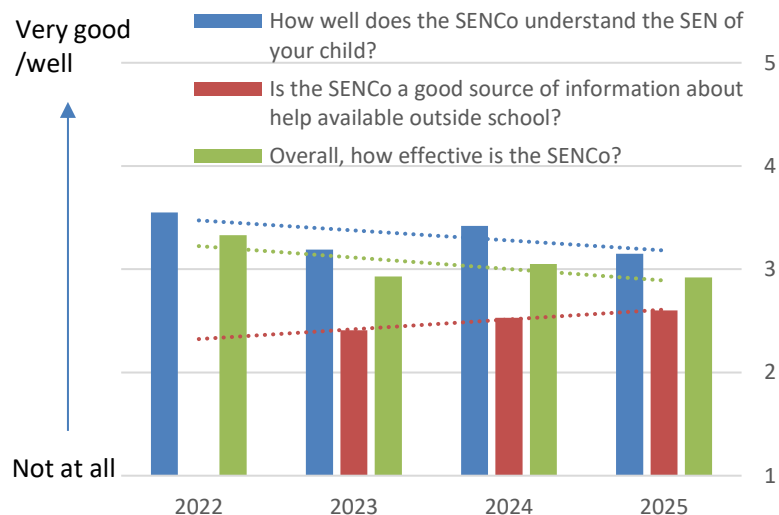
In 2025 the fraction of respondents who were unsure about the identity of their child’s SENCO (mainstream school pupils only) doubled, the value rose to a quarter from less than an eighth.

The ratings of the knowledge and the effectiveness of SENCOs continued a gradual decline, though the ratings of SENCOs as a source of information continued to improve.

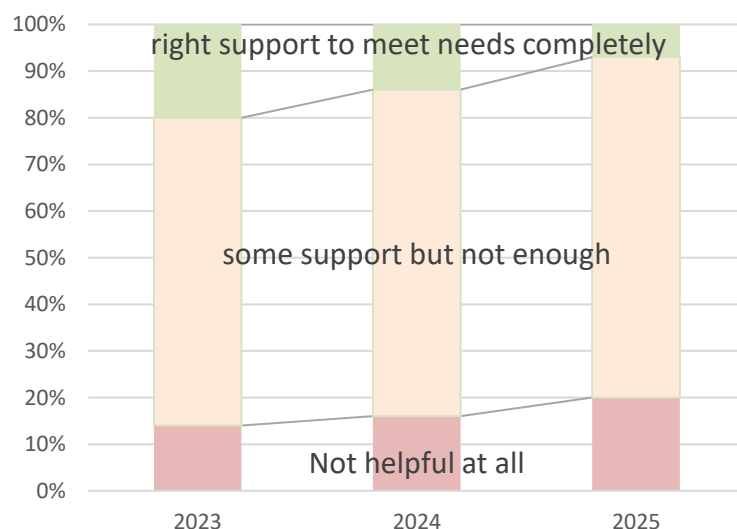
SEN Support Plan

74% of respondents’ children with SEN but without an EHC plan are on SEN support, most of these (76%) have been on SEN support for more than a year. Only 7% of respondents feel that the SEN support plan is enough to meet their child’s needs, with three times this number saying that it is not helpful at all, leaving 73% saying that their SEN plan partially meets needs but more help is needed.

