



**Square Peg & Not Fine In School
evidence for Social Care Review**

August 2021



The intersection between children facing barriers to school attendance and social care

Square Peg and Not Fine In School

Square Peg (Team Square Peg CIC) is a not-for-profit company that exists to effect change for all children and young people who face barriers to attendance. The website can be found here: www.teamsquarepeg.org

Not Fine In School (NFIS) is a social enterprise that supports the same families. It has a closed Facebook Group of 17,500+ parents, growing at a rate of approximately 800 pm. The website can be found here: www.notfineinschool.co.uk

Evidence included in this report

Not Fine In School has run surveys in the past which cover the parent experience of social services referrals and support (May 2018, completed by 1,661 respondents, and March 2020, completed by 714 respondents). The full report comparing both surveys can be made available on request. The data and comments from these surveys, along with our cumulative extensive knowledge in this area, form the evidence outlined in this report.

For more information, please contact hello@teamsquarepeg.org

Introduction

The Terms of Reference for the Review claim that the review will consider *'how the children's social care system responds to all children who are referred to the system. It will address ... the inconsistencies in children's social care practice and outcomes across the country...'*

It goes on to say *'This review will be bold and broad – a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reform systems and services. Children's needs and the context in which they are growing up have evolved. A children's social care system which can respond appropriately now and in the future is needed. The review will build on the strong foundations we have established: recent reviews over the past decade have given us rich insights into the component parts of the children's social care system such as fostering and residential care, alongside analysis of support in and around schools though the review of children in need.'*

It claims that *'This review is unique in its breadth and scope to look across children's social care and suggest radical change.'*

The report also references (several times) the many and varied historic reviews of both social care and the services that interlink with it. Yet again there are several reviews currently underway in parallel with this Social Care Review. We cannot assume that these will collectively cover all the bases unless they cross-reference each other. If this does not happen, children and families will undoubtedly fall between the gaps.

Our main concerns:

'The Case for Change' report assumes that *'school is a place of safety, social learning and academic exploration'* and negates the experiences of many children who have suffered trauma because of the current education system. It makes no reference to low attendance as a red flag on safeguarding policies, and therefore fails to acknowledge a large cohort of children and young people who enter the social care framework for this reason.

A missing cohort

There were (at the last count in autumn 2020) 916,000 children who were classed as persistent absentees. We believe this to be an under-estimate, as some absences will have been recorded as Covid-related. In autumn term 2019 this figure stood at 922,566.

For 40%+ of their absences there was no formally recorded reason (usually logged as 'other' and often unauthorised). This does not mean they are 'truanting' or on the school to prison line, despite a recent Centre for Social Justice report¹ – the evidence simply isn't there to support this narrative. A recent Mind report² is likely to be more accurate; many have mental health issues which have impacted their ability to attend school.

Not Fine in School runs a closed Facebook Group for over 17,500 families whose children struggle to attend. Many have been unable to access education for months, if not years.

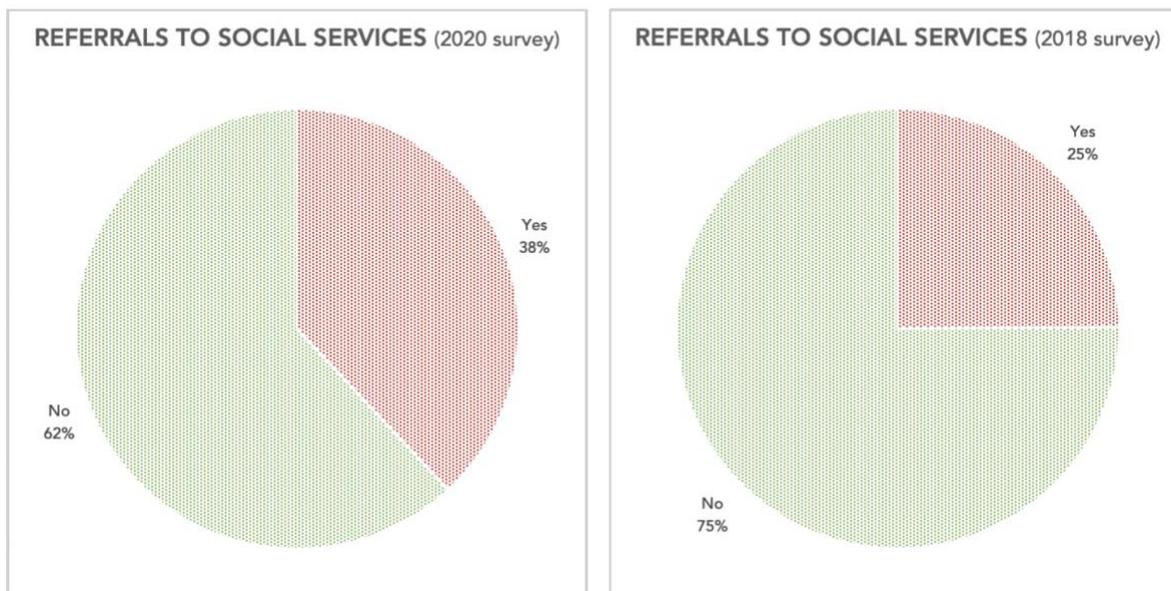
In both 2018 and 2020 Not Fine In School surveys parents were asked about section 47 referrals.

