



Cumbria: Reviewing and planning service improvements

Cumbria is predominantly a rural county and home to some of England's highest mountains and biggest lakes. Cumbria as a region presents many challenges. It has areas of significant deprivation and a complicated mixed economy of rural and urban areas. The size of Cumbria also means that the SENDIAS service faces significant challenges whilst supporting disabled children and young people, those with SEN, and their parents. The IAS service in Cumbria is currently led by a part time service manager and supported by five part-time co-ordinators. Team members each work directly with parents, carers, children and young people including parents of children of a few months old through to young adult in their early 20s.

The challenge

The IAS Service's overarching aim is to provide good quality independent information, advice and support to parents, children, and young people who contact the service directly. This also includes supporting home educated children and those who have been adopted and/or fostered as well as other vulnerable groups in the community. The IAS service reaches its population through a range of channels, including a designated website, contacts with schools, children's centres, nurseries, FE colleges, the voluntary sector and support groups, as well as the Parent Carer Forum.

Since the Children and Families Act (2014) was introduced, the IAS service has experienced a rise in the demand for support including an increase in the number of complex cases. For example, the service has seen an increase in work to support families where a child is unable to attend school due to anxiety or health reasons, or where a child or young person has been permanently excluded. In both cases, the schools are often not as supportive as they should be, with zero tolerance policies cited as a contributing factor to a rise in case work.

Alongside this, the IAS service has experienced the impact of funding cuts to local services and school budgets. Funding restrictions to the IAS service itself have resulted in a reduction in staffing levels, which, in turn, has had an impact on the level of support it can offer across Cumbria.

Initial impact of IAS programme funding

During 2018/19, funding provided by the IAS programme has helped the service manager to allocate time to review the current IAS service offer, and develop a comprehensive two year operational plan to seek service improvements. Funding has also helped to fund the additional time of IAS service co-ordinators so as to be able to meet the rise in requests for service support.

IAS programme funding has helped the service manager to implement and support a new project to help build a better service offer to post 16 providers. This has resulted in healthy new relationships with these providers and improved how the IAS service engages and supports young people in general.

IAS programme funding has also helped the manager to manage co-ordinators more effectively, by offering more supervision time and face-to-face sessions. This has supported staff to better manage complex issues and overcome barriers to service provision.

Impact to service beneficiaries

During 2018/19, funding provided by the IAS programme has been used to review the current IAS service offer and develop a two year development plan from April 2019. This work, led by the service manager but conducted with the co-ordinators and key stakeholders across Cumbria, has identified strengths and weaknesses in the current service offer, and set out priority areas for the service manager to take forward in order to deliver an enhanced service offer in line with the new Minimum Standards.

During 2018/19, funding has enabled the co-ordinators to offer a greater number of young people support with their EHCP annual review, or help to secure an education placement of their choice. One well-versed co-ordinator was invited to the University of Cumbria to discuss her case work with students participating in a Health and Social Care course. Here she was able to promote the IAS service offer and share her own expertise and experience in working with families and young people. The co-ordinator has also shared good practice with several groups of local health professionals and this has served to improve links across the country.

Lessons learnt

During 2018/19, the review of the SENDIAS service has identified a need to better understand how technology can be used to improve our communications, our reach and our service offer to children, parents and young people across the county. We have learnt that it may not be easy to engage the strategic leads and commissioners to enable joint commissioning of the service, and we will be seeking support and guidance from the IAS programme to achieve that statutory requirement in the Minimum Standards.

How is the approach being sustained?

The strategic planning requirement under the IAS programme has helped to raise awareness of the IAS service within the local authority, particularly with strategic leads and commissioners. Our planning intentions in our two year operational plan include targeted work to build on these new strategic relationships, which in time will lead to a more robust governance structure to steer the direction of the IAS service as it seeks overall service improvements. In so doing, the IAS service will continue to improve its relationship with the Parent Carer Forum so as to ensure they are part of the service journey ahead and able to constructively challenge the new service plan put in place from April 2019 onward.

Contact details

Helen Leader

IAS Service Manager

Helen.leader@cumbria.gov.uk

<https://www.cumbria.gov.uk/childrensservices/schoolsandlearning/ils/parentpartnership/>