



Wolverhampton: a vision for the IAS Service

Wolverhampton is a diverse city with many challenges and over 200 community languages spoken. The population is approximately 260,000 with a school population of 45,249. 20% of Wolverhampton's adult population does not have any qualifications and this is a barrier to getting employment and progression once in work. There are approximately 1500 EHCPs with very low numbers of appeals to tribunal

Wolverhampton has a long and successful history of supporting parents of children with SEN through a Parent Partnership Service (PPS) since 1994, prior to any legislative requirements to do so. In 2014 it became the Information, Advice and Support Service (WIASS). In 2015 the "new" service was relaunched to coincide with the 21st birthday celebration of PPS in Wolverhampton. It has always been an "in house" service and maintains its impartiality through clear "arms-length" line-management arrangements. WIASS has excellent citywide working relationships and is well known; is held in high regard and valued by the LA and the families it supports. Its confidentiality and impartiality status and requirements are understood.

As part of the arms-length arrangements, the service is based at the Gem Centre in Wednesfield, a purpose-built facility, housing community paediatric health services and providing a holistic service to families under one roof. WIASS accommodation continues to be funded by Health.

Feedback demonstrates a high level of satisfaction with the support available from WIASS. The service has an excellent, dedicated and knowledgeable team and continues to be innovative and forward thinking.

The challenge

Despite the additional responsibilities of IAS Service under the C&FA, there has been no increase to the permanent staffing level within the service offer. The earlier government funded programme called Independent Support provided an essential increase to service capacity but associated funding completely finished in Spring 2019 leaving the IASS at risk of non-compliance. WIASS has seen a growing number of referrals over recent years of additional complexity and requiring an increased level of intervention particularly regarding disagreement resolution or Social Care.

Casework continues to take a significant proportion of the WIASS team time. Unfortunately, many of the aims in the service development plan (2016-2018) were put on hold due to casework delivery taking priority.

WIASS has always been at the forefront of creative and innovative ideas to develop the offer to local families. The casework demand situation was frustrating for WIASS and prevented opportunities to reflect or implement the many ideas for non-casework activity to push the service forward.

At present, WIASS does not truly offer the same level of support to CYP as it does to parents or carers. Strengthening how the IASS reaches and works with CYP is a gap that remains a developmental priority.

Initial impact of IAS programme funding

Year 1 of the IAS programme has enabled capacity to maintain the staffing levels in order to manage casework delivery, which inevitably takes priority within WIASS. Consequently this has provided the service manager with scope to reflect on the wider strategic requirements and the creation of a 2 year operational plan for WIASS. It was essential that sufficient time was available to explore creative and innovative ideas that are proactive rather than reactive and ensure the service is compliant with the Minimum Standards.

Unfortunately, casework management tends to be responsive and reactive so it was necessary to consider the wider impact and look at ways of managing this demand in a more efficient and effective manner. This included investigating ways of strengthening casework support by utilising volunteers. In the early days of Parent Partnership, there was a volunteer programme in Wolverhampton, which was unfortunately unsuccessful. That model meant cases were shared among volunteers and Parent Partnership staff on an ad hoc basis. Due to the growing complexity of the cases and the lack of regular experience and training for the volunteers, a significant amount of time was spent by existing staff overseeing and guiding the course of the case. Ultimately it proved poor use of time as it could have been quicker for the staff member to have just dealt with the case. There was also feedback to suggest concern about fairness given that volunteers were, in essence, doing the same work as paid staff.

Having reviewed the previous volunteer experience and considered the successful use of volunteers under the IS programme it was decided to discuss with partners, a new approach to the recruitment, utilisation and maintenance of volunteers. There was also a need to take into account advice from the body leading on the Parent Champion Programme who considered it to be “morally” wrong to expect volunteers to do the same role as paid staff.

The conclusion was to draw up a clear and structured framework to support volunteering. It was agreed that instead of using volunteers to do casework they would have a defined role profile reflecting their own skillset to support the service. The Volunteer Parent Champions will not offer advice to parents and carers but will instead provide specific elements of the support part of the WIASS offer. Volunteers will be recruited who have personal and/or professional experience in the world of SEND and the skills to be able to support other parents and carers as they navigate the SEND processes. Tasks within the volunteering profile will include:

- Listening to and providing emotional support and encouragement
- Supporting to express views, wishes and aspirations as part of the EHCP process
- Supporting with visits to prospective schools
- Encouraging an active role in decision making
- Promoting the IASS at various events

It is anticipated that the recruitment of volunteer Parent Champions will support long-term sustainability of WIASS especially as casework continues to grow in complexity and numbers continue to rise. It is hoped that as this work develops, that it can be used as a platform to develop a similar model for YP.

Impact to service beneficiaries

WIASS has always done its best to maintain a strong strategic presence and has been at the forefront of developing and adopting best practice. Examples include supporting the creation and maintenance of the local parent/carer forum, securing joint-funding for a Co-production Officer and being the single point of contact and referral for a very successful IS Programme.

Unfortunately, as previously mentioned, casework demand has dominated staff time. This coupled with citywide cuts to services has had an impact on the ability to plan and work strategically. Being able to carry out a full review of WIASS with local partners was only possible through the additional capacity provided by year one of the IAS programme. There is now a clear plan for operational and strategic development for WIASS.

WIASS knows how to build on its strengths to enhance its offer as efficiently as possible. For example staff have been able to develop training packages on the EHCP process. A series of workshops will be offered to parents/carers and CYP going through the EHCP process. It is hoped this on-going investment of time will create greater knowledge and understanding amongst local families and reduce casework referrals

Lessons learnt

WIASS needs to improve its data collection methods. There is a software system in place, solely for the IASS, that can hold this data but the collection systems need improving to record additional detail. For example, there is not enough evidence of “themes” and “issues” making it difficult to evidence the need for a strategic approach to be adopted. WIASS has excellent feedback from users but there is the need for more qualitative evidence such as case studies as demonstrated in the IS programme. These will both be areas of focus as we move ahead.

How is the approach being sustained?

A draft term of reference for a new WIASS Advisory Board is now in place. A priority is to operationalise this and have termly meetings with partners to fully understand where WIASS is going in the future. The service must continue to find ways of reducing reliance on casework activity and adopt an earlier intervention approach by developing and using resources, information and training to empower local families.

WIASS has a strong relationship with the LA and the CCG. This coupled with excellent relationships with the local parent/carers forum and YP’s board will support the service moving forward both operationally and strategically.

WIASS is proud of its achievements and values the high regard both locally and nationally that it is held in. The manager feels the team are amazing and is appreciative of support from local partners to ensure this reputation continues and, most importantly, provides an excellent service to local families. WIASS is looking forward to the next stage of the IASP and is excited about the future.

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