SENCOs



SEN Support Plans



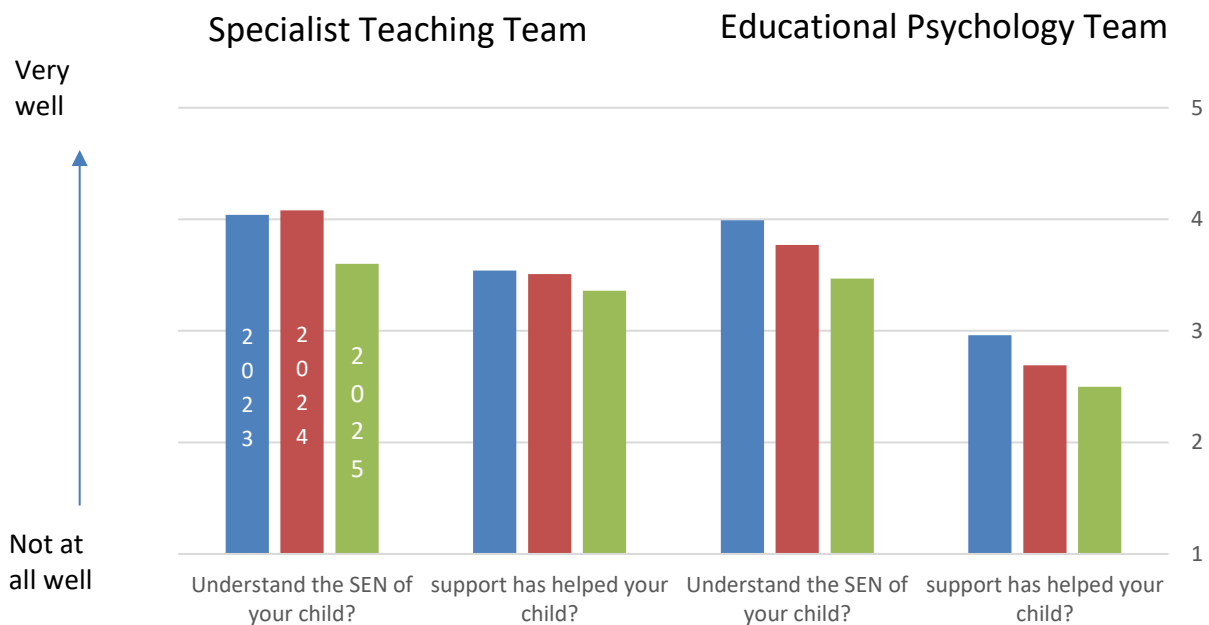
Boarding

Excluding those whose children already boarded (fewer than 10% of respondents), 10% would like their children to be able to board now or in the future and a further 24% 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 (83%) with only 57% 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 years of the survey.

Specialist Teachers and Educational Psychologists

The proportion of respondents having used these services fell during the year with 15% (2023: 21%) having had support from the Specialist Teaching Team and 15% (2023: 19%) from the Educational Psychology Team.

The rating of the council services, particularly of the Educational Psychology Team, has declined over the past three years.



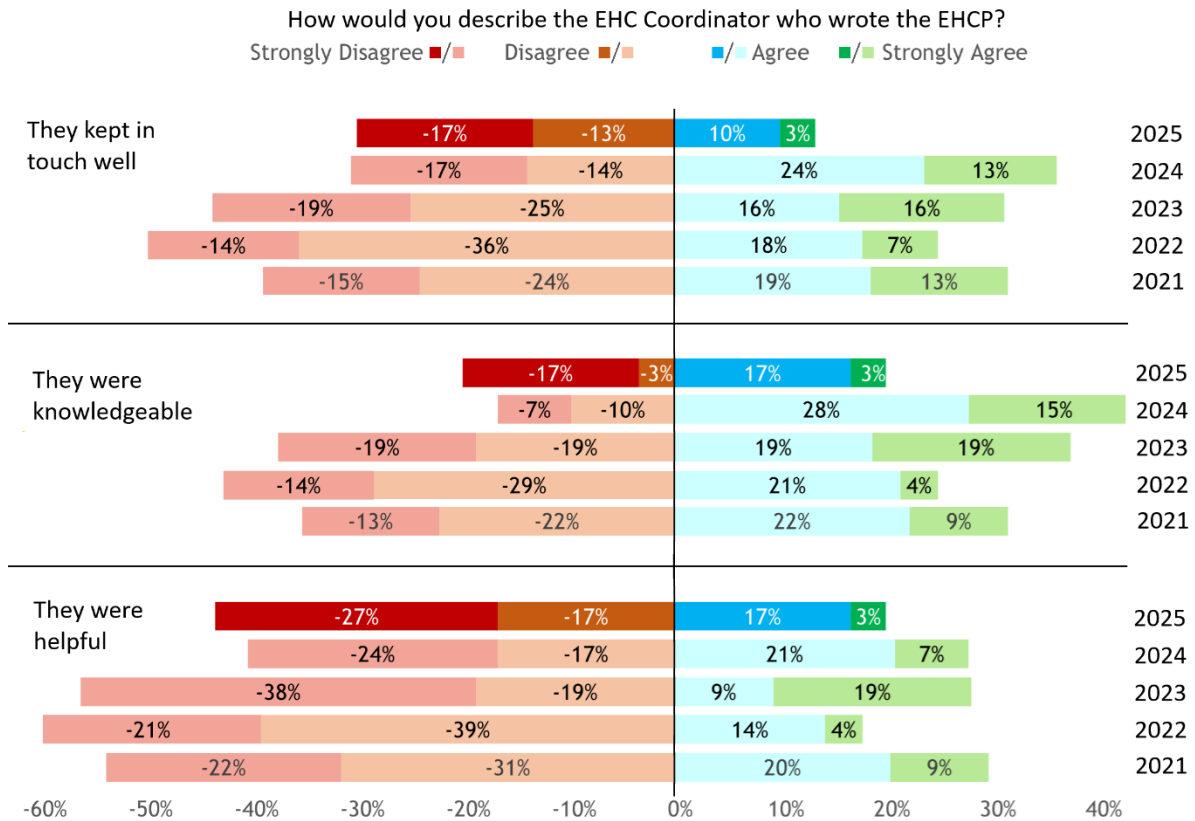
EHC Needs Assessment and the first EHC Plan

