

Annual Report

April 2021-March 2022

1. Overview

There is a statutory duty for Education, Children's Social Care and Health to jointly commission **impartial** Information, Advice and Support (IAS) for children and parents with Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND). This is set out in the Childrens and Families Act and SEND Code of Practice.

Devon County Council (DCC) and the Integrated Care Board (ICB) meets its' statutory responsibilities through the commissioning of the Devon Information, Advice and Support (DiAS) service. This can be summarised as Information Advice and Support Services (IASS) provide free impartial, confidential and accurate information, advice and support about education, health and social care for children, young people and their parents on matters relating to special educational needs and disability. Minimum standards for the service are listed in Appendix 1.

DiAS is commissioned to support SEND improvement and transformation programmes. It also provides strategic support and advice to improve services for children and young people with SEND and their families, including delivery of high-quality training. Any strategic messages to commissioners are managed under the clear need for DiAS to be impartial and confidential.

2. Service Delivery

The service has had to adapt to increasing demand in 2021-22. This rise in demand can be seen across the whole SEND sector, in particular relating to recovery after the Covid pandemic. DiAS delivers its commissioned service by providing information, advice and support.

2.1 Information

The DiAS information offer has been developed with the intention of providing empowering self-help materials. These enable families to understand SEND law, local SEND processes, and how they can have constructive conversations with professionals and a voice in decisions. The information includes branded printed and online resources and social media. We have a designated member of staff skilled in information and communication development.

DiAS has a specific and stand-alone website for children, young people, parents and carers which provides useful resources, signposting to other SEND information, and information about how to contact the team. The website is a rich source of information for all user, including schools and other partners. It includes frequently asked questions, information and advice on a range of SEND topics and downloadable resources. Other information includes downloadable and printed materials such as top tips, advice sheets, leaflets, booklets on SEND support and EHC Plans.

It has been recognised nationally as an example of best practice. The site includes a dedicated section for children and young people. The site can be found at: devonias.org.uk

The service also has a strong reach across social media which enables the service to provide information to a wider range of users. It connects with parents through the Facebook page, with approximately 23,000 users and information for professionals on Twitter. Children and young people have advised the service that they do not use these platforms, and we continue to consult with them on the most effective way to communicate information.

2.2 Advice

DiAS provides advice through an enquiry line which is staffed from 10am to 3pm, five days a week. In general, the enquiry line provides level 1 and level 2 advice.

- Level 1: Information, self-help resources and signposting through our website and enquiry line.
- Level 2: Advice requested by webform, phone or email. Requires SEND legal expertise and research. Responded through our enquiry line within 2 working days.

Enquiries that require a higher level of support are triaged and allocated to specific case workers or to DiAS Children and Young People's (CYP) workers.

2.3 Support

DiAS has eight officers who all work part time (4 FTE equivalent). They work on the enquiry line and provide higher level casework support. All have other responsibilities supporting wider information, advice and support. We have 1FTE CYP worker for the specific support of children and young people and delivery of their information offer. All DiAS team members are accredited IASS legally trained.

Casework can be summarised as:

- Level 3: Support provided for more complex issues or where a parent/carer is vulnerable and/or has additional needs. Support is provided by phone, email, online and face to face depending on the needs of service users. Some elements, such as meeting support, may be provided by trained DiAS volunteers. Support and advocacy are given for children and young people, so they can share their views and participate in decisions that affect them.
- Level 4: Support as per level 3, to include advice for higher level complaints and legal processes including: Ombudsman Complaints, Disability Discrimination Claims, Disability Discrimination Claims, SENDIST tribunal hearings, and Judicial reviews.

CYP can access information, advice and support through the same routes as parent carers. Often CYP are referred by schools or other professionals, or by their parents. DiAS can support CYP either alongside their parent carers, or in their own right. Support is tailored to their needs and preferences. Most CYP support is at level 3 or higher. Staff will often meet with a child or young person several times, to develop trust and enable them to share their views in a way that works well for them.

3. Training

DiAS has a remit to offer training for parents and professionals to increase knowledge of SEND law, guidance, local processes and participation. It provides a broad training offer which is tailored to the needs of its users and developed based on feedback and the types of enquiries the service receives. The service also trains volunteers for the Ambassador Volunteer programme, as well as volunteers to enhance the service support offer.

