
The Work of Family Information Services in England 2013/14

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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 should know what is on offer. This need for information has been recognised by the Government and today all local authorities in England have Family Information Services whose role is set out in the Childcare Act 2006 and in statutory guidance.

Following on from research in 2011 the Family and Childcare Trust has undertaken a survey of Family Information Services in England. This survey aimed to give a comprehensive picture of the scale and nature of enquiries, staffing, outreach practices and the impact of spending cuts. Some 90 per cent of Family Information Services responded to the survey.

Overall, the survey showed that the majority of Family Information Services are providing a high quality service to families. But there is a minority that are under-performing and not conforming to the standards that are set out in law and statutory guidance. Often, these are teams that have been merged into call centres, without the retention of a second tier Family Information Services. But there are others that have poor quality websites, or do not undertake outreach or childcare brokerage. Other findings from this research are:

- Family Information Services are answering an estimated 430,000 enquiries every year, with 73 per cent of enquires coming from families and 27 per from professionals.
- While most (35 per cent) enquiries are about childcare, over the last year some 20 per cent of them have concerned free early education for the most disadvantaged two year olds, a flagship government policy. In many cases Family Information Services now help match eligible two year olds to vacant places.
- Over the last year, some Family Information Services have increased their use of social media to reach more families. However, the content, detail and quality of online material vary greatly.
- The average staff size of a Family Information Service is 4.6 staff, down from 4.8 in 2011. But there are ten local authorities whose Family Information Service function is carried out by one member of staff or fewer.
- Some 58 per cent of local authorities have cut the budgets of Family Information Services in the last 18 months. Looking forward to the next year, 52 per cent of local authorities plan further budget cuts, changes to service provision or structural changes.
- Some Family Information Services have born such large cuts that there is little scope for further reductions in their budgets without substantially damaging the quality of their work.
- Some parents require extra help in finding childcare, for example, those with disabled children. This extra help is called childcare brokerage and statutory guidance obliges

local authorities to do it. Despite this duty, at least 16 local authorities are not providing a childcare brokerage service at all.

- Outreach to families that under-utilise services is another duty of Family Information Services outlined in statutory guidance. But over the last 18 months 53 per cent of local authorities have cut their outreach services. This risks undermining the delivery of free early education for the most deprived two year olds as information about this initiative and the qualification criteria may not get to the relevant families.
- Family Information Services collaborate with many different organisations and individuals. For example, they get health visitors to publicise their services and inform parents about services such as free early education. These arrangements are sometimes termed multi-agency working. But for Family Information Services about three-quarters of their work with vulnerable family 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 more difficult to replicate them more broadly without strategic agreements.

Both the Childcare Act 2006 and its associated regulations and statutory guidance set out the duties that local authorities are all obliged to fulfil in relation to information for families. Our research showed that while the majority of Family Information Services did fulfil these obligations, a minority were falling short and failing to deliver a high quality service. Noting these findings, the Family and Childcare Trust has five areas for action that would improve the quality of information for families in England:

- Where local authorities are not fulfilling their information duties, the Department for Education and Ofsted should put in place measures to ensure Family Information Services are compliant with existing legislation to enable them to deliver a high quality service to parents.
- Local authorities should take steps to improve the quality of online information available to parents and make more use of social media to reach more families, ensuring that the practices of the best Family Information Services are shared and replicated across England.
- Family Information Services should draw up outreach strategies and use health visitors and peer-to-peer schemes such as Parent Champions to disseminate information, as it is essential that information about free early education and support with childcare costs reaches disadvantaged parents.
- Family Information Services need to draw on best practice in marketing and advertising to ensure that information and outreach reaches the most marginalised families.
- Local authorities who have merged or are planning to merge their Family Information Service into a call centre should retain a second-tier service to deal with complex enquiries, update information and undertake outreach.

Introduction

Successive governments have 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 resources to be together, infrastructure such as housing and transport as well as 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 children's centres, nurseries, childminders, play, sports and arts activities for children, youth clubs, libraries and health 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 England 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 England, Family Information Services have been central to the delivery of free nursery education, as they match children who qualify for this provision to available places in nurseries. 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, are jeopardising the quality of Family Information Services. In 2011 some 76 per cent of local authorities reduced their budgets for family information and a growing number of them were merging their Family Information Services into generic call centres (Daycare Trust, 2011). Since 2011 there have been further pressures on local authority budgets and changes to funding streams for children's services. As the Family and Childcare Trust we have decided to carry out a new survey to capture the work of Family Information Services in England and in a separate report, Wales. We hope this research will be useful to policy makers in local and central government, and inform decisions about the future of Family Information Services.

Our survey

The research aimed to provide a comprehensive picture of the work undertaken by Family Information Services across England and 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 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

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

- 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 (included as anonymised quotations in this report).

Initial responses were received from 126 Family Information Services in England, representing the same number of local authorities. However, some local authorities that have previously amalgamated their Family Information Services into call centres failed to respond to our survey. In order to ensure that the work of this type of Family Information Service was adequately represented in the survey, we used Freedom of Information Act requests to obtain responses from a further 25 local authorities. The overall survey response rate was 90 per cent and every English government region had a response rate in excess of 80 per cent.

Alongside the survey, we looked at the websites of all 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 whether Family Information Services used social media to reach families.

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 has been a large expansion of formal children provision in nurseries, after-school and holiday clubs. This increase in provision grew hand-in-hand with moves to make childcare more affordable. The Government first took steps to make childcare more affordable in 1994 and today families receive help with childcare costs through the childcare element of Working Tax Credit, employment-supported childcare vouchers and part-time free early education. All three and four year olds in England receive now 570 hours of free early education per year and this entitlement is now being extended to the 40 per cent poorest two year olds.

This expansion of early education and childcare sat alongside many other changes to education and family policy – changes which aimed to improve children's outcomes. From 1999 onwards, the Government has supported a more integrated approach to supporting the under-fives through Sure Start children's centres. Today over 3,000 of these centres deliver a range of universal and targeted services to the under-fives and their families, often bringing together early education, healthcare, Job Centre Plus, further education and third sector service providers. The last 20 years have also seen changes to the delivery of youth work and careers advice, thorough the introduction of the Connexions advice service for 13-19 year olds. Schools are now offering a greater number of after-school activities - homework clubs, childcare, sporting and cultural enrichment activities.

The overhaul of childcare provision and the development of new children's services brought the importance of information to the attention of policy-makers. If children are to benefit from this provision, parents need to need to *know* 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. 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 the UK – 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 these local centres delivered much of this information to families. The work of these first family-focused information services was recognised in *Choice for parents: the best start for children*, the Government's Ten Year Childcare Strategy, published in 2004, which stated:

Parents often lack easy access to information about what choices are available to them as they try to balance work and family life and about what services they can access for their children. In disadvantaged areas, Sure Start Local Programmes have fulfilled this role in providing a broad range of information about what childcare and other support for parents is available locally. (HM Treasury, 2004).

