

Education, Health and Care Needs Assessment – Parental Views

April 2022

Naomi Clemons, Qualitative Analyst Manager
Demetria Burnett, Qualitative Analyst Officer
Vicky Butler, Qualitative Analyst Officer

1 Introduction

KCC sees a high volume of applications for Education, Health and Care Needs Assessments (EHCNAs) directly from parents; this research was commissioned to better understand parental motivations for making applications. Data demonstrates that parental applications are less likely to progress to the next phase of assessment when compared to school-led applications, the volume of applications is putting pressure on the system as well as potentially leading to distress and disappointment for parents undertaking the process. This report not only explores some of the broader themes that emerged from this research but also provides examples of family journeys too.

Contents

- 1 Introduction.....1
- 2 Methodology 15
- 3 Data Analysis 16
 - 3.1 Application Data..... 16
- 4 Parental Insight..... 19
 - 4.1.1 Previous SEN support.....20
 - 4.2 EHC Needs Assessment Application21
 - 4.2.1 Why did you apply?21
 - 4.2.2 Support while completing the application.....22
 - 4.3 Submitting the application.....23
 - 4.3.1 Support after application submitted.....24
 - 4.3.2 Application process difficulties25
 - 4.4 Purpose of an EHC needs assessment and plan26
 - 4.4.1 How do you think a plan will help your child?27

4.4.2	EHC plan in place.....	28
5	Conclusion.....	30
6	Pen Portraits	31
6.1	Family A.....	32
6.2	Family B.....	34

2 Methodology

A mainly qualitative approach was taken to this research, however, some referral data has also been incorporated to provide context¹. The decision was taken to conduct semi structured interviews with parents who were currently going through the application process to enable them to reflect on this process and their reasons for applying prior to a decision being made. A total of 60 parents or carers who had made an application on behalf of a child in the months of November and December 2021 were contacted to participate in this research; interviews were undertaken with parents/carers between January and March 2022. Recruitment presented some challenges, overall, of the 60 parents/carers who were randomly selected and invited to take part, only 9 agreed to be interviewed. It is also acknowledged that two participants who took part have formal complaints against Kent County Council. Therefore, we have been especially careful to ensure that no participant can be individually identified by the quotes used and that some very specific points or examples raised have been excluded to protect anonymity.

Interviews were conducted over the telephone or via MS Teams and ranged in length from 30 minutes to 1 hour. Despite the small numbers, the data gathered is rich, therefore, meaningful insight can still be drawn from these participants. Even with the unique nature of some of the journeys that these families have been on, shared challenges and experiences around the reasons for applying and the application process itself were evident during the analysis.

¹ Francesca Baylis – Kent Analytics undertook the analysis of this data

3 Data Analysis

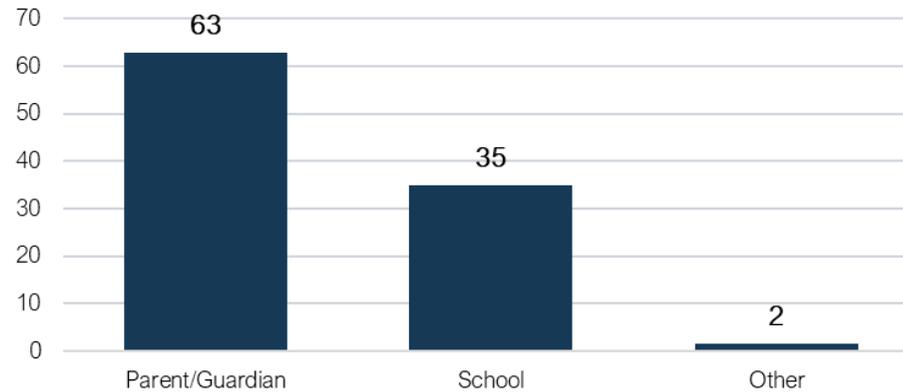
KCC sees many applications for Education, Health and Care Needs Assessments (EHCNAs) directly from parents; this research was commissioned to better understand parental motivations for making applications. Parental applications are less likely to progress to the next phase of assessment when compared to school-led applications. The volume of applications is putting pressure on the system as well as potentially leading to distress and disappointment for parents undertaking the process.

