

Cambridgeshire: Increased confidence in meeting service users' needs and the minimum standards

Cambridgeshire SENDIAS Service covers the whole of the county which consists of a mixture of urban and rural areas and a diverse population with varied occupations, nationalities and incomes. The south of the county has various research and high tech industries as well as the famous Cambridge University. The north, and other areas of the county, have significant problems resulting in it being one of the Government's 12 Social Mobility and Opportunity Areas.

The service is valued by parents, the local parent carer forum and the local authority (LA). In evaluations parents rated it 6% higher than the national average for the helpfulness of the information, advice and support provided and 6% higher than the national average for its neutrality.

The challenge

The service's principle aim is to provide information, advice and support to parents, CYP who contact the service. In addition to this it provides information and advice sessions to groups of parents to increase service reach and as a more efficient way delivering an empowerment model than one to one work. Although the requirements on the service increased in 2014 due to the broader remit coupled with the increase in demand, no additional funding accompanied this and later that year previously agreed funding that had been provided to increase staffing levels to help meet rising demand prior to 2014 was removed. Since 2014 the rise in demand has continued and still with no increase in funding.

The services biggest area of weakness is in respect of its lack of work with CYP, as well as being unable to meet parental need for face-to-face support requiring cases to be triaged in order to prioritise and restrict face-to-face support only to those parents with the highest levels of need.

Despite this a conscious decision was made to begin work with YP with SEND by co-producing a leaflet setting out what the service offers to them. The resulting YP leaflet was sent out to settings to publicise the services offer to YP. The service also met with groups of YP to discuss the type of support they would like and how they would like this provided. Unfortunately it has not been possible to build on these pieces of work or begin working with children.

Initial impact of IAS programme funding

The IAS programme funding provided through CDC has enabled the recruitment of additional staff to help meet rising demand alongside freeing up manager time to carry out a comprehensive review of the service against the new Minimum Standards than was previously possible. It has also facilitated a review of working practice which has enabled the introduction of a more efficient way of working and providing a more timely response to people who contact the service.

The service plan developed as part of the funding sets out how areas of non-compliance will be addressed with the aid of the new Development Officer post which the IAS programme funding finances.

The IASP has also allowed staff to begin to access training and facilitated the future provision of training needed to address their training needs. These needs have arisen from the wider remit of IAS Service including changes in legislation. It has allowed all staff to successfully complete all levels of the IPSEA/IASSN legal training as required by the new Minimum Standards. Where possible this training has been provided as part of an initiative by the region as it was recognised this would be more cost effective as well as allowing some services' staff to access it who would not otherwise have been able to.

Another benefit of the programme that should not be overlooked or undervalued, has been a much needed boost to staff morale. They correctly feel the programme demonstrates recognition of the pressure services in general are under and consequently the toll it may have taken on staff. Staff feedback confirms this and they consider the additional funding to be an attempt to address this as well as supporting them to meet the new Minimum Standards and explore more efficient ways of working.

Impact to service beneficiaries

The service, as part of its work to meet the Minimum Standards, has begun to train parent volunteers to support other parents with appeals to the First Tier Tribunal (SEND). The volume of work needed can be very intensive requiring in some cases levels of support amounting to several days. It was recognised that without a significant increase in the number of staff the only way this need could be met was through recruiting and training volunteers with the appropriate skills and attitudes with SENDIASS acting as an expert adviser when needed.

The programme has allowed the service to provide EHCP Support filling the gap left by IS. This initiative again relies on parent volunteers to support the straightforward cases with the service's EHCP Supporter acting as a coordinator, providing a source of expert advice and handling the more complex cases.

Lessons learnt

One lesson learnt is that strategic leads for those areas that are required to joint fund the service, while recognising the benefits to CYP and parents of doing so, are very mindful of their budgets and are keen to look at alternatives to financial support. This is going to be an interesting area to explore in 19/20.

Another lesson learnt is that new ways of working are required to successfully engage with CYP. While telephone support will sometimes be required methods like texting are as important if not more so to YP. The service needs to use methods like this and where possible use them as efficiently as possible i.e. via specialist software on computer rather than typing direct onto a phone.

How is the approach being sustained?

The programme has enabled positive conversations with the LA regarding additional funding to stop further cuts to the service at a time when IASP money is available to help it meet its requirements under the Minimum Standards.

Discussions have started with Health about the requirement for them to jointly commission the IAS Service with the LA. It is hoped that whatever the agreement is over their contribution, it will enable a better and more compliant service to be made available and maintained.

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