The Ten Year Childcare Strategy 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 which was later backed up by regulations and statutory guidance (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007). In England, Section 12 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 12 of the Childcare Act – *The Childcare Act 2006 (Provision of Information to Parents) (England) Regulations 2007*. They provide 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 how they should carry out their information duty (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008). This makes local authority Directors of Children's Services responsible for fulfilling the duties outlined in the Childcare Act 2006 and 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 statutory guidance also obliges local authorities to hold information about the suitability of services for children with disabilities or special educational needs. In order to build a recognised 'brand' the guidance also recommends that Family Information Service is used as the name for these information services.

Anticipating that some parents will need extra help finding childcare, the statutory guidance for English local authorities obliges them to provide childcare brokerage. Although it does not define childcare brokerage, the guidance gives examples of this service. Parents may be helped to widen their search criteria, for example. For some parents, Family Information Services may contact a childcare provider on behalf of the family, for example to check if provision is suitable for a disabled child.

The present government has continued to see Family Information Services as providing an important service to parents and their children. Although not explicitly articulated in any new guidance from central government, Family Information Services are seen as an integral part of the delivery of three flagship government policies: better support for troubled or vulnerable families, the extension of free early education to the most deprived two year olds and the introduction of Universal Credit.

Family Information Services hold much information about a wide range of support services for troubled families – useful for them and the staff that work with them. England's most deprived two year olds children also qualify for some free early education. 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. By September 2014 local authorities will be obliged to offer 15 hours free early education delivered over a minimum of 38 weeks to the 40 per cent most income deprived two year olds. An estimated 296,300 children will qualify for this provision which will be delivered by childminders, private and voluntary sector nurseries as well as those in the maintained sector. The Government envisages that Family Information Services will get information

out to families who may qualify for this targeted provision and match children who qualify to vacant places.

Alongside the extension of free early education, the 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 the Universal Credit. For low income families help with 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 increase is due for implementation in 2016, although at the time of writing this additional level of support will be restricted to families where *both* parents are paying income tax².

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 tax free 'voucher' worth £1,200 per year. The Government proposes to introduce this new scheme in 2015. At the time of writing this support will be restricted to families where both parents work but are each earning less than £150,000 per year and where children are under five year olds.

These changes will result in new challenges for Family Information Services, who will have to get information out to those who will qualify for these initiatives. Despite their importance in assisting in the delivery of the two year old early education offer and informing parents about financial support for childcare, Family Information Services have not been offered additional funding to help them discharge this role. Instead, as a result of general pressures on local authority budgets and changes to funding mechanisms, there have been year-on-year reductions to their budgets. In 2011 our survey of Family Information Services showed that 76 per cent of local authorities were planning to reduce the budgets of Family Information Services or had recently done so (Daycare Trust, 2011). This year changes to funding mechanisms have forced more cuts. From April 2013 the funding for most Family Information Services has been made available to local authorities through a general grant called the Business Rates Retention scheme. This funding scheme replaced the Department for Education-administered Early Intervention Grant (EIG) which also funded Sure Start, teenage pregnancy services, mental health support in schools and targeted help for troubled families.

Money allocated for Family Information Services within both the EIG and Business Rate Retention Scheme has not been ring-fenced, although the EIG allocation for local authorities is visible within Business Rates Retention funding. In 2013-14 the visible EIG allocation within the Business Rate Retention Scheme is £1.7 billion and in 2014-15 it will be reduced to £1.6 billion. This cut is a consequence of a general budget cut and changes to the way the EIG element is calculated. The Department for Education has also retained £150 million of this visible EIG funding. The Local Government Association estimates these structural changes mean non-ring fenced resources within the visible EIG allocation will fall by 27 per cent between 31 March 2013 and 31 March 2015. This reduction means that some local authorities will be forced to make further cuts to Family Information

² Childcare Written Ministerial Statement, Sajid Javid, Economic Secretary to the Treasury, 19 March 2013

Services. This survey has looked at the impact of recent and planned cuts on Family Information Services and ways that local authorities can manage this period of change.

“We are a 'hub' and deal with everything related with children, young people and vulnerable adults. We offer a welfare and benefits advice service and have trained staff to deliver this service. We offer a school uniform recycling scheme. We see clients face to face (appointment or drop in) as well as deal with enquiries in the usual format. We provide outreach at our children’s centres and an asylum seeker support group.”

Research findings: The work of Family Information Services today

There are presently 152 Family Information Services in England, one in every local authority. In 2011, almost all Family Information Services were branded and named as such. However, since then, a number of them have renamed and rebranded themselves and may not be called Family Information Services.

At present the majority of Family Information Services exist as separate teams within children's services, although some of them deliver some of their advice through local authority call centres. Our 2014 survey showed that the average staff size of a Family Information Service in England is now 4.6 full-time equivalent staff; we discuss staffing later in the report.

All Family Information Services provide written and web-based information, as well as answering telephone and email enquiries. Over the last two years Family Information Services have made increasing use of social media to reach parents. Many Family Information Services also provide face-to-face help, through their work in Sure Start children's centres, outreach sessions or through a 'shop front' presence in libraries or council headquarters.

Volume of enquiries

Excluding website hits and social media followers, our survey showed that Family Information Services were dealing with an average of 235 enquiries in a typical month, or across England 430,000 enquiries every year. Some 73 per cent of enquiries came from families, the remainder from other staff, both within and outside the local authority. The 2013 survey showed that 62 per cent of enquiries to Family Information Services were over the telephone, 28 per cent were email enquiries and 10 per cent were face-to-face enquiries at advice clinics, events and so on.

Almost all Family Information Services monitor their website hits and generally these have shown year-on-year increases. But excluding website usage, the number of enquiries dealt with by Family Information Services has fallen since the 2011 survey, when an average of 391 enquiries were logged in a typical month (Daycare Trust, 2011). However, the volume of enquiries varies greatly between individual Family Information Services; generally those where initial calls are routed through a contact centre helpline deal with fewer enquiries. Thus the decrease in the number of enquiries since 2011 may represent restructuring within Family Information Services and the greater number of local authorities who have incorporated some of them into contact centre helplines where calls may not be counted. Other factors that may have contributed to a decrease in direct enquiries include a greater use of websites and social media since 2011 and a decrease in face-to-face contact as a result of budget cuts and the reduction in 'shop-front' presence.

While all Family Information Services in England have an online presence, its content varies considerably in its detail, quality and the subjects covered. 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 Sure Start children's centres activities, school admissions information, activities for young people, as well as information about childcare. Regrettably, a small number of Family Information Services have very little information for parents on their websites and in other cases available information has not been updated.