3.1 Application Data

This section explores data that covers the period January 2018 to 14th December 2021. Figure 1 demonstrates the percentage of EHCP referrals by parent, schools, and other categories during the above-mentioned time period.

Percentage of EHCP referrals by referral source

Referral date Jan 2018 - 14th Dec 2021



Source: Kent Analytics, (FB) Mar 22

Figure 1: Percentage of EHCP referrals Jan 2018 – 14th Dec 2021 by referral source

Figure 1 demonstrates how the largest referral source over this time was parents, with 63% of all EHCP referrals being made by parents, 35% by schools and only 2% from other sources. Referrals made by parents are less likely to result in an EHCP, therefore any reduction in this area may not only ease pressure in the application system but also focus on supporting children in different ways thus diverting them from the EHCP process.

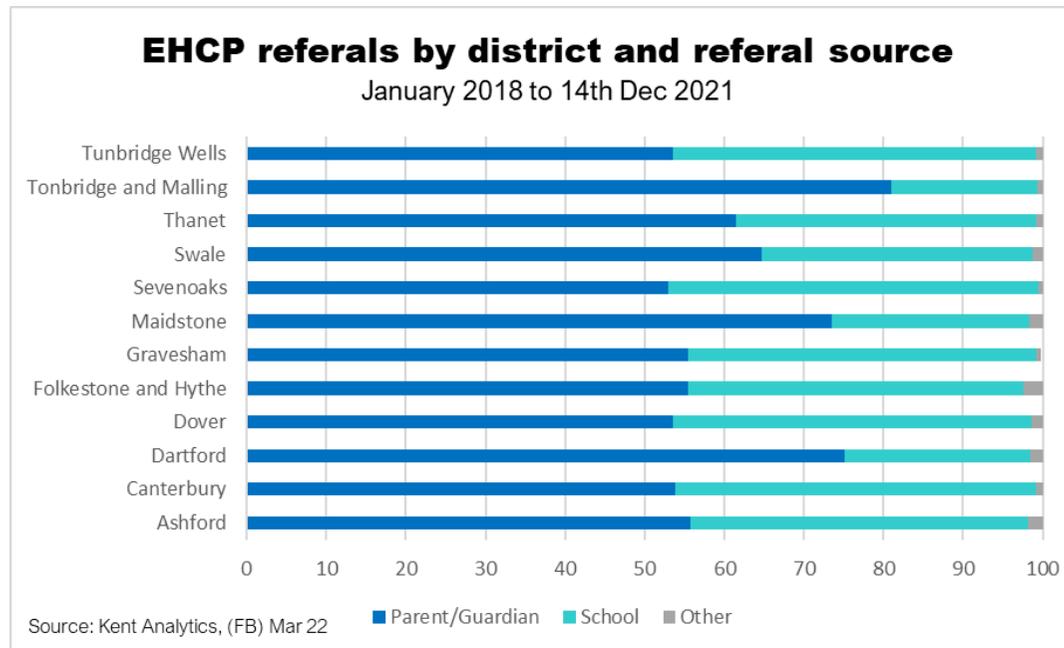


Figure 2 ECHP referrals by district and referral source January 2018 to 14th December 2021

Figure 2 demonstrates EHCP referrals by referral source broken down by district, this clearly demonstrates that some districts have a much higher rate of parental applications than others. It also demonstrates that Tonbridge and Malling seeing the highest proportion of EHCP referrals from parents out of all EHCP referrals for that district followed by Dartford. Whereas Sevenoaks and Dover are two areas that see a lower proportion of referrals from parents.