31 of the respondents' children underwent an EHC needs assessment during the previous year. This is a relatively small sample so the accuracy of the results may be less than in previous years.

More than a third (39%) of these families commissioned independent reports from professionals, though this was down from nearly half (47%) in the previous year.

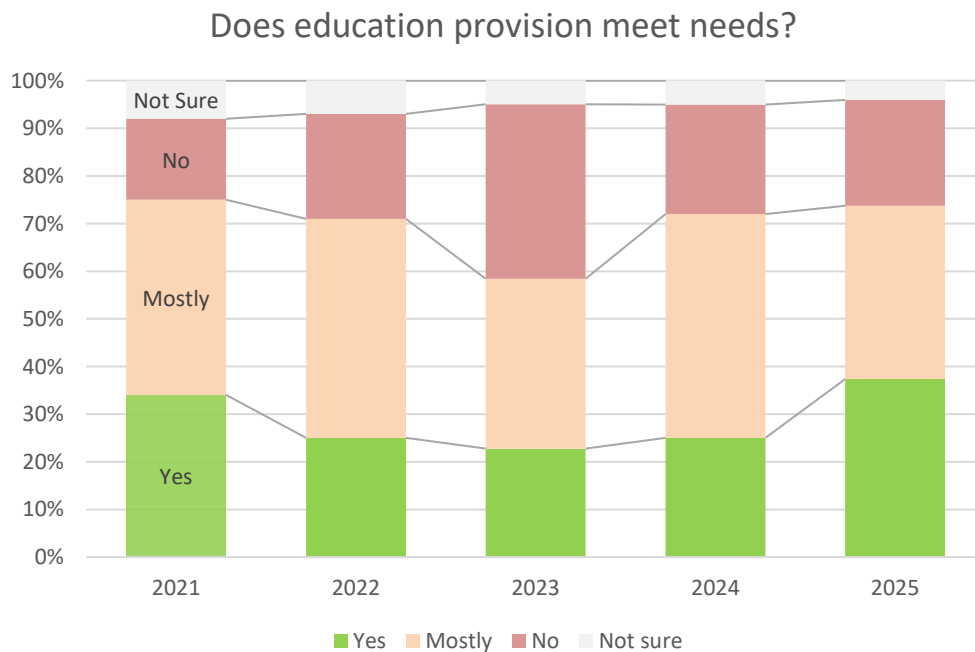
Views on the EHC Coordinators who drafted plans less pronounced, with more respondents selecting "don't know" than in previous years. This led to a large drop in the number of positive ratings but no general increase in negative ratings.

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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 16% stating that it was not. Views on section F improved for the second year running from a critical consensus in 2023 to have less than a quarter of respondents sure that the provision doesn't meet needs.

