
The work of Family Information Services in Wales in 2014

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Key findings and areas for action

Every year many thousands of parents and professionals receive help through their local authority's Family Information Service. These information teams provide a wide range of essential information about childcare, children's centres, play, sports and arts activities for children, youth clubs, parenting classes and so on. But if parents and children are to benefit from the range of services available locally, they need to know about what is on offer. This information need has been recognised by the Government and today all local authorities in Wales have Family Information Services whose role is backed up in the Childcare Act 2006 and in regulations and statutory guidance. Similar arrangements are in place in England and Scotland.

Following on from an earlier report in 2011, the Family and Childcare Trust has undertaken a survey of Family Information Services in Wales. This survey aimed to give a comprehensive picture of the scale and nature of enquiries, staffing and outreach practices. This new survey allows for an assessment of the impact of spending cuts. Responses were received from 20 of the 22 local authorities in Wales.

Overall, the survey showed extremely high levels of satisfaction with Family Information Services across Wales. But there are some that are under-performing and not conforming to the standards that are specified in statutory guidance (for instance by failing to perform required outreach activities), and the quality of Family Information Service websites is variable. Other findings from this research include:

- Family Information Services in Wales are answering an estimated 76,000 enquiries every year, with 66 per cent of enquires coming from families and 33 per cent from professionals.
- While most (49 per cent) enquiries were about childcare (including childminder registration and professional queries), 13 per cent of enquiries were about leisure activities and similar, and another 11 per cent were concerned with practitioner matters.
- Some Family Information Services are using social media very effectively, which will hopefully encourage further adoption.
- There is too much variation in the content, detail and quality of online material. Some websites had key features (such as their childcare search facility or homepage) that were not functioning properly at the time of writing. Some included much more information than others and there was significant variation in the ease of use of the websites.
- The average staff size of a Family Information Service in Wales is 2.4 staff.
- Satisfaction among people who have used Family Information Services in Wales is extremely high – 99 per cent on average.
- There is a mixed budgetary picture for picture for Family Information Services across Wales. Some 50 per cent of Family Information Services reported no change in budget in the last 18 months, whereas 25 per cent saw cuts, and 25 per cent saw increases.
- Outreach to families that do not access services is another duty of Family Information Services outlined in statutory guidance. Over the last 18 months, 25 per cent of Family Information Services have reported cuts to their outreach services. By contrast, 33 per cent reported an increase in their outreach services, and 42 per cent of Family Information Services reported no change. This suggests that in many cases, the importance of outreach is being recognised, and it is being prioritised as a result.
- About three-quarters of work that Family Information Services conducts in collaboration with health visitors, youth services and Job Centre Plus was conducted on an ad hoc or individual basis. Such informal arrangements can collapse when staff move on and it can

be more difficult to replicate them more broadly without strategic agreements.

- The Family Information Service network in Wales is in the middle of a period of considerable change: 31 per cent reported major structural changes in the 18 months leading up to the survey, and half anticipate further changes.

The Family and Childcare Trust has five areas for action that would improve the quality of Family Information Services:

- *Local authorities must ensure that they fulfil the information duties outlined in the Childcare Act 2006 and its accompanying statutory guidance.*
- *Where local authorities are not providing a high quality Family Information Service that conforms to statutory guidance, the Welsh Government should hold them to account.*

- *Local authorities should take steps to improve the quality of online information available to parents and make use of Twitter and Facebook to reach families, ensuring best practice is replicated across Wales.*
- *Collaborative work involving Family Information Services – for instance with health visitors – should be formalised through service level agreements wherever possible.*
- *A number of different Welsh Government programmes – Flying Start, Families First, Communities First and Integrated Family Support Services – are concerned with improving outcomes for children and families, especially the most vulnerable. Resources from these different programmes could usefully be coordinated in supporting Family Information Services, as their work focuses on many of the families targeted by these programmes.*

Introduction

The Welsh Government has recognised that resilient and thriving families are at the heart of a prosperous and happy society. Factors that enable families to thrive include a decent income; time and resources to be together; infrastructure such as housing and transport; and high quality education and public services. This view underpins family policy and the development of services to support parents, carers and children. Such services may be universal or targeted at specific groups, and include nurseries, childminders, play, sports and arts activities for children, youth clubs, libraries and health services, as well as targeted support through Flying Start, Families First, Communities First and Integrated Family Support Services. But if parents and children are to benefit from the range of services available locally, they need to know about what is on offer. This information need has been recognised by the Government and today all local authorities in Wales have a Family Information Service with its duties enshrined in law.

Family Information Services typically answer telephone and email enquiries and sometimes provide face-to-face advice. They compile and update web-based information and also work with other professionals such as health visitors, children's centre and Job Centre Plus staff to get advice and information to parents. In Wales, Family Information Services are central to the delivery of the Flying Start programme, as they provide information on parenting support to families in this programme as well as arranging free nursery places for two year olds who get help through Flying Start. But in 2011 a survey undertaken by the Family and Childcare Trust¹ showed that spending cuts, as well as changes to the way that local authorities deliver information, were jeopardising the

¹ As Daycare Trust, the predecessor organisation of the Family and Childcare Trust

quality of Family Information Services. Since then there have been further pressures on local authority budgets. We have decided to carry out a new survey to capture the work of Family Information Services in Wales and to give an idea of the impact of cuts. We hope this research will be useful to policy makers in the Welsh Government, local authorities and others who work with children and families.

