

Families Information Services

Evaluation of Services Provided

TNS UK and GHK Consulting



**Research Report No
DCSF-RR082**

*Families Information Services
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The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Children, Schools and Families.

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1. Executive Summary

1.1 Background

Since April 2008, in addition to information on childcare, local authorities are required to provide a range of information which parents may need to support their children through to their 20th birthday. This is usually delivered through the local Families Information Service (FIS), although the name of the service may vary in different areas.

The aim of this project was to provide a robust evaluation of current FIS and make suggestions of how to improve them following the requirement to expand the service in April 2008.

The research objectives were:

- To assess FIS's performance against the existing standards¹
- To explore the nature of any existing barriers to the provision of high quality information services experienced by LAs
- To analyse the response of users to their FIS's services
- To identify best practice regarding local systems and delivery mechanisms
- To make recommendations on how delivery of local information for parents can be improved.

The research carried out consisted of a web survey of 98 FIS managers, a telephone survey of 842 users of FIS services, and qualitative case studies in a sample of 10 FISs. Full details of the methods are included in the main report.

1.2 Key findings

- Half of managers surveyed said the FIS was fully meeting the requirements of s12 Childcare Act 2006. The remainder said that it was not, or that they did not know whether or not the FIS was meeting the duty. It is the local authority's responsibility to meet the requirements of the extended information duty, however there is no survey information on whether the local authorities as a whole were fully meeting the information duty.
- Users reported a very high level of satisfaction with the service provided.
- Overall FISs area of greatest strength was in the provision of information in respect of childcare.
- Telephone and email help was almost universally available to provide information to families, as well as information on websites. Information on registered childcare was generally accurate and updated regularly. Other family information was also collected and maintained, and much of this was available online.

¹ Childcare Act 2006 (Provision of Information to Parents) (England) Regulations 2007, Section 12

- A wide range of access opportunities were available including drop-in facilities and kiosks. Many FISs provided a range of outreach services. FISs undertook marketing activities to promote the service to parents.
- FISs generally led on developing integrated information resources for Children's Services and worked well with Children's Centres, libraries and early years services.

Key challenges for FISs in meeting the extended information duty requirements were:

- Increasing coverage of information especially of non-registered provision and activities for older children.
- Improving accuracy through more frequent updating of all information held, and improving data quality assurance procedures.
- Few FISs had a clear policy on when to provide brokerage assistance.
- There was a lot of variability in the range of delivery outlets and outreach services available, with some FISs only providing limited services.
- Many FISs studied were not providing outreach targeted at the hard to reach population, or targeting promotion of their activities towards these groups.
- Work with extended schools and youth services could be improved, and few FISs surveyed were working with private or third sector organisations, or with local employers
- Although some monitoring of user contacts takes place, it is not systematic and does not measure FIS performance in terms of speed of response, accuracy, coverage of enquiries and user satisfaction.

Key barriers to meeting these challenges were:

- Co-operation within councils: there were difficulties within some organisations that seemed to override the local authority's duty to provide the FIS. Some FISs have found blockages in getting information about non-registered childcare and activities from leisure and youth services, Connexions and extended schools.
- Co-operation from partners: some FISs were not actively building relationships with JCP and the third sector, for example, and in some cases this was due to difficulties in identifying staff in some partners to build relationships.
- Information system development: FISs were at different stages of integrating and expanding their web based information.
- Resource: staffing levels were very variable between FISs and tended to constrain two key activities: outreach and updating information. Staffing levels could also affect the extent to which brokerage could be provided.
- Performance management: FISs have few service specific delivery targets and monitoring is not systematic

1.3 Childcare information

FISs are expected to provide comprehensive expert information advice and guidance to parents on childcare and early years services in their area. This includes information about registered childcare, non-registered childcare, the free entitlement to early years provision, and childcare settings suitable for children with disabilities and special educational needs.²

Findings

All the case study FISs updated their information on registered childcare providers from fortnightly Ofsted updates. All had information on non-registered providers and additional information about all providers. They updated this at least annually though practices varied considerably in terms of frequency and standards applied. When asked how often information about registered providers was updated, 41% of managers said this was done at least weekly, a third fortnightly and a quarter did this less often. Updates were primarily from Ofsted, but just under half received updates from the local authority. 71% found the Ofsted information to be very or quite helpful. A few case study FISs stated that in some cases the Ofsted information was unreliable and needed checking for errors and “junk data” before uploading.

When users were asked how they had found out about the FIS, they most frequently cited the local authority website, a referral from a friend, a search on the internet or a referral from someone at the council.

Three quarters of FIS managers said they had a marketing and awareness plan and all the case study FISs produced some kind of marketing and publicity material to promote their service. These included leaflets on key issues such as childcare, or being a childminder, magazines sent to parents, visits to key practitioners and advertisements in local media. All FISs had a brand associated with the service.

Most but not all case study FISs made efforts to engage hard to reach members of the community such as fathers groups, minority ethnic groups, parents of disabled children and deprived families.

Challenges

- Many case study FISs were not updating additional information on registered and unregistered providers very frequently
- Some case study FISs had incomplete coverage of non-registered provision in extended schools and youth services particularly, or had to refer enquirers to other sources; coverage on websites in particular could be improved
- Data quality assurance standards were not in place, and many case study FISs were not quality assuring their information

² The statement of requirements made here and throughout the document are drawn from the 2006 Childcare Act Section 12 guidance

1.4 Advice and assistance - brokerage service

FISs should provide a brokerage service, whereby further assistance should be offered to parents who do not find childcare that readily meets their needs.

Findings

Brokerage was not specifically covered in the user survey, however user ratings of the advice provided generally by the FIS were very high - 97% of users were satisfied with the service they received. Over half of users surveyed contacted the FIS with a query about childcare (61%). 14% had a query about the price of childcare. Two thirds of users received follow up information after their enquiry, usually by post but sometimes by email or phone. A quarter of users had tried to find information on a similar subject before, most commonly from the internet (27%) or from their local council (14%).

85% of users who had previously contacted another organisation with similar queries said the information provided by the FIS was better (45%) or the same (40%).

In the case study FISs, most requests for advice were primarily about early years childcare, with the proportion about activities for those aged over 5 growing only slowly. All case study FISs were generally aware of gaps in childcare provision within their area drawing on experience of advice and assistance. Some case study FISs were not actively promoting sources of support with target groups who may find affordability a problem. Few FISs had a clear policy on when to provide assistance to users.

Challenges

- Many case study FISs need to actively and systematically check on whether the quality of advice met users' needs
- Some case study FISs were not actively promoting sources of support with target groups who may find affordability a problem; some need to do more to work with JCP and others consistently
- Few have a clear policy on when to provide brokerage assistance

1.5 Information about other services, facilities and publications

FISs should provide information about other services, facilities and publications that may be of benefit to parents and prospective parents. There is no definitive list of what should be provided, but this should be decided by the local authority and FIS.

Findings

A quarter of FIS users were referred on to another organisation to help answer their query more fully. Of those referred to another organisation, half had contacted them and a further 10% intended to. Over 95% of users that had contacted the organisation they were referred to agreed that the referral was appropriate, helpful, useful and had accurate contact information.

All case study FISs were broadly making available information on national services, facilities and publications on websites although web-based information is of variable quality. Many of the case study FISs provided further information about activities for children of all ages but the coverage of this varied as did the extent they had information about child benefits and tax credits to funding childcare. Some case study FISs had not yet got information on local services, facilities and publications covering education, employment, health, leisure and parenting of value to parents of children aged over 13.

Challenges

- Some case study FISs have yet to collect comprehensive information about activities for older children at extended schools and other providers in their area
- Some case study FISs have not yet got information on local services, facilities and publications covering education, employment, health, leisure and parenting of value to parents of children aged over 13
- Some case study FISs have not integrated this information within their on-line resources
- Web-based information is of variable quality

1.6 Information on services for disabled children, for children with special educational needs and for disabled parents

FISs are required to provide information about whether particular childcare is suitable for disabled children, and about services, facilities and publications which may be of particular benefit to disabled children, young people or their parents.

Findings

All case study FISs were providing information for parents of disabled and SEN children about childcare.

Challenges

- Not all case study FISs were providing information *about services and facilities* for parents of disabled and SEN children

1.7 Access to the information service

Local authorities need to be proactive in establishing and maintaining their information services in ways that best facilitate access to it, in particular, that reach out to people who might otherwise have difficulty in taking advantage of the service.

Findings

The research found that FISs offered a range of contact methods for users. All FISs offered a telephone helpline (100%) and email helpline (100%). The vast majority offered a website for information (99%), outreach (97%) and access through Children's Centres (95%). In the case study FISs all had a telephone helpline open during office hours, a website or web pages for information, an email address for enquires and some degree of outreach. Most case study FISs had a shop front facility for users to drop in, and a few had placed extensive information

on their website to help reduce enquiries. Only two of the case study FISs had extended opening hours for their telephone helpline.

The manager survey showed that outreach is mainly conducted through Children's Centres (82%), events in the community (56%), through health centres (51%) and schools (48%). In total, 97% of managers said their FIS provided outreach services of some kind and 50% said they had increased outreach to assist in the delivery of the extended information duty. 47% of surveyed FISs were not currently offering a drop in or kiosk service, and only a minority said they were planning to extend or develop these services in future.

The case studies elaborated on the breadth of outreach and its variability. Examples of outreach from the case studies included attendance at parents groups, local events, Job Centres, libraries and events run by other organisations, such as job fairs and festivals. Some by and large only attended events.

All case study FISs and managers said that their FIS offered choices about how enquiries can be made. All case study FISs were actively promoting information services. However, many FISs were not providing opportunities for access by the socially excluded at a range of suitable places and the extent and nature of outreach varied significantly. Few case study FISs targeted their promotion of information services at specific areas or groups and few case study FISs updated their understanding of needs of parents from surveys and feedback on a systematic basis.

Challenges

- Many case study FISs do not have a wide range of delivery outlets; some are yet to enable key people working with children and parents to have access
- Some case study FISs were not increasing the choice of times and places for access
- Many FISs were not providing opportunities for access by the socially excluded at a range of suitable places, the extent and nature of outreach varied significantly
- 47% of surveyed FISs were not currently offering a drop in or kiosk service, and only a minority said they were planning to extend or develop these services in future
- Few case study FISs targeted their promotion of information services at specific areas or groups
- Few case study FISs updated their understanding of needs of parents from surveys and feedback on a systematic basis

1.8 Service delivery

It is for local authorities to determine the most appropriate delivery arrangements for their area. However, information should be provided as part of a joined up and co-ordinated offer to parents with other support services including health, education and parenting support services. Information should be delivered by suitably trained and qualified staff.

Findings

The majority of case study FISs were located within the early years or childcare development services. A few had been moved to central services within their councils. Staff numbers in FISs from the manager survey varied from 1 to over 21 members of staff, most however had 10 or fewer staff (76%). All the case study FISs had fewer than 10 staff.

Budgets for FISs varied from less than £100k to over £400k according to the manager survey, although a third of managers could not give an approximate budget for the FIS.

Nearly half of FIS managers said they felt the local authority's strategic planning and oversight of the FIS was very or quite effective. Managers felt that the local authority supported the FIS in marketing (55%), updating information (52%) and training (49%) and brokering relationships (46%). Managers said that their FIS worked closest with Children's Centres, childcare providers, Job Centre Plus and libraries.

The case study FISs had strong relationships with most other local authority departments, particularly early years services and the library services. These were less strong with extended schools and youth services. Most had some relationship with Job Centre Plus, to help customers citing lack of childcare as a barrier to work, but the strength and depth of this and other external relationships varied considerably.

Senior managerial support for the FIS was particularly directed at integrating information services and developing relationships with partners. Priorities varied between case study FISs and some were making slower progress than others towards integrating legacy systems and integrating their web-based resources and information services.

Training for FIS staff varied but all could point to training and development provided in relation to the duty. In the case study FISs, a few had requirements for at least one member of staff to have a level 3 qualification in IAG, though most had at least one member of staff who had a qualification. Staffing levels varied significantly which affects the breadth and depth of service provided.

Nine in ten managers surveyed said they internally monitored the FIS using feedback forms, 84% produced weekly reports on enquiry handling and three quarters conducted a user satisfaction survey. Monitoring for external purposes was less widespread, with 56% of managers stating they did not use any external monitoring. It was left to the respondent to interpret the difference between external and internal monitoring, however internal monitoring can be assumed to be for the purposes of improving the service by using feedback received and processing this within the FIS. External monitoring implies that the results will be shared and scrutinised outside the FIS for example wider within the local authority.