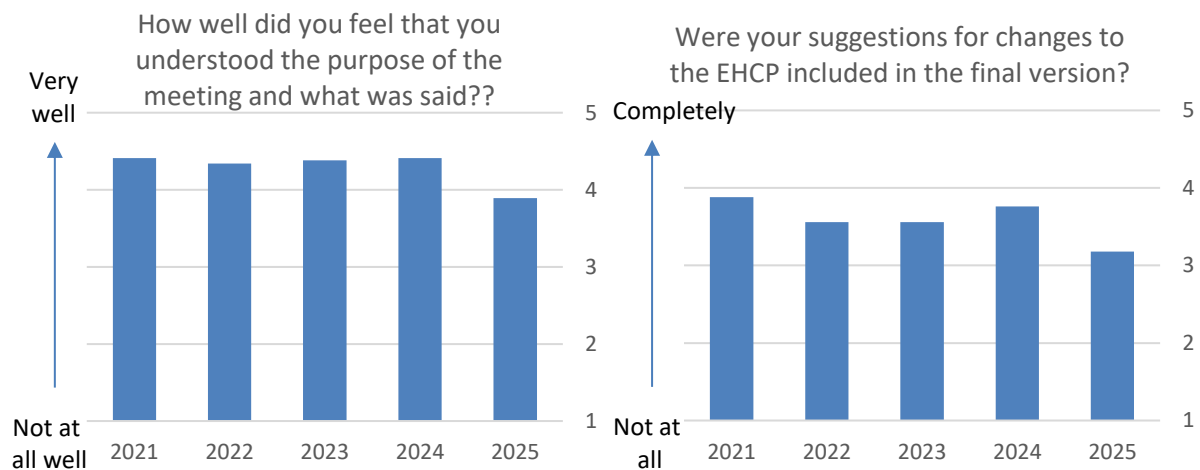


Respondents generally do not regard the outcomes in EHC plans to be “SMART”. While the responses suggest that outcomes are becoming more realistic, they are becoming less relevant, more vague, less measurable and more open-ended.

More specifically only 6% of respondents thought that the outcomes had clear deadlines, 13% thought that they were specific and 19% thought they were measurable.

Annual reviews of EHC Plans

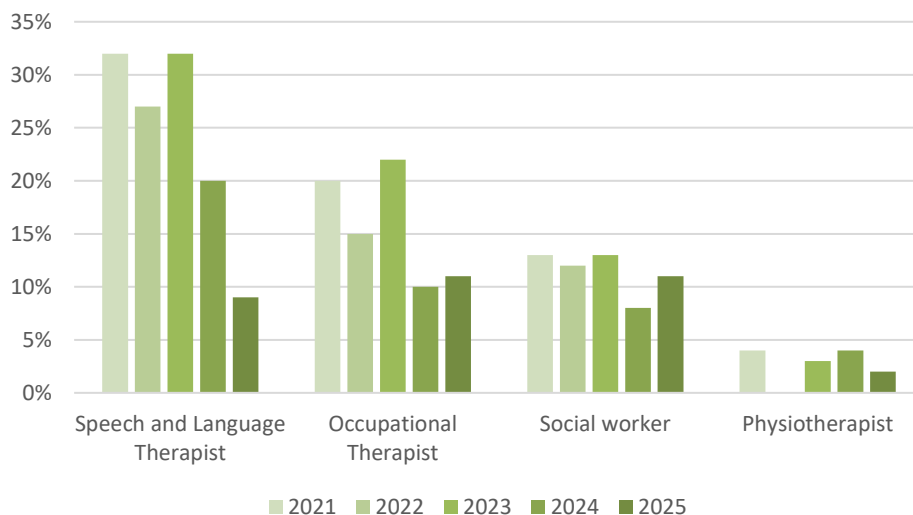
83% of respondents who have had a plan for over one year reported that they had had a review within the last 12 months. There was a sharp increase in those who reported not understanding the purpose of the meeting, from 3% to 16% over the year.



There also seemed to be a drop in some aspects of co-production, with more respondents reporting that their suggestions for changes to the EHCP had not been made, but there were no noticeable changes in how much the child’s voice was included.

For the second year in a row there was a notable drop in attendance at annual review meetings by speech and language therapists, who for the first time attended fewer annual review meetings than occupational therapists or social workers.

Attendance at annual review meetings



Personal Budgets for Education

Familiarity with the system of personal budgets changed little, with 30% of families of children with EHC plans felt knowledgeable enough about personal budgets, and only 19% had never heard of them. 23% of families had asked about or been offered a personal budget in the last year.

Preparing for Adulthood

Preparing for adulthood (PfA) continues to be a more regular topic at EHCP annual reviews, reportedly discussed at two thirds (66%, up from 54% in 2024 and 38% in 2023) of reviews, though most parents (80%) would still like more focus on PfA. Only 9% of families of teenage children reported any discussion about future housing at the annual review, and only 20% of their children had received advice from a careers counsellor.

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. 8% recalled having received some support from family centres during the year. These proportions are in line with previous years.

Nearly half (42%) of respondents with social care needs reported that section D was blank (and 8% that it was wrong). Only 10% said that the social care provision in sections H1 and H2 was good.

Short Breaks

As in previous years 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 many times the number of respondents (4%) whose children attend “specialist” short breaks at The Vines, Merryfield or The Grove or the “targeted” short breaks with Bucks Activity Project. Twice as many respondents said that their child attends Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) sessions as those who said that their children attended the targeted and specialist short breaks. One quarter of respondents would be interested in attending HAF sessions. Only one tenth (9%) 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. However except for visits to the GP, which were little changed at 68%, the proportions that had accessed all other health services dropped noticeably compared to the previous year. The proportion reporting having seen CAMHS (25% down from 34%) and community paediatrician (14% down from 23%) dropped particularly sharply.