The service delivers an online training offer for parents, to maximise reach and rationalise staffing capacity. We provide information sessions for professionals on the remit of the service and input to training for SENCOs.

Staff work with school leads for SEND and Inclusion, to develop strategic relationships. This has supported improved understanding and practice in schools. It also ensures that the service is able to recognise the challenges that schools face and give advice which reflects the wider educational environment. There are regular meetings with commissioners.

4. Ambassador Volunteer (AV) Programme

The Ambassador Volunteer Programme is a joint programme with the Parent Carers Forum Devon. It provides outreach and connection for parents around Devon.

The aim of the programme is to build a network of ambassadors for parents and carers of children with SEND, who act as points of contact in a school, group or local area. Intended outcomes are to

- increase awareness of DiAS and the Parent Carer Forum Devon (PCFD)
- create a mechanism for connection
- increase reach
- gather feedback
- share information
- provide peer support

Local authority and health services information is also shared, and the feedback that is gathered is disseminated through strategic mechanisms.

There is a wide range of parents and professionals who volunteer. They are connected to a range of groups including, social media SEND groups, parent carer groups, school-based SEND parent carer groups, therapeutic support groups and elective home educators. The AV coordinator works across DiAS and PCFD and manages the programme, including the training and induction of new volunteers and ongoing support for volunteers.

These are examples of some of the ambassador volunteer's activity.

- An AV linked in with staff at a primary school. There had previously been a strained relationship, but the headteacher valued the connection. They created a webpage and reconnected, through the AV, to the local parent carer support group.
- Created a new AV lead community group based at a primary school. This was supported by a community connector and local GP practice nurse. It welcomes families from the surrounding areas and families with children with SEND.
- AV network is sharing information with parent carers about other services and links to them, for example, Young Minds, Devon Carers, CAHMS, Children and Family Health Devon.

"I helped a guardian of a child with autism apply for Carers Allowance. I have had 1:1 coffee and chats with two different parents from my local school who have children with additional support needs."

The Ambassador programme Annual Report for 2021 can be found at:

devonias.org.uk/documents/2022/05/ambassador-volunteer-programme-annual-report-21.pdf/

5. Strategic activity

Strategic activity includes:

- Making a contribution to the SEND Improvement Board and several workstreams.
- Supporting the recruitment of new staff in commissioning organisations.
- Giving strategic input into discussions about improving school attendance.
- Input into SENCo award training.
- Partnership working with Parent Carer Forum Devon.
- Developing CYP participation and voice with the DCC participation team.

- Taking a lead role in Regional IASS network and National IASS Steering group.
- Being involved in the regional network for 'Whole School SEND'.

The feedback and specific data contained within this Annual Report is provided for commissioners, to help them review their practice or communications with parents, carers and CYP.

6. Activity Overview in 2021-22

Enquiries

There has been a significant increase in activity from the previous calendar year. The full breakdown of activity and other service indicators can be found in Appendix 2

- A **42% increase** in total number of **enquiries** since the previous reporting period.
- A **158% increase** in the number of **children and young people** supported by DiAS.
- A **96% increase** in the number of enquiries relating to **health** provision.
- A **157% increase** in the number of enquiries relating to **social care** provision.
- A **350% increase** in numbers attending DiAS **training** sessions.
- A **300% increase** in the use of the DiAS **website** including an increase in CYP using the resource.
- A **600% increase** in **social media** users to DiAS Facebook page.
- A **75% increase** in enquiries from **professionals**, with a notable rise from health and social care.

There were notable increases in the number of enquiries relating to exclusion, children missing education and general school support impacting on school attendance and wider inclusion. A high proportion of these learners had a primary need of Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) or Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC).

These are some of the main enquiries topics.

- Exclusion related enquiries focused on the legal process, access to education, decision making and support with representations to school governors or Independent Review Panel meetings.
- Advice and support about attendance issues due to anxiety and mental health difficulties.
- Return to school following home education during lock downs was a challenge for many children but especially those with SEND.
- Delays to statutory processes, access to health and social care services and challenges with understanding referral processes have all contributed to the increase in demand.
- The number of service users receiving higher level casework support i.e. level 3 or 4 increased by 32%.
- There has been an increase in enquiries about SEND Support and a significant increase in work around secondary school aged students. These often related to missing education, low attendance, SEN impacting behaviour, using consequences such as internal isolation, suspension and permanent exclusions.
- Early years enquiries increased by 62%, although from a low base. Themes from this phase relate to the impact of COVID lockdowns, such as deferring school entry, EHC needs assessments where schools have advised a high level of support needed, advice for children with emerging needs in the areas of speech and language, fine and gross motor skills, and social interaction.