The main standards worked to by FISs in the manager survey were the DCSF S12 guidance (85%) and the DCSF 2003-06 guidance (64%).

However the case study FISs did not have many measurable targets to measure improvement against and could not provide much evidence of management reporting and surveying users. There were few examples of FISs with service delivery targets, and service statistics to monitor performance. Although some monitoring takes place, it is not systematic and does not measure FIS performance in terms of speed of response, accuracy, coverage of enquiries and user satisfaction.

Challenges

- Many case study FISs had not yet joined up their provision with other public services (JCP, PCT) nor the third sector in their area
- Few FISs surveyed were working with private or third sector organisations, or with local employers
- Work with extended schools and youth services could be improved as could systematically using information from enquiries to maintain their councils' childcare sufficiency assessments
- Progress with integrating information services needs to be made
- Not all case study FISs had suitably qualified staff able to provide advice and assistance; staffing levels vary significantly which does affect the breadth and depth of service provided
- Few case study FISs had quality assurance systems for their information
- Few case study FISs had regular consultation and review of their service

1.9 Changes made as a result of the extended information duty requirements

It is the local authority's responsibility to meet the requirements of the extended information duty. Half of FIS managers said that their FIS was fully meeting the extended requirements of the information duty, however there is no survey information on whether the local authority as a whole is fully meeting the information duty. The case studies found significant gaps in coverage of the extended requirements, and it may be that managers are not fully aware of what the information duty requirements are.

Of those who said they were not meeting the requirements, managers most commonly said that there were gaps in the service that was provided or that they were still working towards meeting the duty. Changes made in order to meet the extended duty included increasing outreach, increasing staff numbers and increasing information available for staff (all mentioned by around half of managers). Despite these changes, only a third of managers said there had been an increase in local authority financial support to help them deliver the extended information duty.

Changes have also been made to publicity and marketing for FISs. Change of name was the most common mention (43%) and publicising the extended service (40%). A third had made changes to their marketing materials.

1.10 Barriers

The research found that FISs are in general providing a service which is highly rated by users. However, there are significant challenges in meeting the full scope of the extended information duty requirements. We understand from the managers' survey and the case studies that the following are genuine barriers to addressing some of these challenges.

- Co-operation within councils: there are difficulties within some organisations that seem to override the local authority's duty to provide the FIS. While most can demonstrate progress in drawing together information about non-registered childcare and activities from leisure and youth services, Connexions and extended schools, some have found blockages in some of these services where managers do not appreciate the requirement. In some cases information silos continue to exist which does not help parents or practitioners.
- Co-operation from partners: there are difficulties in some areas of identifying staff in some partners to build relationships but it is more often reported that partnership working is more limited by the FISs themselves. Some are not actively building relationships with JCP and some have weak working relationships with the third sector, for example.
- Information system development: FISs are at different stages in integrating and expanding their web based information. Some are grappling with legacy systems and some are developing hubs for children's services.
- Resources: staffing levels are the biggest difference and tend to constrain two key activities; outreach (and the related partnership working which follows from this) and updating information. It could also affect the extent that brokerage can be provided. Few have large budgets for printing and promotion which could be reassigned to paying for additional staff if these means of providing information are no longer cost effective.

1.11 Recommendations

We would suggest that DCSF:

- Considers the strategic priority given to FISs within local authorities and how to emphasise that meeting the information duty is the local authority's responsibility, not that of the FIS.
- Reinforces requirements for services, such as Connexions and youth services, and extended schools to cooperate with FISs.
- Uses this report to draw out where FISs have shortcomings compared with the Guidance standards and what they could learn from other councils' FISs in particular around outreach, partnership working and increasing other workers' access to information to enable them to meet these standards.
- Provides guidance on key performance indicators which FISs could use for operational monitoring so that they can set meaningful targets and measure improvement.

1.12 Limitations of this research

- **Manager Survey:** Managers could choose whether or not to complete the survey. Although the response rate was high (66%), not all managers responded. It is not possible to determine whether or not there may have been commonalities between FISs that chose not to respond, which were not picked up in the survey.
- **User Survey:** The user survey sample could only be collected from FISs who had initially responded to the managers survey. It is not possible to determine the characteristics of users of non-responding FISs. It should also be noted that as respondents were required to 'opt in' to the survey, on invitation from their FIS contact, we do not have any information on those users who either did not want to take part in the survey, or who were not asked to take part. Therefore, it is not possible to assess to what extent the users in the survey are fully representative of the whole population of FIS users.
- **Qualitative Case Studies:** The results of this qualitative research are indicative and cannot be projected onto the overall population.

2. Background and objectives

Section 12 of the Childcare Act 2006 extended local authorities' (LAs) existing duty to provide information to the public on childcare and related services. Since April 2008, in addition to information on childcare, local authorities are required to provide a range of information which parents may need to support their children through to their 20th birthday. LAs are also required to ensure that the information is made available to all parents who wish to use the service and to be proactive in ensuring that parents who might otherwise have difficulty in accessing the services they need are reached.

Prior to April 2008, local authorities met their information duty by running Children's Information Services (CISs). CISs provided information on childcare and nursery education. They also provided guidance to parents in selecting the most appropriate care for their children. LAs were encouraged to broaden their activities in anticipation of LAs' extended duty coming into force and to provide information on a more comprehensive range of services which can support parents, prospective parents, children and young people.

The generic name for the services provided by local authorities from 1 April 2008 changed to Families Information Services (FISs). FISs are funded by local authorities and are either provided directly by them or delivered by other organisations on a contract basis.

The aim of this project was to provide a robust evaluation of current services and suggestions of how to improve them following the requirement to expand the service in April 2008.

The research objectives were:

- To assess FIS's performance against the existing standards³
- To explore the nature of any existing barriers to the provision of high quality information services experienced by LAs
- To analyse the response of users to their FIS's services
- To identify best practice regarding local systems and delivery mechanisms
- To make recommendations on how delivery of local information for parents can be improved.

The research carried out consisted of a survey of FIS managers, a survey of users of FIS services, and qualitative case studies in a sample of FISs.

³ Childcare Act 2006 (Provision of Information to Parents) (England) Regulations 2007, Section 12

3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This research project consisted of three linked strands - a web survey of FIS managers, a telephone survey of FIS users, and qualitative case studies. Further details of these elements are given below. The Technical Appendix includes full details of the research methodology, and copies of the questionnaires.

3.2 Manager survey

The FIS manager survey was offered to every FIS manager in England in the form of an online survey. The DCSF provided the names and email addresses of named contacts of the managers of all the FISs around the country. The manager in 149 FISs (Isles of Scilly were excluded due to the unique nature of their FIS) was invited to take part in the study via an email including an individual link to the survey on 4th June 2008. Managers could return to the survey at any time should they be unable to complete the survey in one sitting. This was particularly important as some questions required information about the FIS that the manager may have needed to look up in order to complete the question.

The survey was in field for four weeks and a reminder email was sent out to non-responding FISs after two weeks. The survey closed on the 30th June with 98 responses submitted, resulting in a 66% response rate.

As the survey was non-compulsory and self completion managers could choose whether or not to complete the survey. Although the response rate was high for a self completion, it is not possible to determine whether or not there may have been commonalities between FISs that chose not to respond, which were not picked up in the survey.

3.3 User survey

Sample for the User Survey was collected from FISs that had responded to the Manager survey. 39 of the responding FISs were randomly selected representing FISs from a range of locations, of different sizes, with different budgets and staffing levels in order to provide a representative selection of users from across FISs. Each FIS was asked to collect the contact details of users who had contacted their FIS (by any contact method) who agreed to have their details passed on for the survey, and provide these to TNS. Of the 39 FISs approached, 20 agreed to provide sample. Users who agreed to take part were re-contacted by TNS by telephone and interviewed at a convenient time over the phone. The interview lasted 15-20 minutes on average.

In total 1204 pieces of sample were provided to TNS, from which 842 interviews were achieved representing a response rate of 70%. 93 of those who did not complete the survey were incorrect numbers, 124 refused to take part. The remaining 145 contacts could not be reached during the fieldwork period. Interviews were conducted from 15 September 2008 - 10 November 2008.

It should be noted that as the respondents were required to 'opt in' to the survey, on invitation from their FIS contact, we do not have any information on those users who either did not want to take part in the survey, or who were not asked to take part by their FIS contact. Therefore it is not possible to assess to what extent the users in the survey are fully representative of the whole population of FIS users.

3.4 Qualitative case studies

Qualitative fieldwork was conducted in a sample of ten FISs across the country⁴. These were selected from the 98 FISs responding to the survey with a target for FISs in two London boroughs, two metropolitan districts, two urban unitaries, two rural unitaries and two counties. To ensure a balance of demographic and socio-economic characteristics the selection included no more than two from any region and no more than four from the same third of the IMD index.

In each FIS⁵, semi-structured interviews were conducted with:

- The FIS manager and staff providing the service;
- Other local authority staff - the line manager for each FIS and staff delivering other services we would expect the FIS to work closely with, such as Children's Centre managers; area managers for children's services; extended schools co-ordinators, teenage pregnancy co-ordinators; and library service staff;
- Managers and practitioners in other local services, such as Jobcentre Plus (JCP) and the Primary Care Trust (PCT);
- Staff in local private and voluntary organisations that have worked with the FIS, including organisations or networks representing private and voluntary sector providers; and,
- Groups of parents that could be 'harder to reach' (including parents in disadvantaged areas, fathers, parents with disabilities, lone parents, unemployed parents, black and minority ethnic parents).

Please note that the results of this qualitative research are indicative and cannot be generalised to the overall population.

3.5 Structure of this report

The information is presented in this report in relation to:

- The service that is delivered to users, in terms of access, information and advice and guidance;
- How the service is run, in terms of partnerships, staff and structures and review mechanisms; and,
- Parents' views of their information needs and the extent to which these were being met by the FIS or other sources of information.

This is followed by some assessment against the guidance to local authorities on the duty to provide information, advice and assistance and the key questions of this evaluation.

⁴ These were Bedfordshire, Bolton, Bromley, Cumbria, East Riding of Yorkshire, Gateshead, Middlesbrough, North Lincolnshire, Southend on Sea and Westminster

⁵ Please note that the results of this qualitative research described in the report are indicative and cannot be projected onto the overall population.

4. Access

4.1 Summary

We would expect from the DCSF Guidance standards to find:

- Information that can be accessed from a choice of locations visited by parents and in different media and formats
- Information services that reach out to disadvantaged families to overcome barriers to access by the socially excluded
- Information services which are accessible to fathers as well as mothers, targeted to reflect the diversity of the local community and delivered in compliance with DDA
- Key people working with children have access to the information services
- The promotion of information services

We found from the FIS case studies and surveys:

- All case study FISs provided telephone and email access and had printed and website information available; in the managers survey, all offered a telephone helpline and email service and 99% had a website;
- A few case study FISs offered extended opening hours; some had kiosks for self help, most had a drop in facility, one had a contact centre;
- 97% of managers said their FIS offered outreach; in the case study FISs all had some outreach but in some this was limited to a few events a year; a few had a much more extensive range of outreach activities targeted at the hard to reach;
- Some case study FISs were developing access to information through their websites and trained workers in other services;
- Three-quarters of managers said their FIS had a marketing and awareness strategy or plan.
- Most case study FISs produced some publicity in addition to printed information to signpost people; a few undertook direct mailing, most had paid for general advertising, some focused this on the hard to reach;
- All case study FISs branded the service though some were still described as children's information services;
- Few case study FISs regularly undertook research into revealed demand.

4.2 Service delivery channels and availability

4.2.1 Managers survey

FIS managers were asked how people are currently able to get in touch with their FIS. A list of contact methods was provided including telephone, website, email etc, from which managers were asked to indicate which were available at their FIS. Respondents were also given an opportunity to specify any other contact methods they offered to their users.

All the responding managers reported that their FIS had a telephone helpline and an email service for users to seek information. FIS websites were available in 99% of cases and 97% of FISs offered an outreach service (Figure 1).

95% of managers said that people could contact the FIS through Children's Centres, and 81% that people could gain information from their FIS via intermediaries. The contact methods which were offered least by the FISs were a text service, selected by 12% of managers, and a fax service selected by 3%.