4 Parental Insight

We asked the families to share some background about the child to whom the needs assessment application referred to. The children and young people they spoke about ranged from being at nursery right through to secondary school.

Some of the children/young people had been diagnosed, whilst others were still waiting to be assessed. Diagnoses included Asperger's, Autism, ADHD, and trauma to the brain.

At the time of their applications, many of the families explained how they had run out of options or ideas and in some instances were in crisis and struggling to know what the best support options were available.

4.1.1 Previous SEN support



“The school have got a really good provision for him because they’ve got a SRP Unit. I think they are amazing; they are a breath of fresh air for me as a parent with children with SEN needs, even without a diagnosis they can clearly see both my boys’ needs. That’s why I trust their opinion, they are telling me that he needs this. Even though he is bright and academic he can’t reach his potential and he is not going to get on as well if he’s not understood and not given the support. So, I’m dreading going through the process again, but I feel this time I’m a lot more knowledgeable about it, it’s still hard, it still shouldn’t have to be this much of a fight.”

When families described previous SEN support it was very mixed with some recalling support from Early Help, specific 1:1 support, and a variety of programmes, like Lexia within the school community. Some families recalled that their child’s school were particularly helpful in ensuring support was in place for their child. Families also sought advice from their GP which led to being referred to other professionals i.e., CAHMS, whilst some paid for private assessments, i.e., speech and language therapists and psychologists.

One parent mentioned that their child received support only once they had gotten to a point where they could no longer attend school, they felt it was a shame that support was not put in place before their child had gotten to this point.

“We had quite a lot of support because of how it came about because unfortunately, he was quite poorly, he couldn’t get into school, he wasn’t functioning, and he really took a bad turn... it got that bad that he needed it. I kinda feel that it was a shame that he had to get to that point before anyone realised, oh he’s a child that really needs some support and really needs to be in a provision with the right support for him.”

Some families reflected that it was through these initial forms of support that the desire to gain a more formal assessment and plan for support originated, either through acknowledging that more was needed or because they felt that the current support available was not enough.

“Early Help pushed for the school to do screening again they were very reluctant it took many meetings for them to even do basic screening...”

4.2 EHC Needs Assessment Application

4.2.1 Why did you apply?

Some families first heard about an EHC needs assessment from their children’s/young person’s school via the SENCo, although others mentioned that they had been advised by other professionals like occupational therapy to apply for a needs assessment. However, when asked ‘why did you apply for the needs assessment’, all the families interviewed were advised to do it themselves or felt they had no choice but to apply themselves. If their child/young person was in school, the reasons varied from being told by the SENCo it wasn’t something the school did or *“it would be quicker”* if you (the parent) completed the assessment, however, a few families did explain that their school had been supportive with the application and provided relevant information for them to support the process. A few of the families mentioned that they had also been told by their school that *“EHCPs were very hard to obtain, that it is a long process, and you need a lot of evidence”* which left them feeling *“put off”* by the process.

“He [SENCo] never said anything about school doing an application, so it was always the ball was in my court if I wanted to, that was the way it felt and part of me was thinking it’s such a big process, do I personally feel capable of doing that, because I know it’s quite a challenging process, emotionally draining process...”

“I had the full support of the school, I discussed it with them first, they were quite happy for me to do it as a parent application. So, I feel quite lucky that I had the agreement of the school because a lot of parent applications are because the school won’t and that wasn’t my experience.”

4.2.2 Support while completing the application

A few of the families explained that they had been given support from local charities with specific knowledge of EHC needs assessment applications, they were able to either guide them through the application process or fill in the forms together, ensuring all the relevant sections were completed correctly. Support from schools was again mixed, some were happy to support the families whereas others stated that they had no help with their application. Most applications were made online, and families found the actual submitting of the applications easy and straightforward. However, it was gathering all the evidence and information required that families found complex, with one family stating that for someone like herself that had ADHD, there appeared to be no help or support for them, *“I find (reading questions/form filling) difficult, it all becomes overwhelming for me...”*.