Our survey

The research aimed to provide a comprehensive picture of the work undertaken by Family Information Services across Wales and comprised a survey and audit of the content of Family Information Service websites. In late 2013 a survey was sent out to every Family Information Service manager in Wales (a parallel survey was run in England) and asked questions about:

- The staffing of the Family Information Service in relation to the numbers of staff it employed and their qualifications
- How the service was organised within the local authority structure
- The number and type of enquiries received in a typical month
- How Family Information Services reach out to families that under-utilise services such as free nursery provision
- Work undertaken in partnership with other professionals such as health visitors
- The nature and impact of recent and planned financial, operational and structural changes
- Case studies of good practice in working with parents and professionals.

Responses were received from 20 of the 22 Family Information Services in Wales, representing the same number of local authorities. Alongside the survey, we looked at websites of Family Information Services in order to examine the range of information available, its content and themes, its detail, the quality and accuracy of the information. We also

examined the use of social media – Facebook and Twitter – among Family Information Services.

Policy context: the development of Family Information Services

In England, Scotland and Wales, Family Information Services developed as a consequence of the desire by the Government to increase the provision of childcare and help greater numbers of parents move back into work after they had children. From the mid-1990s onwards, there was a large expansion of formal childcare provision in nurseries, after-school and holiday clubs. This increase in provision went hand-in-hand with moves to make childcare more affordable through the tax credit system, employment-supported childcare vouchers and part-time free early education places. All three and four-year-olds in Wales receive a minimum of ten hours of free early education with two-year-old children receiving extra hours through Flying Start support.

The overhaul of childcare brought the importance of information to the attention of policy-makers. If children and their parents are to benefit from affordable childcare – and other activities and services – families need to know about what is on offer. Moreover, this information needs to get to all parents, including those with the fewest educational qualifications, no internet access, limited literacy or fluency in English or Welsh. Education legislation going through Parliament presented the Government with the opportunity to address the information needs of families. Section 118A (3) of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 introduced a childcare information duty for local authorities in England and Wales.

As a consequence of these developments, from 1999 onwards a growing number of local authorities – in all parts of Britain – set up Children's Information Services which aimed to address this need for information. In the areas covered by the first Sure Start children's centres from 1999, these local programmes delivered much of this information to families. The work of these first family-focussed information services was recognised in Choice for parents:

the best start for children, the Government's Ten Year Childcare Strategy, published in 2004 which outlined a commitment by Government to improve parents' access to information about childcare. This pledge became a reality with the passage of the Childcare Act 2006, which extended local authorities' existing duties to provide information about childcare. This legislation came into force in 2008, alongside regulations and statutory guidance (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008a; 2008b).

In Wales, Section 27 of the Childcare Act 2006 obliges local authorities to run a service providing information, advice and assistance about childcare and other activities of benefit to parents, children and young people up to the age of 20. There are additional regulations attached to Section 27 of the Childcare Act – The Childcare Act 2006 (Provision of Information) (Wales) Regulations 2008, a statutory instrument providing a detailed outline of the type of childcare information that local authorities are required to provide to families including: contact details and registration information, the cost of childcare, the times it is provided and its suitability for disabled children. The regulations also oblige local authorities to provide information about other services for families, children and young people.

There is also statutory guidance for local authorities on the implementation of Section 27 of the Childcare Act 2006 (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008). It requires that local authorities hold and provide information on registered and non-registered childcare, as well as other services of relevance to parents and children. The guidance sets out the obligations of Family Information Services in much greater detail than does the equivalent guidance in England. In contrast to their counterparts in England, local authorities in Wales are not obliged to provide a childcare brokerage service that can provide parents who need it with extra help in finding childcare.

Although the legislative framework for Family Information Services came from Westminster, the Welsh Government has continued to see them as providing an important service to parents and their children. It sees Family Information Services as an integral part in the

delivery of a number of flagship programmes: Flying Start, Families First, the Integrated Family Support Service and Communities First. At a UK-wide level Family Information Services will also help get out information about important initiatives such as the government's new scheme to provide 20 per cent support for childcare costs, up to £2,000 a year per child, and the childcare support offered through Universal Credit (HM Treasury, 2014).

As noted above, the Welsh Government has introduced a more integrated approach to supporting the most disadvantaged under-fives through Flying Start. Today over 36,000 children are targeted for additional help from health visitors and other tailored support. Flying Start also provides parenting advice, free early education for two-year-olds, language development and play programmes. This ambitious policy has the capacity to make a real difference to the poorest children, helping narrow the educational gaps between them and their more advantaged peers. The Welsh Government envisages that Family Information Services will get information out to families who may qualify for this targeted provision and match children who qualify for free early education to vacant places in nurseries.

The Families First programme provides funding for tailored support to help deprived families. Alongside this is the Integrated Family Support Service which is trying to turn round the lives of families experiencing multiple disadvantages. The Communities First programme is tackling poverty in a number of target areas. All these social programmes require that professionals work together and know about the range of support that is available to families. Local authority Family Information Services hold this information and can direct professionals and parents to sources of advice and support.

Alongside these social programmes the Westminster government is in the process of changing the way that parents' childcare costs are supported. Between now and 2017 the present tax credit system will be merged with other benefits to form a single payment called Universal Credit. For low income families support for childcare costs will in future come through the childcare element of Universal Credit. In March 2013 the Government announced that it intends to increase the level

of childcare support through Universal Credit support to 85 per cent of costs, up from 70 per cent of costs that parents receive today. This was reiterated in the March 2014 Budget announcement.