Figure 1 How people can contact the FIS

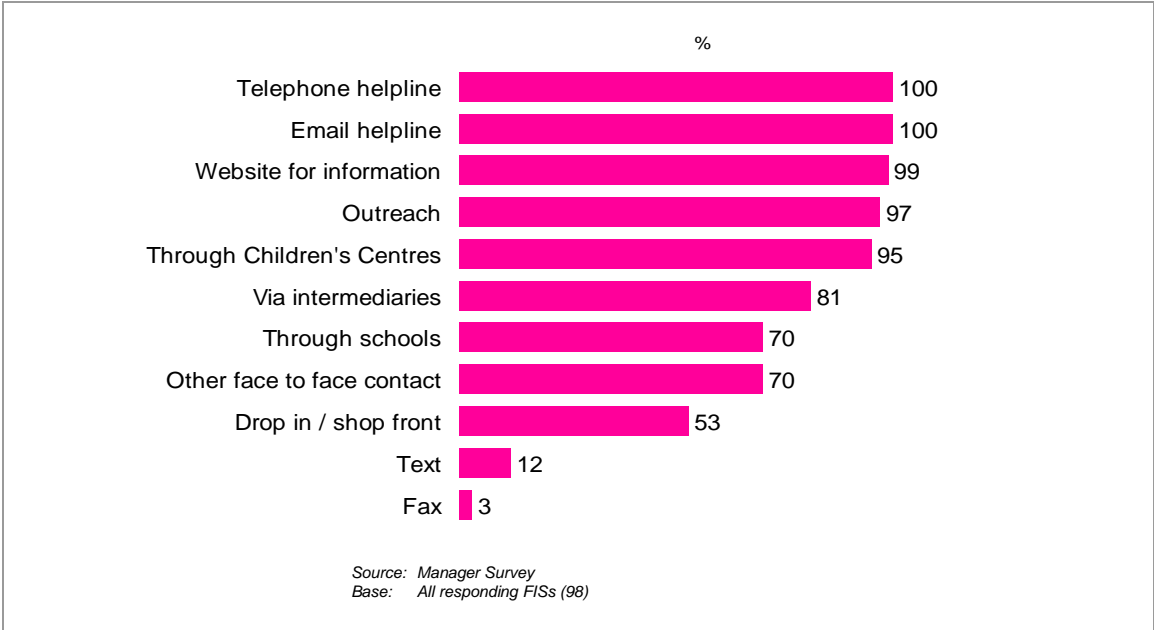
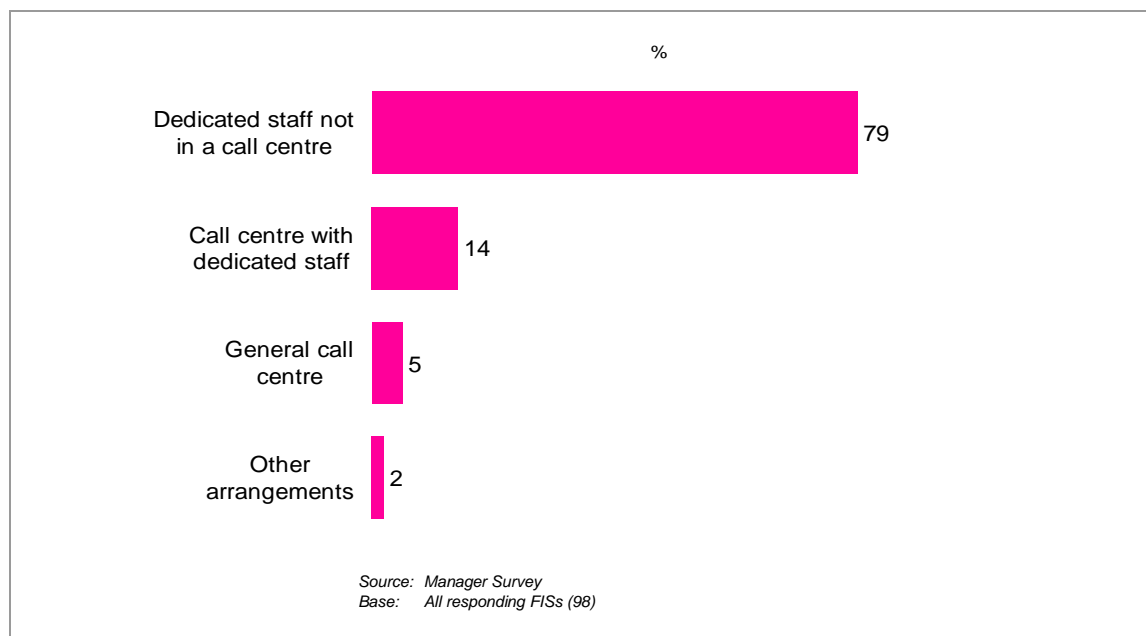


Figure 2 shows how the running of the telephone helpline was managed. The majority of FISs had dedicated staff within their FIS to answer any telephone queries, not in a call centre environment (79%). Dedicated call centre staff managed 14% of the telephone helplines, and a further 5% were answered within a general call centre. The remaining 2% of FISs specified a range of other arrangements.

Figure 2 How the telephone helpdesk is managed

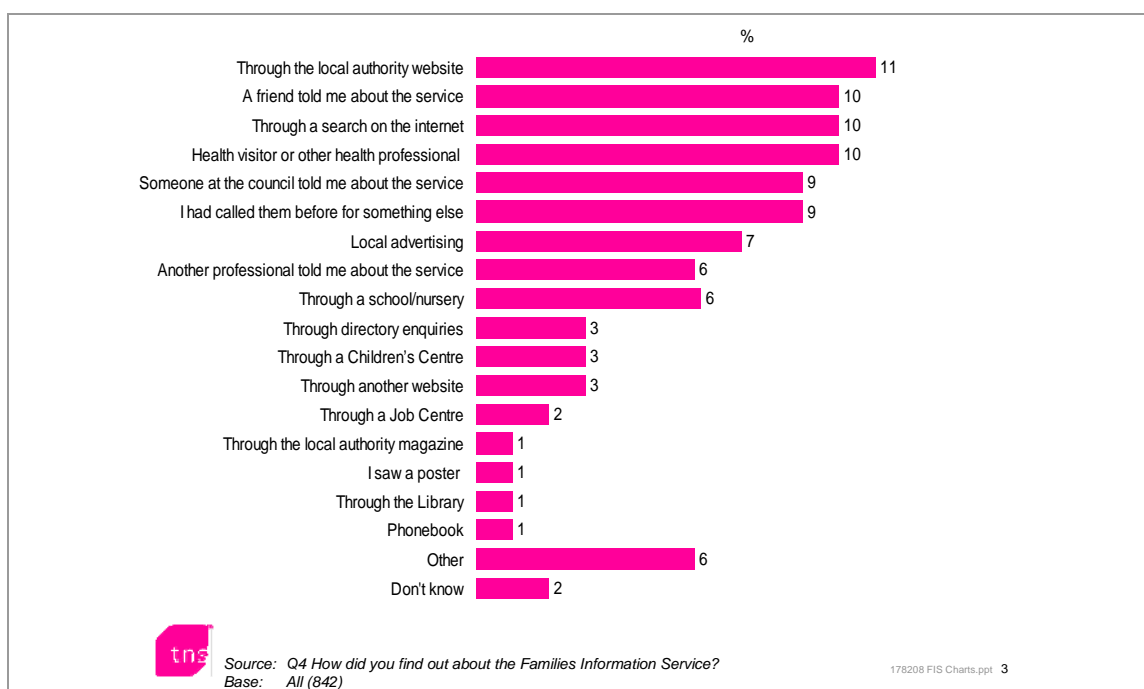


In order to further investigate how accessible FISs are to the general public, FIS managers were asked which contact methods, if any were provided outside their normal working hours. Nearly all managers (96%) mentioned their website as a point of information which was always available at any time. Outreach programmes were conducted outside normal working hours by 53% of FISs. Email help services were mentioned by 41% of managers, 29% referred to their telephone helpline and 27% of managers stated Children's Centres as out of hours contact methods. Around 20% also mentioned face to face contact, schools and intermediaries or other organisations as forms of contact for the general public to get in touch with their FIS outside of their working hours.

4.2.2 Users

In order to see where users were learning about the FIS they were asked where they had first found out about it. There was a wide variety of possible answers for users to choose from and also an opportunity for them to add another answer if needed. The place which was mentioned by most users was the local authority website, 11% of users found out about the FIS in this way. The full breakdown of responses is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3 How users found out about the Families Information Service



The vast majority of users who took part in the user survey had contacted the FIS by phone (90%). 5% had made contact in person and 2% by email, with the rest mentioning other methods of contact including through the 'contact us' page on the website.

When asked how easily they found the contact information for their local FIS most respondents said it was very easy (63%) or quite easy (28%) to find. Those who had made contact in person were less likely to say they easily found the contact information (77%, compared with 92% of those contacting by phone).

When asked how easy they found it to get through to an adviser at the FIS, 74% said they found it very easy and a further 20% found it quite easy, meaning that overall nine in ten users found it easy to get through to their FIS. Again, those who made contact in person were less likely to say it was easy to get through to an adviser (77%, compared with 96% of phone users).

FIS users were asked if they had contacted the FIS before; 30% of users had done so and of these repeat users 73% had contacted the FIS previously in the last year.

4.2.3 Case study findings

All of the case study FISs provided the following:

- A telephone helpline for enquiries, open during typical working hours (i.e. 9am to 5pm five days a week), with an answer phone outside these hours;
- A dedicated website or web-pages hosted by the council (although not all were local authority branded);
- An email address for enquiries;
- Some degree of outreach.

FISs varied considerably in the extent to which they went beyond this level of delivery:

- Only two of the FISs had longer opening hours for their telephone helpline. The longest hours a week were from 8am to 7pm on weekdays and from 9am to 1pm on Saturdays where the FIS helpline and email enquiries were handled by a contact centre and from 9am to 7.30pm three days a week where the service was provided from a central library building;
- Over half of the FISs had a shop front or 'drop in' facility, so that users could ask questions face to face either at a single fixed point in their area or from a series of places at particular times of the week or month. However, some of the single fixed points were not in places with a high footfall and they had very few personal callers (fewer than five a day). As one manager said 'we are a hidden service'.
- A few FISs had placed all, or a large volume of, the data they held online so that users could search for the information they required through the FIS branded website without necessarily making an enquiry. However, several did not have a comprehensive FIS website and the bringing together of information was 'a work in progress'. There were varying reasons for this, and most FISs were in the process of reviewing or changing their public-facing information on the web because local authorities were commissioning a replacement for the iChIS system, as well as updating Family Services Directories (FSDs) to comply with DCSF guidance relating to the Information System for Parents & Providers (ISPP);
- Some FISs had obtained kiosks located in children's centres and other sites for people to search children's services websites including their own. The greatest numbers were in county areas, Cumbria, for example having 28. To be effective self-service facilities site managers reported that they had to be supported by staff in the locations and 'not just dropped in by the FIS';
- Some of the case study FISs were developing a 'hub and spoke' model, so that practitioners in other services, particularly children's centres, but also JCP and extended schools in one case each, had access to the FIS database and were trained to respond to parents' information needs. These like outreach sessions enabled information and advice to be available at the points where parents were likely to make enquiries and need assistance. Other FISs had made little progress to enable others to use their resources though a few, such as Bedfordshire, had network days to inform practitioners about developments;
- A few FISs had well developed, regular programmes of outreach (see Section 4.3 for more detail).

Few of the FISs had large volumes of enquiries (by telephone, email or face to face) compared to other local authority services, such as benefits, council tax and registrars. Estimates range from 50 to 200 a week. Not all could provide accurate figures on enquiry volumes, differentiate between types of enquiry and enquirer (parent or practitioner) or discern any trends, with recording practices also varying. In the case of FISs, such as Bolton, where the service has a role in handling calls about childcare recruitment, these additional services also had an impact on the volume of enquiries. From the figures obtained, there does not seem to be any pattern in relation to size of area and scope of service. The FISs with a shop front in a well-used public place (or places) tended to have more personal callers needing assistance but in all FISs most enquiries are over the phone or by email and many are from practitioners on behalf of parents. In some, declining numbers may reflect greater use of web based information by people looking for information and assistance and the success of information strategies. All point to seasonal patterns reflecting the times of year when many people have to make childcare arrangements. FISs also handle enquiries from parents when childcare providers close suddenly, and in the case of 2 FISs this resulted in short-term increases in enquiries.

Generally little use was made of web statistics apart from hits, though Gateshead, for example, could point to an increase in active searches over recent years.

