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## Complex enquiries and Family Information Services in Wales *Duncan Lugton*



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## Introduction

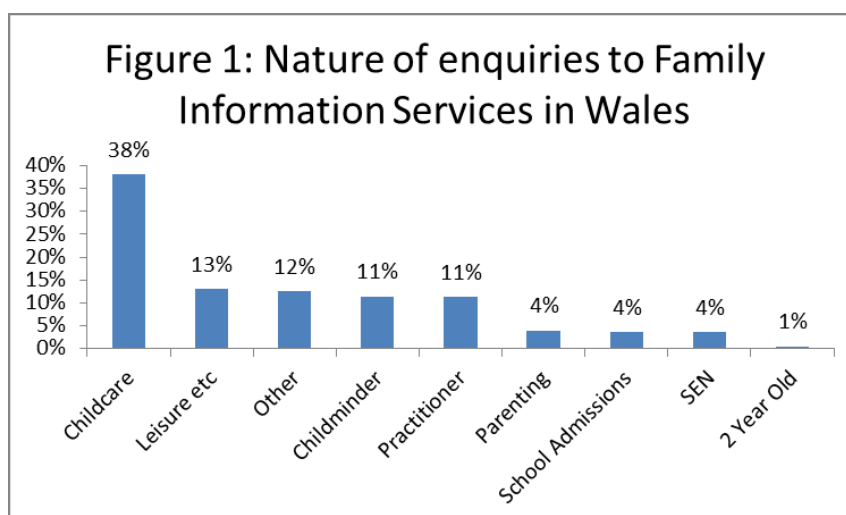
Family Information Services in Wales answer an estimated 76,000 enquiries every year. (Lugton, Rutter, & Stocker, 2014) These can range from routine questions about the contact details of a local nursery to much more complex requests from someone about support with a specific special educational need or disability.

The report sheds new light on what exactly ‘complex’ enquiries are. It highlights the work Family Information Services do and the value they can add through successful responses, as well as examining the breadth and depth of expertise needed to respond. The report also shares some examples of best practice and looks at what is needed to carry this work forward into the future.

Complex enquiries deserve attention for a number of reasons. They are examples of some of the most demanding and creative work done by Family Information Services and provide a cross-section of all the different areas of Family Information Service work. They are also often cases involving particularly disadvantaged families which – if not dealt with effectively – could result in higher levels of need further down the line. Finally, looking at complex enquiries gives us a better idea of the range of outcomes for parents and families that Family Information Service work can support.

Family Information Services in Wales have some important features that are relevant to the way they handle complex enquiries. Compared to England, a much larger proportion of Welsh Family Information Services have their own dedicated phone lines, instead of being merged in to generic local authority hotlines. The Welsh Government also provides a national 0300 number which links callers to their nearest Family Information Service. Family Information Services in Wales are also providing more face-to-face advice than their counterparts in England (19 per cent compared to 10 per cent). (Lugton, Rutter, & Stocker, 2014) As will we will see, the relative immediacy and accessibility of contact that Welsh Family Information Services has is key to responding effectively to complex enquiries.

The figure below shows the wide range of topics that enquiries to Family Information Services in Wales cover. (Lugton, Rutter, & Stocker, 2014). Childcare is the most significant single element, but there are a large number of areas that Family Information Services are called upon to assist with. Complex enquiries can often cut across each of these different areas of work, and more.



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## Research background

This research draws on analysis of case studies provided by a number of Family Information Services in Wales in response to a request for examples of 'complex enquiries'. Examination of these case studies gave a clearer picture of how we should understand the term 'complex enquiry', and provided an insight into some recurring features of complex enquiries and the work that Family Information Services do in this area. The research also draws on Welsh Government guidance and legislation and previous Family and Childcare Trust research.

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## Statutory background

Legislation and guidance sets out the core activities of Family Information Services in Wales, although there is some flexibility regarding which services each particular Family Information Service will provide and in what form. For an overview, see Childcare Act 2006 and associated guidance, in particular *'Delivering Quality Information for Families Together'* (Welsh Government, 2014).

