



Cheshire West and Chester: Strategically Developing a Sustainable Service to Meet Local Need

Cheshire West and Chester is a unitary authority located within the county of Cheshire. It was created during the local government changes of 2009. The authority is almost 917 square km in size, which in itself is a geographical challenge and consists of both rural communities and urban areas. There are both affluent as well as pockets of high deprivation within the area.

It has a higher number of CYP with plans when compared with its statistical neighbours and a high number of special schools all of which are currently full. The IAS Service aims to ensure parents/carers, CYP are fully informed to enable them to play an active and knowledgeable role in their child's or their own education. The service is well established and is currently rated a 5 star service on the Local Offer.

The challenge

Maintaining capacity to meet the demand for casework has been a challenge for the service. The numbers of families contacting the service and complexity of the casework has increased over the years. It has been vital to ensure temporary staff on fixed term contracts remain employed in the service. This hasn't been easy particularly at a time when councils have shrinking budgets.

Reaching young people directly has also been a difficulty that required addressing.

Reaching more parents who might not currently engage with the service is a challenge and exploring ways of working in partnership with other parent organisations for example providing drop-in sessions to efficiently improve service reach across a large geographical area. The funding has enabled this work to begin and will be developed further over the next year.

Going forward creating a new manager role will support opportunities for change within the IAS service.

Initial impact of IAS programme funding

Government funding provided by the IS programme, IAS programme alongside legal training provided by IPSEA through the Information Advice and Support Network (IASSN) has been of huge benefit to the service and the team is now made up of legally trained, highly knowledgeable, skilled staff. The LA has supported the service with additional funding from the SEND Reforms Grant. Continuity of staffing has meant that families have received high quality support and the manager has been able to develop the future strategy for the service.

Financial support has enabled a fully costed two year plan to be developed thus providing a real opportunity to raise the profile of the service and allowing the manager the time to develop local partner relationships.

The IAS Service Manager has been able to reflect on the achievements of the service and consider future developments. This has included the commencement of discussions with commissioners about longer term funding to provide a sustainable service that meets both local need and the national minimum standards.

There has been time to consider future goals and what we might be able to achieve in year 2 by researching practice in other areas and then applying lessons learnt. There has not been any capacity for this previously.

The IAS Service Manager of the service has been able to participate in local strategic groups. This has included the development of Early Year's descriptors for the SEND continuum of need. IASS input into this area of work has meant the original paperwork associated with this, has now been changed to ensure the voice of parents' not just professionals is included.

The IAS Service Manager is also working on a strategic piece of work to explore the views of YP who have already transferred to college about their transition experience. It is intended for the report to influence future transition planning for YP.

Impact to service beneficiaries

The IAS Service Manager has supported the PCF through training to understand what being a parental representative means and to help them develop their constitution and policies and their surveys. The manager was able to lead the work with PCF and partners to produce the Children Trust's Co-production strategy and accompanying self-evaluation tool. There has been time to reflect on how the service can influence local policy and practice going forward and to ensure a wider representation of parent views is available for consideration by the LA and their partners' in their policies and practice.

The Advisory group for the service has been relaunched; with a very healthy representation from parents, schools, voluntary sector, health, staff and volunteer members of the team and other LA staff. The manager was able to commit sufficient time to enable this group to co-produce the 2 year action plan. It has resulted in the CCG having a better understanding of the service and an agreement to consider how the service can be jointly commissioned.

The governance of this group will be extremely important going forward in relation to improving local policy and practice and raising the profile of the service.

The additional capacity in the team has enabled direct work with CYP to progress and a successful pilot in a school was delivered to see how the service could support year 9 students taking part in their Annual Reviews and consequently future planning. Further development of this pilot is included in the 2 year plan.

Work is progressing with a group of YP with SEND called Clever Champions to develop how they can participate individually and how the group can support and influence the SEND strategy.

Lessons learnt

Increasing the capacity of the IAS service to develop both an internal and external strategic approach, keeping skilled staff, raising the profile of the IAS service and developing external relationships have proved the most valuable outcomes from receiving the funding.

The IAS service has an action plan which has been co-produced with partners so has full commitment from to support the activities in the plan and shared responsibility for goals to be achieved.

Co-producing the plan with the Advisory Group has taken time but has enabled members to understand what the IAS service currently delivers and the limitations of what is achievable with the current arrangements. Activities and developments included in the plan are based on the knowledge and understanding of the wider representation of the Advisory Group that are required to meet local need.

How is the approach being sustained?

How the Advisory group feed into the SEND SG will be critical in influencing future policy and practice. This is a key way in which service users alongside the PCF can have their voice heard. It may help if the chair of the group is a parent and they have their own place at SEND SG alongside the IASS manager and PCF chair and vice chair.

The CCG will be involved in setting KPIs for the IAS service and this should support the joint commissioning of the IAS service.

The LA and the CCGs will need to hear about the work of the IAS service and the outcomes for both families and services. It will be important to report annually to the SEND SG.

Ultimately the 2 year plan gives opportunities to deliver activities and review and evaluate the IAS service to support service user needs and long term sustainability.

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