Non-attendance is seen as a safeguarding issue

These often occur because low school attendance is a red flag on safeguarding policies, and if the Designated Safeguarding Lead fails to follow protocol (despite their personal view on whether the non-attendance is a safeguarding issue), it can be career-ending. We believe this results in unnecessary section 47 referrals, putting additional stress on a family already in crisis, and introducing them to social services through a safeguarding lens. Almost without exception the question is not 'what do you need?' but 'we're checking that you're not neglecting or abusing your child'. The responses are shown below. Referrals to social services increased, from 25% to 38% between 2018 and 2020.

Social Services Referrals

Have you been referred to Social Services because of your child's attendance difficulties?



¹ https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Cant_Catch_Up_FULL-REPORT.pdf

² <https://www.mind.org.uk/media/8852/not-making-the-grade.pdf>

Blame, gaslighting and consequent trauma

Parents are often blamed for their child's non-attendance, by schools and services, and when this translates into a section 47 referral, the experience is overwhelmingly reported as traumatic, disempowering, and intrusive.

The recent Cerebra report by Professor Luke Clements 'Institutionalising parent carer blame'³ evidences the extent of this problem, stating '*National and local social care policies in England create a default position for those assessing disabled children, that assumes parental failings. This approach locates the problems associated with a child's impairment in the family – a phenomenon referred to in this report as 'institutionalising parent carer blame'.*

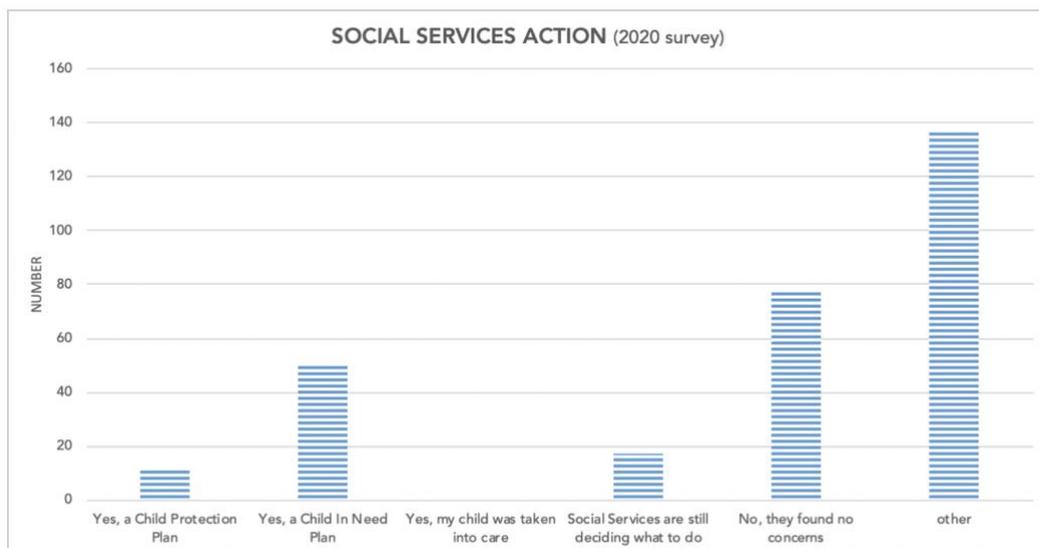
"School lied to social services - accused me of saying he had medical conditions which he doesn't have, school implied to social worker that my son's illness was psychological and that he was anxious, despite writing a letter to the paediatrician saying he was fine and telling me he was not anxious. School nurse lied to social services; said I refused their help when I pursued her for 2 months for her to say she was unable to help my son. GP and Consultant confirmed that my son's condition is a physical not psychological condition. Social worker said she had no concerns and discharged my son."