Some parents require extra help in finding childcare, for example, those with disabled children. This extra help is called childcare brokerage and in England, statutory guidance obliges local authorities in England to do it. (Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), 2008) Although there is not a definition of childcare brokerage in the guidance it does give examples: parents may be helped to widen their search criteria when looking for childcare or the Family Information Service may help parents by getting in touch with providers themselves to enquire as to their suitability for a child with additional needs. (Rutter & Stocker, 2014)

There is no legal requirement in Wales to provide brokerage. But a significant number of responses to complex enquiries can be classed as this sort of 'brokerage'. In 2009, a Government evaluation of Family Information Services found that families particularly valued this childcare brokerage support. (Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), 2009)

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## What is a complex enquiry?

There are many kinds of complex enquiry; no one definition fits all cases. But, one or more of the following elements are usually present:

- Issues that people rarely ask the Family Information Service about
- (or at a degree of depth not usually encountered).
- Issues that are not solely or immediately linked to childcare or financial support with childcare
- Issues whose resolution involves activities that extend beyond 'routine' or 'established' ways of working
- Signposting to other services/organisations requiring specific knowledge/judgment on the part of the Family Information Service professional
- Issues involving multi-agency work with a Family Information Service professional acting in a coordinating as opposed to simply a signposting role
- Enquiries involving multiple questions or issues
- Enquiries where the full extent/nature of needs and support were not immediately apparent to the person making the enquiry

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## What is involved in a good response to a complex enquiry?

The kind of conversation or action that can resolve a complex enquiry takes time. People may take some time to feel at ease and comfortable talking about certain issues; some needs might take a while to be identified or clarified; and following up with other professionals, agencies or sources of information takes time on the part of the Family Information Service professional involved.

*“A mother was referred to the FIS brokerage officer as she was struggling to find suitable childcare for her 3 year old son with additional needs who had been allocated a place at an early years provision. Working with Early Education and a local private nursery, adjustments were made and her son was able to attend wrap around care at the private nursery. Support was also given to the mother to help her find financial help from the college to fund the childcare for her son and her older daughter who attended an after school club. The mother still struggled to attend college in time due to the different needs of her children in the morning and FIS brokerage liaised with the college tutor to allow her to have extra time in the morning for her child’s needs.”*

In responding to complex enquiries, Family Information Services professionals apply a wide range of skills and knowledge. In all cases, they require empathy and people skills to get people to open up about issues, to know how to put people at ease and to know how to ask well-targeted questions to identify needs. Depending on whether the enquiry is face-to-face, over the phone or electronic, they will need good written communication skills, the ability to read body-language and expression and good telephone skills. It is also crucial to know how and when to ask follow up questions that in some cases may touch on difficult subjects, and how to identify and sensitively address any misinformation or anxieties the enquirer might have.

In responding to any enquiry, the Family Information Service professional needs:

- extensive knowledge of childcare and related services
- knowledge of the law and entitlements
- background knowledge about the kind of challenges families face
- knowledge of relevant local or national support services and organisations (which will often require knowledge of specific policies and programmes and procedures)
- knowledge of additional sources of information for more challenging cases
- specific local knowledge, for example, of schools, local leisure facilities and businesses

*“We were called by a mum who has a 16 year old visually impaired daughter and wanted support to help her become more independent. We gave her information about the Barnardo’s Independent Living Scheme and referred her.”*

To apply this knowledge successfully, the professional will need to think laterally and solve problems, a good deal of experience, intuition and professional judgment about people’s needs and situations. In addition, tenacity and research skills are required to answer challenging questions, and people skills are sometimes required to secure support or assistance from other organisations. In many cases, the professional relationships and contacts of Family Information

Service staff are vital to this process of securing information and support – whether this is from within the local authority or from an external organisation.

In some complex enquiries, instead of simply signposting to other sources of support, Family Information Service professionals take on a more explicit coordinating role where they take charge of the interaction with other agencies. In other cases, the Family Information Service professional might actually go out and arrange some particular item of support themselves, for the child or family concerned. In one case we heard of, a Family Information Service staff member was able to persuade a hair dressing salon to allow a child with a severe disability to familiarise herself with the salon via several visits ahead of her own appointment. These kinds of cases are a strong example of staff having a ‘can-do’ attitude and going the extra mile because of their commitment to the ethos and work of the Family Information Service.