For families who are not entitled to tax credit support, the Government has announced that it will phase out the present employer-supported childcare voucher scheme and replace it with a scheme where the Government contributes 20 per cent of childcare costs, up to a value of £2,000 per year per child. The Government proposes to introduce this new scheme in 2015. It is planned to be available to families where both parents work but are each earning less than £150,000 per year and whose children are under twelve years old.²

These changes will result in new demands on Family Information Services, who will have to get information out to those that will qualify for these initiatives. Pressure on local authority budgets makes this a particular challenge.

² Budget 2014 Announcement, Prime Minister's Office, 18 March, 2014

Research findings: The work of Family Information Services today

There are currently 22 Family Information Services in Wales, one in every local authority. At present 69 per cent of Family Information Services in Wales exist as separate teams within children's services, education, early years or childcare. The remainder also operate within the local authority, but do so outside of children's services or education, either as a distinct team or merged with another unit. None of the respondents to the survey reported that their Family Information Service was outsourced or merged into a helpline, unlike in England where some local authorities have done this. Our 2014 survey showed that the average staff size of a Family Information Service in Wales is 2.4 full-time equivalent staff. This compares with 4.6 full-time equivalent staff in England, although Welsh local authorities generally serve a smaller population than do local authorities in England.

Information provided and number of enquiries

All Family Information Services provide written and web-based information, as well as answering telephone and email enquiries. In recent years Family Information Services across Wales have made increasing use of social media to reach parents, although this is still in a relatively early stage of adoption overall. Many Family Information Services also provide face-to-face help through outreach sessions or through a 'shop front' presence in libraries or council headquarters.

Excluding website hits and social media followers, our survey showed that Family Information Services were dealing with an average of 288 enquiries in a typical month, or across Wales some 76,000 enquiries every year. This figure needs to be seen in context of the increased use of social media to reach families, and also the population of Wales. Census 2011 indicated that there were 365,427 families in Wales where at least one child was under 18 years old, compared with 6.4 million such families in England.

All Family Information Services in Wales have an online presence, usually as a sub-section of the local authority website. However, the online

information produced by Family Information Services varies considerably in its content, detail and quality. Some Family Information Service websites restrict themselves to basic information about childcare. Other sites have more varied content and give details about a range of services and activities for families, including Flying Start, school admissions information, activities for young people, as well as information about childcare.

The information presented on the websites was generally accurate and up-to-date, however in some cases there were problems with broken or out of date links. In a few cases, core website features were not working – for instance a broken homepage or online childcare search facility.

Websites varied considerably in terms of how well their material was organised and how easy they were to navigate. The best examples had clear headings and few visual elements competing for attention. In the best cases it was easy to tell at a glance which part of the website different information or guidance would fall under. One effective strategy was to construct the homepage around the most frequently asked questions or most commonly requested resources (e.g. childcare search). Presenting information as answers to common questions, common issues or as practical guidance made it easier to read and more involving for parents.

The utilisation of social media varied significantly among the different Family Information Services – only some had a social media presence, and of those that did, some used Facebook, some used Twitter, and some used both. The best use of Twitter involved a Twitter feed being integrated directly into the Family Information Service's own homepage, allowing for that Twitter feed's news and content to be displayed on the Family Information Service website. This Twitter feed often contained 're-tweeted' content from sources external to the Family Information Service that would be of interest to families. This meant that visitors to the site could find out about events, information from other services and so on. Integration with the homepage meant that people were able to

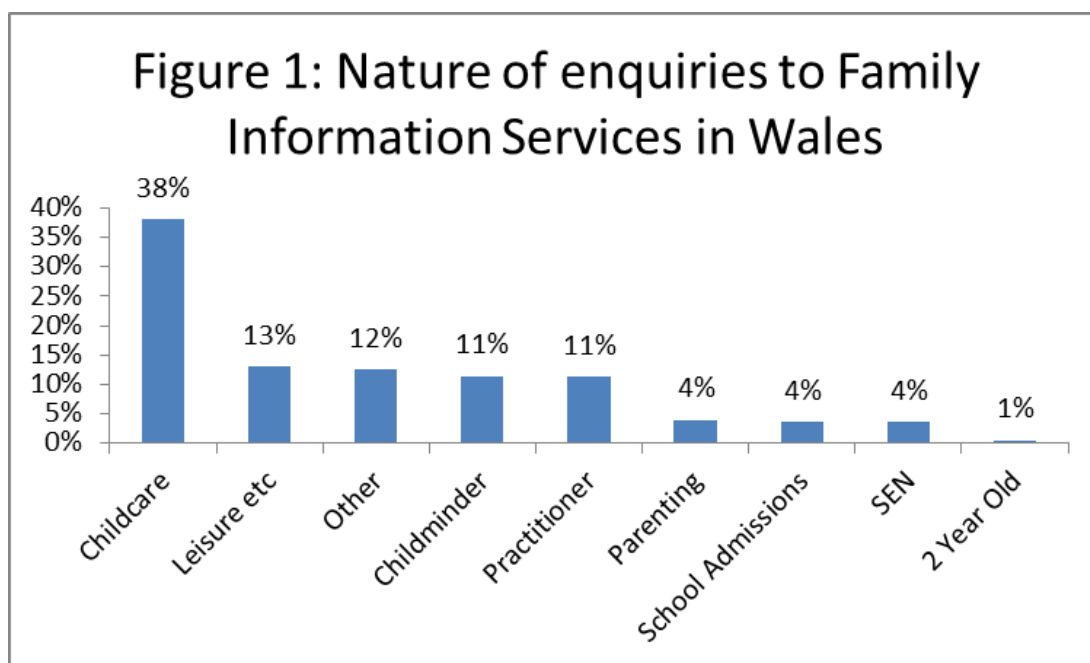
access the Twitter information without having to know about Twitter or the existence of the Family Information Service's Twitter account. It also acted as a way of providing extra information to site visitors that they might find useful but that falls outside the direct remit of the Family Information Service.