There has been a significant increase in the number of children and young people supported directly by DiAS. This was due to the recruitment of two Children and Young Peoples' workers in September 2020, and an increased awareness of their role among schools and other services.

Health and social care advice or support to families has increased for all types of enquiries. This may be partly due to extended assessment waiting lists and more families struggling with post covid impact.

Information

This year it included activity to improve the service offer including:

- A full review of the website was undertaken including a survey of users, with work on new design and navigation to improve engagement, readability, and usability.
- Following a review of our information offer to children and young people information resources and a new website section for them were developed.
- A suite of new resources about SEND Support in schools started development, to help parents understand what is and should be available to every child with SEND. This addresses a much wider range of need and meets the needs of a bigger group of parents.
- Ten new information resources were created including step by step practical tools and guides developed to enable parents to take part fully in sharing theirs and their child's views and in contributing to EHC draft plans and review.
- New information about what to do when things go wrong, to help when communications break down between parents and professionals.
- The Information Officer met with 11 other IAS services across England to share information and ideas around the IASS enquiries process.
- Provided input to development of the Devon Local Offer review and updated website.

During this reporting period, reach of the DiAS Facebook page (i.e. number of accounts that saw any content from or about the DiAS page) was 22,793 which was an increase of 614% on the previous period. The Ambassador volunteers also promoted content through their community links.

Training activity

In 2021-22 DiAS delivered training and information sessions to 731 participants in 55 sessions - an increase of 350%.

In 2021-22, as a response to COVID lockdown limitations, DiAS developed and delivered an online training offer for parents. This was enabled by core staff working additional hours. Three specific training sessions were delivered about SEND support, EHCP reviews and the child's voice. An increasing number of professionals attended.

DiAS provided training input to the SENCO Award qualification. Other training for professionals to support them when they are working with parents has, unfortunately, had to be suspended due to lack of capacity.

Eight training sessions were delivered for DiAS volunteers and Ambassador Volunteers.

The Ambassador Volunteer programme has been vital in enabling the delivery of training and in helping to increase awareness of the sessions. This included information sessions for parents and professionals and training for Early Help professionals to support participation.

Ambassador Volunteer Programme Activity

- There are 33 Ambassador volunteers across Devon.
- Around 9,000 families are connected in the Ambassador Volunteer Network.
- Approximately 43 social media groups (many closed groups) are also connected.
- 13 parent carer support groups are directly linked.

Since 2020 there has been:

- 65% increase in recruiting Ambassador Volunteers.
- 50% increase of outreach to families.
- 43% increase in connection with social media groups.

7. Outcomes and impact

The service reports nationally on its impartiality and effectiveness, gathered through an online survey of service users. For 2021/22

- 97% of families gave 5 stars (out of 5) for 'How neutral, fair and unbiased do you think we were?'
- 90 % of families responded with 5 stars for 'How helpful was the information, advice and support we gave you?'
- 88% of families responded with 5 stars for 'What difference do you think DiAS made for you?'

Comments from parents

"DiAS are an invaluable service, a lifeline, it's amazing to have impartial knowledgeable people who are able to talk through situations."

"Their support gave me the knowledge and confidence to speak to professionals about my child and have my concerns taken seriously."

"The service is impeccable; we've felt a lot more confident since making contact."

8. Key messages from parents and carers

Education:

- A lack of resources and reduced numbers of support staff is impacting school's capacity to implement SEN Support.
- School behaviour policies are resulting in sanctions for behaviour that for some children is a direct result of their special educational needs, or lack of appropriate support.
- Parent carers feel that their children are stuck in a cycle of sanctions and suspensions with no clear way forward.
- In mainstream schools, there is a wide variation in the approach to supporting children with SEND and making reasonable adjustments. Many families give examples of good practice and flexible approaches to inclusion, but many others share more negative experiences, particularly in secondary schools.