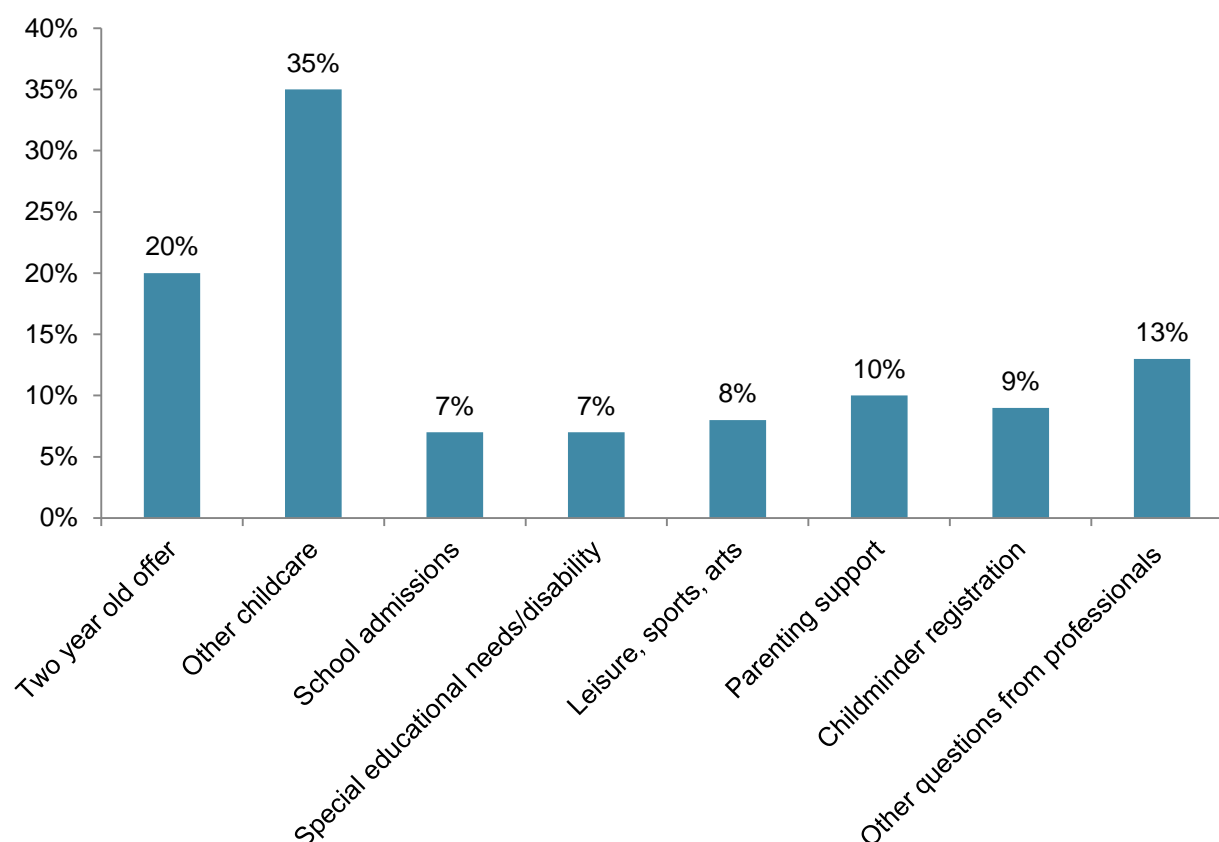
Nature of enquiries

We examined the nature of enquiries and the 2014 survey showed that over a third (35 per cent) of enquires to Family Information Services were about childcare (excluding enquiries that relate to the free early education offer for two year olds (Figure 1). But the survey highlighted the breadth of work undertaken by Family Information Services today. For example, they hold information on leisure, sports and arts activities and can direct families to them. They also hold the details of parenting support, for example, drop in sessions in children's centres advising parents on managing behaviour or eating. An estimated one in ten enquiries to Family Information Services related to parenting support.

Many Family Information Services help parents whose children have special educational needs or a disability. This assistance can be about suitable childcare or out-of-school activities. At present many Family Information Services are involved in getting out information to parents about changes to the way their children's additional needs will be supported in the new Education, Health and Social Care plans. Where appropriate all parents will be allocated a personal budget from which their child's support needs will be funded (Department for Education, 2012). Statutory guidance also specifies that local authorities are obliged to publicise their local 'offer' to parents. At the moment some local authorities are using their Family Information Services to publicise these policy changes and explain the local offer.

Figure 1

Nature of enquiries to Family Information Services in England, as percentage of calls



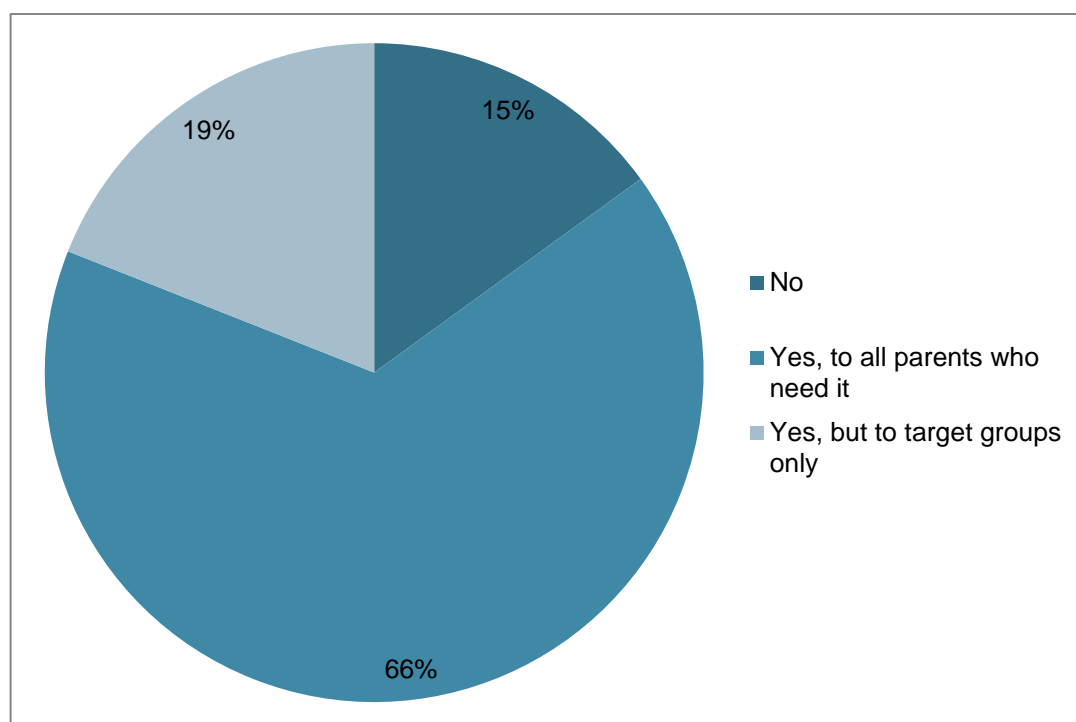
Source: Family and Childcare Trust Survey of Family Information Services, 2014

Childcare brokerage

As noted above, the statutory guidance relating to Family Information Services obliges local authorities in England to provide a childcare brokerage service – extra assistance to families who have difficulties finding suitable childcare (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008). The Government's 2009 evaluation of Family Information Services indicated that childcare brokerage was a service that families particularly valued (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009). We asked Family Information Services about this form of extra support. Figure 1 presents the results with two-thirds (66 per cent) of all Family Information Services offering childcare brokerage to all families that need it.