Good use was also made of social media to announce important information from the Family Information Service, and also to broadcast messages from other local organisations that were relevant to families and children. Twitter was used to respond to specific questions and enquiries from individuals. Sometimes, Family Information Services that used both Twitter and Facebook published different content on each. This might be because different posts are thought to be appropriate in each case, but on the other hand it potentially risks parents feeling like there is no single authoritative source of news from their Family Information Service.

Nature of enquiries

We examined the nature of enquiries and the 2014 survey showed that over a third (38 per cent) of enquires to Family Information Services were about childcare (excluding enquiries that relate to the free early education for two-year-olds or childminders) (Figure 1). The survey also highlighted the breadth of work undertaken by Family Information Services today. For example, they hold information on leisure, sports and arts provision and sources of help for Families with special educational needs.

Some 66 per cent of enquiries came from families, the remainder from staff, both within and outside the local authority. The survey showed that 56 per cent of enquiries to Family Information Services in Wales were over the telephone, 25 per cent were email enquiries and 19 per cent were face-to-face enquiries at advice clinics, events and so on. Family information Services in Wales are providing much more face-to-face advice than their counterparts in England, who deliver 10 per cent of their advice face-to-face.



Source: Family and Childcare Trust Survey of Family Information Services, 2014

Outreach

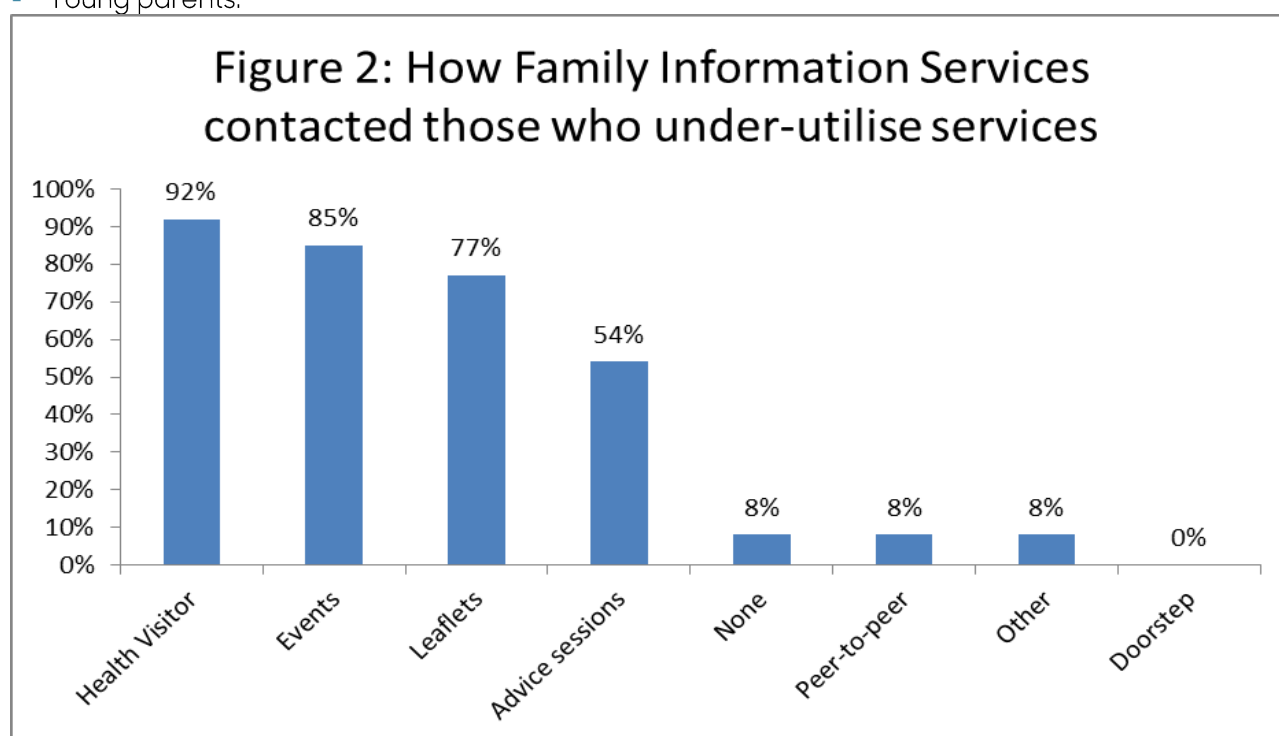
As noted above, most Family Information Services are contacted by parents through telephone enquiries. But as well as responding to enquiries, actively reaching out to families who may under-utilise services is a core activity of Family Information Services.

These families may include

- Those with negative experiences of education or helping agencies
- Parents who work long hours
- Low income families
- Parents with limited literacy or fluency in English or Welsh
- Families who are new to the area
- Families who move frequently, for example, those in private rental accommodation
- Gypsy/Traveller families and some migrant and minority ethnic groups
- Parents with poor mental or physical health
- Young parents.

Some of the families at risk of under-utilising services are those who may qualify for support through Families First, Communities First and Flying Start. But this is targeted, not universal, provision and in order to benefit from it, families need information. Outreach provided by Family Information Services, often in collaboration with other professionals is a key part of the delivery of these programmes.