- Parent carers often don't trust that SEN support will be implemented without a statutory plan in place.
- Involvement from Devon County Council (DCC) advisory teacher services has resulted in a better understanding of their child, and a more collaborative approach with school and other agencies.

DiAS received an increasing number of enquiries from parents/carers whose children are not attending school. They report the following.

- In a minority of cases, schools are working hard to engage the child, and to try and work with families and other agencies to find creative solutions.
- Many parents feel that they are 'stuck' as their child is unable to engage with a mainstream setting and there is a lack of alternative options and support either from schools or DCC.
- An increasing number of parents tell us that they have taken their child off a school roll because they feel there is no alternative, rather than taking a positive decision to electively home educate.

As recognised by commissioners, parents and carers report:

- delays to statutory processes including EHC needs assessments and reviews
- frustration at lack of communication, including lack of response to emails and phone calls requesting updates
- ongoing difficulties with the EHC hub

Health

DiAS Service users are increasingly requesting advice and support around access to health services. Common themes are:

- lack of clarity around referral processes, lengthy waiting lists for assessment and limited access to follow-up support
- lack of a consistent 'joined-up' approach from education and health services to support children with mental health difficulties
- lack of clarity about how to access support for children and young people with either an ASD diagnosis, or autistic traits, who are not attending school due to anxiety
- delays to health assessments and support for children in the early years, including speech and language therapy and occupational therapy

Social Care

In respect of social care, families highlight:

- that they have had regular changes in social worker and are often unclear about what support to expect
- a lack of consistency and transparency in the processes for social care assessment and support for children with disabilities
- health and education professionals are often unclear about how to request a referral for assessment from Disabled Children's Services
- when Early Help is initiated, and a Team around the Family approach is used effectively families feel more supported and services work together
- they value support from the Family Intervention Team and other targeted services

9. Key Messages from the children and young people (CYP) DiAS supported

Education

- Most CYP want to be at school, they are motivated to learn, and want to do well in exams.
- While some CYP don't know what they want to do when they are older, lots have clear ambitions and career aspirations.
- Lots of CYP have positive memories and experiences from primary school. Often, specific teachers are named.
- CYP connect with staff they trust at school, which often isn't their 'allocated' member of staff. CYP seem to have a positive relationship and feel able to speak to someone when they have self-selected who this is, rather than it being a directed member of staff.
- CYP find that their support plans work best when all staff members follow them. They often know and openly share the reasonable adjustments that are helpful for their learning.
- Support plans are most successful when they have contributed to them and when they are delivered consistently and without question.
- Secondary school pupils often express that being in a big, noisy, busy school is a barrier to learning. They find the environment overwhelming. CYP want a smaller school or they want to go to a special school.
- CYP feel the pressure of having to attend school and are fearful of the consequences of low attendance. Many CYP don't feel their views are considered when there is a plan to get them back into school. In practice find returning to school very difficult if they don't feel listened to and supported.
- School is a huge source of anxiety for many CYP, a large majority either miss lessons, or don't feel able go into school at all.
- When there has been an incident or something has happened at school, CYP often say they haven't had a chance to give their point of view or say how they feel. This sometimes leads to an escalation of the situation, or non-attendance.
- Where DiAS has supported CYP to give their views for an EHC Needs Assessment, they have understood the process and felt empowered to say what they think.
- Some CYP say they do not feel safe at school, they feel anxious of others, worry about how they are perceived, and do not want to be different.

Health

- CYP have expressed frustration about the long waiting list for an autism assessment. They talk about how it affects their identity, and how having a diagnosis means that they are confident about what they say to others. CYP want to be able to explain their difficulties so that others understand and can make reasonable adjustments.
- CYP have told us that they would like support for their mental health, but there isn't any or they can't access it due to thresholds/waiting lists.

Social Care

- CYP usually know about meetings that are being held about them, e.g. TAF meetings, but often say they haven't been invited to go along.
- CYP know some of the language and know they get 'Early Help,' or have a social worker, but don't always understand what it means for them.

10. Conclusion and recommendations

The Service has seen rising demand for yet another year. This year's increase of 40% has had a significant impact on the team, with the additional challenge of no extra capacity and changes in staff. It takes time to build the knowledge and skills required to cover the breadth and depth of

information and legal expertise needed. The demand on other services, such as the continuing rise in EHC needs assessment and ASD assessment, has an immediate impact on demand for our service.

