

## Bolton: Moving with the times – demonstrating that you cannot assume you know how the LA views your IAS Service if you don't ask!

The Metropolitan Borough of Bolton is part of Greater Manchester with a population of almost 295,000 39% which live in the highest level of deprivation in England<sup>1</sup>. There are approximately 56,000 children aged 0-19. Almost 40% of their 2000+ education, health and care ( EHC ) plans are placed in special schools. It has very low numbers of appeals to First-tier Tribunal (Special Educational Needs and Disability).

Bolton IAS Service provides impartial information, advice and support to families of children and young people themselves, who have SEND, between the ages of 0 to 25 years. It supports on average in excess of 1500 families per year as face-to-face casework, with between an additional 500-1000 accessing other forms of support from the service.

### The challenge

The introduction of the SEND reforms in 2014, along with all the additional duties this brought about almost doubled service user rates in less than a year. At the same time, the IAS Service contract was being put out to tender and although Bolton IAS (SEND) was successful in its bid to retain being the IAS Service provider, it suffered a core funding loss of £30,000. The reduction in funding required a full time post to be cut despite the expectations on the IAS Service being increased along with an expansion in the sectors to be included under the reforms and consequently an increase in the volume of workload.

It was clearly evident that the excellent service level provided previously was not sustainable. Whilst understanding the Government and local authority (LA) needed a fully compliant service and not necessarily an excellent one, the service was determined not to drop its own high standards at this point. Having held the service contract since Parent Partnerships were at their inception, it was necessary to find a way round this dilemma to help maintain the high quality profile the service had previously established.

The IAS Service was also acutely aware that its work with young people was almost non-existent. In addition to the high volume of workload already being faced, it was essential to find time to consult, plan for and deliver a high quality service for young people too.

### Initial impact of IAS programme funding

The additional funding from the Information Advice and Support (IAS) programme from the strategic planning phase has been a godsend. It has allowed capacity to be built by relieving the Programme Manager of her caseload as well as some of the daily duties in generally running the service. This allowed time and thought to be invested towards putting together a plan of action to address the previously mentioned issues. The Programme Manager was able to complete a fully comprehensive service review, looking at what the service did well and what it needed to be better at and then exploring possible ways of achieving this.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.boltonccg.nhs.uk/media/3822/annual-equality-data-publication-final-with-appendix.pdf>

On the back of the service review there was enough funding left to employ 2 part-time members of staff and increase their hours to allow a consultation exercise with young people to help gain a better idea of what meaningful support for them would look like. Finally there was still funding left to turn this into a work plan.

The funding provided each member of staff had an opportunity to reflect on their current practice and situation, and to discuss as a team the new visions for the service.

## Impact to service beneficiaries

The IAS Service review shone a light on some fantastic examples of achievement. It helped the service recognise it had some really strong partnerships in Bolton with other agencies. In particular the work with Bolton Parent Carer forum was, and still is, a beacon of good practice for co production and sharing the same passion to equip parents and carers with knowledge to enable them to make informed decisions for their children and young people.

The IAS Service review that the Programme Manager completed was, however, highly criticised by the LA commissioners as they felt the Programme Manager had been too hard on herself and the service! They sent pages of amendments for the final report that was provided to IAS programme manager, as they strongly believed in the IAS Service what it does, and could see success where the Programme Manager had perhaps only seen room for improvement. The review showed the service that others view it as a crucial cog in the SEND wheel in Bolton, even if sometimes the service staff couldn't see this for themselves.

## Lessons learnt

The IAS Programme Manager learned that she is officially not superwoman! It is a small team for quite a disproportionate number of families. In previous years the service had always been able to respond to queries on the same day. It surprised the Programme Manager when contacting other IAS Service providers to be told that someone would come back to them within a week. The Programme Manager wondered how this even worked for families having such a long wait. However, the average "contact" at Bolton IAS (including phone calls, walk ins, website enquiries, emails and meetings), on a tried and tested day, is between 70-130 people. If this happens to be on a day when there was only one member of staff in the office a same day response wasn't a realistic expectation. The service revised some of its in house standards to accommodate this new reality. For example all website enquiries are now responded to within 24 hours; phone calls are assessed on urgency levels, and sometimes directed back to the website for certain information/ forms. All families are informed that a minimum of a weeks notice is needed to attend planned meetings, and urgent meetings (less than a weeks notice), will be facilitated as far as possible.

The IAS Service now believes it has some amazing and exciting things ahead for implementing the operational plans from the review because it knows the funding is in place to be able to do it. It is creating a great bespoke package of support for young people, and some new workshops for parents and carers that have been co-produced with the parent carer forum. The IAS Service now is feeling confident and reassured at this that it will be successful in delivering this and everyone is ready and raring to go!

## How is the approach being sustained?

It isn't true to say that the IAS Service could carry on doing what it is proposing to do without the additional funding. The IAS Service was stretched to the absolute bare bones prior to the funding being provided by CDC. However, the hope is that the planned work will be successful, and by working with the local commissioners who are offering support to the service, they will recognise the benefits of having this level of service in place, and will help the service develop business continuity plans to sustain it.

In essence though - it's all work that needs to be staffed. It is not something a volunteer could be expected to do unless being paired with a paid worker, as it will be mostly unsociable hours (out of office), and requires it to be consistent people every single week. Staff need to be paid and this needs to come from somewhere. I hope the people with the purse strings to hand see how important this is and want to continue with it as much as IAS Service do once this additional funding through the IAS programme has ceased.

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— BOLTON IAS-SEND —



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