



Bracknell Forest: IASS adjustments to meet service users' needs during the Covid-19 pandemic

The context

This case study firstly describes the adjustments made by the Bracknell Forest IASS to continue service delivery and meeting service users' needs during the pandemic. Secondly it goes into detail to show how adjustments were made to support one particular parent and young person.

The story

An immediate adjustment was for all four part-time Bracknell Forest IASS staff members began to work from home. Working hours were adjusted to keep up with service demand and ensure service coverage whilst managing staff members home commitments. The team set up a WhatsApp group to share important information and to alert each other to urgent enquiries requiring attention. Team meetings were carried out using Microsoft Teams.

Time was set aside for staff to keep their knowledge up to date in an ever-changing situation. This included:

- being familiar with the adjustments in DfE legislation and guidance
- checking CDC's and IPSEA's websites for updates
- "attending" webinars about recent changes
- maintaining contact with the SEN team to gain an understanding of the local picture to ensure the most up to date and relevant local information is available to service users
- "attending" meetings with the East Berks SEND team
- getting updates regarding health, social care
- finding out what neighbouring LAs are doing
- receiving updated resources to share with service users.

When receiving an enquiry on a new subject, i.e. not previously dealt with within the service, this information is shared with team members and the anonymised wording of any correspondence saved to the "generic emails" folder. For example, many parents were asking about timescales during the pandemic or free school meals whilst out of school.

The helpline numbers and email service were able to run without disruption and service users' were given the option of phone calls or virtual meetings. The service "attended" several annual review meetings via Teams and a mediation meeting. The CYP case officer collected a YP's views over the phone. Other regular meetings involving the team for example with the SEN team, steering group and IASS South East regional meeting have all successfully continued on a virtual basis.

A range of resources have been collated for families and added to the service website including information relating to the Covid 19. The team decided it was important to reach out to all service users and have emailed or called them all individually to assure them the service remains "open" and to offer support or to get in contact if they wish. Relevant information and resources relating to Coronavirus have also been sent out. Useful resources have also been shared with local schools and LA depts. e.g. school effectiveness managers, Family Intervention Team and the SEN team.



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More parents than usual are reporting having a difficult time and have been signposted to mental health and wellbeing services. In addition safeguarding referrals have also been made with the consent of parents. With schools and other services having less contact than usual, parents might be confiding in the service more than they might otherwise. Analysis of service stats for March to May 2020, compared with the previous year show a decrease of calls to the helpline, whilst sending similar amounts of emails. It would seem parents are preferring to email instead of call. The volume of work is comparable to prior to lockdown although a higher quantity of more in-depth work has been recorded e.g. checking draft EHCPs and amendment notices or support with EHC needs assessment requests.

Adaptions have been made to delivery on development plan goals e.g. for the time being replacing face to face work with YP to collect their views on the new website and resources with a questionnaire to send out electronically.

To demonstrate how adjustments and adaptations panned out in real life, this case study will now go into more detail about how the CYP case officer supported one particular parent and YP as they prepared for and undertook mediation about the contents of a final EHCP. Before the lockdown, the CYP case officer had been working with the family through telephone calls and face to face meetings at the family home. The YP of 16 years old has ASD and suffers with severe social anxiety preventing him from leaving the home. The family lacked confidence in using email to communicate and were not confident in using Teams, the platform used by the LA for virtual meetings. Therefore, the only methods of communication after 23rd March 2020 the case officer could use with the family initially, were telephone and royal mail. The latter was not overly successful, due to restrictions on printing confidential information outside of the office so required arrangements to visit the office to print before posting meaning the process would be untimely. The case officer raised this with the family and discussed the possibility of them trying email, assuring them of support in using email and accessing the security encrypted email system. Emails were kept brief and in very plain and clear English and were preceded by a telephone call so they knew to expect an email and were already familiar with what the content of the email would be. Documents were either attached or web pages copied and pasted rather than including links in the email as the parent found this easier to access. The case officer had more frequent conversations with the family initially than they would usually and the time spent on this proved worthwhile as they became empowered to begin to collect and send emails for themselves. This decreased their anxiety in the run up to mediation, as they had relevant information in time and were able to independently and confidently communicate with the mediation service by email to arrange and access the "virtual" mediation meeting.

The case officer called the parent and YP prior to the meeting to discuss and confirm all of the points that they wanted to discuss at the mediation meeting. The case officer joined the mediation meeting via phone line, with audio only as the LA does not permit the use of ZOOM, which was the parent and mediators preferred platform. The parent was comfortable with her supporting in this way and the case officer was able to raise and support in discussions all the points previously agreed with the family and to clarify the mediation agreement.

The YP was able to join the mediation meeting as they did not need to leave the house to do so. This was useful as they felt able to clearly express their views about how they would like to receive their provision and this was very powerful. The YP felt satisfied they had been able to give their views and the parent was very happy with the outcome of the meeting and all the decisions reached and agreed



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in the mediation agreement. This level of involvement in the process may not have been possible for this family without the careful and sensitive support of the case officer.

The outcome

In summary, the service has made many adaptations to continue to meet service demand and service users' needs, including those with a higher level of dependency on the service, as seen in the individual example included here.

It has been well received by families when the service went out of its way to check in with them. This is perhaps because families were feeling more isolated than usual due to less contact and support from schools. One parent expressed, that having heard nothing from school, the LA and other services they were feeling "entirely forgotten about" and that this makes it "all the more lovely" to hear from IASS. Another explained how difficult they found a process, putting it like this, "I've literally sat in tears with this. It's so stressful.... Thank you so much, I honestly do not know what I would've done without you." Many others have written emails expressing their appreciation for our service, with one saying, "I am so grateful to you, I have felt really supported".

The service will continue the adaptations that have been made in response to the pandemic for as long as they are needed. Some adaptations will be incorporated into future service planning. There are certainly time efficiencies to working from home and to having virtual meetings and in some cases a CYP simply would not have felt able to attend a face to face meeting and contribute their views, whereas virtual meetings may be more accessible and a way to ensure that a CYP or parent's views are heard. The service plans to continue to routinely offer service users the option of having virtual meetings if this is their preference. Thus, there can be some long-term positives that can be taken from this difficult and challenging situation.

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