Figure 2

Percentage of local authorities offering a childcare brokerage service



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

One in five (19 per cent) of local authorities are offering childcare brokerage to targeted groups of parents. These vary between local authorities but often include unemployed parents hoping to return to work, parents of disabled children, single parents and families who are new to the area.

The survey showed that 16 local authorities that answered this survey question stated that they are not providing any childcare brokerage at all, despite the obligations of statutory guidance. This is 11 more local authorities than in 2011 when we last asked this question, when five local authorities in England stated that they were not providing childcare brokerage. Overwhelmingly, those local authorities that have ceased to provide a brokerage service are those who have transferred much of their Family Information Service into generic local authority call centres.

Since our 2011 survey, the Government has introduced free early education for the most deprived two year olds. This is a positive step but there are a number of challenges in implementing this policy. It is targeted rather than universal provision and the Government has set an income threshold to qualify for it. For children who will qualify for the free early education offer by September 2014, there is a household earnings threshold of £16,190 per year, bringing in most families who receive Working Tax Credit. Children with special educational needs or disabilities will also qualify by this date (Department for Education, 2012a). Many families are not aware of the detail of the household income threshold, which has to be verified using the HM Revenue and Customs database. Family Information Services have an important role to play in publicising entitlement to this new provision. In many local authorities Family Information Services have also played an

important brokerage role, checking a family's entitlement to the free early education offer then matching a child to a vacant place. Today, across all Family Information Services in England, an average of 20 per cent of enquiries now relate to the two year old free early education offer.

"We have been working very closely with the early years' service to develop the systems to enable parents to apply for free two year old early learning places. We have developed an interim application procedure and are working on a more long term online system. The Family Information Service is the main information point for parents enquiring about the new free early learning offer and is stepping in to offer brokerage for parents who have not been offered a place at their first choice early years setting.

"The introduction of a Disabled Children's Access Officer into our Family Information Service from Sept 2010 has seen a marked increase in the number of enquiries we get from families with disabled children. She helps broker childcare and short breaks for these children. Since we have had this specialist post we have also taken over the responsibility for the Disability Register. This means that these families regularly receive information via mail about services, activities and events they may find useful as well as opting into our text service and Facebook page."

Given the importance of the two year old free early education offer, and the difficulties some parents face in arranging childcare, the Family and Childcare Trust is concerned about the failure by 16 local authorities to provide a childcare brokerage service. It urges all local authorities to fulfil this statutory obligation.

Outreach

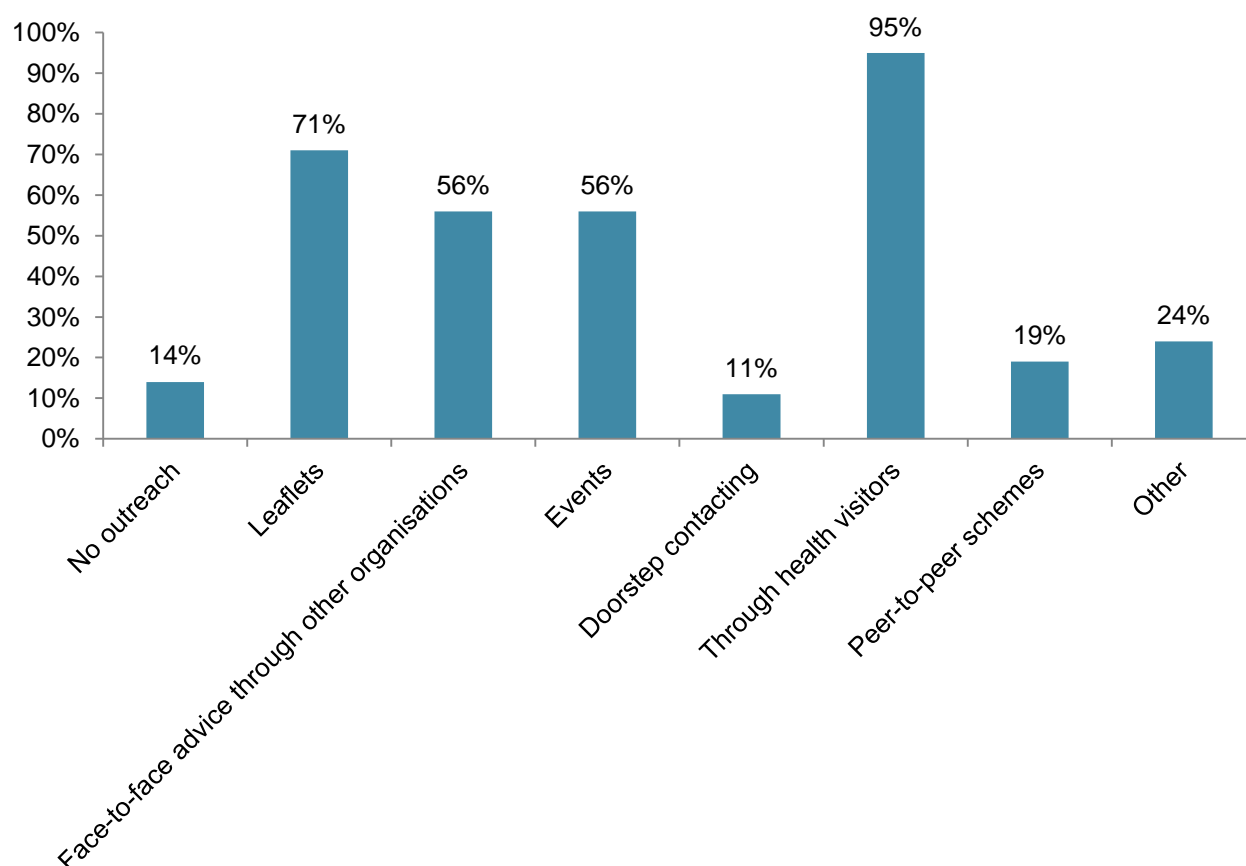
As noted above, most Family Information Services reach parents by their online presence and through telephone enquiries. But outreach to families who may under-utilise services is a core activity of Family Information Services. These families may include

- 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
- 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.

The survey looked at how Family Information Services reached out to the above groups (Figure 3). It shows that the majority of local authorities 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.