The service responded by researching and exploring different delivery models, including a helpline model giving advice which focussed on immediate issues. We identified that we need to have a new role within the service to put in expertise at the first line response.

The development of the children and young people's offer has been very successful and contributed to a Devon-wide vision to promote the voice of the child. It has enabled compliance with our core requirements; however, this is not secure as the posts are not permanently funded.

The Ambassador Volunteer Programme, run jointly with Parent Carer Forum Devon, has been very successful at building local connection for SEND families and delivering our training offer. It is nationally recognised as good practice. However, lack of long-term funding means the programme is led by a staff member on a temporary contract.

The DIAS website is seen as an exemplar which has been emulated by many other IAS services.

Recommendations:

- To enable commissioners to meet their strategic responsibilities, all DiAS staff fulfilling core strategic functions should be made part of the permanent work force.
- Strong strategic and commissioning connections exist with education. These could be increased with health and care.
- Health funding should be prioritised to make the area wide partnership statutorily compliant.
- A commitment to permanently appoint child and young person advocacy workers will support the wider Devon agendas.
- DiAS expertise on information and communication could be enhanced to advise the OFSTED Local Offer response.
- The DiAS Reference Group membership needs to be reviewed and revised and could be linked to commissioning.
- Review and recommissioning of the service should be a priority for partners.

Appendix 1

National IASS Minimum standards

The [national minimum standards](#) describe the requirements a SENDIASS should provide. For full description of the standards read the linked document.

The standards specify four areas.

Standard 1. Commissioning, governance, and management arrangements

DiAS is jointly commissioned, the service is led by two managers who make decisions about how the service is run. Staff are directly employed by Devon County Council and in order to protect impartiality it operates at “arm’s length”. DiAS has a Reference Group where stakeholders meet three times a year to advise on impartiality and service developments.

Standard 2. Strategic functions

DiAS works with local partners and has been invited by the Local Authority to provide input on a range of strategic groups to help shape SEND policy and practice. We are very careful to maintain our impartiality and remain arm’s length, whilst sharing themes and trends we observe from our support work of families experience of accessing Devon services. We work closely with the Devon Parent Carer Forum to gather and strategically raise the views of families about SEND services. We link with the strategic children and young people’s participation teams. DIAS has an active role both regionally and nationally with other IAS services to inform strategic planning and training.

Standard 3. Operational Functions

Information: The DiAS website describes what the service offers, to whom and our staff team. It includes a range of online FAQs and self-help resources for children and young people and parents. Printed materials are also available.

Advice and support with advocacy for children and young people either direct or with their parents.

Advice and support for parents through an enquiry line and individual higher-level support for those who need more.

Training: DiAS delivers an online training offer for parents and input to training for professionals on working with parents. Participation: A joint programme with the Parent Carer Forum, the Ambassador Volunteer Network, provides outreach and connection for parents around Devon.

Standard 4. Professional development and training for staff

All staff undertake accredited IASS legal training. Ongoing training is delivered through DCC and external providers.

Appendix 2

Service Data

Total Enquiries to DiAS

	2020-21	2021-22	Increase
Parent/Carers	1892	2617	38%
CYP*	38	98	158%
Professionals	64	112	75%
Total	1994	2827	42%

*Due to recruitment of CYP worker

Number of professional enquiries

	2020-21	2021-22	Increase
Education	45	88	96%
Health	10	33	230%
Social Care	20	51	155%
Total	64	112	75%

Examples of types of requests from professionals:

- Education: EHC hub advice, admissions, transport, special school placement, mediation and appeals to the SEN Tribunal.
- Care: PIP, DLA and other funding/benefits, bereavement support, access to childcare for children with SEND, signposting requests to family support groups.
- Health: Mental health assessment and support, specialist dental treatment for children with SEND, ASD assessment post 18.

Level of Support Provided

Support Level	2020-21	2021-22	Increase
1	398	607	53%
2 to 4	1596	2220	39%

Type of SEN need

The primary area of need is recorded for all enquiries.

The number of cases where ASC and ADHD were described as the primary area of need increased significantly during the reporting period.

