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## **Cheshire West and Chester: IASS adjustments to service delivery to meet the needs of families during Covid-19**

### **The context**

Cheshire West and Chester is a unitary authority located within the county of Cheshire. It was created during the local government changes of 2009. The authority is almost 917 square km in size, which in itself is a geographical challenge and consists of both rural communities and urban areas. There are both affluent as well as pockets of high deprivation within the area.

It has a higher number of CYP with plans when compared with its statistical neighbours and a high number of special schools all of which are currently full. The service is well established and is currently rated a 5 star service on the Local Offer.

### **The story**

During the COVID-19 pandemic the service has had to cope without members of the team for one reason or another. The team have had to adapt and adopt new ways of working, with demand for the service higher than ever - it has been a difficult time. The team has faced questions from parents/carers, and YP that they didn't know the answer to – due to the nature of the rapidly changing situation.

Longer hours have been worked and greater flexibility in terms of service availability to include weekends, evenings etc. In fact, the service has helped in ways it never knew possible.

The biggest change was in the way the service interacted with, and supported service users. This has included utilising online platforms for meetings, used the website for one-to-one webchats, and spending so much time on mobile phones the team are hearing their ringtones in their sleep! But the positive of all this has been that the service has helped so many more families by becoming more efficient with time due to not travelling around in between meetings.

The service's knowledge base has grown enormously – who'd have thought there would be a need to put together FAQ's on how to best support your child with social distancing when they have SEND. Another positive aspect of this situation is that all information leaflets have been updated and devised new ones to cover the questions COVID-19 has brought to light.

The team feel very honoured and proud to be the first port of call for parents at this time, helping them make sense of this strange new world. The team recognised the need to gather feedback at this point, as a lot of families have been, and still are struggling – so in conjunction with the Parent Carer Forum a survey was created and sent out to service users. The results were fed back to the LA, the CCG's, Health & Social Care. This survey will inform and shape how services are involved with families moving forward.



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The team have been involved with more appeals and tribunals, which have all been held virtually. This work is very comprehensive and complex, so a meticulous approach is vital, even more so when it's all being done remotely.

The service has also worked collaboratively with many partners including our CCG in putting together and launching an Autism Hub. The aims of the Autism Hub are to keep autistic children and adults and their families at the heart of everything it does, including exploring innovative ways of working in partnership to create a valuable service, value everyone equally, respecting their individual differences, and work proactively to meet the needs of autistic children and adults and their families and raise its profile across Cheshire West. It will be a welcoming space to visit and access services, such as post-diagnostic support, education advice, supported volunteering and internship opportunities and details about social and community group activities. While the Autism Hub will eventually be based at its own premises in Chester, it has had to launch virtually for the time being because of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The service will also have virtual online drop-in sessions on the Hub to give advice & guidance to families and YP accessing the support.

**Below is an example of one family the service supported remotely and the challenges to be overcome:**

Parent contacted IASS when she received a draft EHCP for her Year 6 child. The LA's recommendation was that the child attends the local mainstream high school. It had taken time for the EHCP to arrive in the post and the 15 day timeframe to respond to the LA was soon to expire. The parent had limited reading and writing ability and some processing difficulties. The parent had no internet access. The parent said from the outset that she felt her child needed to attend a special school from Year 7. A Team Around the Family was in place but the parent said she felt unsupported by the TAF lead.

The parent also expressed concern about her child's emotional well-being as he had fallen on a number of occasions and as a consequence was unwilling to leave the house, was having no exercise and was gaining weight. The parent said she felt very low about the situation and very alone.

In normal circumstances, the IAS officer would have arranged to meet up with the parent to explain the EHCP process and how to ensure the EHCP accurately reflected her child. A face-to-face meeting with the LA would have been arranged to discuss any amendments. As this was not possible due to Covid, the parent gave permission for the IAS officer to act on the parent's behalf. The IAS officer kept in close contact with the parent, the LA, school and TAF lead ensuring everyone was kept informed at every stage (almost on a daily basis). The IAS officer was able to speak to the EP to clarify some recommendations in her report. The LA agreed to make most of the amendments requested. The local high school felt they couldn't meet the child's needs and all of the LA's special schools were unable to offer a place. Rather than name the local high school on the EHCP, the LA has now agreed to consult with other schools of the parent's choosing. They are currently doing this and the schools' responses are awaited.

Although a high school has still not been named in the EHCP, the parent said "without you, I don't know what would have happened. You and school have been the only ones to have kept me informed. You have been a rock in these difficult times".

A member of the local church has also given the family their unused exercise bike which the child is looking forward to trying out.



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## The outcome

While the service continues to meet the needs of families, things have changed dramatically in ways never previously imagined. Service delivery has become more difficult but the team have relished the challenges that have come their way. From wondering how they're going to cope with the sheer volume of families contacting the service to being able to adapt and rise to those challenges extraordinarily well!

## Feedback

Here is some examples of the positive feedback we've received:

"SENDIASS Have  
been great!"

"You've been  
amazing"

"I don't know what I  
would have done without  
the IASS, they've helped  
me make sense of this  
situation"

"I didn't want my child with  
ASD to go back to school as I  
didn't feel it was safe, but  
IASS helped me see that it  
was best for him and me. They  
even put together a plan of  
action of how things would go  
and how my son's day would  
look"

### Contact details

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