

Devon IASS: Our Ambassador volunteering project

DIAS and the Parent Carer Forum Devon (PCFD) have worked in co-production to build a network of volunteer ambassadors for parents and carers of children with SEND. The Ambassador Volunteer (AV) project aims to connect parents within their own communities and more widely into a support network across Devon. AV's are based in their own communities across the county functioning as a link in their area to the wider Devon network ensuring parents are informed and know how to access advice and support. AV's are parent carers of children with SEND, some are professionals and support staff who work with them. What they all have in common is that they are at the right place and time to offer peer support to others. They all have a desire to help families on their SEND journey and understand what life is like with a child with SEND.

The context

Devon has a large geographical area with hidden vulnerabilities including rural deprivation, difficult access to services and limited support for families with SEND, leading to social isolation for families. The latest SEND Ofsted report highlighted the need to listen to the voices of the families of children with SEND and ensure services utilised the messages fed back from families across a broad geographical reach, that reflected the diversity of both the SEND needs of the CYP and the families in Devon. Engagement with the Parent Carer Forum Devon was highlighted within the written statement of action for the LA.

The issue that was identified to be tackled using IASP funding

Families highlighted to DIAS that they felt isolated without the knowledge and skills to support their child, they wanted to know more about SEN support and how to get help from Social Care, Health and Education. Some families wanted to connect with other people who had similar experience of living with SEND in Devon and others felt they wanted to be able to share their knowledge so other families would not experience the same challenges they had faced. In some areas parent/carers support groups existed and offered support but these were not connected or linked across Devon. DIAS knew that across the wide geographical area many families did not know about the free IAS services, they also did not know about the Parent Carer Forum or understand the function of the forum. The PCFD and DIAS listened to families and developed a new participation project; the Ambassador Volunteer project.

Intended project outcomes:

- Improved service awareness and reach for DIAS
- Embedding a joint participation initiative between DIAS and the Parent Carer Forum Devon.
- Increase in reach of SEN support information training offer to isolated and rural areas.
- Gather feedback from parent/carers to inform service development and future IASS training offer.
- Create a mechanism for connection for parent support networks across Devon offering peer support.

How the funding was used

The funding was used to recruit a Volunteer Co-ordinator who designed and developed the recruitment, training and publicity package for the project volunteers and provided ongoing support and guidance for them through monthly team meetings and supervision. Parent/carers were recruited onto the project during face-to-face meetings at parent/carer support groups, school meetings and through professional introductions and networking. A range of established parent support groups with different areas of focus indicated the desire for closer connections with both DIAS, the PCF or indeed both. These included, elective home educator group, autism and ADHD support groups, and a mental health support group. Some parent/carers connected wanting to develop SEND parent/carer support group in partnership with their school, others focused on virtual support groups or connecting into their social media groups. August 2019 to March 2020 face-to-face meetings were attended across Devon focusing on areas of isolation, delivering support sessions and live volunteer induction training. In March 2020 with COVID lockdown restrictions it was felt the viability of the project would be impacted due to the inability to attend support groups and schools. However, after the move was made to virtual sessions, it was found the AV's stayed connected and the project gained momentum. Induction training, connecting with the AV's and support groups moved to a virtual format, which involved training the volunteers in a new medium. Some gained confidence and skills from this and went on to deliver their support groups virtually, WhatsApp groups were utilised to aid peer-to-peer support for the AV's and in building connection with the PCFD.

In 2020, "Demystifying SEND" information sessions for parents were delivered virtually in response to the feedback being heard via the AV's. The sessions are aimed at parents beginning their SEND journey. Helping parents to understand how they can access information and which services may be available for them, highlighting the graduated response and the terminology around SEND. The sessions aimed to explain processes, give tips for engagement and signposting to local groups and the information and services through the Devon SEND Local offer.

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

Ambassador Volunteers: 43 prospective volunteers have been trained in 6 face-to-face sessions and 3 virtual online sessions. There are currently 20 active volunteers across Devon and over 40 interested in training in 2021. The current volunteers have a reach of over 6000 people in their own networks connecting parents into a much wider network of support. AV's support parent/carers in school settings face-to-face and then virtually during lockdown, adapting as circumstances demanded. By supporting the volunteers, groups were able to keep running which provided routes for keeping families in touch with fast paced COVID related changes and the AV's were able to feed into the development of DIAS COVID information. The creative approach of virtual connections ensured a wider reach area and the ability for connection with AV's more often as travel was not a constraint. DIAS has been able to connect and share good practice across other IASS services, leading to a replicated model elsewhere in the South West. Connections have been made with voluntary and community sector services for parent/carers, Children's Centres and other Early Help teams, enabling services to provide support their clients alongside cascading DIAS information and raising awareness of PCFD.

Demystifying SEND Parent information events: 8 sessions were delivered to 79 attendees. All sessions were delivered virtually due to COVID restrictions. Attendees also came from outside the county. DIAS understands the sessions have been replicated by other IASS, a clear indication that the format, information, and resources used were of benefit to a much larger audience.

Ambassador Volunteers-the difference the project made for me.

"The supervision meetings have been really helpful for gaining advice and support within the role. Receiving information to pass on through our networks has been greatly appreciated by many parent carers. "

"We couldn't offer the support to additional needs parent/carers effectively without the intervention of this project."

"The project has been vital as a parent myself with children who have additional needs that information and support are key to helping everyone on their own journey. As I believe that the more informed, I am the more empowered I have felt."

Ambassador Volunteers- the difference we made for parents:

"Supporting a mother who has concerns about her child having SEND who was too nervous to approach her teacher, she has now approached the teacher and begun engaging with school to put support in place for the child - it feels good. I don't want any child to have to miss out in education due to lack of support."

"Parent/Carers often thank me for giving the hope, which makes me feel overwhelmed and validated as a human being! Sharing what I have learnt makes me feel useful to others."

," What has been the most useful aspect of the Demystifying SEND session?". Parents said: *"Knowing that just because you are at the start of a very long pathway to an assessment, that you're not alone and there's resources available to whatever part of the journey you're on."*

"Really good to understand the difference between health/social/mental and educational needs assessment."

"Understanding the graduated response & the websites to go to for more information/support."

The sessions supported parents to feel empowered one parent said: *"This has given me the where with all to feel I can now ask questions and if I am unsure of the answers have confidence to ask again for more details."*

<https://devonias.org.uk/about-us/the-ambassador-volunteer-project/>

Contact details:

Sue Brealey DIAS Lead Officer
sue.brealey@devon.gov.uk

Megan Kenneally-Stone, DIAS Ambassador Volunteer Co-ordinator
megan.kenneallystone@devon.gov.uk