

Suffolk: IAS service review and future development planning

Suffolk is a rural county with a population of 757,000 and a school population of just under 110,000. The main towns include Ipswich, Lowestoft, Bury St Edmunds and Felixstowe. It has over 4000 EHCPs with only 34% being educated in special schools or specialist units.

The Suffolk IAS Service is a well-established service which has been operating in its current structure since 2016. It has its own website providing comprehensive information; a Facebook page which has a large following; a twitter account and several information videos on YouTube. A digital newsletter is circulated termly.

A helpline is provided daily and face-to-face caseworker support for SEN issues and EHC advice. Families are offered support with the tribunal process and attendance at meetings and tribunals subject to capacity. The team includes a “training and development worker” responsible for providing a comprehensive offer of workshops and courses for parents and practitioners throughout the year. An annual conference is also organised for parents and currently webinars are under development.

Currently the IAS Service mainly reaches parents and practitioners and CYP are only ever seen alongside their parents and do not contact the service directly themselves. Ethnic minority groups are not proportionately represented in service contacts and there is low take-up of workshops and courses in rural areas of the county.

The main goals of the IAS Service are to become more accessible to CYP and minority groups and to increase awareness of the service offer.

The challenge

IAS Service user feedback has consistently shown that families would have liked to have known about the service sooner. Many parents have commented that they only found out about IASS once they had got to a crisis point. The team has been aware of the need to increase publicity of the service, but this is coupled with anxiety that the service would lack the capacity to meet the subsequent increase for demand.

Another challenge is that some schools are not aware of the service or have not fully understood how it operates, therefore, do not share IASS details or information. There are over 360 schools in Suffolk, and it is a challenge to get information to them all, despite attending conferences, circulating information by email, offering workshops and distributing leaflets.

When the Children and Families Act 2014 came into force the IASS remit was extended to meet the new requirements. However, service capacity was not increased in any way. The team has developed their knowledge in line with the CFA and although CYP are welcome to use the helpline and casework service, the YP have said they don't want to access services in the same way their parents do. Unfortunately, there has not been enough time to explore what would work for them or to put it into practice.

The IAS Service does not currently have a steering group. In the past there has been extremely poor attendance at steering group meetings, so it was decided to disband it and try to develop a “virtual” steering group instead, however, this has not been successful either but it is accepted there is a need to create an advisory group to steer the service going forward.

Initial impact of IAS programme funding

Funding through the IAS programme enabled additional support to be brought in to develop the IAS Service database to ensure the relevant information is recorded to support effective reporting. The team are now collecting more specific data making it possible to review the service based on clear information reflecting the work that has been done and what needs to improve. Improved recording has meant a more methodical approach has been introduced to gain service user feedback therefore, more accurate data can be gathered to inform service development.

Funding has enabled cover for maternity leave and temporary admin support which has increased capacity within the team freeing up manager time to concentrate on strategic working with partners. This provided a clearer overview of what is happening in the world of SEN in a wider context and how this may impact on the service, or how the service needs to develop in order to meet future need.

Impact to service beneficiaries

During the Spring and Summer terms of 2018 the helpline and casework offer had struggled to keep up with the increase in demand exacerbated further by reduced capacity arising from a team member being on maternity leave. Staff were overwhelmed and feedback showed that families were finding it increasingly difficult to contact the service and response times were slow.

The funding allowed a team approach to fully review the helpline process. It was decided that a completely different strategy was needed to respond to calls and a new process was introduced using an appointments system. This means that parents (or YP should they call) book a slot with a caseworker. This means callers know exactly when they will speak to IAS Service staff, rather than leaving a message with no idea when they would receive a return call. This is working much better for parents. It also means caseworkers are much better able to manage their time and plan calls as they know what’s booked in. Team members have reported feeling much less stressed and feeling as though they have more time.

Other team members are no longer required to cover helpline slots, and this has meant that there has been further development of the website, learning videos and publicity. There has been really positive feedback about the digital information from families and practitioners.

Lessons learnt

Whilst it is very easy to continue doing the same thing because it has worked in the past it is very important to review what is working and what is not working so well. As far as the Suffolk IAS Service is concerned, it was continuing as usual despite clear evidence that what it was doing was no longer working well and couldn’t be sustained. Without time to review its practice the service simply reacted to demand by putting more time into supporting the helpline. By taking time out to review it was possible to gain a clearer picture of what is going on and what needs to change, leading to better planning and an improved service offer. It is important to set goals and to keep data to evidence and monitor what is working, how things are changing and what is needed to continue to meet demand. A clear operational plan has been

produced meaning the whole team knows what is expected of them and what the service is aiming to achieve. It is also useful for reporting to stakeholders.

How is the approach being sustained?

During the year the directorate management within the LA has become much more aware of the service; what it offers and how it operates. This has been very positive for the service. The directorate management team (DMT) are very supportive of future plans and have agreed new, fixed term, recruitment. It has also had further resource agreement to support with administration. For the first time the IAS Service has been asked to report to DMT with regards to its development plan and they reviewed the Annual Report in September. The head of CYP has also agreed to discuss joint commissioning arrangements with Health.

The IAS Service is planning to set up an advisory group to guide the development of the service and report to the LA and to stakeholders. This will strengthen its governance arrangements and impartiality status.

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