The survey looked at how Family Information Services reached out to the above groups (Figure 2). It shows that almost all (92 per cent) local authorities in Wales rely on health visitors to inform parents about support services, including Family Information Services themselves. Health visitors may distribute publicity leaflets to the families they visit or in clinics, or simply talk to parents about childcare and childcare information. Alongside health visitors, events (85 per cent) and leaflets (77 per cent) were the two other leading methods for conducting outreach. Although less popular, advice sessions were used by just over half of Family Information Services in Wales (54 per cent). The only other method of outreach reported in our survey was peer-to-peer outreach, which was used in one case.



Source: Family and Childcare Trust Survey of Family Information Services, 2014

We can compare these figures to the results for England. In England, advice sessions (56 per cent), health visitors (95 per cent) and leaflets (71 per cent) were used to about the same degree. Events were less commonly used in England (56 per cent), although peer-to-peer outreach (19 per cent), doorstep outreach (11 per cent) and 'other' outreach (24 per cent) were more common. It is worth noting that a greater number of Family Information Services in England reported doing no outreach (14 per cent compared to 8 per cent in Wales).

It can be seen that Family Information Services often rely on other professionals and organisations to reach parents. This shows the importance of collaborative or multi-agency work, an issue discussed in the next section. The survey also highlighted good outreach practice in some Family Information Services who have pioneered ways of delivering information to hard-to-reach and hard-to-engage groups. They may attend local events and parents evenings in primary schools and some visit supermarkets on Saturday to target working parents. A number of Family Information Services work closely with Jobcentre Plus and provide advice sessions to their clients. The survey showed examples of Family Information Services working with their council's birth registration team to disseminate information to new parents. Others have set up meetings with the big employers in its area to ensure that information about childcare reaches their workforces.

Research shows that parents are particularly responsive to oral advice from peers, presenting valuable opportunities for outreach (Family and Childcare Trust, 2013). One challenge for Family Information Services across Wales is to establish an effective method of peer-to-peer outreach. One scheme that has recently been started in England is the Parent Champion scheme developed by the Family and Childcare Trust.

Here volunteers are trained and supported to provide advice to other parents about childcare, the free early education offer and other support for families. Given the current low level of peer-to-peer outreach activity across both England and Wales, there are real opportunities for innovation and improvement in this area.

While there is much good practice, the Family and Childcare Trust believes there is an over-reliance on health visitors and printed leaflets to get information to parents in many local authorities. Some local authorities have cut back on contacting parents on the doorstep and street. This may partly be a consequence of cuts to staffing and budgets; our survey showed that 25 per cent of local authorities in Wales had cut their outreach services over the last 18 months (although 33 per cent had increased it (see Figure 4)). But additionally, some Family Information Services may lack an understanding of the barriers to taking up services, as well as good outreach practice. There is certainly a need to ensure that all Family Information Services reach out to those who under-utilise support services and emulate practice from the best local authorities. There is a role for the National Association of Family Information Services to disseminate good outreach practice and to improve its quality.

The Family and Childcare Trust is concerned that not all Welsh Family Information Services were providing outreach. Outreach is not only vital for ensuring that information reaches some of the most deprived families, but it is also a statutory requirement on local authorities, so it cannot be ignored.

Collaboration with other professionals

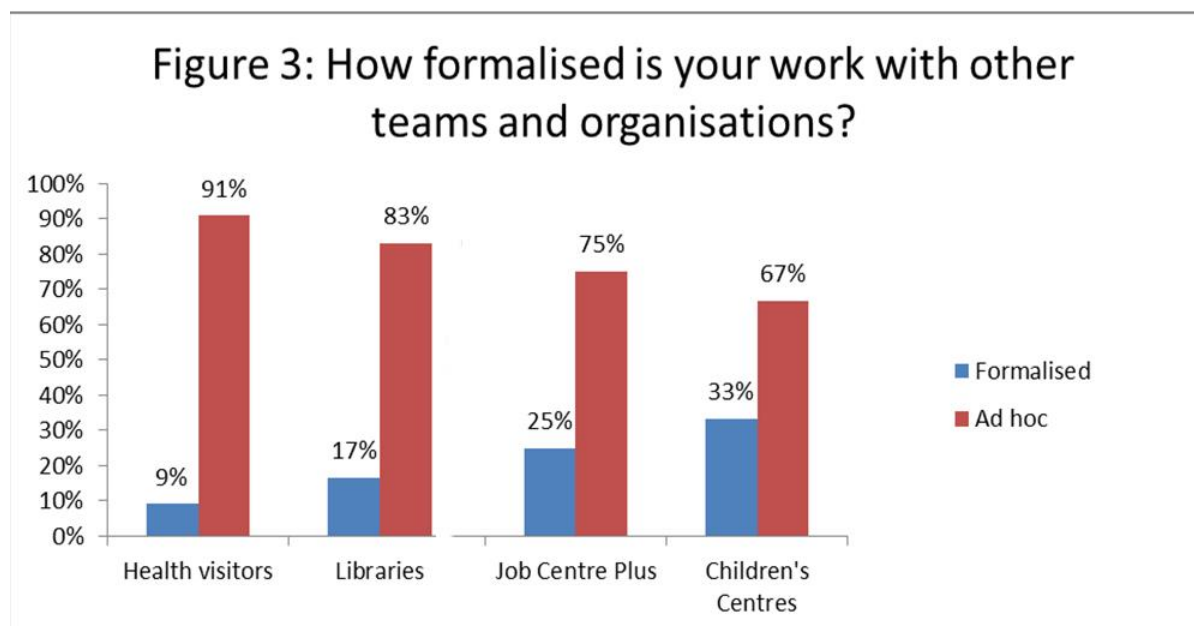
The survey highlighted the importance of Family Information Services to other staff and organisations, within and outside the local authority. Across the local authorities that replied to the survey some 33 per cent of enquiries came from other professionals, most frequently health visitors, social workers, children's centre staff, public libraries, the youth service and Job Centre Plus staff.