Figure 3

How Family Information Services contacted those who under-utilise services



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

As Family Information Services rely on other professionals and organisations to reach parents this illustrates the importance of collaborative or multi-agency work, an issue discussed later in the next section.

The survey 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, for example, 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 meetings with the big employers in its area to ensure that information about childcare reaches their workforces.

A change since 2011 is the greater number of Family Information Services who have organised peer-to-peer information schemes, for example, 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. The project is based on the finding that parents value oral advice from peers (Family and Childcare Trust, 2013).

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 the street. This may partly be a consequence of cuts to staffing and budgets; our survey showed that 53 per cent of local authorities in England had cut their outreach services over the last 18 months, particularly face-to-face contact and their shop-front presence (see Figure 5). But evidence showed that a significant minority of Family Information Services lack an understanding of the barriers to taking up services, as well as good outreach practice. Very few Family Information Services have engaged with debates in behavioural science to inform their outreach.

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. Additionally, Family Information Services need to look at how other organisations publicise their goods and services. Outreach practice involves a marketing and advertising component as well. The Family and Childcare Trust believes that Family Information Services should draw from best practice in marketing and advertising to ensure that information reaches the most marginalised families.

The Family and Childcare Trust is also concerned that in England 14 per cent of local authorities that replied to the survey stated that they did not conduct any outreach activities themselves, up from 5 per cent in 2011. Some of these Family Information Services were in local authorities where outreach was now the responsibility of children's centre staff, but largely the local authorities not undertaking outreach are those where much of the role of Family Information Services now lay with generic local authority call centres. This group may not be compliant with the Department for Education's statutory guidance on Family Information Services, which sees outreach as a core activity (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008).

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 27 per of enquiries came from other professionals, most frequently health visitors, social workers, children's centre staff, public libraries, the youth service and Connexions and Job Centre Plus staff.

The information supplied 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

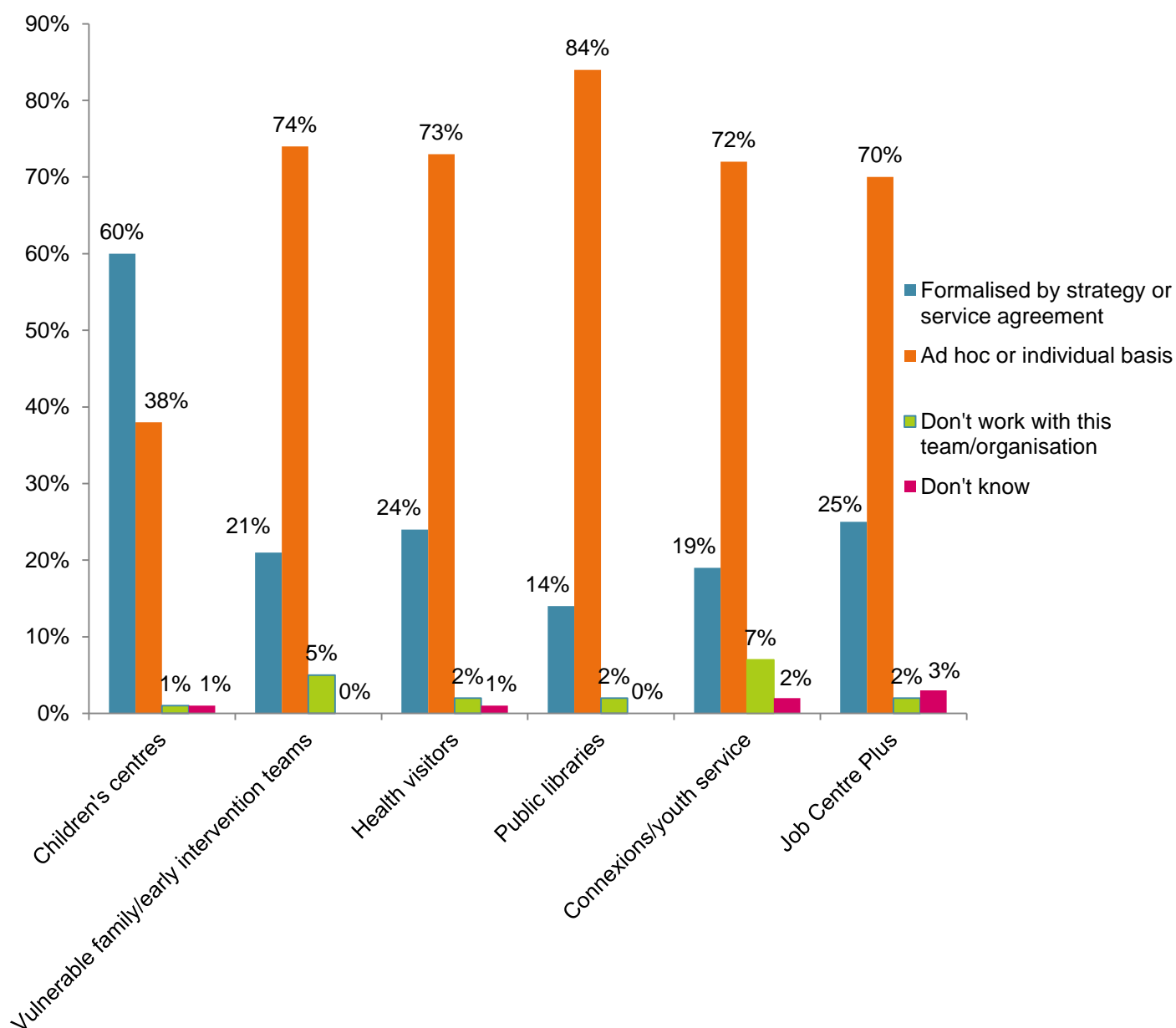
and public libraries to get information to new parents. Additionally, Family Information Services may deliver face-to-face advice sessions using the offices of other organisations such as Job Centre Plus or community groups.

“We work with Job Centre Plus to deliver a fortnightly workshop to lone parents who are moving on from Income Support to JSA. The workshops explain the changes to their benefits, the expectations of them to seek work and how they can overcome the challenges and barriers to work such as childcare.”

Much collaboration with other professionals and organisations helps Family Information Services improve the reach of their information, 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 4). Despite the importance and effectiveness of this work the Family and Childcare Trust is concerned that most collaborations with other professionals were on an *ad hoc* or individual basis. For example, about three-quarters of all work with vulnerable families teams, health visitors, the youth service and Job Centre Plus are on an *ad hoc* or individual basis. There are inherent 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.

Figure 4

How formalised is your work with other teams and organisations?



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

Quality of services

Childcare brokerage, outreach and collaborative work involving other staff and organisations are all components of high quality Family Information Services. Ofsted inspects local authority children's services, but few inspections look at the quality of Family Information Services in any detail. Quality is an issue that the survey examined in the context of continued pressure on local authority budgets.

