

North Yorkshire: IASS adapting our service to continue our offer to families and young people

The context

March 2020 and the UK was in lockdown due to the Covid 19 outbreak. SENDIASS North Yorkshire, like other IASS', had to quickly take stock of its position and respond accordingly.

Several years prior to the Covid 19 situation North Yorkshire County Council developed their "2020" policy which was to try and equip all their services with the technology they would need moving forward. SENDIASS North Yorkshire as an "in house – arm's length" provision was part of the 2020 project and as one of the smallest teams in County became an early adopter of some of the innovations. Equipment roll-out meant the service had already been provided with tablet/laptop devices, smart phones, desktop phones that connected to WIFI and were configured for home-working with specific reference to the need to provide a responsive advice line service.

The story

Alternative ways of working were adopted and embraced several months prior to lockdown including a large element of home-based provision. Service users no longer expected face-to-face meetings as a standard approach as the new ways of working were explained e.g. adoption of National Minimum Standards, empowering service users to use information to self-advocate, the ability to meet the needs of a much greater number of service users, budget efficiency in terms of reduced travel costs etc. via conversations with service users, professional partners and through promotional materials/website etc.

With reference to home-based working a lot of what makes this work well within the team is that everyone is trusted to continue their work without "micro-management". This has been helped by the implementation of KIT forms during lockdown (see below) so that the manager, at a glance, has an overview of what's happening with each team member. This has allowed for flexibility within area roles.

The use of Skype, Zoom and Teams has been extended during lockdown meaning locality work could continue uninterrupted and with the ability to still input into meetings including Tribunal hearings, Independent Review Panel (exclusions), CiN meetings and SEN support meetings where planning was taking place for the school re-start.

2 social media platforms – Facebook and Twitter have been adopted – allowing for reliable information to be spread throughout the community. This information also included mental health resources for CYP activities for long days at home and links to other resources etc.

One of the team volunteered to collate all of the Covid 19 regulations/announcements/updates so they were readily available for all team members thus enabling them to give timely and accurate information to service users and professional partners.

Prior to the pandemic the emphasis was about empowering service users so when lockdown happened many were already very able to advocate for themselves knowing that information was available to them via the service website, social medial platforms and through signposting to other organisations. They also knew they could still contact the advice line and would normally receive a response the same day or next working day.

The service worked collaboratively with its professional partners, sharing knowledge and information and establishing a pathway to quickly flag up education/support needs for vulnerable children.

Use of webinars and other information coming from the CDC was vital and incredibly helpful in trying to ensure advice being given to families was as up to date as possible, in a fast-moving situation.

Individual team member profiles were accessible on the website, so even though service users might not be able to actually meet staff members, they were able to find out a little bit about the person, either before or after, they were speaking with them.

The service managed to advertise, shortlist, interview and recruit for the new Advice and Referral Officer post using Skype as the interview platform. The process was helped by the Safer Recruitment training staff had previously undertaken which assisted in interrogating the applications received and informed the approach during the interview process. This meant the additional funding from CDC could be used to ensure the person appointed was in post by June 1st and the appointee is already making a significant difference to the service offer.

With regard to the well-being of the team, team meetings via Skype were already an established way of working and worked well. During the Covid 19 situation team meetings were increased from monthly to fortnightly or more often when needed. Like other teams within SEND, Keep in Touch (KIT) forms were established and completed every 2 weeks. These meant everyone in the team could clearly list all of their tasks and their progress towards them. In addition team members could if they wished, include where they were in terms of their own well-being. This meant the manager could offer support as necessary e.g. a listening ear, NYCC's Health Assured service, AskSal etc. A "well-being" section was introduced at the start of each team meeting. This demonstrated the level of support available within the team and at least 2 people were able to say they were struggling emotionally within the current situation, knowing they wouldn't be judged.

The outcome

The outcome was that not only did the service make a difference to an individual service user but a difference was made for the majority of service users. Service delivery was not interrupted due to the technology already being in place allowing work to continue using virtual platforms & conference calls for meetings etc. As anticipated there were some technology related "glitches" during meetings, however, most of the time they were successfully resolved and in the majority of cases practical support/guidance was offered prior to meetings to help prepare services users for the new way all of them were now being conducted e.g. mediation meetings, dispute resolution, exclusion appeals etc.

The advice line remained open as normal for the duration. For only 3 days was the service unable to answer definitive questions about Covid 19 and the impact on SEND. Once correct information was being circulated, questions were once again answered as accurately as possible. By combining helpline enquiries with social media platforms to get information out to the community, the service was able to provide regular updates on the Government's Covid 19 response and answers to frequently asked

questions. This included Facebook Q&A sessions. Communication from CDC at this point, webinars and other information were valued and incredibly useful.

During this time the service was nominated for the National Diversity Awards. As part of this process the community was asked to support this nomination and comments were received such as:

“I believe that SENDIASS North Yorkshire deserve this award due to their sustained and continued focus on service user empowerment and capacity building. Furthermore, the recent efforts to rebrand has allowed for further democratisation of the organisation, creating an org-services user relationship where both parents/guardians and children are proud to be represented by them.”

“This team have transformed over the last year or so and are making massive progress in empowering young people with disabilities to make their own voices heard”

“Fantastic service helping hundreds of families each year. The coordinators are approachable, very knowledgeable and make sure that everyone can access the service whatever their circumstances and needs.”

Lessons learned

Emergency planning, no matter the situation, is crucial in being as ready as possible for any eventuality. Because the service’s model of working had previously changed it was already “Covid ready” and work could continue relatively uninterrupted without having to massively re-think how to work or source equipment etc. SENDIASS North Yorkshire is proud of its response to the Covid-19 situation and constantly strives to improve its offer to service users.

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