Not all FISs had service standards for responding to enquiries or monitored their service standards. When quoted it was commonly 24 or 48 hours. Bromley's service, for example, offered to answer a telephone call within 5 rings and to give an answer to all enquiries immediately without the need for the customer to ring back, as well as responding within one working day of a message left by voice. Gateshead's contact centre offered a response within the day. Middlesbrough FIS triaged its enquiries according to urgency, with urgent calls dealt with as soon as possible and all non-urgent enquiries to be answered within three days. Bromley's handling of enquiries is described in Box 1 below.

Box 1

Bromley Council - Signposting

Bromley Council's FIS is based in the library building in the centre of Bromley itself. Calls are handled by 3 part time staff (with an additional vacant post) and the vast majority of enquiries are telephone calls. Three quarters of these enquiries last for less than three minutes; with roughly 10-15 calls per week being intensive enquiries that last longer than 10 minutes. The number of drop-in clients can vary from 2 to 7 each day.

The FIS aims to answer within 5 rings; be able to give an answer to all enquiries immediately without the need for the customer to ring back; and respond within one working day of a message left on answerphone. Although staff are offered training up to NVQ Level 4 in information, advice and guidance, this is not a prerequisite to working in the FIS and the main focus is on finding staff with high quality customer care skills (hence the staff have a diverse working experiences where they have dealt with customers, rather than a childcare background).

For general parenting enquiries, the FIS produce a booklet called 'Help I'm a Parent' which provides advice and a list of local and national support groups; this can be mailed out to callers.

For calls in relation to health, parenting skills, tax credits and other enquiries outside the core offer, the FIS recognise they are not the experts and will endeavour to ask as many questions as they can in order to find callers the right service, and refer parents on (or offer to call the other service and get them to call the parent back).

4.3 Proactively reaching out to parents

4.3.1 Managers survey

Almost all of the managers surveyed (97%) said that their FIS could be contacted through outreach. They were asked to describe what outreach was conducted. Answers were recorded verbatim and coded into categories. Children's Centres were most commonly mentioned (by 82%), followed by Events in the community (56%). A wide range of other types of outreach were also mentioned, as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4 Outreach conducted by FISs	
	Types of outreach
	%
Children's Centres	82
Events in the community	56
Health centres / services	51
Schools / training	48
Parenting / parent and toddler groups	34
Libraries	31
JobCentre Plus	28
Employers / job fairs	19
General outreach work	17
Town centres / shops	16
Youth services	6
Family Centres	3
Other mentions	53
<i>Source: Manager Survey</i>	
<i>Base: FISs that offer outreach (95)</i>	

4.3.2 Case study findings

Outreach was used by all case study FISs as a means for proactively accessing parents that might not otherwise have heard of, or made use of, the FIS. It was more generally used to raise awareness and encourage parents to use the service than to increase enquiries though most are geared up to handle enquiries at outreach activities. All FIS managers believe that face to face contact helps to build trust and understanding about what the FIS can do for parents and engage with more of the harder to reach than through conventional promotion.

However, the type and amount of outreach work carried out by each FIS varied significantly. To a large extent this seems to relate to staff capacity, but also to how dispersed or concentrated the population of the area is and the perceived diversity of parents. Westminster, for example, had a considerable amount and range of outreach activities with a strong link to increasing parents' awareness of financial assistance for childcare and the availability of affordable childcare, whereas East Riding of Yorkshire and Cumbria had relatively little. Westminster's outreach work is described in Box 2 below and Bolton's in Box 3.

Outreach activities included the following:

- Attendance at parents groups and FIS-specific drop-ins (hosted by other services such as children's centres, the PCT or VCS organisations) or places where parents would attend, such as a library reading event, adoption and fostering events, or school parents' coffee morning;
- Attendance at local events and galas where an activity for children can attract parents to information about the FIS;
- Attendance at events run by other organisations where parents could be in need of information and assistance, such as jobs fairs/employment guidance run by community development teams and sessions with lone parents run by JCP;
- Attendance at internal Council events (local authorities are also major employers);
- Visiting women's hostels or traveller sites;
- Setting up a stand and speaking to parents in busy places (such as supermarkets).

In most of the FISs outreach was relatively ad hoc, only planned insofar as determining a few months in advance some target events to attend. In the others outreach was more systematically organised by dedicated staff throughout the year with activities chosen to target particular areas and groups of parents who are thought to be in need of greater awareness and assistance. None have much evidence of the effectiveness of outreach in increasing awareness though those who are most active can point to additional enquiries and assistance with affordability. 'We have met our target for providing advice on affordability which we would not do if we did not go out'. And in addition some can point to providing information to the groups of parents who are least represented among their enquirers. 'We can particularly reach BME parents, lone parents and those who have children with disabilities through our outreach'. Some FISs distribute targeted literature through outreach - for instance Bromley FIS provide tailored leaflets printed on sheets of A4 targeted at different age groups, along with information on activities, choosing a childcare provider, stress prevention for parents, and child accident prevention.

Box 2**City of Westminster FIS - Outreach**

Outreach is carried out by two staff who also manage the service's face to face enquiries at several fixed points around the City. It is intended to 'be a walking talking service' to make targeted groups of people aware of the service and respond to their enquiries. Each worker has a schedule of relatively regular events and surgeries they attend. These include children's centres, libraries at child reading times, schools, leisure centres and VCS family centres and parent groups so that some places are visited once or twice a year others as frequently as monthly. For example one of the workers visits a centre for children with a disability and a family centre every month which has been 'extremely useful for practitioners and the parents who come in at these times'. These are changed in response to demand and need in terms of times and frequencies.

In addition the workers arrange other sessions in conjunction with Jobcentre Plus offices, the PCT, Westminster Adult Education and City Homes when there is a need. These include attending sessions with lone parents at return to work sessions and prospective learners.

They have also set up sessions as part of a council wide campaign to increase tax credit take up; taking part in events on three weekends in different parts of the City. Apart from providing general information they do exactly what they would do in the office with an enquiry for help and advice.

The whole FIS team work together to promote the service at large scale events which are likely to attract parents with children. They have a target of five community events a year in different parts of the City, including an annual play day which is run by the children's service. At these events they use games and give-aways to attract children and parents. They give a lot of thought to this since a stall with information does not work. Most of the enquiries at these will not be about specific advice or tax credits so they have leaflets to describe the service and how to access it; browsers rather than users are the target.

Box 3**Bolton FIS - Outreach**

Outreach is carried out by one dedicated worker whose role it is to develop partnerships and awareness of the FIS at a community and practitioner level. Her role is to engage with parents directly and follow up their enquiries, building on her previous experience as a community development and playscheme worker.

Her key links include: children's centres; extended schools; health visitors and nursery nurses (baby and toddler groups, post/ante-natal groups); family support services; attending parents' evenings in schools; Connexions; the Bolton outreach and advice team; PCSOs; adoption and fostering staff; the traveller outreach officer; dads' workers who put on sports days and other groups linked to children's centres and neighbourhood management teams; hostels for homeless women with children; and the childcare development team. She also has a role in training information assistants (front-of-house staff who will answer parent enquiries as part of a 'hub and spoke' model) in children's centres. Events that are new to the FIS are entered into the database.

The outreach worker also carries out visits to new providers to encourage them to promote the FIS, and contact the FIS regularly so the providers can keep their details updated.

The outreach worker handles between 50 and 90 contacts a week. She is now studying for a Level 4 qualification in Information, Advice and Guidance.

Most FISs would like to increase their outreach activities, partly as a response to Section 12 requirements. In some FISs there were plans to issue outreach staff with laptops so that they could handle enquiries 'on the spot'.

4.4 Communication, publicity and marketing

4.4.1 Managers survey

Three-quarters of the FISs in this study (76%) had a marketing and awareness strategy or plan. Those with a larger budget were more likely to have a marketing plan - 90% of FISs with an annual budget over £200,000 did so, compared with 67% with a budget up to £200,000.

4.4.2 Case study findings

All case study FISs produced marketing and publicity material to promote their service and different aspects of it. The range of this material varied considerably. Bedfordshire, for example, had produced a series of short leaflets about key issues such as childcare, benefits, being a childminder and activities for children with SEN or disabilities, which were distributed mainly via children's centres. Cumbria, for example, adopted a more directed marketing approach and sent magazines to particular groups of parents every 4 or 6 months, with articles featured about local support services. These had extensive distributions.

In some cases where distribution does not take place via a direct mailing, FIS Managers were dubious about the value of printed publications because they are distributed often to places where they have no staff presence, meaning that take up and use of leaflets is rarely monitored. Although one FIS used considerable funds to print 2000 leaflets, it was unable to discern a subsequent increase in enquiries or awareness of the FIS. In only a few FISs was comprehensive distribution, upkeep of stocks and monitoring of use carried out by FIS staff.

For some it was felt more important to promote material to key practitioners such as workers in children's centres, health visitors and parent support advisers in schools and to include material in other services' material such as Bookstart packs in Bolton and Middlesbrough and the health visitors red book in several areas.

Every FIS had developed a brand identity, with a service name (even if this was simply the "[local authority] Families Information Service") and identifiable design (such as a logo, a particular image and a recognisable design for all branded materials). In some there is a tension between council and FIS branding but there is no evidence that one is more successful at raising awareness than the other. In Bolton, for example, a recent rebranding exercise has meant that the FIS number is now printed on all kinds of leaflets aimed at promoting events, leisure activities, or other services aimed at parents.

The majority of FISs had undertaken some more ambitious marketing and publicity work, including advertising in local media. These included regular advertising in council publications and occasional advertising in local newspapers (education and childcare supplements), transport interchanges, radio stations and the side of buses. In a few cases these have increased awareness and the level of enquiries received. 'The bus advertisements were very effective in raising our profile'. These approaches were felt by some to be more effective than printing information. One FIS considered that advertising in local media channels was not effective and no longer used this as a method of marketing. Many FISs realise that people are not likely to use the number until they need the service, and have focused their marketing on parents in settings that they use with their children.

The FISs undertaking advertising tended to have larger budgets and the active support of the local authority's central marketing function, which helped them to produce more professional promotional materials and negotiate advertising rates.

Promotion can be more subtle and inexpensive. One example is given below in Box 4 of involving parents and young people in the branding of material in East Riding of Yorkshire. Another, Southend, held a competition to name its teddy bear mascot, which succeeded in raising the profile of the service (several parents that we spoke to in the area had heard of the bear). Bolton is currently consulting with young people to ensure the 'front end' design of the website is accessible and attractive to young people.

Few had done anything to promote the extended information duty. Cumbria, for example, had promoted its 14-19 information under the title 'Wots4U'. Others had not because they already covered this information and several will do so later this year when they re-brand the service.

Box 4

East Riding of Yorkshire FIS - Marketing and publicity

Marketing and promotion has been a key priority for the FIS because resources for going out to provide information face to face across such a large area are limited. The FIS is branded as FISH (the Families Information Service Hub), with its own distinctive logo and design, which were developed through consultation with parents and young people.

With the help of a corporate marketing officer in the council they planned a complementary set of campaigns to raise awareness of the FIS through both generic materials (such as information leaflets, pocket guides to FISH, posters and stands, pens, bags and mouse mats as well as advertising campaigns in print media and on local radio) and more targeted promotional tools (for example, placing an advert in the health 'red book' for parents of 0-5 year olds and providing template promotional materials for schools, children's centres and other childcare providers to use with their own materials).

The marketing officer was also able to ensure the FIS received a high level of prominence in other council marketing, such as getting posters placed throughout council buildings and, in one month, putting an advertisement on the payslips of all council employees.

4.5 Engaging the whole community

This aspect was assessed through the case studies only. All case study FISs recognised that they had to be proactive if they wanted to ensure that the whole community of parents accessed the service. Most could demonstrate some activities focused on specific groups of parents who might have the greatest barriers to access. The following were most common:

- Working with other service providers to provide information and assistance to their clients; for example teenage pregnancy services (to reach young parents); JCP (to reach lone parents particularly); and parents groups run by different services or voluntary sector organisations (these included minority ethnic groups, fathers' groups and groups of parents with disabled children); and Children's Centres.
- Working with community development services in the council or in housing and regeneration services to organise events in disadvantaged areas or with particular ethnic groups;

- Working with specific community groups to ensure they could tailor any service to their needs. For one FIS this was an orthodox Jewish community in others it was travellers and parents of children with disabilities.

Translation was not generally done though most could provide interpretation services if required.

It is difficult to discern whether many of the FISs had taken a systematic approach to identifying different groups of parents in their area who were not users and what their particular information needs are, or the extent to which the FIS was engaging them.

