



## Cheshire West and Chester IASS: Covid-19 response and the impact of IASP funding

### The context

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, service delivery has significantly changed. The team quickly made the transition to working from home by using new technology and finding a space to work at home (not always easy with whole families being at home together), while balancing caring responsibilities, home learning and the stress of being in the middle of a pandemic! Despite all of this the team worked together to creatively find solutions to ensure continued support to families during an extremely challenging time.

There are now over 2000 CYP with an EHCP in the borough, with requests for assessment increasing by 100% during the current situation - an average year usually has between 400 and 500 requests for an EHCP assessment but there were just under 800 requests for the period March 2020 to February 2021. IASS has been involved with many of the Parents/Carers requesting these assessments. It feels like the pandemic has intensified every situation, including the requests for assessment. Consequently, a higher number of EHCP request for assessments means a higher percentage of refusal to assess cases requiring IASS support.

Here has also been an increase in Health & Social Care cases, with over 80 families contacting the service between March 2020 and February 2021 needing help with Social Care assessments and medical need circumstances. This may be due the service's increased work with CCG Colleagues and now being jointly commissioned means IASS work is recognised by a wider audience.

### The issue that was identified to be tackled using IASP funding

The service has adapted and adopted new ways of working to meet increasing and changing demands for support. Additional challenges included a member of staff being on secondment, and dealing with questions arising from a rapidly changing situation from parents/carers, and YP that staff couldn't answer. Staff worked longer and more flexible hours to improve service availability including evenings. Although it was helping in ways it had never thought possible, this is where the issue arose that the service wasn't up to speed enough with technology to meet the requirement to completely embrace the virtual world! Another concern was the realisation that the most vulnerable groups of service users weren't accessing support at all, so another priority was to reach *harder to engage* groups including YP and BAME families.

### How the funding was used

The coronavirus pandemic disrupted the life of every child in the Borough but especially CYP with SEND. There was also a particular concern for BAME families, who may have leave to remain but are subject to no recourse to public funds (NRPF). This exclusion means there is a high risk that many of these children will fall between the cracks, unable to access support from various agencies, likely to suffer an income shock, insecure housing or miss out on vital support like school meal vouchers. Already vulnerable and isolated families were being pushed further to the brink. The service also found that the females in these families felt

more isolated than ever, cut off from usual support networks including their own wider families who would in normal times help with childcare etc. and still having to go out to work.

It was decided these groups would be prioritised for virtual support sessions. By working in collaboration with the Parent Carer Forum and local CAMHS online support groups have been developed aimed at BAME families. This included hiring an interpreter for those sessions in case any language barriers arose.

Practical support suggestions and options of ways to access further help were most appreciated by these families. Raising the profile of the issues facing these groups and the work IASS was doing to support within the LA helped create a broader understanding of how much families were struggling and helped develop a more targeted response accordingly.

Due to a noticeable increase in cases involving YP with anxiety, dealing with feelings of loneliness, and not feeling hopeful for the future, the service wanted to concentrate its efforts on supporting and protecting the mental health of CYP via the online Mental Health Awareness sessions/workshops it had developed by utilising shared partnership working with Health colleagues and CAMHS. Positive feedback from attendees showed how extremely useful and informative this approach was. YP appeared to be more comfortable in the online environment, so much so that peer support was particularly evident and follow-up sessions have been arranged at the YP's request. This work was incorporated into the SENCO cluster sessions thus raising awareness with other professionals.

In order for staff to become more tech savvy and be able to maximise their work and get the best use of all the online tools, the service commissioned the in-house Digital Media Team to carry out some team training and ensure current information literature was online friendly and accessible to a wider audience. This also helped with the successful delivery of the service's annual Transition to Adulthood event online.

The Preparation for Adulthood Transition Event was held virtually over two days in February 2021. Over 600 visitors logged on over the two full days of the event compared to the live event in February 2020 which had 150 visitors in person although this was the maximum the venue could hold. Without physical constraints the reach of the virtual event was far wider with over a 400% increase in the amount of Families, Parents/Carers reached by going virtual. This included families logging on from outside the borough i.e. from neighbouring LA's (Warrington, Wirral, Merseyside even as far as Shropshire) which was fantastic. Good advice, well planned sessions, and listening to topical, relevant guest speakers is always useful no matter which area you live in. Hard work, good preparation, pertinent information and of course targeted marketing and advertising of the event via the service's networks including the Parent Carer Forum networks well and truly paid off.

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

The service and its service users have been impacted greatly by the changes that have been implemented in response to the coronavirus pandemic. The service has become more streamlined and agile reaching more families, CYP than ever before just by going virtual. The work carried out has made a huge difference to the lives of the families the IASS has been working with by helping families become more optimistic and resilient while navigating these difficult times. Time saved on travelling has meant more time has been available to work with even more families. The team has developed expertise in using technology meaning working practices are now smarter and they have been able to offer support to a wider group of people in more varied ways. It has become more adept at finding creative ways and swift solutions to issues.

Feedback from service users has been very positive:

*"It was very refreshing to have someone understand our complex situation and be understanding to our family's needs whilst applying common sense!"*

*“The advice from IASS gave me options for my next step to resolving my issue. I felt I was better informed to making the right decision and was comfortable enough to contact the services in question independently and have managed to resolve the issue amicably. Thanks to IASS.”*

*“Being able to chat online was so much easier, IASS were available after I’d finished work - well after 6.30pm - the person I spoke to was so helpful and didn’t mind all my questions, we were still talking at 8.00pm. They helped me plan my next steps, which with their help were put into action and we’ve now got my daughter an EHCP assessment.*

*The practical support the IASS Team identified for my family was a massive help, I didn’t know who or what was out there to help. But now thanks to them we are getting some respite help.*

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