



**Reaching  
Families**

# Impact Report 2021/22



*Empowering families of  
children and young people with  
special educational needs and  
disabilities in West Sussex*

# About Reaching Families

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Reaching Families is a parent-carer led, grassroots charity which aims to support parents and families of children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities in their daily lives, in particular through the delivery of information, training and peer support. We work with over 3,000 West Sussex families every year through a range of high quality projects and services.

## Our services



### **Making Sense of it All**

In-depth parent-carer guide covering SEND issues from birth to adulthood



### **Animations**

Short animated films on a variety of subjects



### **Fact sheets**

Covering a range of SEND issues localised to the needs of West Sussex families



### **Training**

Workshops and courses on a variety of issues delivered in-person and online



### **Benefits Advice Service**

1-2-1 advice and editing support for families applying for DLA, PIP and Carers Allowance



### **Face-2-Face**

Peer based befriending for parents of children undergoing diagnosis



### **Umbrellas**

Parent support groups based in Billingshurst, Littlehampton, Worthing and online, via Zoom



### **Facebook Group**

An online parent support group providing news, information and peer support

# Executive Summary

As we leave behind what we hope is the worst of the covid pandemic and reflect on its impact, it is fair to say it has had a seismic effect on Reaching Families.

Over the period 2019-2022 our operation all but doubled in size as we strived to meet an exponential increase in demand for our service. For the first time we had to work with waiting lists, training workshops booked within hours of publishing dates and a new demand for short term casework support from parent-carers struggling with multiple challenges.

Thanks to additional funding from West Sussex County Council and West Sussex CCGs we have added to our staff team and increased the capacity of our services. However, such is the scale of demand, compounded by covid and the cost of living crisis, we have prioritised further fundraising to optimize the number of families we can support.

If the first year of the pandemic meant finding ways to still deliver services to parents and harnessing technology to help them stay connected, the second year was about reconnecting in person whilst continuing virtual delivery to ensure we remained accessible.

2021/22 was also notable in our publishing a new and extended edition of our parent-carer guide, Making Sense of It All, recruiting and training a new team of volunteer befrienders, reaching a landmark of 5,000 Facebook members and starting work on a new benefits advice service, the timing of which could not be more pressing.

The year ahead promises greater challenges not least in ensuring we can support parents and families' wellbeing, both emotional and financial, continuing to meet increased demand whilst improving accessibility and support to harder to reach members of the SEND community.

*"Reaching Families has opened new doors for me. We'd be lost and alone without your service."*





# Findings from our 2022 Annual Survey

Data gathered from our 2022 online annual survey, (completed by 237 parents), illustrates the multiple impact of caring, covid and the cost of living crisis on SEND families in West Sussex:

- **61%** of parent-carers describe their greatest challenge as anxiety, stress and/or depression
- **56%** say they struggle to access support for their child with SEND
- **50%** said their household income was negatively affected by the covid pandemic
- **44%** have cut back on essential shopping as a result of the cost of living crisis
- **36%** of parent-carers are separated or lone parents
- **25%** of families have more than one child with SEND
- **20%** have cut back on expenditure in support of their child's additional needs as a result of the cost of living crisis
- **10%** are unemployed (more than double the national rate)

*"They've been wonderfully informative and understand the issues we as parents face in raising a child with SEND"*

# Our Impact 2021/22

## Information

**2,625**

copies of  
Making Sense of it All  
downloaded/distributed

**10,342**

factsheets downloaded  
from our website

**90%**

of parent-carers  
reported improved  
knowledge of how to  
access support for  
their child

## Training

**949**

attendees

**84%**

of parent-carers  
reported improved  
knowledge

**78%**

reported improved  
skills and self  
confidence

**52%**

reported improved  
networks of peer  
support

## Peer Support & Wellbeing

**191**

Umbrellas attendees

**97**

Befriending & Counselling  
participants

**80%**

of parent-carers  
reported feeling more  
confident and resilient in  
overcoming difficulties

**70%**

reported improved  
wellbeing

**64%**

reported improved  
networks of peer support



*"Their work is irreplaceable.  
Huge thanks to everyone"*



# Making Sense of it All

The covid pandemic had such a disruptive effect on local services that our original plan to publish a new and extended edition of our parent-carer guide, Making Sense of It All, in 2020 was delayed in order to give a clearer picture of what support is available to SEND families in West Sussex.

The new edition, published in January 2022, combines content from our transition guide, Making Sense of Adult Life (now discontinued). The book now runs to 400 pages and covers issues from birth to adulthood, making it essential reading for parent-carers at whatever stage of their child or young person's development.

As with previous editions the guide remains hugely popular with parent-carers both in paperback and eBook format. Since the first edition was published in 2012 we have distributed over 20,000 copies of the book.