FISs had not generally collected detailed data about the parent population in their area to compare to their users. However, some could point to:

- Systematic research and consultation as part of their work on sufficiency plans and children's service plans in the last few years which had informed the FIS. North Lincolnshire FIS, for example, had undertaken a mapping exercise to demonstrate where children and young people lived, lack of availability of childcare and risk areas for teenage pregnancy. This helped to make sure resources and activities were targeted to 'high need' areas. However, there was little evidence that supplementary information about user needs in areas which were considered to have greater needs had been collected;
- Feedback from council surveys and, in a few cases, their own survey of parents. Cumbria FIS, for example, used gift vouchers as a response incentive;
- Making use of their own enquiry information and feedback forms to ask about user characteristics and what information and advice they needed. Most of the FISs, sent evaluation forms that asked for demographic information to service users. However, all reported that response rates were low and feedback was rarely analysed systematically.

Most FISs point to the limited research they can afford to carry out themselves and the difficulties of collecting information about users and non-users. Because they do not want to put parents off, many FISs have not recorded important characteristics about parents that have accessed the FIS (such as age, ethnicity and whether or not the user was a lone parent). Beyond this, FIS staff do participate in consultation activities with parents and other practitioners to shape their service improvements.

5. Information

5.1 Summary

We would expect from the DCSF Guidance standards to find:

- Provision of comprehensive, accurate up to date information on childcare and other local services covering registered and unregistered provision;
- Provision of comprehensive, accurate up to date information on support for parents of children and young people up to age 20;
- Information services which can directly support parents locally as well as referring them to services and information available at national level through websites, help-lines and printed material;
- Information for parents with disabled children and children with SEN;
- Quality systems to ensure accuracy;
- Liaison with other local authorities.

We found from the managers' survey:

- 76% of FISs updated their information on childcare providers at least fortnightly;
- 99% used Ofsted updates to update information on childcare providers;
- 100% of FISs had an email or telephone enquiry service to answer user queries during office hours;
- 99% had an FIS website to provide users with information outside of office hours, although content was not assessed in the managers survey.

We found from the FIS case studies:

- All the FISs held electronic information on registered and non-registered childcare and maintained additional information about these providers;
- All had some information on other services and activities for children up to the age of 20 but the coverage of this varied considerably particularly in relation to leisure activities, activities and childcare for older children at extended schools, and activities at youth and community centres;
- Some websites were more comprehensive, easy to search and make on-line enquiries than others; some did not have all the information in a single website identified with the FIS;
- Some allowed other practitioners to use, search and provide information and advice about registered and unregistered childcare; others did not;

- Some did not have links to national, regional and local organisations, financial information on affordability, information about careers in childcare, information of likely relevance to parents of teenage children or young people with disabilities and SEN;
- All updated their registered childcare information speedily and some checked this over;
- All audited their non-registered and additional information about registered and non-registered childcare at least annually and gathered information on vacancies more frequently;
- Some appeared to do auditing and updating more frequently and systematically than others;
- A few have standards for information accuracy; practitioners in some councils reported inaccuracies and difficulties in finding information they needed.

5.2 Information available for families

5.2.1 Manager survey

As noted above, 100% of managers reported that their FIS had a telephone helpline and email service to answer user queries, and 99% said users were able to access a website for information. However, as highlighted in the case studies, the information available on different FIS websites is likely to vary considerably from basic childcare provider information to comprehensive information for families.

5.2.2 Case studies

All the case study FISs had the following sources of information to respond to enquiries and provide assistance:

- A fortnightly download from Ofsted, detailing registrations and de-registrations of childcare providers;
- An electronic database of registered childcare providers with additional information based on their own audits and updates;
- An electronic database of non-registered childcare providers with additional information based on their own audits and updates which included information on activities from other services (particularly extended services and holiday activities in schools, children's centres and youth services).

As a consequence we found that all had mandatory childcare information available electronically. Few though kept information in paper form. Indeed only one FIS currently publishes a directory version of their database. Most have ceased this because it is difficult to maintain and costly to produce and distribute. In addition, not all have a single web based database of childcare and activities covering all children and young people up to the age of 20.

Most FISs were custodians of the information and gatekeepers. Some had relinquished their gatekeeper roles by:

- Enabling other staff to access the Ofsted information of registered provision, particularly those working in developing the early years' workforce; several have and are enabling staff in children's centres, for example, to respond to enquiries instead of making enquiries to the FIS enquiry staff. It is apparent though that there are differences in the extent to which FIS and early years staff use all the features of the current system to track early years workforce training;
- Providing facilities on the website for obtaining information about vacancies in local childcare providers. Only a few FISs published a list of childcare providers online but websites of some other FISs linked to the Childcare Link website, which allows users to search by area and postcode to generate a list of local childcare vacancies that can be printed off. All websites encouraged people to contact the FIS directly for a list of childcare providers and vacancies;
- Providing training as described above in paragraph 4.1.3 to other staff in children's centres (information assistants), extended schools and JCP. Given the large volume of enquiries from other practitioners (one estimates 80% of enquiries), this can increase efficiency.

A few FISs have worked with other services to develop their information resources. None had relinquished their role as custodians of the information though in several, data was captured and produced by other services. A few were working with colleagues to develop hubs because they are seen as a resource for children's services and not one of several databases used by different groups of professionals in the council and partner organisations.

In a few cases examples were given of information sources for non-registered childcare provision and additional information within councils and the VCS that duplicated the FIS's or which were the source instead of the FIS's website. Other service managers found this confusing.

Our checks of the FIS website suggest that there are differences in usability:

- Only a few websites encouraged enquiries by way of an online enquiry form. The advantages of online forms are that users do not have to leave the FIS website in order to ask a question and they simply have to enter their contact details and question and click on a 'submit' button. However, one of the enquiry forms only included fields relating to childcare enquiries, despite the wider remit of the FIS;
- While many of the websites provided links to national, regional and local organisations of interest to families, young people and children, a few of the websites only provided links to national organisations;
- The quality of search engines varied across FISs. When FIS web pages were part of the general local authority website, a long list of results was returned from a search but it could be difficult to pick out the most relevant items. However, just under half of the websites had good search engines that covered just the FIS pages and therefore generated useful and relevant information. A few websites allowed users to search by area and postcode. At the time we checked websites (November 2008), only one search engine did not work at all. Several practitioners said 'that they had too many clicks to find anything';

- The majority of websites did not allow organisations to upload or submit new entries for the website or directory themselves. Of the few that did have this function, one required registered users to provide log in details while another asked users to submit an online form to the FIS. A third FIS, provided a spreadsheet template for download to be completed and emailed back to the FIS.

All the case study FISs collect considerable amounts of information in addition to childcare provider information to include in their web based databases. Most commonly, FISs provided:

- Financial information to parents on the affordability of childcare with details about child benefit and tax credits and the implications of these for obtaining childcare. FISs tried to give accurate information on this, though a few reported that they found it difficult to ensure that this was always up to date and they 'did not fully understand all of the complex conditions and implications of all the financial support available'. Most FIS websites provided a concise explanation of the benefits available and gave a link to the HMRC website for more detailed information;
- Information about nursery education funding. Half the websites provide a clear explanation of parents' entitlement, while a few provide a link to national websites such as direct.gov.uk. Some of the FISs were running the Two Year Old Pilot and hence needed to make reference to this; London FISs also provided information about the London-specific Childcare Affordability Pilot funding that is available to workless parents;
- Information about adoption and fostering. Most of the FIS websites provided information, or at least links to other websites, about issues relating to adoption and fostering, including adoption pay and leave;
- Signposting to organisations that offer parenting support;
- Advice about careers in childcare. Most websites provided online advice and guidance about how to pursue a career in childcare. This ranged from detailed case studies, information about courses and funding, vacancy bulletins and advice on how to register as a childminder to a link to the local Connexions branch. A few websites did not post online information or links to other websites but advised users to contact the FIS for further information.

Less frequently and generally as a result of their policies on establishing more comprehensive databases the following can be found:

- Extended schools and leisure activities for children young people. Some FIS websites provided information about local activities across the full 0-19 age range, including details about activities in youth and community centres, parks and open spaces, and libraries; some websites linked to other web pages such as the leisure services section of the council website or the local newspaper's 'What's on' section; while some made no mention of these;
- VCS provision of activities, such as guides and other voluntary youth groups for sports and arts on a few;
- General advice on a few about school admissions procedures and policies, and choosing a school;

- Signposting to other services as diverse as teenage pregnancy, sexual health and anti-bullying;
- More specific information on one to assist people in looking for information about activities for children with disabilities / SEN;
- Legal and advocacy advice. Some FIS websites explained maternity and paternity pay and leave entitlement and some websites signposted to organisations such as the National Youth Advocacy Service and the Citizens' Advice Bureau;
- Links to other local authorities' FIS information.

The FISs with wider coverage tended to have better and wider relationships with partners and to have taken the view that it was a resource for parents of children of all ages. Only a few claim to have had a 0-19 age coverage before the duty came into effect.

Some had experienced some growth in their enquiries for children aged over 10/11 and about affordability. The affordability of childcare (and of activities for children, to an even greater extent) is a major issue in places with expensive provision, and negotiating upfront childcare costs can be one of the main topics for brokerage and assistance (see Section 6.3). A few FISs had also received increased volumes of enquiries about parenting and children's behaviour. All these trends in the nature of enquiries (though largely anecdotal) contributed to prompting some FISs to carry more information and be better informed on these topics.

5.3 Updating information

5.3.1 Managers survey

FIS managers were asked how regularly their FIS updates the mandatory information that they hold on registered childcare providers. 41% of FISs managers said they updated their mandatory information on a daily or weekly basis and a further 35% updated it fortnightly (Figure 5).

Figure 5 Frequency of updating core information

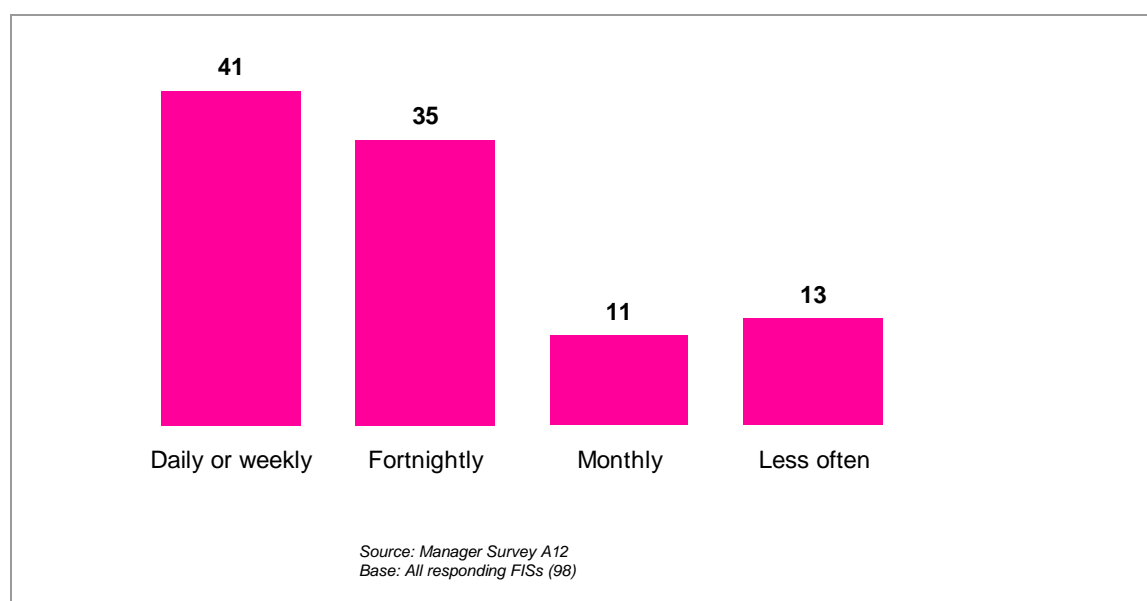
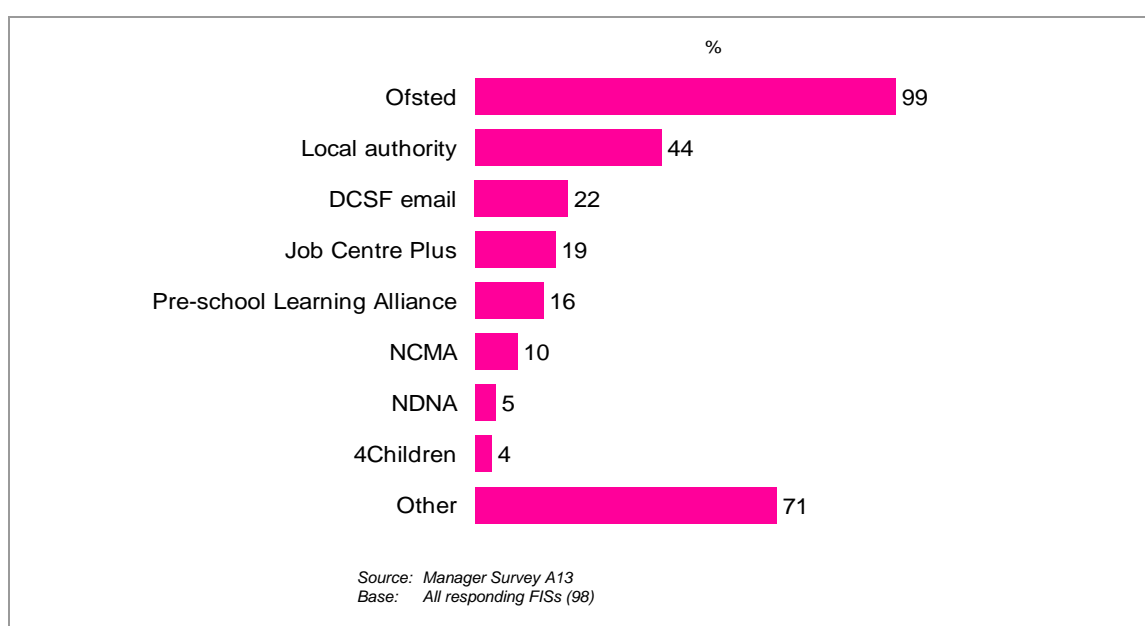