The levels of therapy input, at school, via the NHS and privately, all also dropped markedly. The table below indicates the ways in which that has changed over the past five years.

	at school	NHS	Private
Speech and Language Therapy	46%  11%	10%  9%	6%  5%
Occupational Therapy	30%  12%	11%  6%	9%  7%
Physiotherapy	9%  2%	9%  3%	4%  0%

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 well below 2 on a scale of 1 to 5 for the first time.

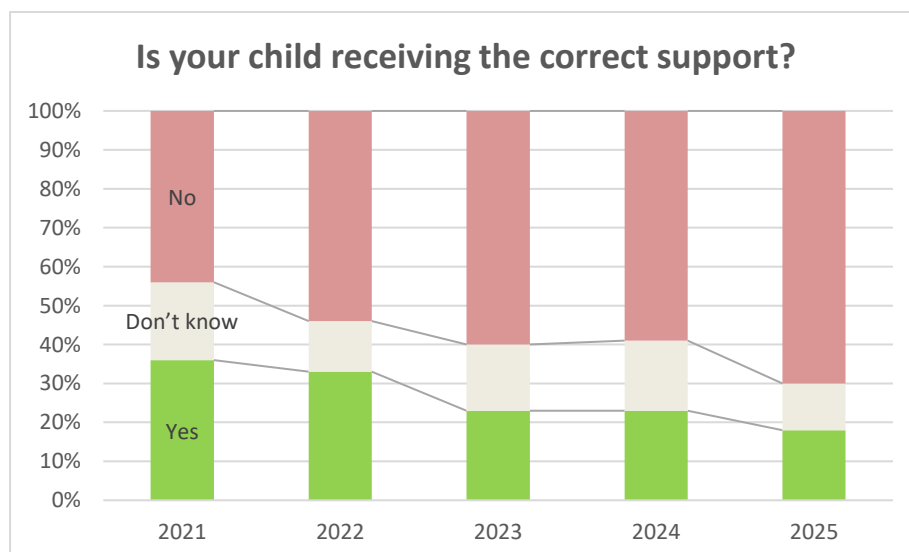
Support for parents and carers

Parents and carers ratings of their own health stayed steady at around 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 slightly increased at 3.0.

The awareness and use of the Young Carers offer among this year's respondents was noticeably higher than in previous years. For the first time the fraction of families having been offered support increased above one half, and almost one quarter used the service.

Overall Support

The final questions asked families to sum up the overall support received. This has resumed its apparent inexorable decline after a pause in 2024. Four times as many respondents (70%) now feel that support is inadequate as feel that it is adequate (18%). 31% of families thought that support had worsened, and only 24% that it had improved.



Part 2: Free text comments

The Survey offered those who completed it the opportunity to record an open comment. 65 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. Several recurring and strongly emphasized themes emerged. Here's a weighted summary based on frequency and intensity of concern:

Delays and Failures in the EHCP Process

Extremely common theme.

Parents report **long delays** (often exceeding legal timeframes) in receiving EHCPs or assessments.

EHCPs are described as **generic, incomplete, or not followed** by schools.

Annual reviews are often **missed or poorly managed**.

"No explanation for timelines missed, did nothing from the mediation outcomes and never corresponded afterwards; they're still refusing to provide the budget for a provision in section F; never acknowledged changes; we've had so many different EHCCOs and none of them seem to save or pass on information; The number of times we've heard that our EHCCo has changed in 2024 - I've lost track; We've been told there is a 12 months delay on Educational Psychologists which is unlawful and unacceptable- we've missed our 16th and 20th week deadlines for EHC; EHCP process was slow and adversarial and stressful"

Lack of Communication and Transparency

Widespread frustration with **poor communication** from SEND teams, schools, and the local authority.

Emails ignored, phone lines unanswered, and **no clear accountability**.

Secretive decision-making processes (e.g., "secret panels") were heavily criticized.

"Nothing seems to happen or change. Little to no communication comes our way; When you reach out you get palmed off to loads of different departments; I've been waiting nearly 4 years and heard nothing; the "secret" panels held to decide on the children's support is absolutely ridiculous with no explanation as to how decisions have come about and no scrutiny or chance to even ask questions"

Inadequate Support from Schools and Local Authority

Many parents feel **unsupported**, especially during transitions or crises.

