

Nottinghamshire IASS: Supporting families with tribunal during the Covid-19 pandemic

The context

Over recent years, there has been a steady increase in families making an appeal to the tribunal. The IASS identified this as an area it needed to increase its experience and knowledge in, in order to provide the necessary support to families in Nottinghamshire. The past year brought new challenges to Ask Us Nottinghamshire and the IRIS Magazine and the families it supports because of the COVID 19 pandemic. This meant that most tribunal support had to be adapted from face-to-face meetings to a digital format.

The issue that was identified to be tackled using IASP funding

The Ask Us Nottinghamshire team was experiencing high casework numbers making it difficult at times to allocate extra time to families for the tribunal hearings. Until last year, the service only supported parents with preparing for tribunal hearings. In order to be compliant with the Minimum Standards the service needed to support families through the whole process i.e. from application, right through to the hearing itself. In order to increase the service's own experience and knowledge of the process, the Ask Us advisers each identified families as being most in need of support and offer them additional contact time.

One example of such a family was where the parent had their own specific learning needs and was resistant to using IT equipment. The parent struggled with reading the correspondence that came initially from the LA, and later from the tribunal service. The Ask Us adviser had to source equipment that could be loaned to the parent in order to access the digital meeting. Several hours of meetings over WhatsApp took place to prepare the information about the child's SEND needs. Following this, coaching was needed on how to access the Tribunal Services Digital Hearing. The hearing was a success for the parent who, as a result of the additional support provided by the Ask Us adviser achieved their desired result. It is highly unlikely that without the extra capacity of the team to provide such a hands-on bespoke service, this parent would have been able to access the "new way of working" i.e. using digital platforms and therefore, would have not been able to exercise their rights or be part of the decision making process.

How the funding was used

In order to increase service capacity, the IASP funding was used to employ an additional Ask Us adviser thus increasing the advisers capacity to spend more time on tribunal cases. This extra time has meant the service could focus its attention in "preparing" families with a greater need for the tribunal and attending the hearing alongside them. Ask Us has set up good practice sharing processes, allocating time for advisers to discuss tribunal cases and share their experiences.

At the time of writing the funding bid for the IASP Funding in March 2020, nobody could have foreseen the complications that would arise due to the COVID 19 pandemic. All Nottinghamshire's tribunal cases have

moved to digital hearings. Ask Us Nottinghamshire's experience over the past year has shown that many of the most vulnerable families have needed additional coaching in accessing digital platforms. Whilst the LA and others assume that parents will "attend" the meetings they schedule, this has only been possible for some families due to the Ask Us advisers providing significant levels of support "teaching" parent/carers how to access digital meetings over Zoom or Microsoft Teams, and how to engage with the tribunal hearing platform. Very positive and complimentary feedback has been received from parents regarding how extremely useful the service has been.

The difference made (i.e. the impact of your work and how your service/service users have benefitted)

From the service feedback surveys, many parents who have been through the tribunal process have found the support from Ask Us Nottinghamshire invaluable. Feedback questionnaires are sent to every parent who has accessed the service for Information, Advice and Support. 100% positive satisfaction feedback from families for the last three consecutive quarters has been recorded.

Based on the service's experience, without the IASP Funding to increase capacity, it is highly unlikely that the most "in need" families would have been able to access the digital tribunal hearings without the additional support and coaching Ask Us Nottinghamshire advisers. Instead, due to the support they received and the tools to increase their knowledge of the process and help with preparing, their confidence in presenting their case increased. The satisfaction surveys show that families would recommend the service to others, have high satisfaction with the IAS provided, are more aware of which services they can access support from, found it easy to get in touch with their IASS and have more confidence as a result.

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