There was a significant increase in the number of enquiries relating to children missing education and challenges around SEN support and school behaviour policies. A high proportion of these enquiries were for children with ASC and ADHD. The following may have had an impact on this group:

- a move by many schools to more stringent behaviour policies
- challenges around staff retention and recruitment
- the transition back to attendance at school following significant periods of time educated at home

Enquiries by area of need

Primary Area of Need	2020-21	2021-22	Increase
ASC	553	748	35%
SEMH	233	229	-2%
ADHD	35	70	100%
S&L	82	54	-34%
SPLD	77	48	-38%
Hearing and VI	23	20	-13%
Health / Medical	23	14	-39%
LD	101	77	-24%
Other	30	39	30%
PD	21	13	-38%

Level of SEND Support

Level of SEN Support	2020-2021	2021-2022
No Additional Help	18%	15%
SEN Support	28%	34%
EHCP	54%	51%

Phase of education

Phase of education	20-21	21-22	% Increase
Early Years	37	60	62%
Primary	836	931	11%
Secondary	665	1067	60%
16-18	99	111	12%
19-25	50	51	2%

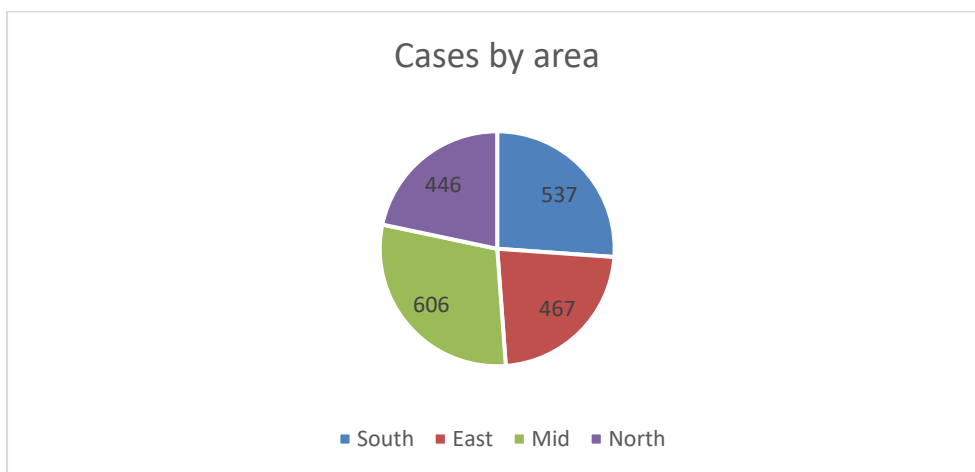
Reason for contact

Reason for Contact	2020-21	2021-22	% Change
Admissions	130	125	-4%
EHC	448	575	28%
Exclusions	40	62	55%
Missing Education	140	251	79%
Mediation and Tribunal	158	132	-16%
School	487	822	69%
Transitions	83	107	29%
Other	203	307	51%

Thematic break down of open cases by service area support

Reason Group	Area of Support			
	Education	Health	Social Care	No Category
School	949	435	179	50
Other	311	150	82	26
Health and Care	41	41	24	3
EHC	518	252	105	19
Transition	96	44	18	7
Admission	117	67	17	3
Exclusion	53	17	8	2
Early Help	2	1	1	1

Geographical area



User survey

A small number (16) users took part in a short survey about what DiAS offers, and what they rated as important. An up-to-date website scored most highly when users were asked what was most important to them, followed by having written information sent to them after a call.

Website visitor statistics

	Number of web users	Number of sessions	Number of pages viewed	Average number of pages looked at each session	Average time spent on the site	Percentage of return users
May to August 2020	4,900	6,600	11,000	1.7	1 min 33 secs	17.5
May to August 2021	5,400	7,800	16,000	2.7	1 min 43 secs	19.7

Demographics of web visitors have changed significantly

	Gender	Young people	
2019	25% men 75% women	18-24 4% of visitors	
2022	36% men 64% women	18-24 16% of visitors	

There have been changes to the pages that site users land on

	Contact us page	Resources library	Children and young people
2019	767	609	151
2022	1922	1705	474

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Devon Information Advice and Support

Website: devonias.org.uk

Email: devonias@devon.gov.uk

Telephone enquiry line: 01392 383080 Mon-Fri 10am-3pm