"The worse time of my life and almost destroyed my family. They came into our home and dropped a grenade. I suffer with flash backs and nightmares. A terrifying experience. "

"They reported me to social services, blaming me because she doesn't want to go to school! I'm trying all I can, but she was bullied at the school, and it's affected her. She's become a very solitude little girl, struggling with friendships etc. The pressure is immense on her and on me and all this is just because of attendance markings and numbers."

Outcomes

Of the 290 parents who responded to this question in 2020, 50 children were put on a Child In Need Plan, 12 children were put on a Child Protection Plan and 1 child was taken into care. In 78/290 (27%) of cases social services found no concerns.



[295 responses]

³ <https://cerebra.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Final-Parent-Blame-Report-20-July-21-03.pdf>

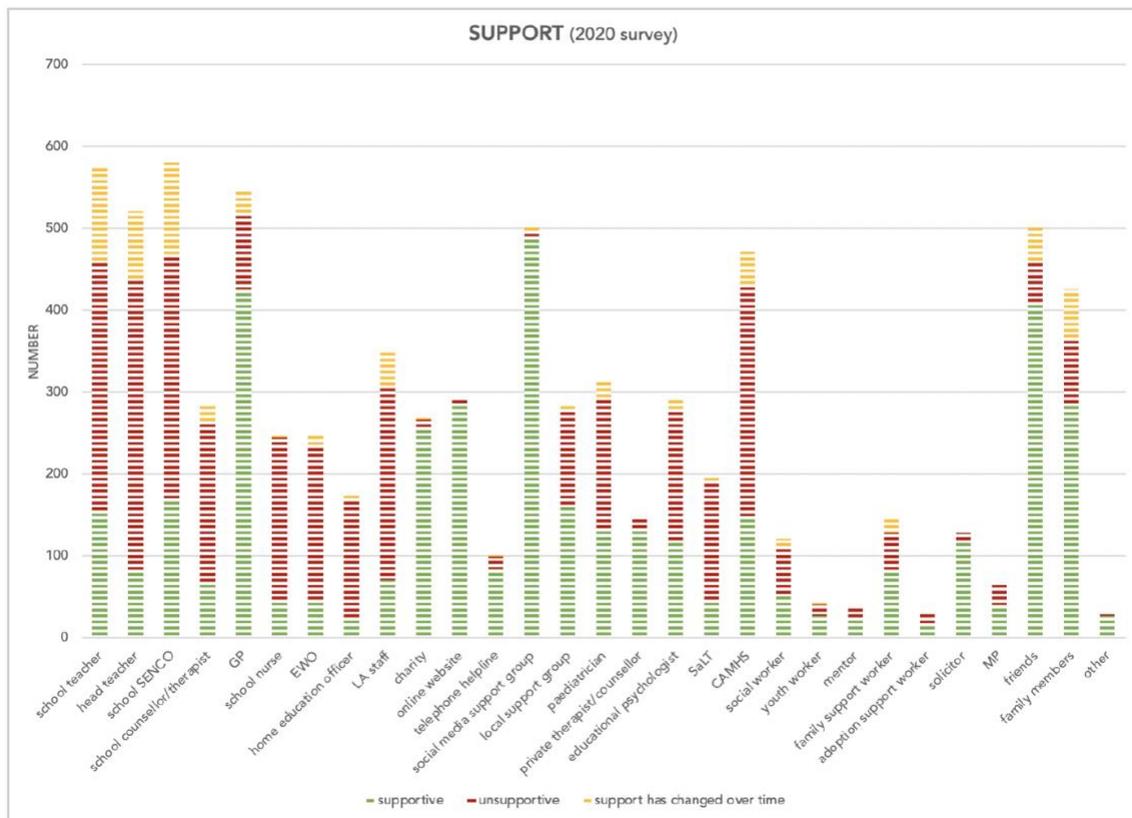
Support

We also asked about support to ascertain whether the services that should be supporting these families were doing so. It's a damning review of public services, with support coming primarily from social media support groups, charities, websites, friends, and family members (none of which constitute the 'paid' support on offer!). GPs and solicitors were found to be significantly helpful.

