

Bexley: Children & Young People with SEND and their families at the heart of what we do

Since the Children and Families Act (CFA) 2014 was first introduced, Bexley local authority had commissioned Kent County Council to provide an IAS service on their behalf. The authority is very grateful to colleagues in Kent who have supported families and young people in Bexley since 2014, but in 2019 is now taking important steps to ensure Bexley has its own local statutory IAS service that can meet the needs of the local community.

The decision made to review the IAS service offer for Bexley had been informed and supported by the Information Advice and Support (IAS) programme, Bexley's own senior leadership team and by listening to the many views of those effected by SEND, including the local Parent Carer Forum, Bexley Voice.

The challenge

The key challenge has been the historical decision made to locate the Bexley IAS service within the Kent IAS service offer, which has often confused parents and made the service less accessible. Although the Kent IAS service was informed on many complex issues, they didn't necessarily have the local knowledge about local provision. This led to some families contacting alternative IAS services in the immediate neighbouring boroughs for support, or seeking clarity through the local Parent Carer Forum, Bexley Voice.

Because of these challenges, Bexley soon recognised that an IAS service located in Kent was not the best solution for Bexley's families and young people and there should be a 'local service for local people'. That service would need to have good local knowledge and understanding and could compliment the local authority plans for early intervention and support.

Since 2014, Bexley have worked very hard to implement and embed the significant SEND reforms in light of the CFA 2014. This is whilst managing some significant internal staff changes across its SEN and Early Intervention services. However, the staffing situation in Bexley has improved since 2014, where now there is a passionate and skilled team who have the support of an experienced leadership team. The focus moving forward is being placed on improving the quality of all SEND services across the authority.

Initial impact of IAS programme funding

Initial funding awarded through the IAS programme supported Bexley with consultation and strategic planning, which included a thorough review of its service offer looking at the strengths and weaknesses. This then informed a new service specification and operational plan for the creation of a new IAS service designed for Bexley. This work completed under the guidance and support of the senior leadership team and involved the Parent Carer Forum, Bexley Voice.

Bexley also consulted and devised an options paper to consider different delivery models for a new IAS service. That included exploring how Bexley might work with neighbouring boroughs to support families who live, work or have children schooled in other neighbouring boroughs. It also aimed to take into

account the request from families and young people for an all year round services and drop in sessions outside of core office hours, ensuring the offer is as flexible as possible to those that request support.

Impact to service beneficiaries

Bexley are in the planning stages to set up a new local IAS service designed and developed in partnership with service beneficiaries. Early feedback from local families reiterate how pleased they are about Bexley's consultation and engagement and the decision to offer a 'local service for local people'. The local authority itself has seen the value and benefits of effective engagement of local parents, young people and key partners in service planning. In doing so, Bexley intend to seek to offer a service that delivers above and beyond the new minimum standards and can offer an enhanced advocacy support service to families who cannot or do not feel confident speaking for themselves.

Lessons learnt

The immediate key lesson learnt is certainly that a commissioned IAS service that sits in another borough is not always the best solution. 'Connectivity' is key to service success and when families don't receive the service they expect they become disengaged. Something Bexley want to now avoid.

Funding to support Bexley with consultation and strategic planning has also increased local authority awareness, value and importance of having a local impartial IAS service. Time dedicated to developing new relationships with the local Parent Carer Forum and others stakeholders has been beneficial to the process long term.

How is the approach being sustained?

The local authority and the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) have already committed to continued resource and are dedicated to ensure the IAS Service becomes an integral part of the Local Offer, and an integral part of their work with children and young people with SEND and their families. In doing so building on person centred planning, co-production with families and embedding a relationship based approach across its new service offer.

Bexley will use its local SEND Improvement Board to monitor the implementation of the new IAS service and remains absolutely committed to working effectively with and for local families in the years ahead. This will include monitoring, supporting, challenging and evaluating progress being made to ensure its offer to children, parents and young people is the best it can be.

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