

Stoke on Trent IASS: To develop virtual methods of engagement with parents, young people and children

The issue that was identified to be tackled using IASP funding

Prior to the pandemic and national lockdown the service had undergone a restructure as part of the cost savings needed to be made locally. Therefore, a more virtual way of working was already in the early stages of development as it moved forward following the restructure. Then Covid-19 hit, immediately exacerbating the need for virtual working. The service had to figure out how it could continue to provide high quality information, advice and support to parents/carers and CYP within the city whilst working with less staff in new circumstances. The service considered how it could:

- Use virtual methods of engagement with parents/carers and YP.
- Continue to empower service users.
- Meet the minimum standards by providing training opportunities.

How the funding was used

1. Access to Zoom, as well as other virtual platforms, such as TEAMS. These were to be used for virtual coffee mornings, meetings with parents and YP and as a facility to deliver training.
2. The daily monitoring of Facebook to inform parents of new SEND information on a daily basis. Responding to enquiries virtually and making the service more accessible.
3. One of the projects worked on by the officer (funded by IASP) was the preparation of materials to be used when delivering training to professionals.
4. Purchase of new database to improve the efficiency of collating case notes and gathering statistical information.

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

Even under COVID restrictions parents have experienced still being able to access quality information, advice and support on SEND issues. They can still be supported to make their voice heard with the LA, at mediations and at tribunals.

YP have become more involved as they are already familiar and comfortable with digital communication. The needs of the YPs were taken into consideration, using person centred planning tools by virtual methods, at a time convenient to the YP. Feedback was also received from other service users that their sensory needs were being met, and they were able to engage more, as they could control whether to be present with/without video, or with/without a representative. Due to the reduction in environmental factors, they felt they were able to participate. In one family, for the first time, both their young adults were able to “attend” the whole of their reviews, the older son having the confidence to make comments during his and the daughter attending the meeting and communicating via text message during hers.

For parents/carers with additional needs of their own, the virtual meetings actually increased the likelihood for them to engage by being able to stay within the comfort and familiarity of their own homes.

This also applied to parents with young children as they were able to take part in virtual meetings on a more frequent basis, as they did not have to source child care.

As the pandemic evolved throughout the lockdown period, the service shared useful information regarding on-line resources that would help with home learning. There were multiple websites and tools shared on the Facebook page, which may have benefitted parents in supporting their children during lockdown. Parents commented that the links were useful and varied for different ages and stages of the curriculum.

The benefits of the Facebook page ensured the sharing of timely updates e.g. legal changes and potential implications for the education of their child, or those associated with EHC procedures. Messages were responded to in a timely manner and attracted more followers.

Virtual coffee mornings were offered initially at the beginning of lockdown, but these 'drop-in' sessions were not well received with parents preferring to engage on an individual basis, so they could privately discuss their personal circumstances.

Working virtually, the caseworkers could share on screen the documentation being discussed and amend it where the service user felt necessary. Another positive due to the convenience and practicality of virtual meetings, was improved attendance of professionals due to their increased availability e.g. no travel.

Parent Champions were also able to work virtually. One supported a family who spoke Punjabi (English was their second language). They successfully explained the procedures and helped the parent make an EHCP request. They translated the draft EHCP and facilitated communication between the LA, Health and the parent. As the family were new to the country, they provided information on mainstream and special schools.

Main areas of development

- Officers not brought up in the age of technology have enhanced their personal development by learning how to use virtual methods of communication more effectively.
- Time and resources are used more efficiently as there is no longer any need to travel long distances (in some cases) to meetings, in particular to mediations and tribunals.
- More YP are willing to engage due to their familiarity with technology and they are wanting to be more involved with processes, procedures and decision making affecting them.
- SENDIASS officers have had the opportunity to develop their training techniques by delivering online training sessions. Such sessions are easily accessible to professionals and more services are requesting networking opportunities to increase their knowledge of the information, advice and support being offered to parents/carers and YP.
- The new database will help officers use time more effectively and collate statistics more efficiently.
- Productivity has increased within the service. Due to the LA's re-structure of the service resulting in a reduction of staffing, time management is crucial to ensure the service has sufficient capacity to provide for all service users including successfully managing the number of duty telephone calls, 1:1 casework meetings, mediations and tribunals etc.

Contact details

Heather Weston

Team Leader

01782 234701

E-mail: heather.weston@stoke.gov.uk