

## Coventry: Developing a comprehensive IAS Service offer now and in the future

The population of Coventry is estimated to be about 360,000 of which approximately 138,000 fall within the 0-25 age group. There are 2,084 education, health and care (EHC) plan with over 50% of these for pupils placed in special schools.

Coventry Information Advice and Support (IAS) Service has been in operation since September 2014, building on the strong foundations laid by its previous Parent Partnership Service. The aim of the IAS Service is to provide impartial and confidential information advice and support to children and young people (CYP) with SEND and their parents/carers, empowering them to be confident in playing their role in achieving the best possible outcomes for CYP in Coventry.

This is delivered via a wide range of opportunities for individual engagement including face-to-face, telephone and/or email support throughout the year, as well as providing parent/carer support groups/information sessions and CYP's workshops. These cover a wide variety of topics across education, health and care sectors, and support around school exclusions.

### The challenge

Most of the barriers faced by the service has been the strategic links with the local authority (LA) and Health commissioners. At the point of the SEND Reforms in 2014, the strategic focus was to establish an IAS Service following the same model as its predecessor (Parent Partnership Service) without really identifying the greater breadth of service user it was now identified to deliver to. In the ensuing time period between 2014 and 2018, referrals to the IAS Service rose by 61.5%. Whilst additional staffing had been possible through a range of external funding opportunities to meet this growing demand, the service is still not jointly commissioned i.e. by the LA and Health.

As a self-referral service for CYP and parents/carers, it is essential the existence of the service is known and understood as far and wide as possible including making sure other services and organisations are aware and promoting it to their clients and service user, to maximize coverage. Whilst gratifying in receiving service user feedback that states they found the support offered hugely beneficial, the phrase "I wish I'd known about you sooner" is telling.

### Initial impact of IAS programme funding

During 2018/19, funding provided by the IAS programme enabled the IAS Service Manager to allocate time to take a much more focused look at longer term aims of the service. With the increased numbers of referrals received (25% increase in 2017/18 alone), day-to-day "fire-fighting" was making it more difficult to look at the bigger picture without reducing the quality of the service offered to service users.

By delegating some of the managers daily responsibilities to other staff, time was freed up to work through the self-review and the development plan with strategic partners, including members of the steering group, Parent Carer Frum etc.

This enabled a longer-term view of what the service moving forward could look like rather than accommodating short term “fixes”. The strengths of the IAS Service, which were often lost in the day-day running, are more clearly understood and defined and these form the foundations for how the identified areas needing improvement can be addressed.

This has also been supported by becoming more involved in attending service user events and an increased strategic role in attending the local area’s SEND Board,

## Impact to service beneficiaries

By looking at some of the areas of IAS Service delivery which may have been under-developed or not fully used particularly identified through the self-review against the new minimum standards, has given more focus to ensuring the priorities are actioned. For the service itself, focusing on developing stronger connections with other services within the community, specifically new early help family hubs, is helping to increase knowledge and participation of service users in provision in their local area. This is something the service is hoping to replicate with the likes of health partners, as this is an area where strategic links are not as strong.

The identification of the need for more diverse ways of engaging with CYP has led to a number of exciting developments, both for young people themselves to be involved and, subsequently, recognition of the service amongst other partners enhancing the status of the service particularly with the LA. The development of the “AmbaSENDors” (title is currently under review with young people!), which will enable CYP to have real involvement in strategic planning both within the IAS Service and the local areas SEND Board, is an excellent example of how service involvement in promoting the voice of CYP can offer real benefits, and is one of the focal points of the service’s plan over the next 2 years and hopefully beyond.

It has also given a greater focus to the governance of the IAS Service, enabling strategic leads, steering group etc to scrutinize the effectiveness of the service. It has also helped the regional IAS Service Network group in the West Midlands to consider how IAS Services can work more collaboratively to provide consistency across borders with regards to the range of services that is on offer.

## Lessons learnt

The biggest impact has arisen from being able to prioritise strategic work, in the face of an increasing demand to focus on day-to-day needs (casework) which has occurred over the past couple of years. To some extent, this has been made manageable by the IS/IAS programme, although staff members trying to cover some of the manager’s responsibilities has also required additional managerial time - recruitment to this rather unique skill set is always challenging, especially in order to maintain a high-quality service (induction, training etc). This process took almost 4 months to complete and other ways of increasing capacity may need to be considered in the future.

2 clear messages emerged during the review:

Firstly, the importance of identifying and understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the service. Although the review revealed no surprises it was reassuring to know that service users find the IAS Service offer very comprehensive.

Secondly the biggest lesson over 2018/19 is that it remains a high priority need for more strategic links to be forged, and that whilst service user satisfaction remains high, this could be threatened without the buy-in of those strategic decision makers. This remains a focus of service development, which until recently was directed (with positive results) at the service user themselves.

## How is the approach being sustained?

The strategic business planning will be continued to be supported by the Governance arrangements through the steering group as well as the links that have already been developed through the LA and SEND Board. These arrangements will also need to be supported through a service level agreement with joint commissioning which will further strengthen the partnership working, particularly with regards to arrangements around IAS for the areas of Health and Social Care. This is part of the development plan for 2019/20, alongside focusing on the areas of the new minimum standards that are still under-developed. By identifying these requirements, it should ensure efficient and effective use of the available resources. This will enable the long-term offer of the service to remain flexible, varied and of consistent high quality to meet service user need.

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