The information supplied by Family Information Services in response to these professional enquiries is varied. It may involve using other staff to deliver information to parents, for example, training children's centre or Job Centre Plus staff about local provision and entitlements to financial help with childcare costs, or using health visitors and public libraries to get information to new parents. Additionally, Family Information Services may deliver face-to-face advice sessions using the offices of other organisations such as Job Centre Plus or community groups.

Collaboration with other professionals and organisations helps Family Information Services

spread their information more widely, including to the most disadvantaged groups. The survey examined the nature of their cross-professional collaboration, and whether it was formalised by a strategy or a service level agreement (Figure 3). Despite the importance and effectiveness of this work, we were concerned that most collaborations with other professionals were on an ad hoc or individual basis. For example, about three-quarters of all work with Job Centre Plus was on an ad hoc or individual basis. The figure rose to 83 per cent for libraries and 91 per cent in the case of health visitors.

There are risks in such an approach: staff turnover means that individual and ad hoc arrangements may collapse if they are not formalised. Even without staff turnover, the absence of strategic or service level agreements can prevent good practice being replicated across the local authority. Formal multi-agency agreements can also mean less duplication of services for disadvantaged families. Those Family Information Services who are committed to improving their work may wish to consider how they formalise collaborative or multi-agency arrangements.



Source: Family and Childcare Trust Survey of Family Information Services, 2014

Quality of services

Outreach and collaborative work involving other staff and organisations are all components of high quality Family Information Services. Quality is an issue that the survey examined in the context of continued pressure on local authority budgets.

Our survey showed high levels of parental satisfaction where this was monitored, with an average of 99 per cent of users judging them to be helpful. But parental satisfaction will only be maintained by setting in place systems to preserve or improve the quality of services. Some local authorities encourage Family Information Services staff to study for vocational qualifications, for example Level 3 or Level 4 NVQs in advice and guidance. Having qualified staff is a particularly important factor in determining the quality of services to families of disabled children (Natcen, 2005). The 2014 survey showed that across Wales, about 35 per cent of Family Information Service staff have a relevant Level 3 qualification, e.g. an NVQ in information, advice and guidance.

Parental satisfaction on its own does not provide a full picture of quality. One more holistic way of assessing quality is provided by the Families First Award, which evaluates the full range of activities of a Family Information Service, including outreach. The Families First Award is a quality assurance process for Family Information Services, developed by The National Association of Family Information Services, Family Information Services practitioners and the Department for Education. To date, 10 of the 22 Welsh Family Information Services hold a Families First Award, with seven more currently undertaking it.

Given the restructuring of many Family Information Services and cuts to their budgets this continued commitment to quality is encouraging.

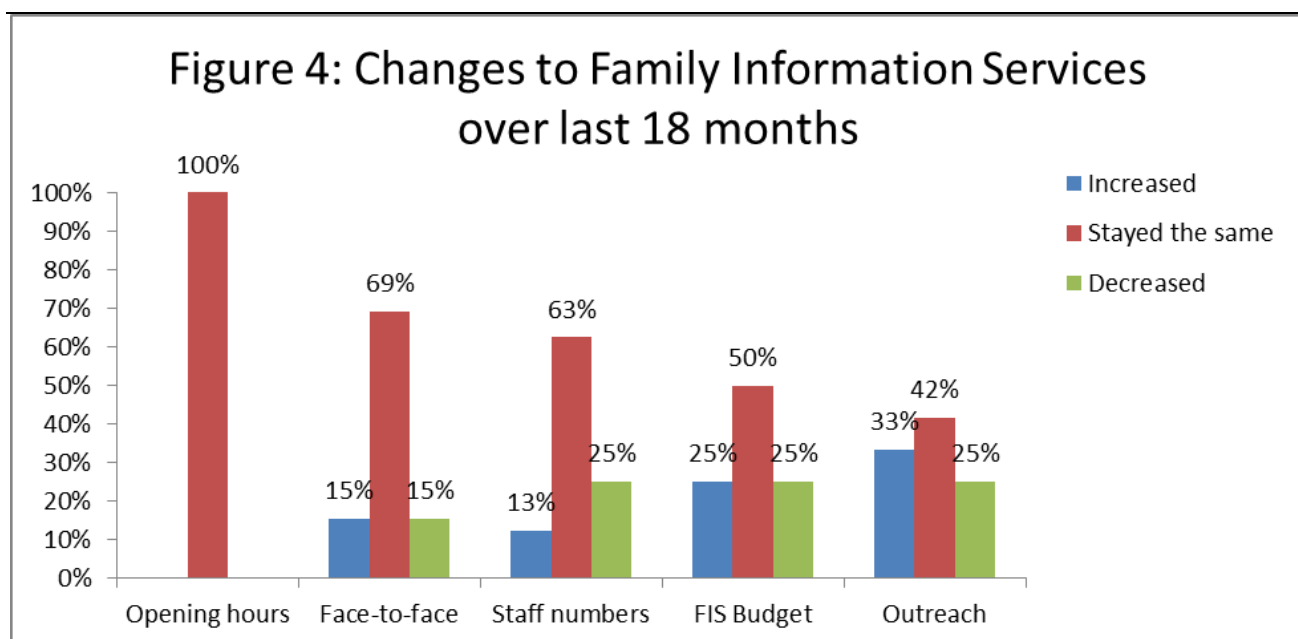
The impact of spending cuts

In recent years, local authority funding cuts have forced many changes to Family Information Services. These include budget reductions, changes to the range of services on offer, staffing changes, as well as structural changes such as where the Family Information Service role sits within the local authority. The Family and Childcare Trust's survey aimed to map these changes and analyse the impacts of them on families.