Previous research and evaluations of Family Information Services highlights high levels of parental satisfaction, with 84 per cent of users of Family Information Services stating they

were helpful in the 2009 Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents (Department for Education, 2010). Our 2014 survey also showed high levels of parental satisfaction where this was monitored, with an average of 92 per cent of users stating that Family Information Services were helpful. But parental satisfaction will only be maintained by the continued provision of high quality 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 in 16 per cent of Family Information Services all staff have a relevant Level 3 qualification in advice and guidance. There are strong regional variations in the proportions of qualified staff in Family Information Services, with Family Information Services in Yorkshire and Humberside most likely to have qualified staff. This finding points to the importance of regional networks organised through the National Association of Family Information Services (part of the Family and Childcare Trust) in encouraging quality and qualifications.

Many local authorities also work towards quality standards such as the Families First Award, a scheme developed by the Family and Childcare Trust and Department for Education. At the time of writing 108 local authorities were undertaking this award or were working for it, an increase since the 2011 survey. Given the restructuring of many Family Information Services and cuts to their budgets this continued commitment to quality is encouraging.

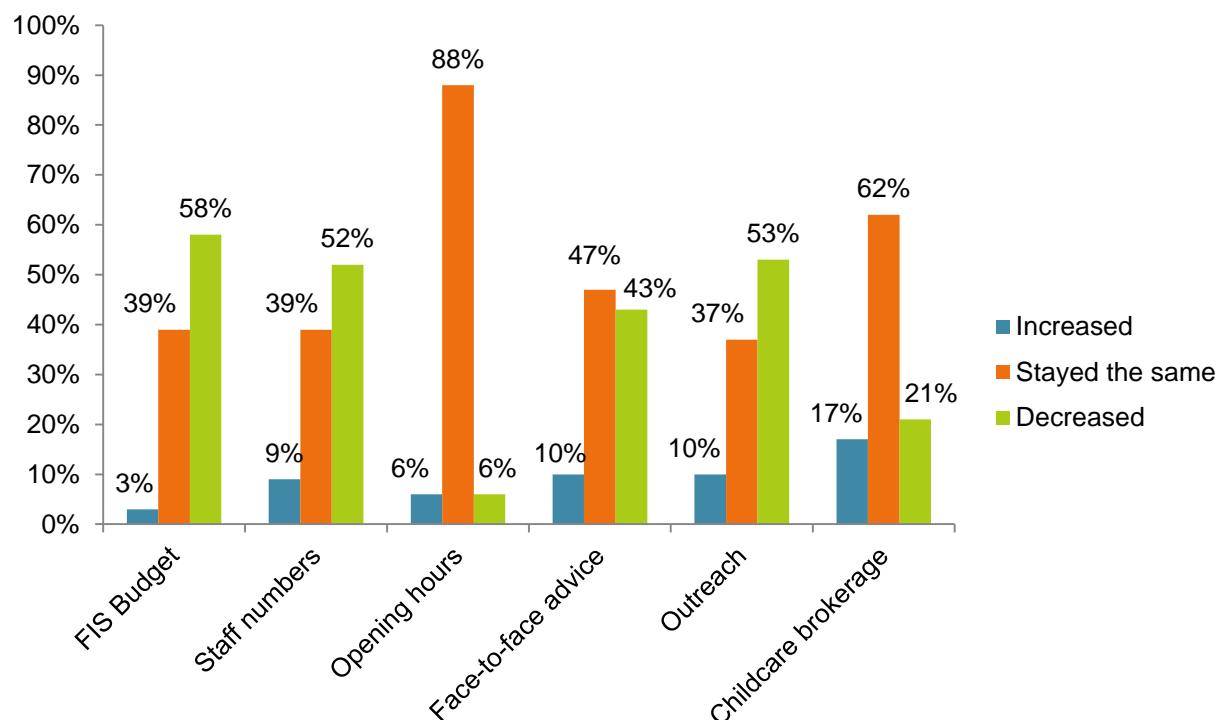
The impact of spending cuts

Over the last three 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 impact of them on families.

In 2011 some 76 per cent of Family Information Services had seen recent cuts to their budgets, with some experiencing very significant reductions, with spending reduced to a third of 2009-2010 budgets in some local authorities. Some 62 per cent of Family Information Services had recent or planned cuts to staffing. Nearly half (45 per cent) had reduced their outreach services, although this has been balanced by an increase in outreach in 21 per cent of Family Information Services. Figure 5 presents the findings from the 2014 survey. It shows these cuts have continued: over the last 18 months, back to April 2012, some 58 per cent of local authorities had reduced the budget of their Family Information Service, while in a further 39 per cent of local authorities funding had remained on the same level as the previous year