“I had been aware of an organisation called The Autism Apprentice CIC. What they do is offer a service where they will support you and help guide you through the application. So, at the time... I think it was £50 and I had a phone call with two of them, who’ve got children on the spectrum as well and have been through the process and then they help and support people who are trying to do the same thing. Together they asked lots of questions, I talked a lot, they wrote the list really on the application. I then got a copy of that and tweaked and edited and put a few extra bits in and then sent it off.”

"I am not very good at computers and a friend of mine helped me, she got the form up and wrote it all in for me. Obviously, she asked me the questions and I told her the answers and she wrote it in and then sent it off. So, I had to use my own support network to do it rather than the school or anything official."

4.3 Submitting the application

"The actual application process so far has been relatively clear up to this point... the moment it was sent in I had confirmation that it had been received. I had a number of people contacting me very early on, very quickly, saying this is what we are going to do, and asking for certain information or asking for permission to collate various things. It felt that it was being handled which was really nice, that was comforting and everybody I spoke to was also really understanding as well."

We asked parents to reflect on their experience of submitting the application. Most of them felt that the application was positive, and the process was straightforward. They felt they were being kept well informed about what happened next. One parent also mentioned that so far, the application process was *"proceeding in a timely manner"* which they had not initially expected. Aside from giving approval for various information to be collated, parents reported that while the application was processing there was little for them to do apart from wait.

"To be honest, I have been impressed with the process of the application so far, from when I applied to where we are now...he has the educational psychologist going in on Monday to assess him. So, I think that process, considering the current times we are experiencing, has been a quick process so I am quite pleased with that."

“We heard before Christmas, probably submitted the application around mid-November. So just before Christmas we heard that they had accepted that he was then going to go through the assessment process, so we are in that bit. So, we are waiting, so I’ve had various phone calls from people saying, asking for permission to collect information.”

4.3.1 Support after application submitted

Whilst in the previous section we discussed how parents were supported while making the application, a few parents discussed the support they had after the application was submitted. In one instance the parent was continuing to receive support from their daughter’s nursery as their original application had been rejected. The parent reflected that they felt unable to contest this decision on their own, so the nursery was supporting them in re-applying.

“The nursery have said, because I told them I didn’t have the strength to contest it, with testimonials and stuff, they said they will see come April, [name] still has more, I think they said they have more paperwork, I don’t know if they can reapply, I’m not 100% sure...Nursery is gathering further evidence for the application.”

Another family mentioned that an advocate would be helpful for parents going through the process. They recalled reaching out for support but could not find the type of support they were looking for.

“And I think you are almost looking for an advocate, somebody to talk for you because it’s a minefield and you want somebody that’s got knowledge insight. IAsk can only advise you but they can’t really act as an advocate, they can’t go and help with you.”

4.3.2 Application process difficulties

Families discussed some of the difficulties that they found during the process. Many problems can be attributed to lack of communication about the application process and what is expected of parents during this time. One parent who felt confident about their knowledge of the EHC needs assessment remarked that they found the process challenging,

“I came into this process thinking I will be able to handle this EHCP because I know what I am doing, but I found it really challenging as to what was exactly expected of me, what the different deadlines are...”

Other parents experienced issues around application rejection, not knowing whether the application was going ahead and what steps they could take next.

“I still don’t know if it is going ahead...I emailed the EH worker back, I said I was upset that it has been cancelled because I still want to go ahead with it and I feel that my daughter is being failed again. I have had to fight for everything, and I am still fighting...I asked her to get back in touch with me and that was over two weeks again and I still haven’t had a response from her.”

Some mentioned that although they were given timescales for how long the process should take, in their experience things took longer which caused frustration and delays in their child receiving support.