Figure 6 outlines the different sources used by FIS managers to update their core information about childcare providers. Nearly all FIS managers (99%) mentioned Ofsted as a source for updating their information and of these respondents, 71% found this source helpful. The next most commonly used source of information was the Local Authority, used by 44%, this was deemed helpful by 95% of FIS managers.

The DCSF email (22%) and Jobcentre plus (19%) were chosen as sources for updating information by around a fifth of FIS managers. Whilst 16% relied upon PSLA for updates, 10% mentioned NCMA, 5% obtained updates from the NDNA and 4% from 4Children. 71% of FIS managers also described a further information source in the 'other specify' option - in most of these cases they mentioned getting updates from the providers directly.

Figure 6 Where updates for childcare provider information are obtained



For each source selected, managers were asked how helpful they found this source. 71% of those who use Ofsted found this to be 'very' or 'quite' helpful. Although this is a main data source for nearly all managers the helpfulness rating may seem a little lower than expected. In the case studies, managers mentioned the need to clean this data before use. Local authority information sources were rated helpful by 95% of managers who used them. Base sizes for the other sources of updates are too small to report on how helpful managers found them.

5.3.2 Case studies

All of the FISs updated their electronic database with the fortnightly Ofsted bulletin on registered childcare. Many of the FISs spent time checking over the data they received before entering it onto their database in order to correct any errors or 'junk' data (i.e. mis-entered data from Ofsted). Generally, there was a perception that the Ofsted data was not entirely reliable.

Case study FISs varied widely in how rigorously they collected and updated their additional data on registered childcare and all their information on unregistered childcare.

Most FISs conducted audits of registered and non-registered childcare providers on an annual basis to maintain their additional information and gathered information on vacancies more frequently. During the year they also carried out ad hoc updates when contacted by providers, carried out checks of other standing information and added and updated information about activities provided by other council services, partner organisations and the community and voluntary sector. For holiday activities these would be updated in advance of each holiday period.

A few FISs did more frequent updating (mainly on a termly or quarterly basis) and were more proactive about ensuring additional information on registered and non-registered provision was comprehensive and accurate. For example in one or two cases they:

- Required new and existing providers to update their details within a certain period (usually around one month) and systematically chased this up to ensure they could provide information to make possible matches;
- Checked around over the telephone information on vacancies with child minders and nurseries;
- Expected monthly information on vacancies and removed information that was not verified or updated;
- Established information exchanges with staff in other services (especially libraries, leisure centres, children's centres and youth services) and chased up its provision if it was not updated;
- Enabled some of these staff to have updating and editing rights so that this could be done speedily;
- Set quality standards for their information. For example, one FIS made providers' details inactive after a particular time without an update, and one would only include non-registered providers' activities if the organisers had had CRB checks.

Staff in a few FISs reported some problems in achieving their plans for their information resources. For example:

- Several have experienced difficulty in building relationships with youth services and have had to obtain information from individual centres;
- Extended schools are not yet buying in to sharing information for parents outside their own school but there is evidence that some FISs are developing joint planning and strategies with extended schools services within the council. For example, Gateshead FIS supported an extended schools event by demonstrating their website to teachers and providing leaflets for extended schools colleagues to distribute and Bedfordshire organised network events and days for staff in extended schools and children's centres.

Generally, users of the Ofsted data on registered childcare found that it was very reliable and up to date. Without it and 'the help the FIS can provide directly to enquirers about working in the childcare sector we would not be able to focus on training'.

A few practitioners reported that information on non-registered provision and other activities and services was less accurate, comprehensive and up to date than they needed. This sometimes meant that they gave less than useful information and enquirers returned or they had to make telephone enquiries with FIS staff or use other sources. For example in one council, information about mother and toddler groups could only be obtained from a libraries service database because the FIS database was not kept up to date; in another the additional information on non-registered provision was 'not well maintained'. Some FISs mentioned the difficulties of collecting reliable information about unregistered childcare provision and tended to advise parents to check directly with providers.

6. Advice and assistance

6.1 Summary

We would expect from the DCSF Guidance standards to find:

- Information services which can directly support parents as well as referring them to services;
- Information delivered in a way which allows parents choice and to become informed consumers;
- A brokerage service to help parents' understanding of what is available and the sources of support and to meet their needs.

We found from the users survey:

- Four-fifths of FISs users were people calling on behalf of their own families, with the rest calling in a professional capacity or on behalf of a friend or relative's family;
- Two thirds of users contacted their FIS about childcare provision or funding childcare;
- 96% of users said the FIS fully or partially answered their query;
- Two thirds of users received further information from the FIS following their contact (most by post) to provide further information for the user;
- A quarter of users were referred to another organisation, half of whom contacted this organisation for information;
- Over 95% of users who contacted organisations they had been referred to found the referral appropriate, helpful, useful, and had accurate information.

We found from the FIS case studies:

- All provided some advice and assistance to parents about all aspects of childcare and activities for children;
- All aimed to provide an impartial service;
- The extent of advice depended on the information they collected and the training given to staff; some referred advice about the childcare workforce and affordability to others;
- All provide some brokerage but in most FISs those given advice were not followed up to see if they needed assistance;
- None had a clear policy on brokerage in relation to all their advice giving.

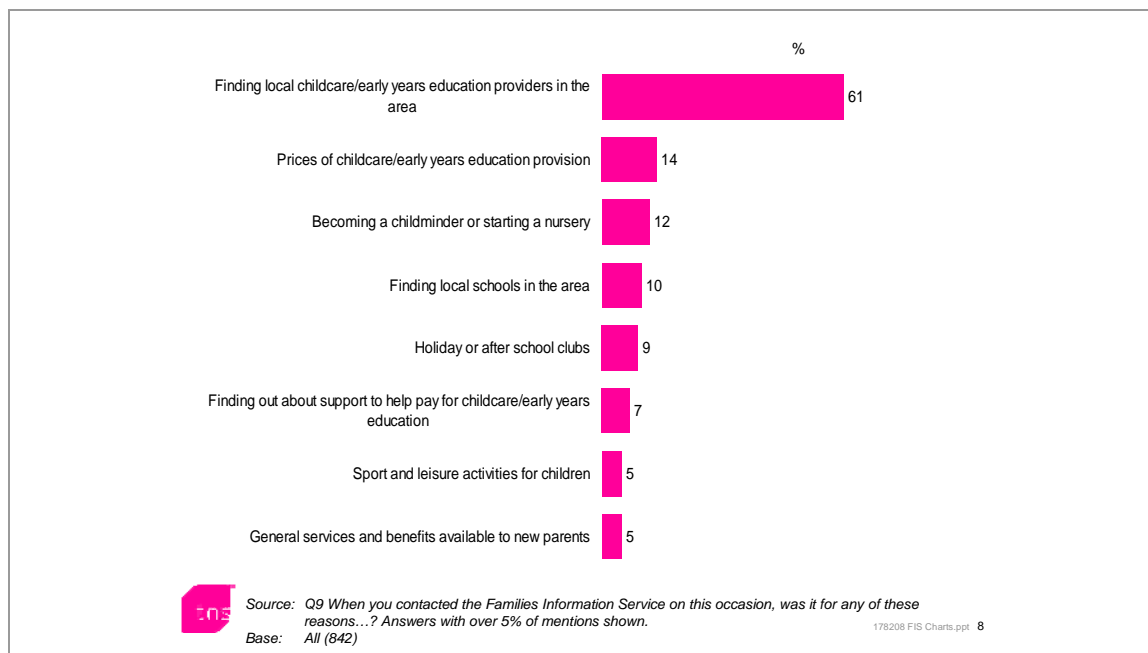
6.2 Advice

6.2.1 User survey

FIS users were asked whether they had contacted the FIS for advice on their own behalf, or on behalf of someone else's family. Three quarters of users had contacted the FIS for information regarding a query about their own family (79%), the remaining users contacted the FIS in a professional capacity with a general query (19%), and 2% contacted the FIS on behalf of a friend or relative.

Two thirds of those users who contacted the FIS did so with queries about childcare (64%). The main query about childcare was to find out about local childcare and early years education providers in their area (61%) (Figure 7). Other childcare-related queries for which the FIS were contacted, included to find out the prices of childcare/early years education provision (14% of users), a further 7% were enquiring about support to help pay for this provision. 12% were enquiring about becoming a childminder or starting a nursery. Of the users asking about childcare and early years education provision, 10% got in touch to find out about schools in their local area and 9% had wanted information about holiday or after school clubs. Sport and leisure activities for children were the reason behind 5% of the users contacting the FIS. 5% of users were asking after information on general services and benefits available to new parents. The remaining users all gave various individual reasons for their contact.

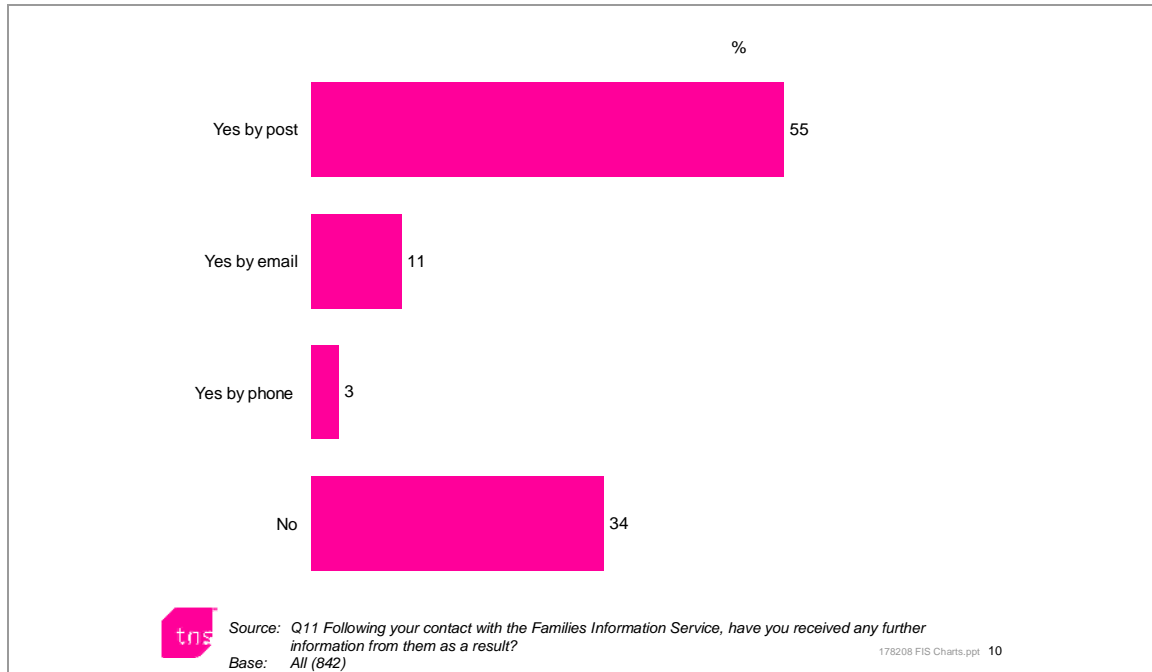
Figure 7 Reasons for contacting the Families Information Service



Users who contacted the FIS on behalf of their own family were most likely to have queries to do with childcare (78%), whereas those acting in a professional capacity or with general enquiries were most likely to be asking for information about becoming a childminder or starting a nursery (48%), or about applying for a job (11%), as well as queries to do with childcare (12%).