*“We were contacted by a mother who was concerned about her daughter being bullied in school. We reassured the mother that we would contact the school to make sure that the head was aware of the situation. The mother had a meeting at the school and both she and her daughter were a lot happier afterwards.”*

The work that Family Information Service staff do in relation to complex enquiries brings a range of benefits. The strong connections that Information Services have with other agencies and services mean that they are able to make referrals and connect people to sources of support that they might not otherwise have accessed. They are able to use their knowledge to identify and address problems that might not be noticed or have been acted on elsewhere. In some cases, this allows Information Service staff to act as an important ‘backup’ route for problems to be identified with children or families and as an alternative channel for various forms of support to be signposted to families. This can allow people to receive support who may have not been identified by the normal operation of those services. In a number of cases, the ‘can-do’ attitude of a staff member has helped resolve an issue not immediately connected to the work of the Family Information Service.

*“At an outreach event, we met a mother who had a daughter with a number of special needs. The mother did not know about the local sports and social group for families with children with special needs. She was interested in the support groups and charities we could signpost her to. Following this, the mother was successful in applying for a childcare grant so she was able to access respite care for herself (as she was not working) and advised us that she was much happier as a result.”*

To successfully respond to complex enquiries requires a range of resources. Staff need time to have a proper conversation with people to make sure they do not miss anything and they are able to get a good grasp of the problem. Staff also need support and training to develop the people skills to establish a rapport with the people they are talking to. For staff to be able to access information effectively, they require training in research/computer skills. Staff also need the time to ‘read up’ about their subject, and to attend external events where they can meet other professionals, share best practice and learn more about related services. Finally, staff need support and encouragement to feel empowered and have the confidence to be proactive and to go ‘above and beyond’.

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## Key lessons and areas for action

Although there is no legal requirement in Wales for Family Information Services to provide childcare brokerage, there is still a need for this type of service and many Family Information Services in Wales are providing something along these lines. This reflects the real need for this kind of support and the commitment among Family Information Services to address these issues. In England, many complex enquiries are covered by the requirement for 'childcare brokerage'.

*“A woman contacted the service to say that she has a 5 year old child who has a growth regulation disorder and was now requiring much larger clothing. Due the family suffering with financial difficulties, the parent asked could FIS assist in sourcing some clothing. The FIS made extensive enquiries with various other services and agencies and sent emails requesting help for this woman. The FIS managed to help the woman, who was delighted with the support and who said that she would have struggled without it.”*

Complex enquiries give a clear idea of how the work of Family Information Services in supporting families often extends beyond the provision of information that is solely and immediately connected to childcare and related financial support. Family Information Services stand at the centre of a large number of strategic objectives for the Welsh Government (Welsh Government, 2014). Family Information Services are required to

- Contribute to children's health and well-being and promoting strong and positive families
- Act “as a key component of multi-agency teams”(such as Team Around the Family) involved in the Families First programme
- Disseminate information to parents and carers in Flying Start areas, and linking parents and practitioners in these areas
- Support families through the Communities First programme by promoting the coordination of information services at a local level
- Support the Child Poverty Strategy by helping parents into work, improving the skills of parents and carers and young people in low-income households, as well as reducing inequality amongst the poorest groups
- Keep parents informed about welfare and benefits reforms and entitlements.

Family Information Services lie at the intersection of a range of different agencies and strategies which means that in many cases, the Family Information Service is uniquely well placed to bring various organisations together. This allows Family Information Services to identify families' needs and then either provide support directly, or provide an effective and well-targeted referral to another agency.

As these strategies relate to a number of different needs – ranging from improving the skills of parents and carers to contributing to children's health – Family Information Services are potentially involved in assisting in a wide range of different issues, and in helping people who have a variety of different needs.

To take forward the work of Family Information Services in this area, it is important to recognise the level of input required to answer a complex enquiry, and how

much value is produced when one is successfully resolved. There needs to be continued awareness of the importance of staff training and development and an ongoing commitment to maintaining the capacity of Family Information Services to conduct conversations with people who have complex enquiries. Welsh Family Information Services have unique strengths in their high level of face to face contact; their provision of specific telephone lines; as well as considerable knowledge and connections with other agencies. These areas of strength, which are vital for successfully responding to complex enquiries, deserve protecting and promoting.



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