"Had to beg social work for support. Teachers said my daughter was acting and there was nothing wrong with her when having a panic attack in school. Told me my daughter needs to be more resilient to bullies. Head teacher told my daughter that if she doesn't try to attend school regularly then social work would be involved and there would be consequences. I had to do all the work to ask for support and find out what had happened to my child as at first I had no idea what had happened to my daughter."

Support

Where have you found support?



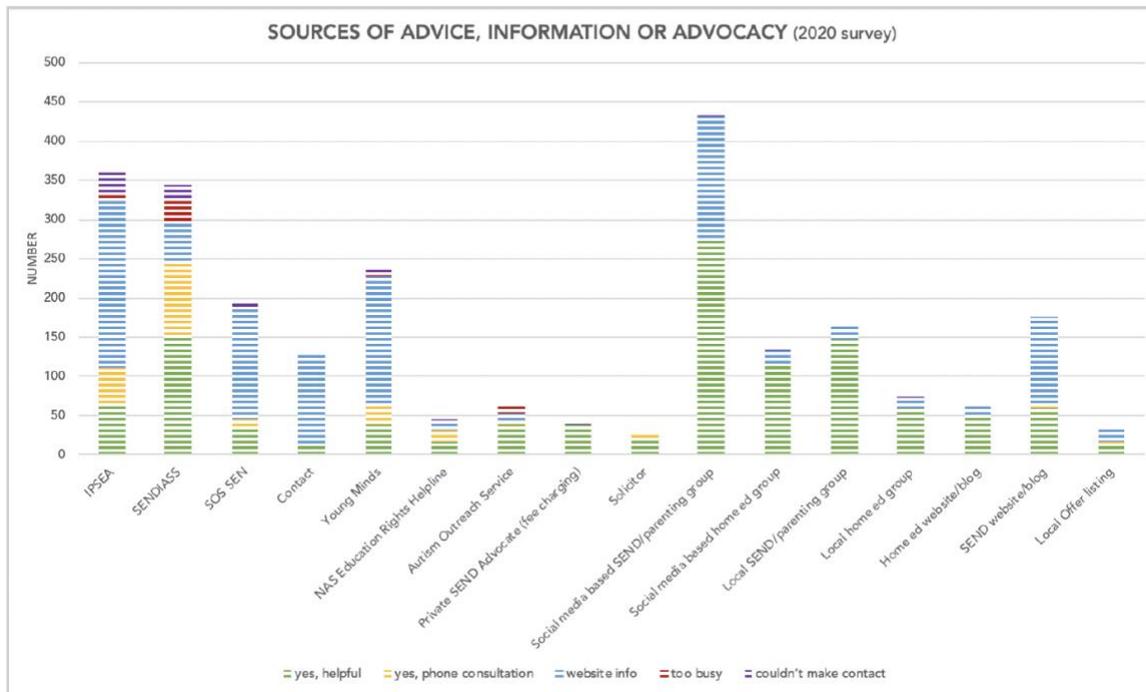
Worryingly, all the other services that should be offering support – school, LA, education psychologist, CAMHS, social work – were considered more unhelpful than helpful.

The chart below shows where respondents did find information, advice, and advocacy. It illustrates that several services have comprehensive websites, but also that demand means that organisations like IPSEA and SENDIASS can be hard to contact. Again, it's the parent-led support groups that proved to be the most helpful – parents in crisis helping other parents in crisis.

