

Devon: Parent trainer enhances IASS training offer

The context

Every IASS needs to have a training offer for parents and professionals so that it can fulfil the IASS Minimum Standard 3.6 “The IASS offers training to local education, health and social care professionals, children, young people and parents to increase knowledge of SEND law, guidance, local policy, issues and participation.”

As a service it had delivered SEND law information sessions but knew that building participation and enabling the effective sharing of views was central to the ethos of the Children and Families Act and to making a real difference for families. DIAS had been working with one of its volunteers, who has a daughter with complex SEND, to utilise her drama and training interest and skills. Through the IAS Programme DIAS was able to employ the volunteer as a trainer to help develop the training offer around developing skills for meetings for both parents and professionals. DIAS already knew that SEN meetings were an area that caused stress for both parties and was a reason that many sought DIAS support. Covering a large geographical area, there is a challenge with how to get better reach for both the meeting support and the training offer. The parent trainer used her knowledge, skills and personal insights as a parent of a child with SEND to develop interactive training resources which included film clips which she created using volunteers as actors. The training was offered, and she had started to deliver sessions but there was a need to be able to reach more parents and professionals.

How IASP funding has improved the IASS offer to its service users

DIAS looked within the service to see how its capacity could be used more effectively and widely. Support at meetings is the highest request category from parents and the service does not have capacity to agree to all requests to attend. Professionals have said they can find meetings with parents stressful too and DIAS presence in meetings is constructive in moving things forward. Volunteers are used to enhance capacity for this support, but DIAS recognises building parents' skills and confidence in relation to meetings and a better understanding of professionals leading meetings is key to making the long-term difference.

1. Increased geographical reach

Devon is a large county and being able to deliver more training sessions over a wider area required more skilled facilitators. The parent trainer identified that DIAS had volunteers with an interest in training. These volunteers were trained to co-deliver the training sessions, discovering talents not yet seen and enhancing their skills. Casework officers were also used in co-delivery of the Meeting Skills training and this enabled them to connect with parents from their area. This has meant more sessions delivered over a wider area.

2. Improved advice and support offer

By having caseworkers at the training they were able to bring their expertise to answer SEND advice questions at the sessions rather than parents needing to phone the enquiry line. The training also

increased service reach meaning more parents knew about the service i.e. what it is, how it can help, how to get in touch and where to find useful information on the website.

In addition, it has enhanced advice and support through the casework support team. They have been able to signpost parents through their support work to the training sessions, where the knowledge they gain through the advice, can be further embedded by building confidence and self-empowerment skills for greater long-term benefit.

Parents connected well with the trainer because she was a parent. It gave another dynamic to the training and increased sense of empathy. Clear boundaries and purpose had to be set to ensure the parent trainer was protected, and it gave her an opportunity to gain some personal development working with the team and access to IASS training.

Professionals responded well to the parent trainer perspective and gained a better understanding of the remit of the service meaning they can direct children, young people and parents more appropriately.

3. Improvements for the wider service offer

The training development has linked with another development area; the service offer for children and young people. Although the training is delivered to parents and professionals it has a children and young people's focus that remains central to the purpose of all meetings. The support for parent carers has enabled them to see their role in enabling their children to have a voice. The training for professionals has encouraged reflection on practice and in developing a more child focused approach.

Professionals' feedback:

"I have learnt to promote the child's voice even more without fear."

DIAS recognised that to make the biggest difference, this training had to be delivered to professionals who are leading meetings. The take-up from schools had been slow so the service consulted with its Reference Group and using their advice changed the name of the training, refocused the content and directed promotion to Children Centres staff. This enabled better links with Early Years services including the social care context. The training take-up improved and good connections were made enabling wider reach of the service and a better understanding of IASS and SEND within social care.

Ways in which improvements have positively enhanced the service user experience – provide evidence/examples

Building trust

For some parents their experiences in the SEN journey has impacted on their ability to trust professionals. Having a parent trainer provided authenticity to the content from real life experiences. It also helped to build a bridge with their trust of professionals.

Parent feedback:

"It is so nice to be in a room with other parents and facilitators who understand and don't feel they have to talk at / judge SEN. You just know they know."

Building confidence

Parent carers' confidence in being able to contribute to discussions and decision-making is affected by their previous experiences and how they feel about their own ability. Through the training they felt more empowered to self-advocate because they had been given the right tools.

Parents feedback:

- "I will be more confident about asking for certain items to be discussed in meetings. That it is ok to expect action and positive outcomes"
- "Perfectly delivered - I'm very grateful that this advice and expertise are available to me. It helps me to feel in control and empowered to make positive changes for my children."

Changing perspectives

The way that professionals work with families has such an impact on their confidence in the SEND systems. Having a parent trainer helped the professionals to see things from the parent's perspective.

Professional feedback:

- "I found the input from the point of view of parent carer very useful. So important to keep child and parent in the centre"
- "Parent presenter is key - authentic/real/honest and knowledge based"
- "The training was brilliant; the DVD clips were useful to see how not to facilitate a meeting and change my practice"

Lessons the service has learnt making service improvements

The training offer of IASS is a requirement in the IASS minimum standards but its implementation can be impacted when direct demands on the service from the enquiry line and casework support is taking up all the staff capacity. It was essential this area of work should be protected and capacity for it planned in a more effective way. Previously the training offer was promoted once take-up had been established the training was then arranged. This meant that the geographical reach was limited and there was a time lag between interest and delivery. To improve capacity and efficiency the service has moved away from offering responsive/reactive training, to trialling a more planned approach by booking and advertising sessions in selected geographical areas.

Service learning around use of social media and online facility for promotion and engagement in the training has been a learning curve. It has enabled the service to build on use of social media in other areas of service delivery and has freed some of the administration capacity.

There can be unseen connection between different areas of service development. The training has had an associated improvement on another area of service delivery. Feedback from parents attending the training sessions has informed content development of DIAS information resources both online and printed.

The approach being taken to sustain the improvements achieved

By training DIAS volunteers to co-deliver the training sessions, there is an increase in the potential pool of trainers, but this still requires a lead for this area of work. Proposals for staffing sustainability using outcomes from the project are being prepared to discuss with commissioners.

Through DIAS's strategic connection with the Local Authority and other partners there are now discussions in other departments looking at parents delivering training. DIAS will engage with these discussions to share its expertise and learning but also make clear this work should be led by someone in a paid capacity not as an add on for volunteer participation expectations.

During the journey towards the service being jointly commissioned the Designated Medical Officer had advised their Commissioner of the high quality and benefit of the DIAS training. As part of the Service Level Agreement discussion, DIAS is exploring the training expectations and ensuring the funding is included to support it.

Contact details:

Sue Brealey

Devon IAS service lead

sue.brealey@devon.gov.uk