

Liverpool & Knowsley: Building a sustainable IAS Service offer for the future

In 2016, Liverpool City Council and Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council collectively commissioned a single, outsourced SEND IAS Service. WIRED had successfully delivered the Parent Partnership/SENDIASS service in Wirral for more than 10 years, and won the contract to deliver the newly established Liverpool & Knowsley SEND IAS Service.

The existing teams transferred over to WIRED, which consisted of two full-time equivalent members of staff from each area. WIRED further recruited two part-time staff, initially funded by Independent Support up to 2018, and then retained with financial support from the Information Advice and Support (IAS) programme funding over 2018/19.

WIRED defined service response times to provide a guide for service-users regarding call back timescales. We also explored options for streamlining casework, and increased telephone and email support to further prioritise meeting demand and statutory deadlines.

The extensive knowledge and experience of the staff members that transferred to WIRED, combined with additional staffing enabled delivery of a full SEND IASS offer, including tribunal information, advice and support.

The challenge

The main overall challenge for Liverpool & Knowsley SEND IAS service was and still is capacity-related. Both local authorities experienced significant austerity related changes and this led to a gradual reduction in service capacity. WIRED captured feedback from parents and carers when the contract commenced, they told us that SEND IAS services had become a “watered-down” version of what Parent Partnership historically used to be, due to less availability for face-to-face support.

WIRED met with both parent carer forums (PCF) when the contract began. We have approached joint working in the spirit of making the most of the resources we currently have and building on existing good practice, in order to further strengthen the service offer. Both parent carer forums are aware of capacity issues within the service and we endeavour to use IASP funding to develop our community drop-in and help-line offer, in-line with PCF feedback.

Empowering service-users to self-advocate and contribute to decisions about education, health and social care is the baseline from which we start. Face-to-face appointments are primarily for families that find it more of a challenge to self-advocate, and for those cases with pressing statutory timeframes attached. We do however know through experience and feedback that increased face-to-face support, including meeting attendance for as many families as possible, helps to move things along more quickly and reach a resolution.

The direct engagement of children and young people (CYP) has also been a challenge for the service. There has been a recognised gap in resources to further develop this area of work, as the focus of existing resources had to be placed upon managing demand.

Initial impact of IAS programme funding

During 2019/20, funding provided by the IAS programme has offered the opportunity to plan strategically and think about the future. The minimum standards have helped with this as they have provided a clear and concise baseline from which to begin. These standards have helped open channels of discussion with commissioners and will soon include the respective Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) to begin discussions around a joint-funded service.

IASP funding has enabled Liverpool & Knowsley SEND IAS Service to engage with stakeholders in order to obtain a clearer picture of where we are in relation to the minimum standards. We already had a service perspective on the necessary areas for development and service-user feedback confirmed that our attention was focused in the right places. Targeted engagement with stakeholders has also enabled us to reflect on the areas that we are doing well and this has been a useful exercise.

The creation and distribution of the IAS programme survey offered an opportunity to contact service-users, hear about strengths and weaknesses from their perspective and receive possible suggestions for enhancing the service. Making contact in this way also helped to establish that some of the perceived weaknesses of the service were not reflective of the current position.

As a consequence of the IAS programme self-reflection there is now a dedicated manager for Liverpool & Knowsley SENDIASS, and a separate manager for Wirral SEND Partnership. This is a positive step forward. Discussions are underway with the LAs as to how this will be sustained and the Minimum Standards are providing a rationale and platform for doing so. The change to management roles has resulted in increased strategic input and better information flow.

Impact to service beneficiaries

The IAS programme workshop held by Council for Disabled Children with the Department for Education (DfE) in October 2018 was helpful as it offered insight into the minimum standards and allowed for discussion with commissioners. Although Liverpool and Knowsley commissioners were unable to attend due to prior commitments, the invitation raised awareness and enabled a meeting to take place following it to update.

Each LA is now more aware of the importance of strategic engagement by the IAS Service and consequently in Knowsley it is now linked into three strategy boards/work streams that it was not previously part of. This allows for direct feedback of parental views to multi-agency professionals and offers an opportunity to discuss the service priorities.

The 2-year joint service operational plan for the IAS Service was informed by parent feedback that both parent forums supported WIRED to obtain. The CEO of WIRED has been part of this development and as a result relationships have strengthened in each LA area between professionals and WIRED.

The IAS programme funding has injected fresh enthusiasm enabling the service to focus and engage in different ways with CYP. There is direct experience of SEND youth voice group development within the existing team and a dedicated CYP worker will further enhance this.

A tiered response system that commences with telephone and email support is a more sustainable model for the future given the current financial landscape. IASP funding will be utilised to create an administrator

type role in order to further manage helpline calls. This system is designed to enable more face-to-face support to be available (from caseworkers and support officers) for those that need it, and to empower service-users with the knowledge and skills to take the lead on resolving issues themselves where possible.

Lessons learnt

The following points are taken from a self-reflection exercise, this is what we found;

- Qualitative data is essential and that the self-reflective review process is invaluable
- That obtaining quality feedback from service users at the point of case closure is key to service development
- That it's important to allow sufficient time for the self-reflective review exercise to be completed, ideally the surveys need to be open for 6 weeks in order to allow time for a representational cohort of parents, CYP and professionals to respond
- Survey questions need to be focused around the minimum standards and co-designed with stakeholders.
- Be clear about the service's current status in relation to the Minimum Standards and thoroughly test how those views have been reached and evidenced
- Be clear about what reasonable improvements can be made to the performance of the service and consider how progress/success can be measured
- Involve stakeholders in the process and keep them in the loop as the project progresses

What has been good?

- Being provided with a resourced opportunity to conduct an in-depth review of the service
- Being able to identify areas where the system could be improved
- Conducting a 360-degree review of the service from all stakeholders i.e. staff, professionals, CYP and parents at a single point in time rather than trying to piece together feedback that has come in from different stakeholders at different points in time
- Providing a supportive environment and data set to enable the development of the service
- The provision of some transitional funding to support the development of services in line with the revised 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 each LA with strategic leads and commissioners. Each LA has demonstrated an appetite to raise the profile and contribution of the service and a meeting is scheduled to begin the discussions around joint-funding. The key to sustainability and building on the renewed vigour around the IAS Service is to focus on the relationships that will support this.

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