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Brighton and Hove: IASS stepping up to strategic challenges around Covid-19

The context

Coronavirus has brought huge changes for parents, for children and young people, but also for all the services that work with them. Everyone has been trying to adapt to new ways of living and working, to keep up with changes in national guidance and cope in a confusing and stressful situation. This has opened up conversations and connections in a different way, with opportunities for exceptional strategic work. At the same time, there has been a real risk of SEND families being left out or left behind as schools closed, respite options reduced or disappeared and health priorities switched to Covid-19 response. Brighton & Hove and East Sussex SENDIASS services are both provided by Amaze, alongside other services for SEND families and a hosting arrangement for PaCC and ESPCF the parent carer forums (PCF) for these two areas. Amaze had existing links in West Sussex too where we run the Compass disability register and nationally as a member of the Disabled Children's Partnership (DCP). The Covid-19 emergency was a time to exploit that position to the full to keep the needs of CYP with SEND and their families at the forefront of the minds of decision makers at every level. SENDIASS worked as part of an Amaze effort that was characterised by:

- Responsive, fast and flexible working, involving all parts of Amaze
- Partnership work externally and sharing of knowledge and resources
- Offering co-ordination or leadership of regional efforts across Sussex, with all three PCFs

This has been a significant way in which we have strived to promote the educational needs of CYP in our area during the Covid-19 lockdown. The examples below illustrate some of the ways SENDIASS as part of a multi-agency group, has worked well to ensure that CYP have continued to receive education, health and social care for their needs.

The story

As the scale of the Covid-19 crisis became clear and lockdown and school closures loomed, SENDIASS developed Coronavirus FAQs made available on the Amaze website. We achieved a very fast response to get the first version of these out by 20 March for both Brighton & Hove and East Sussex. This involved liaison with both Local Authorities (LAs) and work with PaCC and ESPCF to check we had identified the right questions. We shared our content with national groups (Contact and CDC) and regionally. For example, West Sussex PCF and the parent support organisation Reaching Families used them as a basis for West Sussex content. Our other case study gives more detail about our CV19 information work but we mention it here because this early work set the pattern for further and more strategic work by Amaze and the central role of SENDIASS in this.

It was clear early on that LA communications teams had multiple demands and less flexibility than Amaze as a standalone organisation. We were able to support our statutory partners in getting information and comms out to families promptly while it took time for other resources to emerge. For example, the Brighton Schools Wellbeing Service moved swiftly to identify useful resources for mental wellbeing but had no immediate route to share this externally. We were able to develop an online guide on CYP emotional health and wellbeing based on their research and ours <https://amazesussex.org.uk/looking-after-your-familys-wellbeing-during-lock-down/> Similarly we have

Council for Disabled Children, National Children's Bureau, 23 Mentmore Terrace, London E8 3DQ
E-mail: cdc@ncb.org.uk Web: <https://councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk>



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shared LA statements and letters through our news function and active social media e.g.

https://amazesussex.org.uk/amaze_news/brighton-hove-council-thank-you-letter-to-send-families/
and https://amazesussex.org.uk/amaze_news/brighton-hove-and-east-sussex-councils-reach-out-to-parent-carers-around-temporary-changes-to-send-law/

The queries and concerns coming in to the SENDIASS helpline helped identify priority issues for PaCC and ESPCF to raise, confirming concerns identified by their active members. Access to food and shopping was an early worry and Amaze worked with PaCC to get BHCC to see this need and provide a letter to families on the Brighton & Hove Compass identifying them as needing priority accessing supermarkets. This expanded to cover then parking and prescriptions. Another issue that emerged was access to the outdoors during lockdown. SENDIASS spotted legal advice about exceptions to the once a day, on foot and only for an hour rules. The Amaze CEO then worked with the three PCFs in Sussex to draw up a letter to Sussex Police used to brief all their staff, alongside a version for parents to carry with them

https://amazesussex.org.uk/amaze_news/exercise-and-your-child-with-send-during-lock-down/

In April, Amaze SENDIASS led on writing a COVID 19 Parent Carer Survey developed with both PCFs and collaboration from BHCC and ESCC. This was focussed on finding out what school offers looked like in practice for children with SEND but incorporated other issues too including the mental health impact of lockdown. The report and key findings https://amazesussex.org.uk/amaze_news/brighton-hove-parent-carers-experiences-of-covid-19/ were shared with national organisations and used in local influencing work, including writing to all Sussex-wide MPs together with both PCFs and Reaching Families. The Disabled Children's Partnership national survey followed not long after ours, but we supported and shared this survey too and were a signatory to the subsequent letter to the minister Vicky Ford at the end of May. In June we ran two mini polls, again inspired by SENDIASS casework and in partnership with both PCFs, about Risk Assessments and the offer or not of places in school for CYP with EHCPs. We used these to feed back to both LAs where this revealed poor practice. As a follow up we produced risk assessment factsheets with ESPCF and PaCC/BHCC, again sharing these across Sussex and beyond.

An important feature throughout the CV19 period has been frequent meetings with our LA partners alongside each PCF. The Amaze CEO or Deputy CEO have taken the lead on these, whilst bringing to the table questions, issues and supportive activity from SENDIASS. This has freed up SENDIASS capacity to focus on information resources, advice work and support for families. It has also made it possible to maintain close links with CVS partners, for example weekly attendance (now moved to fortnightly) at CVS-Alliance/Reps meetings in both East Sussex and Brighton & Hove. At all these meetings we are taking evidence from surveys and what we hear on the ground via service delivery to inform discussion and to suggest solutions. One practical example of this has been in shaping LA comms to families providing reassurance around easements to SEND legal rights.

Amaze has also worked in liaison with both CCGs and local NHS services, e.g. on accessibility issues with CV19 testing, access to therapies and communications to families about changes to local services. And we have contributed to a solutions-based letter co-written by Amaze and the PCF (in both East Sussex and Brighton & Hove) which has been sent to all Heads and SENCOs outlining what families of CYP with SEND have said they would like and need. This was well-received and PaCC are sending a second letter in Brighton & Hove to all Heads/Sencos outlining further suggestions from parents about coming Summer holidays and preparing for September, as ever drawing on SENDIASS knowledge.



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It is not the role of SENDIASS to carry out more political influencing work, but the intelligence we get from IASS work and the expertise we hold about SEN law, supports Amaze and the PCFs to do so more effectively. When the notice to modify Section 42 was applied, shifting a duty to provide to “reasonable endeavours” this enabled Amaze to write to all Sussex-wide MPs in an informed way. More recently, Amaze was asked to attend a DCP meeting with Minister Vicky Ford to feed in views on the ground. Briefed by SENDIASS, the Amaze CEO could input key points supporting DCP survey findings. She also input to the follow up letter to Vicky Ford.

The outcome

This high level of strategic and influencing work has had immediate practical outcomes for families. It has kept SEND high on the local agenda in Brighton & Hove and East Sussex and made sure the voice of parents (and CYP) has been central to local thinking and action. In the longer term, our work during this time has forged closer relationships and mutual appreciation with statutory partners. We have helped raise the profile of both PCFs, particularly ESPCF which is quite new and has had to take shape in unusual circumstances. Amaze has had a national impact and this reflects well on the perception of SENDIASS locally. We expect further positive outcomes over time.

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