Users who contacted the FIS were asked if they had received any further information from the FIS as a result of their enquiry. Over half of the users (55%) had received some further information regarding their query through the post after contacting their FIS. Another 11% were emailed by the FIS to provide follow up information and guidance and 3% had received a follow up phone call from their FIS. Although this provision of follow up information should be standard procedure, 34% of users had not or did not remember receiving any further information following their enquiry to the FIS (Figure 8).

Figure 8 Whether further information was received after the initial contact with the FIS



Users were asked how they would best like to receive further information following a query in the future. Three quarters of users wanted this information to be sent through to them by post (73%), while a fifth would prefer the information emailed through to them (20%). Although the vast majority had contacted the FIS by telephone, only 3% of the users wanted follow up information to be delivered in this way. Only 1% asked for additional information via their mobile and 3% of users did not know.

FIS users were asked whether the last time they contacted the FIS, they had been offered details of another organisation, website or helpline to help solve their query; 23% of users were referred to another organisation in this way. Of those who were referred to a further source of information 49% had contacted them and 10% had plans to do so. Overall, users who had a referral, agreed that they were appropriate (98%), helpful (99%), useful (97%) and had the accurate contact information provided (96%).

Users were asked whether they had done anything as a result of gaining information from the FIS; 60% of people said that they had done something with this information, examples of which include;

'We employed a childminder'

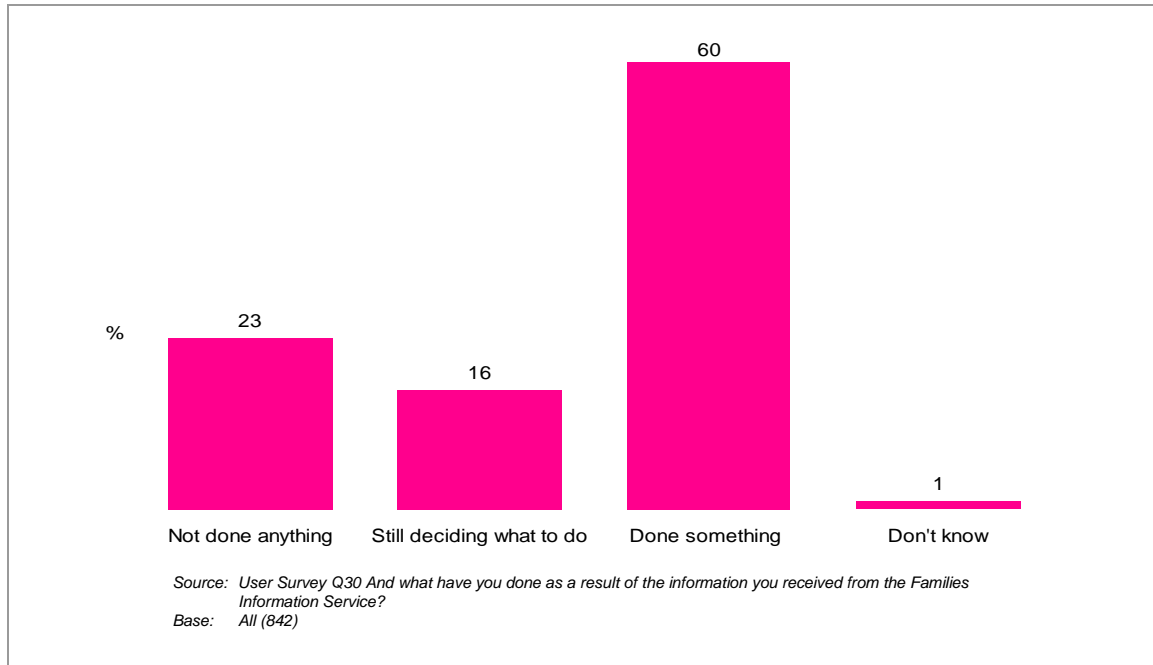
'I booked a date to go on a childminding course'

'We got school transport for the children'

'I contacted a lot of them (childcare providers) in the list. I am in the process of selecting.'

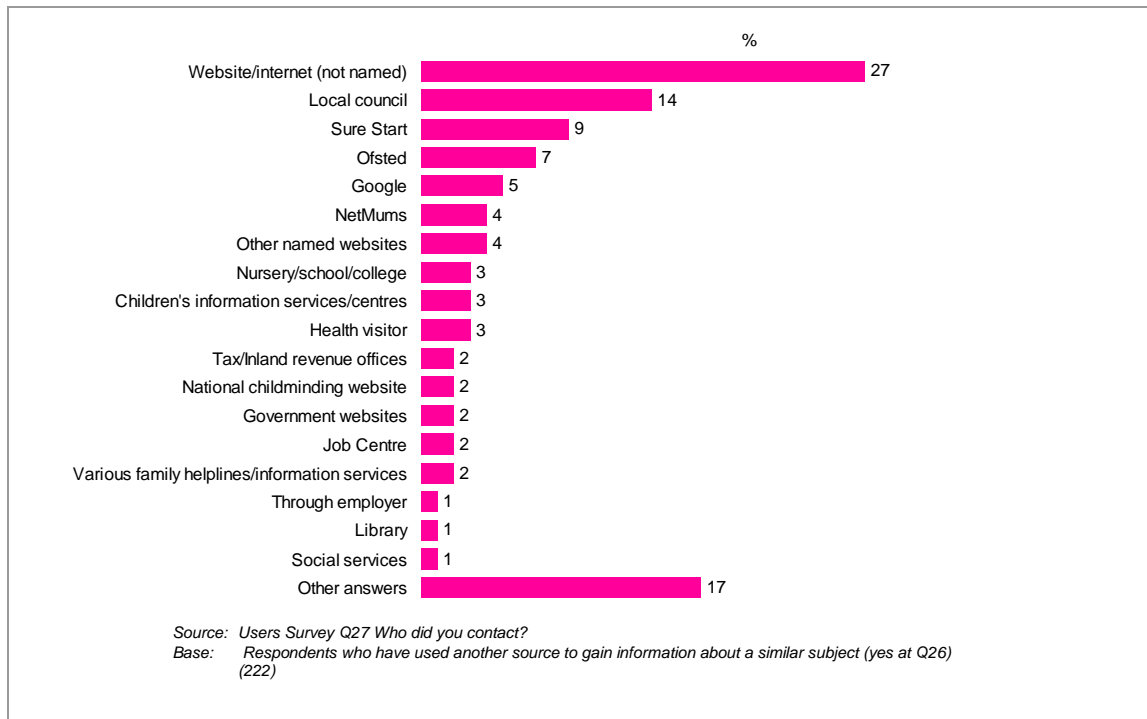
16% of users were still considering and deciding what to do. One user for example had *'put it on hold until I have established when I am finishing with my current employer'*, another said they had *'phoned a few childminders. I will find one when I go back to work'*. A further 23% of users had not done anything as yet.

Figure 9 Whether users had done anything as a result of information from the FIS



FIS users were asked whether they had used another source to gain information about a similar subject before. Over a quarter of users (26%) had previously used another source. These users were asked what sources they had previously used. As Figure 10 shows, a wide range of previous sources were mentioned.

Figure 10 Sources previously used to gain information about a similar subject



These users were also asked how they had used the previous source. 58% had used a website, 22% had contacted them by phone, and 18% had visited in person.

Users were asked how useful they had found the FIS in comparison to other organisations they had used for similar sort of queries, by choosing whether the information they had received from the FIS was better, the same or worse than other organisations. The majority of users were positive as 85% of users said the information provided by the FIS was better (45%) or the same (40%) as most other organisations.

6.2.2 Case studies

All case study FISs provided some degree of advice and assistance to parents or their representatives about all aspects of childcare and activities for children. Most requests for advice are still predominantly about early years' childcare with the proportion about activities for those aged over 5 growing only slowly.

FISs were very consistent in stating that they aimed to provide impartial information and advice to parents. In relation to childcare they generally advised parents about:

- What they might look for from a childcare provider in terms of hours; benefits of different types of provision - for example childminders vs. other childcare; location;
- Provision for children with additional needs;
- Holiday provision (for instance one FIS was the contact point for making bookings on the local authority's summer playscheme provision);

- Indicators of quality (e.g. Ofsted ratings for registered childcare) that parents could use when choosing a provider and what to look for if visiting.

But that, ultimately, choice had to be left to the parent and the FIS could not recommend any particular provider.

Many had information on their websites providing advice. Most had a description of services offered by different types of childcare provider (including childminders, day nurseries, out of school care, Children's Centres and pre-schools), an outline of advantages of each and questions to ask providers. Most FIS websites also provided comprehensive contact details of local Children's Centres and links to their websites.

Some FISs mentioned that they were able to provide information to users about careers in childcare. This was a significant proportion of their work and was supported by strong partnerships with Job Centre Plus. FISs also provided signposting into services that could assist with parenting skills, or provided advice in relation to the nursery education grant or working families tax credits (WFTC), although the extent of this varied as some FISs did not feel it was their role to provide detailed information on these topics. Indeed some had responded to the changing nature and complexity of enquiries they were dealing with by providing training and information to staff so that they could, while others referred enquirers to other services.

6.3 Assistance (brokerage)

This aspect was assessed in the case studies only. In general, case study FISs recognised that some parents had extra needs that they were asked to help with and that they needed to provide assistance. Also, that they had some parents who needed more assistance to find suitable childcare in their area. These included cases where parents could not understand English sufficiently to make their own enquiries, where parents needed active help in arranging visits and asking questions to make a decision, and where particular needs in terms of hours and locations required more assistance in tracking and checking suitability. In several FISs there was in addition active assistance given to JCP clients who were referred to them to ensure that childcare was available.

In general there were not high volumes of such enquiries and only a small proportion of enquiries ended up requiring assistance/brokerage. Some identified these from their follow-up of enquiries to check whether more help was needed to find and fix up suitable childcare. A number of FISs commented on the large amount of staff time required to deal effectively with brokerage cases. Large numbers arose when a nursery closed. Some brokerage calls are also very urgent (for instance parents could be referred to the FIS from the local Job Centre or courts service, with requests to find immediate short-term childcare).

FISs did not generally have any clear criteria defining what constituted an enquiry which required assistance. However, they mostly recognised that this was required if they were to be consistent in offering further assistance. Because of the time they took, staff needed to be clear when they should volunteer to do this. FISs did not systematically log brokerage enquiries. Some were reviewing this because of the Section 12 duties on providing advice and assistance. For example Bedfordshire had developed a protocol between the FIS and National Childminding Association (NCMA) to detail how brokerage to childminders should be dealt with between both organisations and to clarify the nature of support and guidance that parents can be offered by both, with NCMA taking on brokerage cases where children have more specific needs (e.g. SEN) as they have more detailed knowledge of providers' experience of specific issues.

With more complex enquiries for other services such as child protection, admissions, special educational needs assessment and parenting, staff in the FIS referred these to other teams unless they had specific training.

When provided, assistance was generally given by FIS staff with responsibility for collecting and providing information. In a few they had specialists in their teams such as the SEN parents' advisor or the Choice advisor; or the FIS could arrange a drop-in session with a trained specialist (most often, where disabilities or SEN were the issue).

7. Partnerships

7.1 Summary

We would expect from the DCSF Guidance standards to find:

- Joined up provision with other services and complementary delivery;
- Additional information about non-registered provision;
- Increased access for the socially excluded who might find difficulty accessing it.

We found from the managers survey:

- FIS were most likely (more than three quarters) to work closely with Children's Centres, childcare providers, JCP and libraries;
- 40% of managers said they worked with local voluntary organisations, which might include more specialised services for hard to reach groups.