“It wasn’t that simple though, they refused to do the assessment. It was longer than 6 weeks, at his time there were huge delays so everything was taking a lot longer, I can’t remember how long. They refused to assess and then you have to go through whether you want to mediate or not mediate, and then appeal, which is what I had to do. Then they agreed to assess

and then after assessing they then refused to issue a plan so then I had to appeal again and go through that process again. It was only about a week or so we were coming towards tribunal that they then conceded and issued a plan.”

One parent felt that the delays and uncertainty of the process led them to make the decision to have their child privately assessed.

“I couldn’t wait for 3 to 4 years to get him help. So, we decided to go down the private road. So, we booked an appointment and paid and what have you and a week ago he had his assessment done and the paediatrician basically diagnosed him there on the spot with serious ADHD. They stated there was nothing they could do other than to medicate him.”

4.4 Purpose of an EHC needs assessment and plan



“As a parent, we don’t know how these things work. We know we need the assessment and then the experts will suggest what kind of help he needs and work with the school to say this is the kind of support he needs, at the minute it’s 1:1, so they can help his learning, support breaks, to keep him concentrating so that he doesn’t distract the class and that’s the main thing.”

When asked about the families’ understanding of the purpose of an EHC needs assessment, many of them were not entirely sure what one was. However, most of them went on to explain that they hoped that having an EHC plan would give their child/young person more options and support at their current school and especially when transitioning onto secondary school. Some families voiced that they felt they had exhausted all their options and needed the support of professionals to suggest alternatives for them as a family and support within the school environment.

"I feel and, in some ways, the school has run out of ideas or things that can be put in place to help him, that there is no more we can do on our own and in sense within a school environment without the input of other professionals' knowledge, suggestions, basically I've run out of ideas."

Other parents had decided to pay for their own professional assessments to submit as part of the application. Paying for additional assessments is not an option for all parents seeking to make an application but for those who are able to feel that it will help them, particularly if they feel they have tried everything else.

"We've tried everything, and he is still struggling and so with the EHCP what I've done, I've gone privately for an Occupational Therapy assessment which is sensory and cognitive assessments... so that report will go towards as part of the health care plan application. I've requested, I haven't heard anything yet, but I have requested he gets seen and assessed by speech and language therapy as well."

4.4.1 How do you think a plan will help your child?

All the families we spoke to reflected on what they hope an EHC plan will help their child/young person, one of the main reasons was getting the right professionals to assess and support their children to enable them to have the same chances at education as someone without an EHC plan, especially so when transitioning from primary to secondary education.

"I have asked the school for over 2 years to get this sorted as she has only got just over a year left at primary, and I am petrified because I believe if things aren't put into place she will struggle."

Other parents believed an EHC plan is the last chance for support for their child, they hope that having a plan will ensure extra support is provided for their child.

"If he doesn't get the additional support that he needs what I imagine will happen is that he will most likely stay at that school until he ends up being kicked out. That is what I think will happen, so this feel a little bit like the last hope."

Overall, it was the child's happiness and chance to achieve to the best of their abilities that was the main hope for parents in applying for an EHC plan.

"So, I would hope that the EHCP will help to address all the weaknesses and he will feel supported either with a one-to-one or extra provisions to meet his targets. He has low self-esteem when it comes to education and low expectations of what he can achieve. So, I want him to feel happy and positive in the school of his choice. I think it would be met best if he had continuous one-to-one support."

"I want him to be happy in school and what him to feel that he is achieving something that is achievable for him."

4.4.2 EHC plan in place



"I think if it had been followed and if it had been more specific it would have been better. For him as well right from 2017 he had independent OT written into his EHC plan, but he's only just started having that. So, it's taken over 5 years to get that in place, and those 5 years in an academic path for a child is a huge amount of time and the independent speech and language was quite delayed, and I had to go out and find them and I found the OT. The onus is always on the parent and again following the plan the onus always seems to go back to the parent rather than where it should be which is with school, the LA."