Figure 5

Changes to Family Information Services over last 18 months

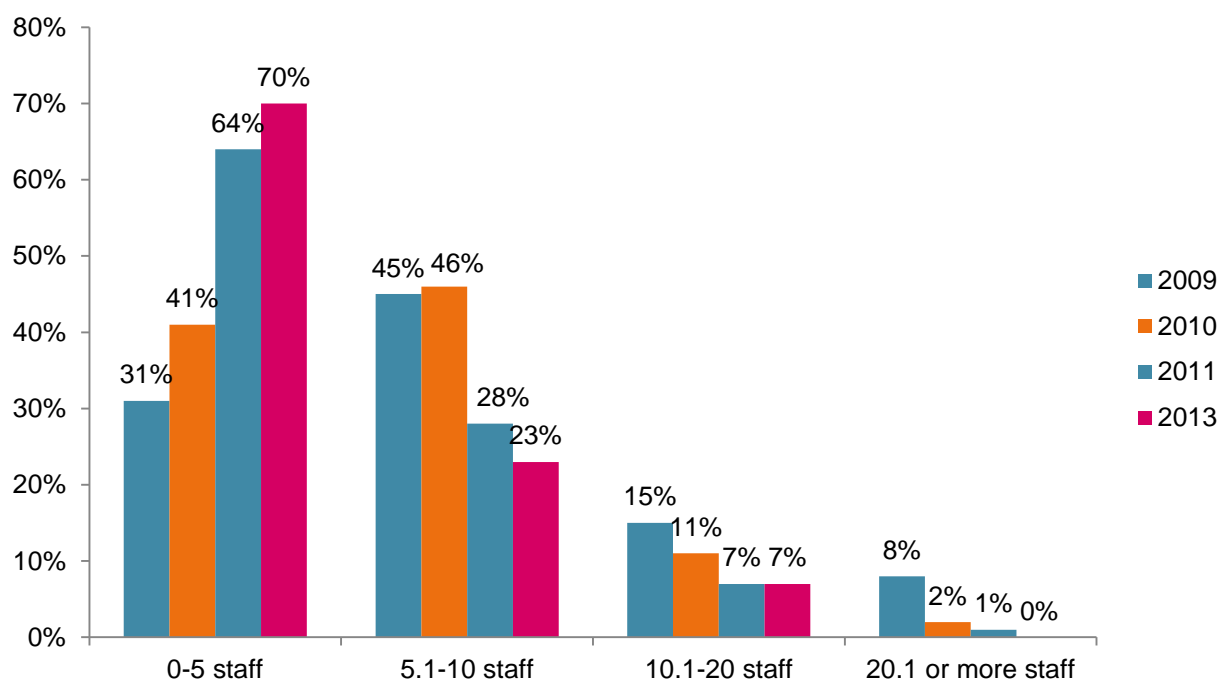


Source: Family and Childcare Trust Survey of Family Information Services, 2014

Staff costs represent the largest component of the expenditure of Family Information Services. The survey showed that the average staff size of a Family Information Service in England is now 4.6 full-time equivalent staff, down from 4.8 staff in 2011. Moreover, 70 per cent of Family Information Services now employ five staff or fewer (Figure 6). Excluding those local authorities that have no discrete Family Information Service team, there are now ten local authorities whose Family Information Service function is carried out by just one member of staff or fewer. All of these local authorities covered a significant area and the largest of them had a population in excess of 1.4 million people.

Figure 6

Staff numbers in Family Information Services in England, 2009-2014



Sources: Family and Childcare Trust surveys to Family Information Services 2011 and 2014 ; Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009; Department for Education, 2010c

Despite spending cuts the vast majority (94 per cent) of Family Information Services had maintained or increased their opening hours (Figure 5). The majority (79 per cent) of them have also continued with their present level of childcare brokerage – an activity that statutory guidance obliges them to undertake. Significantly, nearly one in five (17 per cent) Family Information Services have increased their amount of childcare brokerage as a result of the need to find places for two year old children who now qualify for free part-time early education.

The biggest cuts in service provision have been in face-to-face advice and outreach to families. Over half (53 per cent) of local authorities have cut their outreach. As already noted some 14 per cent of local authorities that replied to the survey stated that they did not conduct any outreach activities themselves, up from five per cent in 2011.

While Family Information Services should not be immune to budget cuts when there are many other important services provided by local authorities, reducing outreach has the potential to undermine some of Government's flagship social policies such as the extension of free early education for the most deprived two year olds. 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 statutory guidance (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008).

Structural changes within local authorities

The survey looked at changes to the ways in which Family Information Services were organised within local authorities. In 2009 almost all Family Information Services were run as discrete teams located within Children's Services Departments, although a few had outsourced this service (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009). One northern local authority had delivered its Family Information Service through a call centre, but had then set up a discrete Family Information Service when officials realised that the local authority was not meeting obligations outlined in legislation and guidance. But since 2010 many Family Information Services have undergone significant structural changes as a consequence of local authority spending cuts. Our 2011 survey showed that 19 per cent of local authorities, all in England, had merged the majority of their Family Information Service function into a call centre. Other local authorities have merged teams within children's services, for example, merging Family Information Services with school admissions.

Continued pressures on local authority budgets have necessitated further structural changes since the 2011 survey. Since then 52 per cent of Family Information Services have undergone restructuring. The most frequent of these changes have been (i) merger with another team or function within children's services (ii) merger of some of the Family Information Service into the generic local authority call centre. Some of these changes have improved the quality of services, others are less satisfactory.

"The Family Information Service has merged with the schools admissions team, so gained staff, however school admissions work is prioritised over Family Information Service work largely, unless a child protection incident occurs or something important needs doing. The workload for the team is heavy."

"Family Information Service calls are now being taken through the local authority call centre. Calls of a complex nature are still referred to the Family Information Service, which remains as a stand-alone entity with no reduction in staff."

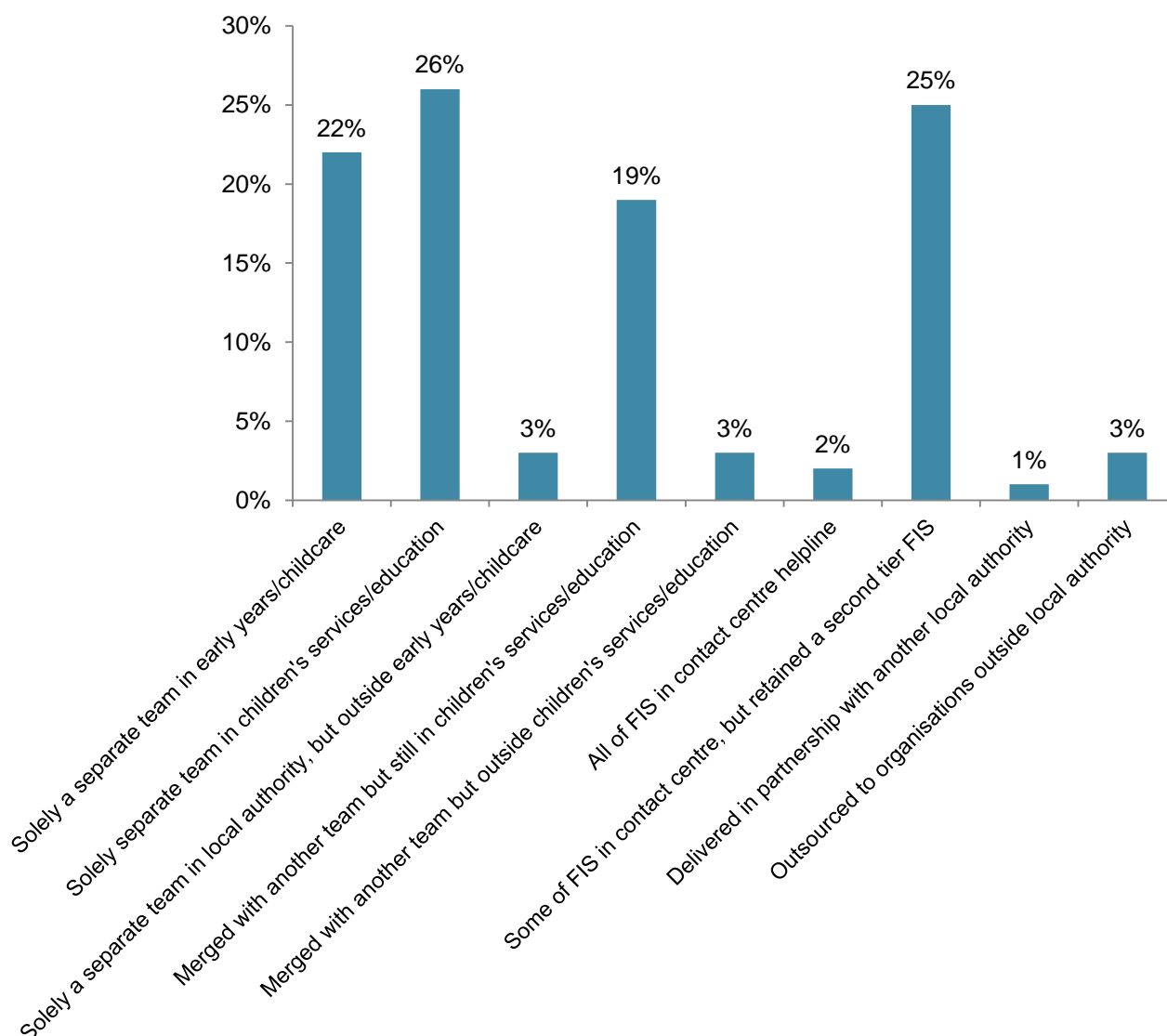
Figure 7 draws from the 2014 survey and shows how Family Information Services are presently organised. Almost half (48 per cent) remain as separate units within children's services. Some 19 per cent have merged with another team but still remain within children's services. While a greater number of Family Information Services have merged some of their function into generic local authority call centres, the survey shows that in the majority of cases this process has been effectively managed. The survey showed that a quarter (25 per cent) of local authorities had placed some of their family information staff in local authority call centres, but managed this transition by retaining a small 'second tier' Family Information Service to deal with more complex enquiries, deliver staff training, update information, conduct outreach and give face-to-face advice.