**2,625** downloaded/distributed



*"Every time I open the book I find a new bit of information. My go to Bible!"*





*"I have attended several training courses now and found them all incredibly helpful - the knowledge and tools I am gathering is very empowering. It's also good to meet other parents and share experiences"*

# Training

Demand for our popular online training programme grew exponentially over the course of 2021/22. It led to further funding from West Sussex County Council and West Sussex CCGs, which enabled us to recruit more staff and increase our workshop delivery - and the number of parents we supported - by almost 100%.

We also began delivering in-person training again, concentrating on subjects where parents gain from face to face contact with other parents. This was particularly true of our Making Sense of It All foundation course, designed to support parent-carers at the beginning of their journey, not only in understanding the complex world of SEND, but in building connections and networks of peer support.

Meanwhile, our online evening course, Making Sense of Wellbeing, first introduced in 2020, continued to be popular with parents wanting to learn strategies and mindfulness techniques to cope with the demands of being a carer.

**949** attendees

# Befriending & Counselling

We made a number of adaptations to our Face-2-Face befriending service during the covid pandemic including offering telephone befriending and extending availability to parents struggling with the emotional effects of lockdown.

We have continued offering telephone engagement but from the Autumn of 2021 refocussed on the project's original aims – supporting parents of children undergoing (or recently undergone) diagnosis.


We also trained a new team of volunteer befrienders and by the year end had a record number of 21 volunteers supporting a record number of parent-carers.

Our counselling provision introduced at the beginning of the pandemic was designed as a short-term project for parents struggling with the emotional impact of lockdown. Over the course of two years we supported 85 parents via telephone counselling. Owing to a lack of dedicated ongoing funding the project closed at the end of the 2021/22 financial year.

*"I had great support from start to finish and an easy process to set up. My befriender was great, great advice, similar personal experience, etc. It has been 100% beneficial and my befriender a God send!"*

**97** participants





*"My local Umbrellas has been an absolute life saver. Just being around other parents who get it - that's what keeps me sane."*

# Umbrellas

One of the most popular services available to parents during the covid pandemic has been our online Umbrellas support group. Such has been its popularity we were happy to continue the group after social restrictions had been lifted.

We also began rebuilding our in-person groups in Billingshurst, Littlehampton and Worthing. We expected this to be a stop start process owing to covid but were fortunate that all but one of our intended sessions were able to go ahead.

As the pandemic has been such a challenging experience for parent-carers we introduced a number of activities at Umbrellas to boost wellbeing including small outdoor summer get togethers, guest speakers, head & shoulder massages and a very welcome Christmas buffet.

Despite all the challenges with social restrictions and uncertainty over the future course of the pandemic, attendance at our Umbrellas groups during the year was at a record high.

**191** attendees



# Benefits Advice Service

In October 2021 we were approached by a charitable trust to develop a new benefits advice service for families applying for Carers Allowance, Disability Living Allowance and Personal Independence Payment.

It is a rare experience to be proactively approached by a funder in this way and whilst we had always wanted to do more on benefits, this wonderful opportunity took us all by surprise. Our thanks to the Bascule Charitable Trust for awarding us £55,000 over three years to develop the new service.

