



East Sussex IASS: Taking parent workshops online

The context that your service is working in

Amaze SENDIASS had developed a tight and well-focussed programme of workshops on key topics for parents of CYP with SEND, drawing on capacity from IASP funding in 2018/19 and 2019/20. These were delivered by SENDIASS advisors face to face to groups of parents in a few venues across the 2 LAs Amaze covers. The aim was to offer essential information about SEN Support, EHCP processes etc to parents who find written or online information less accessible or who prefer to be able to ask questions and get the added perspective of learning alongside others and through hearing their experiences too. Feedback was good although numbers attending were never huge. Some sessions have also been provided for YP. The focus here though is how workshops have been reshaped for parents in response to Covid-19. At the start of the Coronavirus pandemic all planned workshops had to be cancelled and a rethink was required in order to achieve the same aims but in a different way.

The issue that was identified to be tackled using IASP funding

At the start of the pandemic, like most people and organisations, it took a while to recognise how profound and long-lasting the effects of Covid-19 would be, initially assuming workshops were just going to be paused for a while. Once schools and colleges closed and social contact was limited, it quickly became apparent how isolating this was for SEND families so a series of informal SENDIASS zoom sessions open to all parents across Amaze's two areas began. These were initially popular and allowed parents to ask all sorts of questions relevant to their immediate situation, plus share some contact with other parents also stuck at home. At this point many parents put on hold concerns like requesting EHC needs assessment but as time passed it became clear that there was a renewed need for the content of the "normal" workshop programme, but also some sessions relating to issues associated with the impact of the pandemic.

How the funding was used

SENDIASS staff looked at each of the usual workshops and adapted them to work as online sessions. This involved making them shorter and even more focussed on the essentials, reducing participatory elements or approaching these differently and making sure follow-up information was comprehensive and easy to email. Even though the sessions needed to be shorter to take into account the limits to concentration online, it was essential to build in enough time for individual questions and for parents to have a sense of contact with others in a similar position to themselves. Based on past feedback, these factors were known to be of importance, albeit an invisible aspect of attending the "normal programme". Regular topics in the new format were offered in the autumn term when most children went back to school. Take up was good. A similar programme was planned for the spring and has gone ahead despite the new national lockdown. Take up has continued to be good.

The greater flexibility of online workshops has allowed the service to offer additional sessions alongside the usual programme. Some of these have been in response to the particular issues generated by the pandemic. For example in late summer workshops were delivered on "Return to School" issues. At the same time there was a raised level of interest in home education and ESPCF (the East Sussex parent carer forum) shared that they were seeing a lot of discussion about this. In response to this a session on SEND and Home Education (EOTAS and EHE) was planned for early 2021. Offering online workshops is significantly cheaper and easier than having to find and pay for a venue etc. as well as freeing up more staff time. SENDIASS staff time is under pressure even with IASP funding this year so it has looked for partners

who could deliver sessions hosted by SENDIASS online. These have included Public Health on Covid issues, the Family Fund on iPads, a specialist solicitor on Mental Capacity and Powers of Attorney, two different providers on PDA and this month a session on online safety from Digital Awareness UK.

One of the unexpected side effects of the pandemic is that many people have had to adapt to more aspects of their life being organised or delivered digitally or virtually, from shopping to medical appointments. Parents are more confident in booking things online and participating in online sessions. Amaze has used this opportunity to make the switch to using Eventbrite for workshop bookings. This involved extra time and effort to set up provided by the Helpline Triage and Administration worker and the allocated SENDIASS time of Amaze's Website and Comms Manager (using IASP funding). Now the system is working though it should save time and avoid the SENDIASS advice line being clogged up with booking requests. For parents who cannot book online for any reason they will continue to be able to book by phone so as not to disadvantage anyone through digital exclusion.

The difference made

A major benefit of virtual workshops is that there are no geographical barriers. The service can equally reach those in very rural areas as well as those in cities and can offer sessions for parents from both LAs together. Parents do not have to travel and may be able to attend even if their CYP are in the house with them. They do not have to arrange care as they would in order to attend a physical location. Some new parent/carers join the workshops and then hear about and take up other services Amaze offers. As with face-to-face workshops, some participants get what they need from the workshop alone and others need individual follow-up. As an email is used to book the workshop, it means that the follow up resources, links and slides can be emailed out to most participants very easily. This encourages self-help and means that participants do not feel they need to concentrate on taking notes during the workshop. As the link to give feedback is in the same follow up email, it also makes it more likely this will be completed. The combination of screen share and 'chat box' means that the workshop can be shorter and stay structured, whilst still giving specific answers to tailored questions as it happens. SENDIASS staff delivering the sessions are confident that they still offer an acceptable and enjoyable way for parents to share ideas and empathise with each other. Team members have benefitted from delivering them in pairs at a time when contact and joint working with colleagues has otherwise been limited.

Delivery online brings its own issues. Technology can be challenging, and it is hard to keep up 'flow' when there are hitches or late arrivals. The social connections made by participants may perhaps be less powerful. It is important to acknowledge though that some parents are not comfortable with the format and a small but significant group within the local community do not have access to a suitable device or the broadband or data necessary to take part. Nevertheless, overall the service is delighted by its success of moving to online workshops and expects to continue using this approach even when it returns to delivering some face-to-face events.

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