In comparison to the previous section of parental hopes of what having an EHC plan might mean for their child. Parents whose children had already had an EHC plan granted expressed their frustrations. One of the reasons of frustration they mentioned were plans not being reviewed regularly, meaning they didn't always feel they reflected the child's current situation or needs.

"It's supposed to be reviewed annually so it's now been 2 years since the last proper annual review. It was realised that things weren't in place that should have been in place and things were going downhill..."

One family felt that the EHC plan seemed to have been disregarded altogether and this resulted in stressful consequences for themselves and their child.

"... he is finally going to get the support and the help, but they seemed to disregard the EHCP effectively... so things just erupted, and it was quite stressful for him and for us."

Another cause for concern for parents were when changes or reviews to the plan had taken place and information was not recorded correctly.

"... what I found hard and uncomfortable where they'd written, I can't remember it's one of the sections where they do a review and we had to sign it off to say where things had changed, we weren't happy with that because so much of it was not true."

One participant felt that it was down to them as the parent to ensure the plan was being adhered to. This included finding various professionals to support their child. They felt that more of the responsibility to ensure the plan is being followed should lie with the school or local authority.

5 Conclusion

Overall, the main reason for parents applying for an EHC needs assessment themselves, rather than the school, was they believed it was their responsibility. Families had either been advised by their SENCo or other professionals that this was the case and that the process would be quicker. Other parents said they applied because no-one else would.

Parents acknowledged that the process was not easy, and the decision to apply was not taken lightly. Some families sought support from charities to apply whereas others did have some limited support from their SENCo. Although all the families stated the actual submitting of the application via the online portal was straightforward, the gathering of supporting evidence and other relevant information was most challenging.

In many cases families expressed they had no other choice to apply, as the needs assessment was seen as their last hope of getting the support their child needed. All the parents wanted was for their children to be happy, to achieve to the best of their abilities, and have the education that they deserve, the EHC plan was seen to be the method to achieve this when other interventions had not helped.

Finally, we would like to say a big thank you to all the interview participants. These conversations were extremely sensitive and personal, we appreciate you sharing so openly with us. We know you valued the opportunity to share your thoughts and experiences that are covered in this research, and we thank you for taking the time to do so.

6 Pen Portraits

6.1 Family A

Katie is aged 12 and in Year 8, she has two older siblings. Katie struggled at primary school from Year 1, reading and writing were hard for her, and she showed signs of anxiety. Katie was diagnosed with dyslexia and added to the SEN register. In Year 4 Katie's confidence took a nose-dive, she was even more anxious at how her peers were learning quicker than her and she felt left behind. Katie's parents decided to move her to a different primary school with mixed abilities amongst the children and an innovative and kinaesthetic approach to learning. Katie flourished there, the school celebrated her achievements and she felt like she was succeeding, she even passed her Kent Test. Katie's confidence had returned fully.



By the end of Year 6, Katie had been removed from the SEN register as she was achieving all her goals academically, which meant no special transition arrangements were made for the start of secondary school. Katie found moving on to secondary school challenging.

At the start of Year 8, Katie was extremely anxious, she wasn't sleeping or eating, and she was reluctant to attend school. Katie's parents spoke to the school and although an offer of an anxiety group was put in place, it wasn't working for Katie, and she became even more withdrawn. One day, it all got too much for Katie on the drive to school, she opened the car door whilst in motion and tried to jump from the car into the path of traffic. Katie had said if you make me get in the car and go to school, I will do it again, I can't go there, I would rather die.