Just under a third of Welsh Family Information Services experienced major structural changes in the last 18 months. Figure 4 below illustrates the changes to specific services. The main trend was that the level of service provided by Family Information Services in Wales stayed the same in about half the cases in each area. Most areas of service saw a mix of increased, decreased and constant service across the different Family Information Services in Wales.

Across Wales, there was one service that increased in more Family Information Services than they decreased in – outreach – although a quarter of Family Information Services had cut their provision in this area in the last 18 months. Staff numbers saw about twice as many decreases as increases across the country. Finally, face-to-face services and budgets were increased in as many Family Information Services as they were cut.

The greatest degree of change was seen in outreach services – here, only 42 per cent of Family Information Services reported no change. A third of Family Information Services increased their service in this area and a quarter saw it reduced. The least change was recorded for opening hours: none of the survey respondents reported changes to opening hours in the last 18 months.



Source: Family and Childcare Trust Survey of Family Information Services, 2014

While we believe Family Information Services should not be immune to cuts when there are many other important services provided by local authorities, cutting back on outreach has the potential to undermine some of Government's flagship social policies such as Flying Start. It is essential that information about this initiative and the qualification criteria reaches groups at risk of not using this help. This is why Family Information Services need to undertake effective outreach, a role that is enshrined in law and outlined in statutory guidance (The Childcare Act 2006, and Statutory guidance to Welsh Local Authorities 2008).

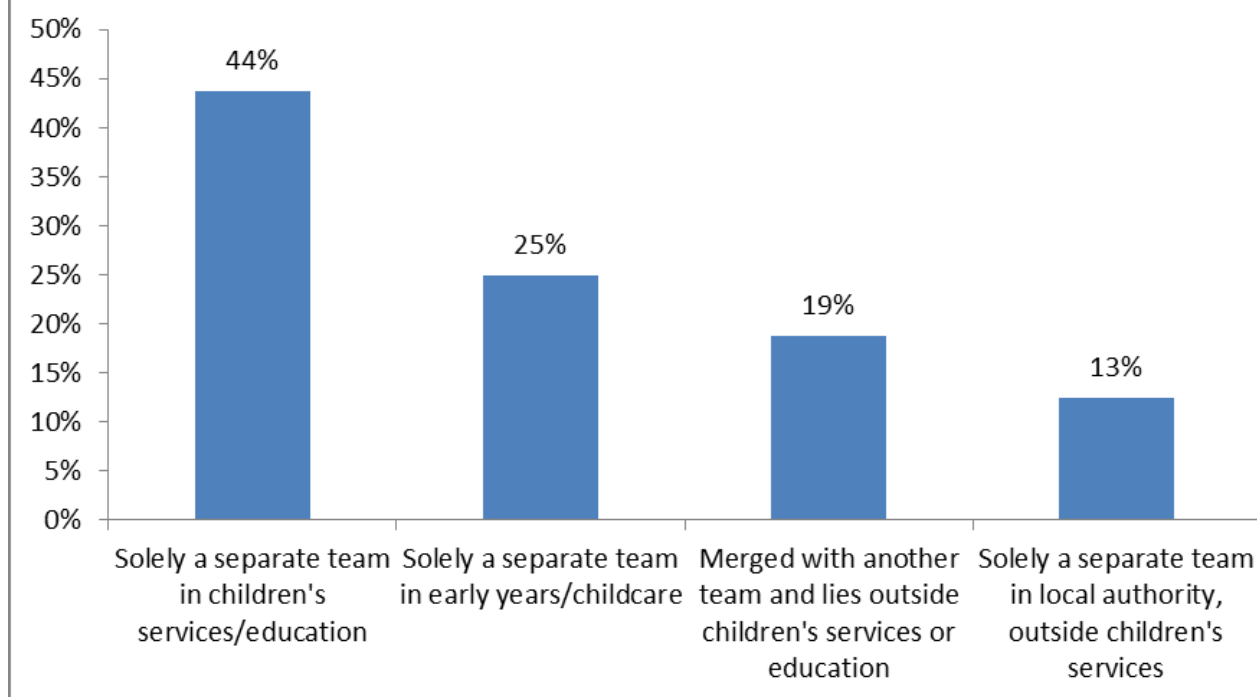
We believe that the money that is currently being spent on Family Information Services in Wales could be used better if it was more coordinated. At present, in addition to money from their local authority's revenue support grant, money from a number of different Welsh Government programmes is also sometimes used to support Family Information Services. This variety of funding streams leads to a varied and complex funding landscape. Ensuring a more coordinated and consistent approach would allow the money that is spent on Family Information Services to be used more effectively.

Structural changes within local authorities

31 per cent of Welsh Family Information services reported major structural changes in the 18 months leading up to the survey (for example, changes to team remit or job descriptions). Around half of Family Information Services in Wales believed that their local authorities were planning further changes in the next six months and the next financial year that would affect their service, whereas just under half did not believe that such changes were planned.

Figure 5 draws from the 2014 survey and shows how Family Information Services are presently organised across Wales. In 82 per cent of cases, Family Information Services operated as distinct teams, although not always within the same part of the local authority. Almost half of Family Information Services in Wales (44 per cent) operate as separate units within children's services, with a quarter operating as separate teams within early years or childcare, and 13 per cent operating as a separate team in the local authority outside of children's services. Around a fifth (19 per cent) of Family Information Services in Wales are merged with another team in the local authority outside of children's services or education.

