

# Weathering the Storm

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*Gary Todd – NAFIS Conference – 18<sup>th</sup> March 2010*

## Introduction

Before I start, let me introduce myself for those that don't know me. My name is Gary Todd and I wear a couple of hats - 60% of my time is spent as the FIS Manager for Dorset County Council – the other 40% over the last year has been spent working on behalf of DCSF with the Family Information Directory Local Authority Support Team.

## So why the title 'Weathering the Storm'?

Let me begin by going back in time ...

On 1<sup>st</sup> November 2003, The Guardian reported the following:

***"Academics in California have confirmed what every office worker in the land has known for years: we are drowning in a rising sea of information.***

***Researchers at the University of California say the amount of information being generated worldwide has increased by 30% each year since 1999, and that the amount being stored has doubled in that time."***

***That means 800 megabytes of data - roughly equivalent to 800 books - was created for every man, woman and child on the planet in 2002."***

A sobering thought when we consider that was more than 7 years ago!

If we do the maths, we discover that this equates to a 600% increase since then, or a staggering 5000 books worth of information per person.

## 2 mins

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At a time when information is often freely available, in vast quantities and such varied quality, I hope you'll agree that it is more important than ever for Local Authorities to ensure that they provide a trusted and efficient route to comprehensive, accurate and current information for the public and practitioners. However, there are a range of other factors that we face as information providers that make things harder:

- There's the challenge of our current economic climate impacting on budgets
- the speed of development of information technology
- barriers when we try to engage both internal and external partners
- and the list goes on

So, how do we as FISs build this public trust and ensure excellent information delivery, amidst this rising sea of information, when the weather is getting worse around us and the waves threaten to break over our heads?

The answer? We need to put in place a foundation, a robust platform on which to build our service, a framework to stand on – in other words ... we need ... a raft.

Now, I could immediately pick holes in this analogy, I could argue that rafts can be capsized fairly easily, that they won't survive a storm, and so on – however, as few of us are likely to be able to afford an FIS equivalent of a Sunseeker motoryacht, we need to be realistic. For the eternal optimists amongst us, who knows what the future holds – but for now, we need to be pragmatic.

## 4 mins

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At this point I would like to state that what I am about to present is by no means the only solution – FISs are diverse and tailored to local need and you may already be doing something that works, or have parts of this framework in place. If so, you should be pleased – however, my hope is that you take something away from this that will help you now to manage your FIS delivery better in 12 months' time, moving forward.

## So, how do we build a good, strong raft, which is able to support the team to deliver, and at the same time navigate the restless ocean?

Now I'm not a secret raft building expert – so I had to research this - general online consensus indicates that we start with **two solid logs** on which to build our frame. For an FIS, this would represent a comprehensive and robust Business Plan. To ensure the strength of the FIS, the Business Plan must identify the key drivers, statutory legislation and local strategies that form the backbone of the service, whilst also providing justification for why FIS is the best place for delivery of Section 12 of The Childcare Act. It is also fundamental that the role of the FIS is clearly defined in a Children's Trust Family Information Strategy – many of us may not have this in place, there was a workshop about this earlier? but a document like this should provide significant leverage to weather the storms of efficiency, restructure and reduced funding.

Once the Business Plan is in place, we can start to build the raft – using a number of planks attached across the two logs, tied in (or nailed) to the Business Plan. These planks comprise the various plans that define how the FIS will achieve its goals.

At this point, we go to my one and only slide that should help us to visualise how this might work.

## 6 mins

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For the first plank, FISs ought to consider how they are going to engage key partners. When I first started this exercise, I made my list of partners to engage and ended up with approximately 30 different people and organisations to contact and 'win-over' – and for that many partners, we must have a plan.

The second plank is one of the most important, the Data Quality Plan. As CISs, we were experts in childcare data and we developed protocols to manage this information effectively. Now, we have a multitude of information types that have, in many cases, been shoe-horned into our ECD and FSD systems.

Parenting courses, Aiming High for Disabled Children short breaks, Third Sector Volunteering opportunities, Online publications – how do these new data types fit in with our current data structure, if at all? Moving forward, it is important that we look at the data we need to hold and develop data structures, systems and protocols in line with need and not limited by previous data standards. Clearly, this will need to be addressed centrally, as well as locally, to ensure a consistent approach and this will be a substantial area of work.

The third plank is the Budget Plan – I’ve added funding onto this as I believe this plan should identify new sources of FIS revenue, primarily through identifying funding from key partners in return for managing and delivering their information. This is where FISs can leverage funding against efficiencies in the Local Authority.

OK – so all these plans could be one document, or several – the important thing is that we scope out how we intend on addressing these various functions. Once this is done, it is much easier to ‘hang’ operational delivery onto the framework we set out.

## 8 mins

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### **So, we’ve built our raft around a robust Business Plan, and planned who, what and with what money – what next?**

Every raft needs buoyancy, something to keep it operating in a safe and stable manner. This is where we need to identify an Action Plan (or action plans) – what are we going to deliver and when? And then stick to it!

And we need clear processes, something that many FISs have been doing for years, but we need to manage the new and old processes in an effective manner. One way of doing this is to model our business processes so we can not only formalise them but also streamline or hone them – but there are other methods as well – maybe for your FIS, just a set of step-by-step procedures written in a Word document is best – whatever the method, it must be able to be controlled, reviewed and disseminated effectively and

efficiently to maintain the high standards of delivery we aspire to in FISs. This is what keeps us 'afloat'.

I haven't got time to go into all these things in more detail, but I wanted to give you a flavour of how FISs might consider navigating the changing sector that is Family Information. And this is something that will take time ...

There are other elements of the raft that can be considered – the rope symbolising the working agreements we set with partners, along with our staff's passion for delivering FIS to families. The mast and sail are the Communications & Marketing Plan and the Channel Development Plan, that define how we are going to be visible on the horizon to service users, and how to best use new technology and emerging channels effectively to harness the wind of policy and change. The rudder is the Performance Management Plan and any Assessment that is undertaken, that can feedback into our plans in order to improve our FIS delivery.

And what of actually sailing the ship, the day-to-day delivery and operation of FIS – the important bit – well for that we need to identify training needs and good training provision. You wouldn't think of sailing in the open ocean without this training, and FIS is no different.

## **To conclude**

This may seem easy, or it may seem utterly daunting – likely, it's somewhere inbetween - but we are not alone in this. DCSF are currently looking at how best to support FIS in the future and are working with NAFIS, Ofsted and Government Office on Data Standards and other methods to help FISs over the next 12 months to work smarter, cleverer, better.

If you want to ask about anything I've raised, I am happy to discuss this with you today – otherwise, the best way to feed back about some of these challenges is through your regular contact with Government Office representatives.

Hopefully I've given you something to think about – in the meantime, we hold out for a calmer sea in the future.