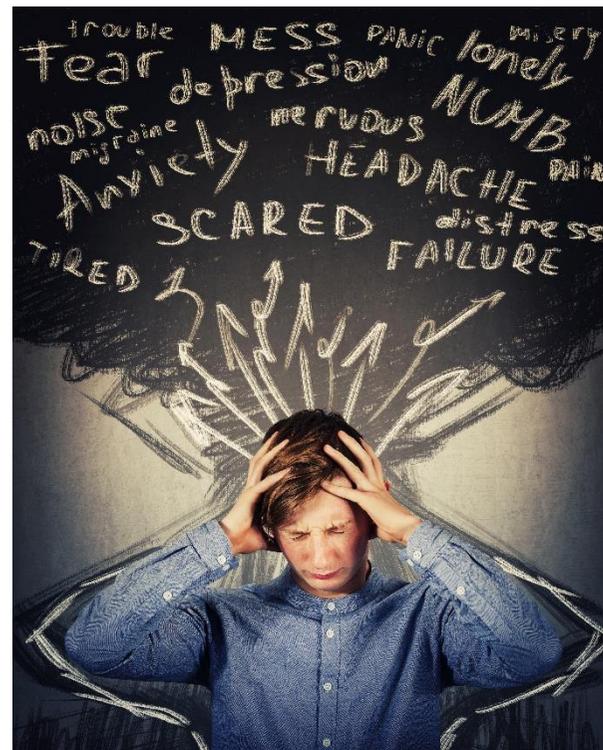
Katie's GP made a referral to CAHMS, the school suggested an autism assessment although all of these had extremely long waiting lists of 2-3 years. Katie's parents felt they were unable to wait that long and decided to go private. Katie and her parents were feeling stuck, Katie wanted to be in school and learn but she physically couldn't go. Katie's parents felt the only option left available to them was to apply for a needs assessment. They had no idea what support was available to Katie and felt that the process of applying was about getting that extra support.

6.2 Family B

Josh is in Year 10 and has three older siblings. Aged 7, Josh was diagnosed with Asperger's. Josh's parents managed to support him throughout primary school and the early years of secondary school without additional SEN support. At the end of Year 9 going into Year 10 Josh's mental health took a turn for the worse. Through their GP and CAHMS they were advised to do a self-referral for Josh to Early Help. Josh had seven months of support from an Early Help worker, which his family found helpful as they were able to bounce ideas and suggestions to help support Josh. It was the Early Help worker that suggested they apply an EHC plan.

Josh experiences social anxiety along with sensory overload, he finds it very hard to communicate, which can lead to miscommunication, especially with teachers. The way Josh copes when he has sensory overload or becomes anxious, he puts his head down and goes into his safe bubble where nobody can get him, he is safe there. On one of these occasions in class, he was sent out and given a detention for his unresponsive behaviour. Josh's parents explained that after this ordeal he was so terrified, that he had spent the next three years terrified of being told off, terrified of getting detention, basically every day he goes to school it is hell for him. Josh's parents have learned to give him space so that he can process his thoughts and tell them what has happened in his own time.

During Josh's first few years at secondary school, they experienced four different SENCOs, none of which supported Josh despite many meetings to explain his situation. By Year 10, a new SENCO arrived, and Josh's parents were able to meet and explain what had been happening, and despite some support from the SENCO, which has helped, it is only in terms of what is in the SENCOs remit.



Josh's parents had been aware of a local CIC and so they turned to them for guidance and support in applying for an EHC needs assessment, as although they had the support from the SENCo, they had felt it was left to them to apply. With the help of the CIC, the application process has been relatively easy for Josh's parents. They have had communication during the process, and it has made them all feel they were doing the right thing.

Josh's parents feel that they and the school have run out of ideas or support that can be put in place to help Josh, they feel they are unable to do anymore without the input of other professionals' knowledge.

Josh has said that he just wants people to acknowledge that he needs a different type of support, a different sort of help, just an understanding of his needs.

Further Information

Kent Analytics
Kent County Council
Invicta House
Maidstone
Kent
ME14 1XX

Email:

SCAnalytics@kent.gov.uk

Tel: 03000 417444

Report writers

Naomi Clemons, Qualitative Analyst Manager
Demetria Burnett, Qualitative Analyst Officer
Vicky Butler, Qualitative Analyst Officer