

## Cheshire East: Getting to knowing ourselves well and using our evidence to build an IAS Service team that fulfils its statutory obligations

Cheshire East is a unitary authority area, with borough status, in the county of Cheshire. As a borough it presents many challenges; it covers almost 450 square miles and includes both urban and rural communities; there are a mixture of economies with areas of high employment and affluence whilst also areas of significant deprivation and unemployment. There are approximately 79,423 children and young people under 19 in Cheshire East, which is 21% of the population. Cheshire East's Joint Strategic Needs Assessment for children and young people with SEND, estimated that we should expect around 8,252 children and young people aged between 5 and 18 in CE to have a special educational need. The JSNA for 2017-18 showed that 3,566 children and young people in CE were receiving SEN support, and 1,891 have EHCPs and 40% attend special schools.

The IAS team in Cheshire East is well established; over time it has developed its offer to children, parents and young people. The team offer benefitted from additional funding provided through the IS Programme. This funding was essential in supporting the work transferring statements to EHCPs and in enabling Cheshire East Officers to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills in areas of work such as appeals, tribunals, mediation and disagreement resolution. (Funding continues to support Officers with this.) Cheshire East's Information, Advice and Support (CEIAS) team provide support and information to young people and their families at any stage in their journey through education and into adulthood; empowering them to make informed choices and decisions.

### The challenge

In March 2018 a joint local area SEND inspection took place, as a result of which CE now has a Written Statement of Action to address areas of weakness. Each of these factors has led to increased demand on the IAS team from a range of sources including: parents who are concerned about the quality/timeliness of EHCPs, working groups wanting to ensure that the team's knowledge is drawn upon to develop their systems and processes etc.

Officers spend a large proportion of time helping parents, CYP to understand paperwork prior to, during and after the application for a EHC Assessment has been made; supporting them to share their views in a way that is adapted and relevant to each individual. The complexity of the EHC Assessment process and the reality for families to "tell their story once" is more complex than anticipated; the team are proactive in supporting developments of simplified systems and communication around this to reduce anxieties and increase effectiveness and efficiency.

The service receives a high number of repeat requests for attendance at meetings from specific parents. The main reasons are:

- lack of confidence so they want someone to give them support so they feel more confident in addressing issues with professionals
- they want the Officer to use their "legal" knowledge to influence decisions/actions
- they have become used to support in all meetings and want their "entitlement" to support

Attendance at such meetings may not be possible due to too short a notice and unavailability of Officers. At the same time Officers are required to use their professional judgement to determine when attendance is necessary. This has resulted in a small group of parents feeling disappointed and they have shared that dissatisfaction with the parent carer forum and in their responses to parental surveys. This high demand means that the majority of the work completed by IAS Officers is reactionary, preventing the proactive work

which could be done to meet the needs of greater numbers of parents and YP; as well as reducing opportunities to engage with specific members of the community currently not engaging with IAS.

## Initial impact of IAS programme funding

The additional funding received over 2018/19 has given the manager of IASS in Cheshire East an opportunity to drill down into what is delivered and to whom; how it is delivered and most importantly, any gaps in delivery.

It has also allowed for scrutiny of the different ways in which Officers pick up and carry out work. The available evidence including data and parental feedback has been explored, refined and enhanced as it was incomplete and recording was inconsistent. Having more robust evidence has given weight to discussions and has allowed some challenging questions to be asked. It has also informed development of internal processes.

## Impact to service beneficiaries

The planning which has taken place over this year has supported development of relationships with commissioners and strategic leads. They are better informed of the remit and offer of the team and are supporting CEIASS' plans going forward as well as including CEIASS within their own strategic plans. The focus on delivery and outcomes has identified the need for wider engagement with CE residents in their communities. This need has become part of the strategic focus for the team; incorporating time for the manager and staff to identify key contacts, to have relevant conversations, to forge hitherto unexplored links; thus increasing the opportunities for engagement with a wider group of parents, agencies and LA officers within local community hubs.

## Lessons learnt

A key lesson learned is the requirement to have a strong evidence base that reflects all elements of service delivery with the capability of being drilled down and analysed to reveal and inform the necessary changes required within the service. This ensures that what's working and what's needed can be built on rather than acting on what is perceived to work or because the Officers are comfortable doing certain things without any consideration to impact or benefit.

This evidence base is starting to help CEIASS address any negative responses from families that have traditionally been used to the Officers planning with them and then accompanying them to every meeting. This will be a long journey and is certainly one which is challenging but is necessary in order to meet the needs of the changing communities and the needs of a wider group of parents and YP.

## How is the approach being sustained?

There has been a significant change in CE with regards to strategic planning of IASS work which will be sustained going forward; part of this being that an in-depth scrutiny of IASS work and outcomes will be embedded in practice for the future to ensure; value for money; equity of service/delivery, and that the service is proactive in meeting the changing needs of CE CYP in their local context.

Links with strategic leads and commissioners are now established and part of planning for the team. In addition Governance arrangements are being re-viewed and enhanced to support the service going forward.

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