Figure 5: How Family Information Services are organised within local authorities in 2014



Conclusions and recommendations

Having children brings parents into contact with a whole new range of services and activities and not every new parent knows about them. Family Information Services exist to bridge this knowledge gap. They provide essential information to parents and their children – about finding childcare and the financial support to pay for it, as well as a range of other activities and help for families. Family Information Services can support parents to move back in to work and ensure that more children take up the provision to which they are entitled.

Family Information Services in Wales are answering an estimated 76,000 enquiries every year, and our survey shows that overall, the majority of Family Information Services in Wales are providing a high quality service. Parental satisfaction with these services has been maintained since the 2011 survey. Despite pressures on budgets over the last three we believe that the quality of information services has generally been maintained and in many cases Family Information Services have developed new ways of working. There has not been a single overall direction of travel in terms of service provision and funding, with some areas seeing cuts in some Family Information Services, and greater investment in others. For example, in outreach, the overall trend has been for provision to remain the same (or towards greater investment), although there have been cuts in a number of Family Information Services in this area.

This survey gives an insight into the changes that have taken place so far to Family Information Services, but it also makes it clear that there is still a good deal of change left to come. In this survey, 31 per cent of Family Information Services in Wales reported major structural changes in the 18 months leading up to the survey, and around half believed that further changes were in the pipeline for the coming six months. Only when these changes have bedded in will we be able to make a final

analysis of changes to Family Information Services in Wales in recent years.

The 2014 survey points to four areas of concern.

First, there is too much variation in the content, detail and quality of online material. Some websites included much more information than others and there was significant variation in the ease of use of the websites. Some websites had key features such as childcare search and homepage that were not functioning properly at the time of writing this report. There is a considerable gap between the best use of social media among Family Information Services and the weakest (where there is no use at all). Hopefully, the example of best practice will encourage others.

A second concern is about collaborative or multi-agency work. Family Information Services work with many different teams and organisations, both within and outside local authorities. Despite the importance cross-professional collaboration, about three-quarters of all work with troubled families teams, health visitors, the youth service and Job Centre Plus are on an ad hoc or individual basis. Such informal arrangements can collapse when staff move on and it can be difficult to replicate them more broadly without strategic agreements.

Third, the Family and Childcare Trust is worried about cuts to outreach services that get information to excluded groups. The 2014 survey showed that while a third of local authorities had increased their outreach, 25 per cent had cut their activities in this area. It is vital that Family Information Services across Wales continue to emphasise outreach. While we believe Family Information Services should not be immune to cuts, cutting back on outreach has the potential to undermine some of Government's flagship social policies such as Flying Start. It is essential that information about this initiative and the qualification criteria reaches groups at risk of not using this help.

This makes it particularly important for Family Information Services to undertake outreach work.

Fourth, over the next year around half of local authorities are expected to restructure their Family Information Services or see further changes to their budgets. While research conducted by the Family and Childcare Trust has shown that Family Information Services can make changes and work more effectively, there are limits to how much of their budgets can be trimmed. This is particularly true in Wales, where around a third of Family Information Services are run by fewer than two staff. The Family and Childcare Trust believes that in most local authorities further reductions in staffing will impact on the quality of information services.

Overall, the survey shows the majority of Family Information Services in Wales are providing a high quality service to families. But there are a minority that are under-performing and not conforming to the standards that are specified in statutory guidance, for instance by not conducting outreach or by having poor quality websites. The Welsh government must hold any under-performing local authorities to account.

The Family and Childcare Trust has five areas for action that would improve the quality of Family Information Services:

- Local authorities must ensure that they fulfil the information duties outlined in the Childcare Act 2006 and its accompanying statutory guidance.
- Where local authorities are not providing a high quality Family Information Service that conforms to statutory guidance, the Welsh Government should hold them to account.
- Local authorities should take steps to improve the quality of online information available to parents and make use of Twitter and Facebook to reach families, ensuring best practice is replicated across Wales.

- Collaborative work involving Family Information Services –for instance with health visitors – should be formalised through service level agreements as much as possible.
- A number of different Welsh Government programmes – Flying Start, Families First, Communities First and Integrated Family Support Services– are concerned with improving outcomes for children and families, especially the most vulnerable. Resources from these different programmes could usefully be coordinated in supporting Family Information Services, as their work focuses on many of the families targeted by these programmes.

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About the Family and Childcare Trust

The Family and Childcare Trust works to make the UK a family friendly society where all parents and children have the resources they need to thrive. The charity was formed in 2013 as a result of a merger between Daycare Trust and the Family and Parenting Institute. Collectively both organisations have almost 40 years' experience of policy and campaigning on issues affecting families. The Family and Childcare Trust undertakes research and policy advocacy. It also works with parents, businesses and government in order to serve families better. Information and outreach have

always been a core part of the organisation's work. The Family and Childcare Trust is presently running a Parent Champions project in a number of local authorities where parents are recruited to provide peer-to-peer advice parents and to encourage them to take up help such as the free early education offer. The organisation also supports Family Information

Service by running the National Association of Family Information Services, a membership body for them.

Want to find out more?

Call us on 0207 940 7510

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The Welsh Government has a Family Information Service Network Support Contract, which aims to monitor and improve the work of Family Information Services in Wales. At present, this contract is held by the Family and Childcare Trust in partnership with Children in Wales and Wrexham Family Information Service. No assessment has been offered of this Contract in the report because it would be inappropriate for the Family and Childcare Trust to evaluate its own work.

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