The survey also showed that two per cent of local authorities have merged all their staff into a generic call centre, without any second tier service. Both our surveys indicate that the quality information and outreach will suffer as a consequence of this type of restructuring. Additionally, generic call centre staff may not always have the skills and knowledge to provide high quality information to the families of disabled children (Natcen, 2005). It is also very difficult to deliver a childcare brokerage service through a call centre,

as almost all of them limit the length of time that a telephone helpline operator can engage with a parent. Childcare brokerage requires specialist knowledge and a number of discussions with parents and sometimes with childcare providers, all of which may last many minutes. Clearly, any structural changes need to be well-planned; keeping a second tier Family Information Service appears to be the only way that a merger into a call centre can be implemented without undermining quality.

Figure 7

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. At their best Family Information Services can support parents to move back in to work and ensure that more children take up the early education provision to which they are entitled and which supports their development.

Today, Family Information Services are answering an estimated 430,000 enquiries every year. Overall, our survey shows that the majority of Family Information Services are providing a high quality service. Parental satisfaction with these services has been maintained since the 2011 survey. Despite cuts to budgets over the last three years 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. Since the last survey more Family Information Services have started to use social media to reach parents. Our research also highlighted the important role that they are playing in helping ensure that the extension of free early education to deprived two year olds.

The 2011 survey showed that many local authorities were planning to restructure their Family Information Services and in some cases merge them into generic local authority call centres. The Family and Childcare Trust was concerned that such a move would negatively impact on the quality of information services and their ability to undertake childcare brokerage and outreach. The concerns which were voiced in 2011 have largely not been realised as most local authorities have managed their restructuring effectively. While a quarter of local authorities had placed some of their family information staff in call centres, they have also retained a small 'second tier' Family Information Service to deal with more complex enquiries, deliver staff training, update information, conduct outreach and give face-to-face advice.

The 2014 survey did, however, point to six issues of concern. First, there is too much variation in the content, detail and quality of online material. Second, our survey showed that at least 16 local authorities are not providing a childcare brokerage service, despite obligations outlined in statutory guidance.

A third 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 of multi-agency and cross-professional collaboration, about three-quarters of all work that Family Information Services now undertake with vulnerable families teams, health visitors, the youth service and Job Centre Plus is 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.

Fourth, the Family and Childcare Trust is worried about cuts to outreach services that get information to excluded groups. The 2014 survey showed that 53 per cent of local authorities had cut their outreach. Some 14 per cent of local authorities that replied to the survey stated that they did not conduct any outreach activities themselves, up from 5 per cent in 2011.

While Family Information Services should not be immune from cuts, reducing outreach activity has the potential to undermine some of Government's flagship social policies such as the extension of free early education for the most deprived two year olds. 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 outreach.

Fifth, over the next year more than half of local authorities will restructure their Family Information Services or impose further cuts to their budgets. While this survey 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 without undermining the quality of services. There are ten local authorities whose Family Information Service function is carried out by just one member of staff or fewer. All of these local authorities covered a significant area and the largest of them had a population in excess of 1.4 million people. In most local authorities further reductions in staffing is likely to impact on the quality of information services.

Overall, the survey shows the majority of Family Information Services 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 legislation. Often, these are teams that have been merged into call centres, without the retention of a second tier Family Information Service. But there are others that have poor quality websites, or do not undertake outreach or childcare brokerage. Central government, including Ofsted, needs to hold these under-performing local authorities to account.

Noting these findings, the Family and Childcare Trust has five areas for action that would improve the quality of Family Information Services:

- Where local authorities are not fulfilling their information duties, the Department for Education and Ofsted should put in place measures to ensure Family Information Services are compliant with existing legislation to enable them to deliver a high quality service to parents.
- Local authorities should take steps to improve the quality of online information available to parents and make more use of social media to reach more families, ensuring that the practices of the best Family Information Services are shared and replicated across England.
- Family Information Services should draw up outreach strategies and use health visitors and peer-to-peer schemes such as Parent Champions to disseminate information, as it is essential that information about free early education and support with childcare costs reaches disadvantaged parents.
- Family Information Services need to draw on best practice in marketing and advertising to ensure that information and outreach reaches the most marginalised families.
- Local authorities who have merged or are planning to merge their Family Information Service into a call centre should retain a second-tier service to deal with complex enquiries, update information and undertake outreach.

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About the Family and Childcare Trust

The Family and Childcare Trust was formed in 2013 as a result of the merger of the Family and Parenting Institute and Daycare Trust. Collectively, both organisations have almost 40 years' experience of policy and campaigning on issues affecting families.

The Family and Childcare Trust aims to relieve the pressures on family life through work in three main areas:

- Insight – carrying out research to understand family life and childcare
- Influence – campaigning for change in policy and businesses to make life easier for families with children
- Information and innovation – providing information and advice to parents and finding innovative ways of supporting families, for example through its peer-to-peer Parent Champions programme.

Information and outreach have always been central to our work. We have developed ways of reaching out to parents who under-utilise childcare and other support services through the Parent Champions model of peer-to-peer outreach and advice. In 2011, Daycare Trust merged with the National Association of Family Information Services (NAFIS), the charity that supports Family Information Services in Great Britain. NAFIS is now coordinated by the Family and Childcare Trust. One of the core activities of NAFIS is running the Families First Award, a quality standard for Family Information Services.

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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 to other parents and to encourage them to take up help such as the free early education offer. The organisation also supports Family Information Services by running the National Association of Family Information Services, a membership body for them.

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