Schools often **fail to implement EHCPs** or provide appropriate accommodations.

SENDCOs are frequently described as **uninformed, unhelpful, or overwhelmed**.

"We made the decision to move my child's school in the past week, so all comments are made with his previous school in mind. We have a good feeling about how his education and wellbeing will improve at his new school and how we as parents will be supported"

by teaching staff and the SENDCO; Little to no communication comes our way; The school just blindly going in with it; The provision of SEND care in schools is severely lacking with many parents not getting the support they desperately need; It doesn't feel as though Buckinghamshire Council has any desire to support children with SEN. Everything is a battle. Everything requires a complaint to see anything move. It's exhausting.

Mental Health and Emotional Impact

Parents and children are experiencing **significant emotional distress**.

Lack of psychological support and **CAMHS delays** (often 2–3 years).

Some comments mention **suicidal thoughts** due to the stress of navigating the system.

"The stress this is causing me is unbearable; We are dreading telling her; Only worsened; does a child have to totally burn out; bully parents to the point of breakdown; I still have the same concerns for my son's mental health; CAMHS are not interested; We are ignored, we are gaslight, we are spoken down to. It is a daily battering of your physical and mental health. I am suicidal. My young adult is suicidal"

Lack of Access to Therapies and Services

Speech and Language Therapy (SALT) and **Occupational Therapy (OT)** are repeatedly mentioned as **inaccessible or insufficient**.

Children with severe needs are **not receiving mandated therapy hours**.

"it's letting the children down; barely seen a therapist; The support mentioned doesn't exist. HV teams are not prepared, GP is absolutely terrible, nursery staff not trained properly; My child is diagnosed with a severe speech sound disorder yet cannot her speech therapy on the NHS."

Financial Burden and Inequity

Many families have had to **pay privately** for assessments and support.

Direct payments and personal budgets are poorly explained and inconsistently managed.

Parents often **give up work** to manage their child's care and education.

"Life is very difficult and we do not receive any help; It's incredibly stressful. I'm already my child's carer and main provider and I do this for free. I can't work at all because of his needs; Being a SEND Parent in Bucks is like living in a abusive relationship; Reduced timetable whilst both parents working is very challenging to manage and impacting upon our wellbeing. This involves my time and my finances which is challenging having given up work to take on this role; I've had to fight for my child's rights, to the detriment of my job, and my mental health"

Transition Failures (Post-16 and Post-18)

Lack of planning and support for **older SEND students**.

No meaningful pathways for independence, employment, or further education.

EOTAS (Education Other Than At School) provision is described as **fragmented and unsupported**.

“The system is slow and the options for Post 19 study and supported living remain very limited; The support for EOTAS has got worse; EOTAS means no central point of communication and largely left to parents to undertake and disseminate information; No training courses available for over 20s, can't find volunteer work; My son is 19 and there has been a complete lack of transition.”

Systemic Issues and Legal Non-Compliance

Multiple references to **legal action**, **tribunals**, and **formal complaints**.

Perception that the LA uses resources to **fight parents** rather than support children.

Safeguarding concerns and **lack of accountability** for professionals.

“Complaints are upheld but nothing changes; They brought an old EHCP to the meeting. They asked me to send the more recent draft, which I did but they did nothing with it; The SEND team themselves are overworked, understaffed, appear unsupported by management and a quick to burn out as a result. FACT have no discernible impact upon anything; There is NO coproduction in FACT, at SENDIAS and certainly not within the LA itself. Despite the Coproduction Charter they have on their website; They NEVER stick to legal required timeframes”

Lack of Inclusion and Understanding in Schools

Teachers often lack **training** in SEND.

Children are **misunderstood**, **labelled**, or **excluded**.

No autism-specific schools offering full academic programs in Bucks.

“There is no handover process for passing on important notes about SEND children from class teacher to supply teacher; mainstream system totally failed my son; The process has caused undue stress on myself and my child. He now attends CAMHS for the trauma he has experienced in school from staff who don't know what they are doing; The process for accessing alternative provision for a child who can't attend school is too slow”

Parent Advocacy and Isolation

Parents feel they must **fight constantly** for basic rights.

Many express **exhaustion**, **guilt**, and **anger**.

Peer support groups (e.g., NAS, Autism Central) are seen as **lifelines**.

“I'm tired and need help with teaching him about independence and living alone. When I try to teach him about money management etc, it doesn't end well for me; Everyone is very good at brushing off parental concerns, empathy doesn't exist anymore.”