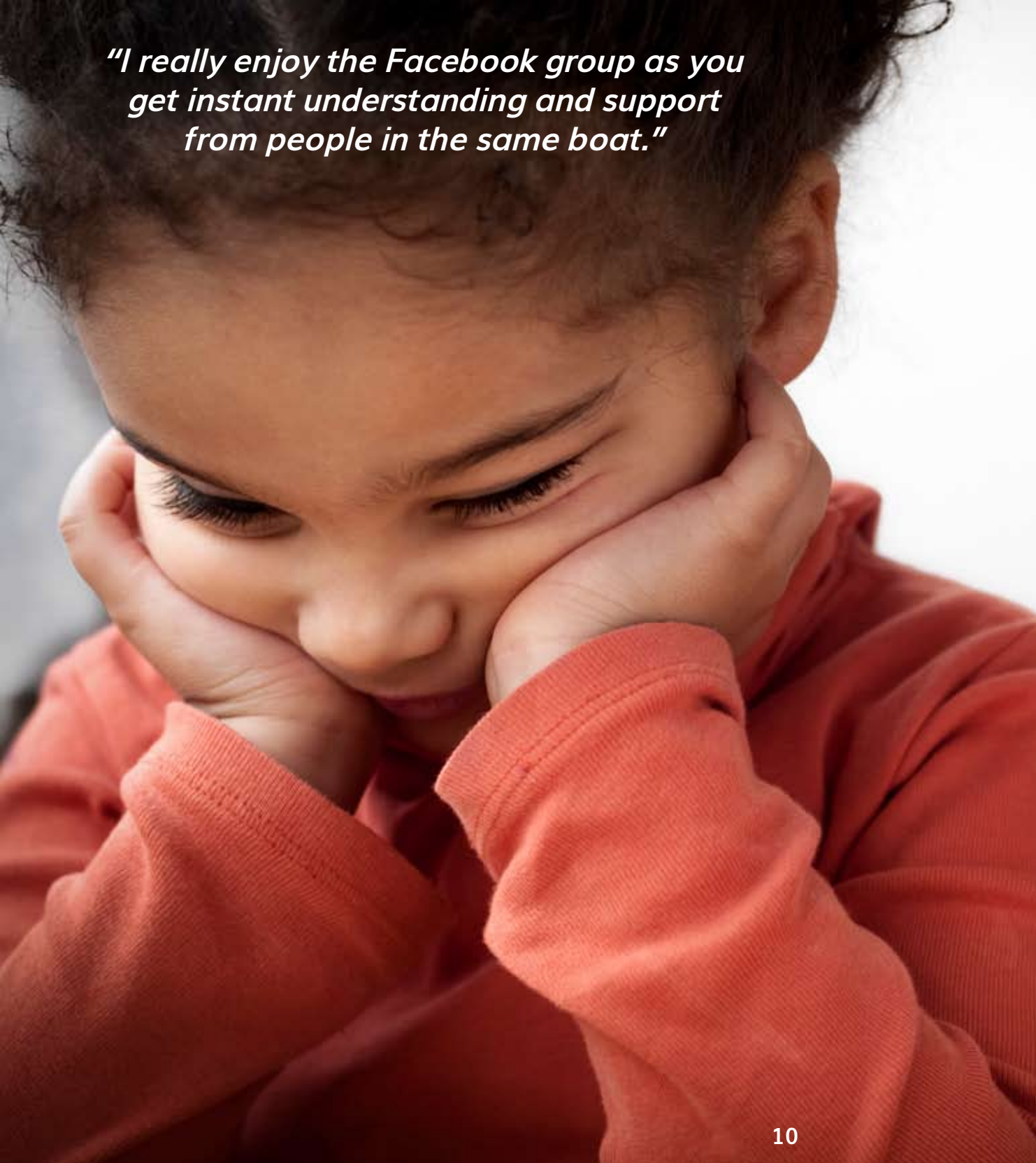
In January 2022 we recruited Rebecca Golby as our new benefits advisor. Rebecca is a parent-carer and has over 16 years experience as a SEND advisor with Connexions and Camden Council. She began giving advice and support with editing to parents in March 2022.

The timing of the new service could not be better particularly bearing in mind what we learned of the impact of covid on family finances and the effects of the cost of living crisis. Within weeks of Rebecca giving advice to parents it was clear demand for this service is going to be very high.

***New service!***

***"The whole process is so draining.  
Thank god there is someone to help."***





*"I really enjoy the Facebook group as you get instant understanding and support from people in the same boat."*

# Facebook Group

Our Facebook group reached a huge milestone in 2021/22 when we approved our 5,000th new member, making it one of the largest online parent-carer groups in the country. Interest in the group surged during the pandemic and in 2021/22 alone we approved more than 1,000 new members.

Managing a group of this size has proved logistically challenging – we monitor over 350 posts and around 2,500 comments per month – but the value of the group in connecting parents, helping them seek peer advice and share information cannot be overstated. It's also an invaluable resource for us in sharing news on our services and other providers, both local and national.

**1,046** new members



A young boy with brown hair, wearing a green parka with a fur-lined hood and blue jeans, is walking on a wooden pier. He is looking down at the ground. In the background, there is a white railing and a body of water under a cloudy sky.

# Next Steps

The enormous impact of covid and the cost of living crisis on the emotional and financial wellbeing of SEND families in West Sussex has made clear our priorities for 2022/23 must be as follows:

1. Managing our growth to ensure we can meet increasing demand for our services
2. Continuing to focus on the emotional wellbeing of parent-carers and their recovery from the covid pandemic
3. Raising further funds to invest in our benefits advice service and ensure we can optimise the number of families we support
4. Extending accessibility and support for harder to reach members of the SEND community

*"It is amazing you have kept going despite the restrictions of the last couple of years. Thank you for continuing to be there for us all."*



# With thanks to

Aspens

Autism and Social Communication Team (WSCC)

Bascule Charitable Trust

Carers Support West Sussex

Foyle Foundation

Garfield Weston Foundation

Henry Smith Charity

National Lottery Community Fund

Specialist Nursing Team (Sussex Community Foundation Trust)

Sussex Community Foundation

Wellesley Charitable Trust

West Sussex Clinical Commissioning Groups

West Sussex County Council

West Sussex Neurodevelopmental Pathway

West Sussex SENDIAS

...and a special thanks to all our volunteers and the parents and families who donated images to be used in this report

[www.reachingfamilies.org.uk](http://www.reachingfamilies.org.uk)



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