"Social Services brought in by school who received complaints our child was being manhandled to school. School were aware of this as was GP, as parents we informed them of our concerns when advised to force our child to school by children's service. Children's Service ignored our concerns, school and GP did

nothing. Until complaints to school from other parents and children were received. All services finally agreed it was totally wrong, but our child was broken in the process as indeed we all were as a family."

Have you used any of the following sources of advice, information or advocacy?



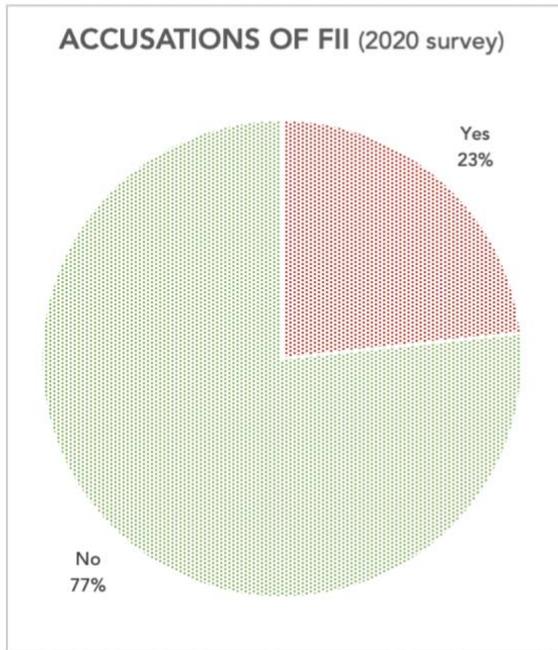
Accusations of Fabricated or Induced Illness

In far too many cases, safeguarding concerns for the child escalate into an accusation of Fabricated or Induced Illness against the parent. These are shocking statistics, given the severity of the accusation and the rarity of it in legal circles. The campaign group [Flightback](#) exists to try and support these families. Accusations of FI (Fabricated or Induced Illness) have risen from 18% in 2018 to 23% (154 respondents) in 2020. Only in 3 cases were parents found guilty, with 3 awaiting a verdict.

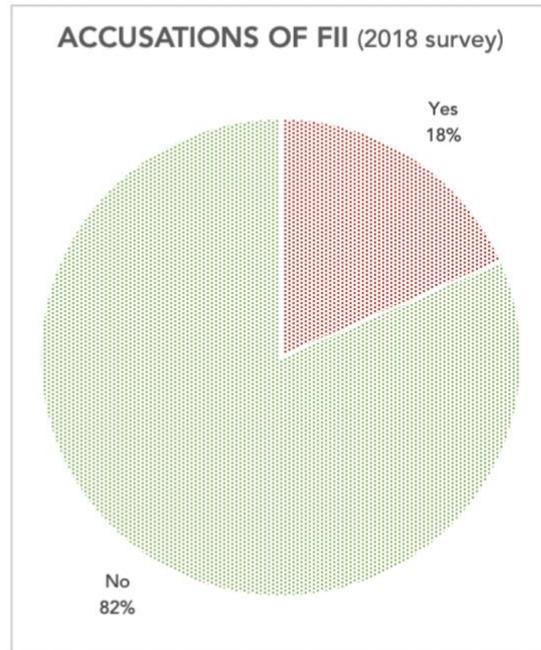
"The new Head suggested to staff that we were FI. The class teacher warned us and agreed home ed would be the best way forward, he was worried what would happen next. social services found no concerns and expressed to the school that they could see I was doing everything I could to get my son to school."

Accusations of FII

Have you been accused of FII (Fabricated or Induced Illness)?



[661 responses]



[1,661 responses]

Our requests to the inquiry

1. To recognise that the education system has the potential to cause harm, and that for those children who experience suspensions or are persistent absentees, this may well be the case
2. To review the relevant data and consider the issue of low attendance as a red flag on safeguarding policies, the pathway that this can trigger, and the experience of these families
3. To investigate the number of these specific section 47 referrals that result in no further action, as evidence that it was not required
4. To explore the evidence that a section 47 referral in these circumstances resulted in help being offered to the family
5. To review the social care offer for those families at Universal / Targeted Support and take an Integrated Review approach between all current reviews to ensure no families fall through the gaps