

Sussex SENDIASS: Partnership working with the local Parent Carer Forum

The context

Amaze has run the East Sussex SENDIASS since 2017. Amaze as a charity runs a number of related services in the three local authority areas across Sussex. Amaze is a user led service with a commitment to user voice and helped establish the parent carer forum (PaCC) in Brighton and Hove many years ago. The organisation still hosts PaCC. In 2020 Amaze took on providing support and infrastructure for the new parent carer forum in East Sussex (ESPCF).

The issue

There are both opportunities and risks in IASS and parent carer forums (PCF) sitting within the same organisation. It is important that Amaze SENDIASS is distinct within Amaze as its umbrella organisation, and that the IASS for each area is clearly distinguished from the PCF, despite being linked through sharing the same umbrella body. Impartiality is a key principle for SENDIASS. PCFs must act as a voice for parents not for the host organisation. All three parties were keen to be recognised as independent by parents and by funders and statutory partners. Another concern was that the formation of a new PCF in East Sussex was politically sensitive. There was, therefore, a greater need for clarity about roles.

It is essential to avoid confusion between roles and responsibilities internally and externally. The PCFs have been asked to take on an information role already offered by SENDIASS. SENDIASS have been invited to be part of meetings and processes as the parent voice. Sometimes there has been neglect regarding structured co-production of SENDIASS work due to reliance on informal contact arising from sharing Amaze as a host. Sometimes this has meant there was encroachment onto each other's responsibilities. At the same time there is a requirement to maximise the value to the SEND community from the close links between SENDIASS, PaCC and ESPCF and the scope for effective strategic work and meaningful co-production this offers. It makes sense to use the intelligence SENDIASS holds about parent experience and knowledge of SEND law and processes to inform the influencing work of the PCFs. SENDIASS need the PCFs to check that everything is in tune with what the parent carer community want and need. Due to demand and capacity issues there is no place for duplication of effort but there will also be times when a two-pronged approach will help achieve shifts in local practice or priorities.

A memorandum of understanding has been developed to achieve this balance.

What the services did together

An initial meeting was set up that brought together Amaze, PaCC, ESPCF and SENDIASS to look at the issue and find a way forward. Consideration was given to whether the central role of each PCF in the SENDIASS Steering Group for their area, was sufficient in itself but decided not. It was agreed to draw up a memorandum of understanding that would set out the different roles of Amaze, SENDIASS and PCFs, how they interconnect and give examples of appropriate joint work.

In the process of writing and agreeing this, it was decided to make sure it was in a form that could be shared externally, as well as informing internal partners. It was agreed it should be in plain English and did not need to read like a legal document. For parents it should be a document that would reassure them that their PCF is independent and the IASS impartial. For funders and partners, it should clarify who they should approach for different purposes, for example a consultation or a working group, and when they might want both PCF

and SENDIASS involvement. The document was eventually titled “The roles, responsibilities and ways of working between PaCC, ESPCF, SENDIASS and Amaze” so it would be easy for external parties to understand. It references both the IASS Minimum Standards and Contact’s framework for PCFs. It also included some illustrative examples of joint work:

- The PCFs work with SENDIASS, to consolidate feedback from parent/carers on their experiences. Keeping each other informed of issues and concerns being raised by parent/carers supports the PCFs’ evidence base in identifying prevalent themes and trends and helps SENDIASS and Amaze services be responsive to local need
- The PCFs, SENDIASS and Amaze work together on research, e.g. running surveys and polls, to gather parent carer feedback and develop a better understanding of families’ experiences and needs
- During the Covid-19 crisis joint communications from PaCC, ESPCF and Amaze were issued to key strategic leads, MPs and Ministers, and were jointly able to successfully influence policy and practice, at both local and national level, improving services and outcomes for disabled children
- Amaze supports forum staff/ reps in meetings where requested, where this is helpful in strengthening the parent/carers voice. Amaze and the forums also operate a reciprocal arrangement to provide feedback from meetings where one party was unable to attend
- The PCFs, SENDIASS and Amaze collaborate around events and comms where appropriate/useful eg co-presenting at partners’ conferences/organising joint workshops etc.

Read the memorandum of understanding here:

<https://amazesussex.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/PCFs-SENDIASS-and-Amaze-roles-v2.docx>

The difference made

Working on the memorandum of understanding helped Amaze, SENDIASS and the two PCFs to have a frank conversation about mutual roles, potential areas of conflict or duplication and scope for productive joint working. This has led to establishing a regular joint meeting of Amaze, SENDIASS and both PCFs. This is proving useful for liaison, information sharing and agreeing joint activities. Current issues or “hot topics” are promptly picked up on and agreement is reached as to who will raise these and where.

An example of how this has avoided duplication of effort is the recent East Sussex JSNA on SEND. We were able to clarify that ESPCF would take the central role in working on this. Amaze would support this by sending an invitation to take part in the survey to users of SENDIASS and other Amaze services in East Sussex. SENDIASS would read and comment on the ESPCF submission to check it covered all the issues regularly seen. This avoided SENDIASS capacity having to be committed to the JSNA at a time when the service was facing exceptional demand via the advice line. Conversely, this August when ESPCF were taking a much needed break, SENDIASS was able to take the lead in bringing parental views to a task and finish group on vaccination of clinically vulnerable 12 to 15 year olds, whilst keeping ESPCF in the loop.

We have used the memorandum of understanding document to introduce and explain the differences between Amaze, SENDIASS and the PCFs to external partners and it has been publicised in the Amaze and PCF newsletters and on social media. The clarity it offers has been helpful and reminds everyone they should not assume that those outside their bubble know who they are and what they do.

Contact details

Amaze Sussex

ros@amazesussex.org.uk

liam@amazesussex.org.uk