

Devon: Delivering Information Advice and Support across a large rural county

Devon as a local authority covers a large rural county in southwest England, which is best known for its sunshine, beaches and beautiful moorland landscapes. The local authorities remit does not include Torbay or Plymouth which are two small Devon coastal areas of more dense population.

Like neighbouring Cornwall to the west, historically Devon has been disadvantaged economically compared to other parts of Southern England, owing to the decline of a number of core industries, notably fishing, mining and farming. And although tourism and hospitality creates diversified employment opportunities in different sectors like accommodation, food and beverage establishments, transportation services and cultural attractions sites, the nature of seasonal work is often related to poor pay and working conditions, low education and instability for families and young people. This then contributes to rural deprivation and feelings of isolation.

The challenge

The IAS service in Devon is well established and respected within the community. However, since the Children and families Act 2014 was introduced, the service has seen a year on year significant rise in requests for support. For example a 38% increase for EHC needs assessment support, a 91% increase for exclusions and appeals and a 48% increase in those missing education due to mental health needs.

Devon's locality and rural challenges has also meant the service has had to be creative if it's going to offer an accessible service across a large county with low population density and isolated rural communities.

One previously delivery model trialled involved part time staff, working from home or operating from bases in different locations across the county. This model was supplemented with trained volunteers supporting the core IAS service team. However, a dispersed delivery model left staff and volunteers feeling isolated and stressed. Therefore the IAS service manager took steps to relocate its core team into a single service location and enhance its current use of information technology services to support the daily operations of the IAS service and its regular communications with children, parents and young people. That service model change has led to the core staff team operating more collaboratively and drawing upon each other's expertise and specialist knowledge in the process. For the IAS service manager, a single service location has enabled case work to be distributed more evenly across the core team.

To compliment a new single service location, investment into a designated post has improved how the service uses information technology services, including web development and targeted social media activities. This has led to new families and young people learning about the IAS service for the first time and a rise in enquiries being received for support. It has also increased awareness of the IAS service and the Local Offer, supported by parent information sessions delivered in partnership with the local authority.

Initial impact of IAS programme funding

During 2018/19, the IAS Programme funding has helped the IAS service manager to resource staff time to respond to the significant rise in requests to the IAS service and offer innovative approaches to those families heading towards a statutory process. However, funding has also enabled the IAS service manager to step back and reflect on the current IAS service offer across Devon. For example revisiting the service remit, purpose, strengths and achievements, interactions with partners and beneficiaries. Then identify gaps in the current service offer and areas for development. One area to be developed is the use of data so it can better identify hidden patterns and correlations and optimize the IAS service offer.

Engaging and discussing future service delivery with the local Parent Carer Forum identified workable solutions to improve upon reach and engagement with parents. This has led to the IAS service and Parent Carer Forum making a commitment to fund an 'ambassadors project' that could benefit both services and build upon the current expertise of the volunteer team.

Impact to service beneficiaries

Funding provided by the IAS Programme has provided the chance for the IAS service manager to hold constructive discussions with service beneficiaries and with other IAS services managers across the region. This has led to peer support, constructive challenge and a platform to share ideas, offer solutions and expertise when locality, low population density and isolated rural communities are a common theme.

During 2018/19, the IAS service manager has also been able to build stronger relationships with the local Parent Carer Forum and develop new relationships with health and social care commissioners, as the IAS service manager seeks a jointly commissioned arrangement. A further outcome of this approach has been the education of commissioners and senior officials around their statutory duty and highlighting the positive gains of a jointly commissioned service. Input by the national IAS programme at regional events and the development of the new minimum standards has been important to give this weight.

Lessons learnt

The IAS service manager has learnt that the requirement to provide 'information advice and support' is not always seen as a priority area of work by others across the county, so leadership, enthusiasm and tenacity are essential attributes for the IAS service to progress. It has also learnt that strategic service development, planning and commissioning are key if the IAS service is able to develop, improve and demonstrate service improvements. However, evidence informed by good practice, guidance and support for service managers from the national IAS Programme will be needed to support local change.

How is the approach being sustained?

The IAS service manager will be using its strategic two year operational plan, developed through the IAS programme as a tool to move discussions with the local authority, Health and Social Care commissioners towards a formal service level agreement and jointly funded service. This will support sustainability and Help to inform future discussions on what capacity is needed to deliver a fully compliant IAS service in Devon.

Also, the jointly funded 'ambassadors project' in partnership with the Parent Carer Forum will aim to increase knowledge and understanding of both local services and improve geographical reach. Data and outcomes collated through this work will be used to inform future discussions with senior officials with budgetary responsibilities at a local level.

Contact details

Sue Brealey

IAS service Lead Officer

sue.brealey@devon.gov.uk

www.devonias.org.uk