We found from the FIS case studies:

- All had developed some partnerships with other council services and other public services in their area;
- Relations with library and early years services were generally strong; relations with extended schools, youth services and Connexions were variable;
- Most used information from enquiries to maintain their childcare sufficiency assessment but this was not always done systematically;
- Managers as well as organisational arrangements made some difference to this;
- Relationships with JCP were generally found but only in a few were there continuing working relationships around assisting parents into work;
- Relationships with health and housing services and with the private and voluntary sector were variable; only a few had strong working relations with many of these;
- Few had worked with employers;
- Only a few had stakeholders closely involved in their service provision.

7.2 Manager survey

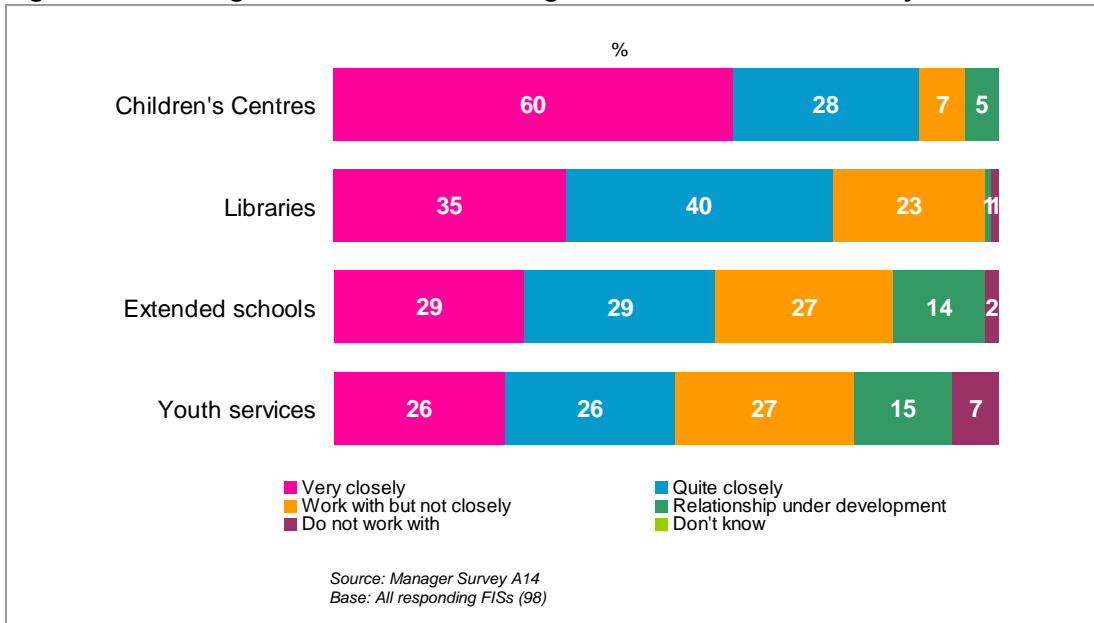
7.2.1 Working with other services and organisations

Managers were asked how closely their FIS worked with a range of other services and organisations. The response options were 'very closely', 'quite closely', 'work with but not closely', 'do not work with at all' and 'relationship under development'. Results are shown in Figures 11 to 13.

FISs were working with a wide range of organisations, with the majority of managers saying their FIS worked very or quite closely with Children’s Centres (88%), private, voluntary and independent childcare providers (87%), Job Centre Plus (74%), Libraries (75%), Parent Partnership Service (65%), Extended Schools (58%), and Youth Services (52%).

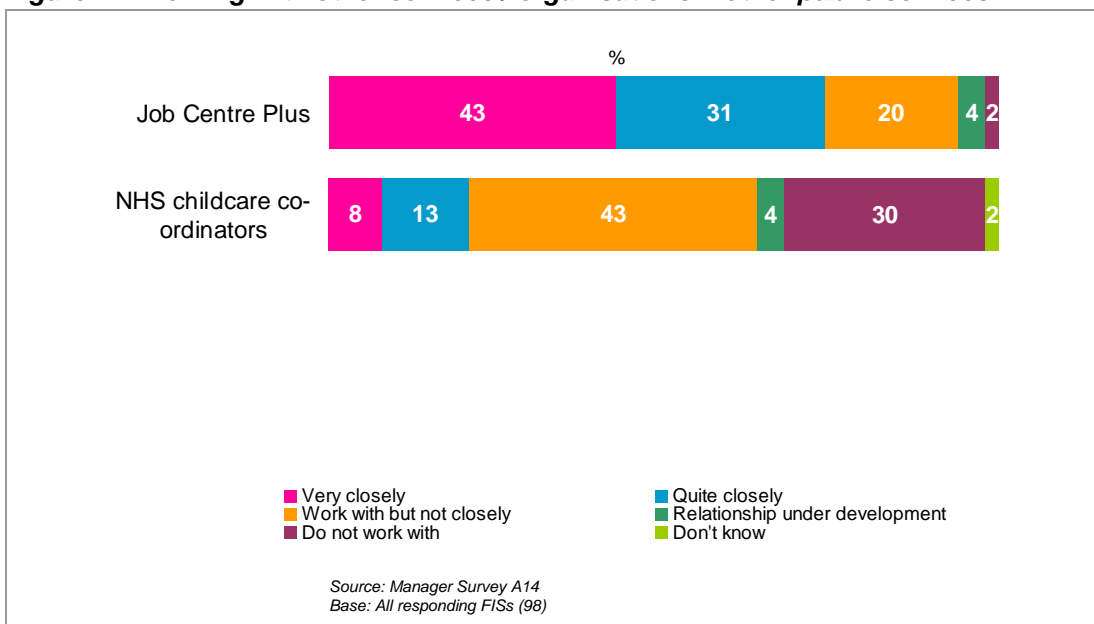
FISs were most likely to work very closely with Children’s Centres - 60% of them did so (Figure 11).

Figure 11 Working with other services / organisations - Local Authority



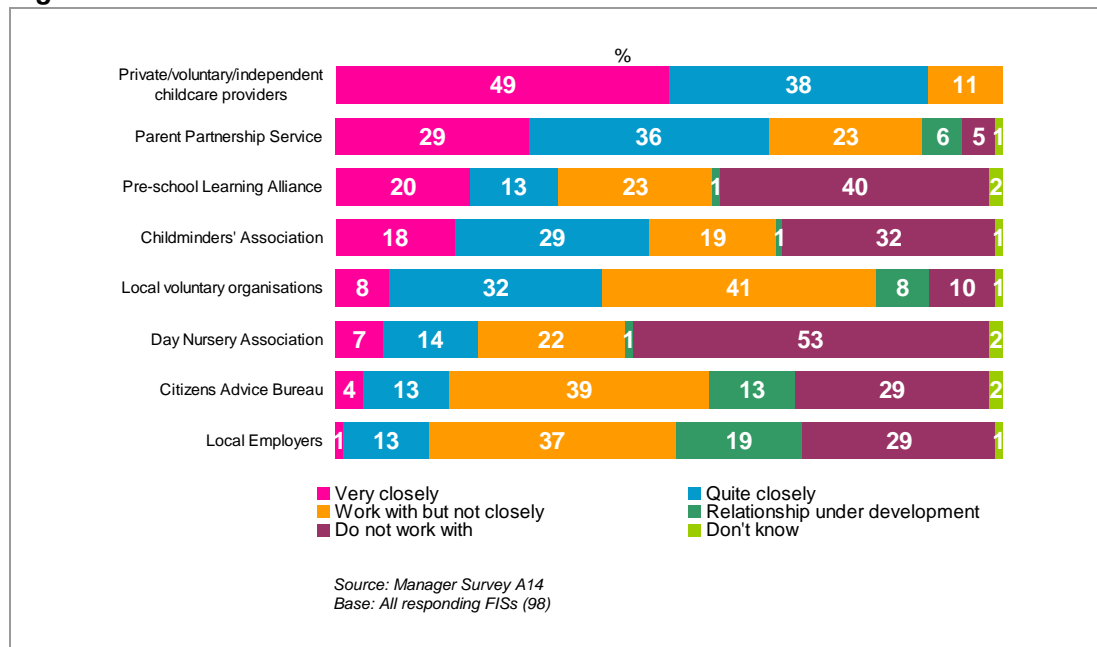
Of the other public services, 43% of FISs worked very closely with Job Centre Plus (Figure 12).

Figure 12 Working with other services / organisations - other public services



Amongst the private / voluntary sector organisations, FISs were most likely to work closely with private, voluntary and independent childcare providers (49%). Very few FISs worked closely with local employers (Figure 13).

Figure 13 Working with other services / organisations - private / voluntary organisations



Managers were most likely to say that they did not work with the Day Nursery Association (53%), the Pre-School Learning Alliance (40%), the Childminders Association (32%), NHS childcare co-ordinators (30%), the Citizen's Advice Bureau (29%) and Local employers (29%), although significant proportions did say that they were developing relationships with the Citizen's Advice Bureau and with Local employers.

7.3 Case studies

All the FISs had actively developed some partnerships with other services in their council and among the council's partners in the delivery of children's services. The extent and nature of these varied between FISs.

7.3.1 Local authority services

FISs had generally developed strong working relationships with other council services. Because of the legacy of the service, they tended to have particularly strong relationships with children's centres and early years services. Some are or had been within the libraries service where they retained strong connections.

The following were more variable:

- Relationships with extended schools were a challenge for some FISs. *'Not all extended schools realise that they ought to make what they are providing known to parents from other schools especially those who are crossing boundaries'*;

- Relationships were still at a developmental stage with integrated youth services and Connexions in a few FISs. In some, such as Cumbria, these were positive where the FIS had taken on 13-19 databases. In one developing a partnership over information provision with the Youth Service was a challenge. *'I don't believe they understand what our role is and that we should be working together on this'*;
- Relationships with safeguarding, behavioural support and teenage pregnancy teams were not common although some had developed these to meet the needs of parents with older children and to support practitioners;
- Relationships with the Childcare Sufficiency Assessment appear to have been common when the audit was being undertaken; some draw on FIS enquiries to review this though this is not evidently done systematically. Most state that the situation does not alter greatly. *'We know where we have few child minders and this is because of the type of people who live in those areas'*.

North Lincolnshire, for example, has a wide range of relationships that are highlighted in Box 5 below.

Relationships were actively created by FIS managers and other staff in the team through making approaches to key staff and seeking to participate in other service's events and activities to promote the FIS, and providing opportunities for other services to do so in their activities. Managers of other services have said that:

- The willingness of the FIS team to get involved *'promotes the service with colleagues'* and ensures they are *'approachable'* and *'can do'*;
- The FIS manager actively participates in initiatives to develop information resources and access and *'makes this happen so we don't provide our information in silos'*.

In a few councils organisational arrangements such as steering groups and the area's Children's Trust helped to build and maintain these though they were not necessarily significant barriers where FIS staff networked well and built good one to one contacts. *'I can just pick up the phone or call by; it does not need steering groups and senior managers' agreement for us to work together'* (parenting commissioner).

Even so, having managerial oversight for FISs alongside children's centres and extended schools in some councils, and having integrated information and advice strategies for children's services which bring together a wider range of service managers, can be catalysts for building and maintaining internal partnerships.

Almost all FISs recognised that they had to work at their relationships and that for some the extended duty had provided a challenge to improve and extend them.

Box 5**North Lincolnshire FIS (Kids Lincs) - partnerships**

The FIS works closely with the following staff and services within the local authority:

- parenting commissioner;
- integrated youth support (including anti-bullying co-ordinator and teenage pregnancy service);
- local safeguarding children board;
- children's centres;
- extended services co-ordinator;
- childcare development team;
- libraries; and,
- domestic violence worker.

The FIS manager and his line manager both worked hard at forging relationships with other service managers through personal contact. This was achieved in large part through ensuring that the FIS has been embedded in strategic policy development groups such as those developing the Parenting Strategy and the Children and Young People's Plan. The FIS is recognised as the council's central point for co-ordinating and disseminating information and providing a first point of contact for support.

The FIS is part of the central Customer Service team in the local authority and has taken on a strategic role as an internal information hub. The FIS is currently developing a 'parenting directory' (a comprehensive list of services for families in North Lincolnshire), which will draw together information previously held in numerous databases across the local authority.

7.3.2 Other public services

While all FISs had some level of working relationships with at least one service provided by other organisations in their area, the extent and quality of these was very variable. Some had strong relationships which could be verified with managers in these organisations, others had relationships which could be described as unstable or only went so far as sharing information. Some of the weaker relationships could be accounted for by the time and priorities of FIS staff and their counterparts, others by personalities and the council's senior management relationship. Most FISs wanted to build their partnerships and recognised that there were gaps.

Jobcentre Plus (JCP)

Most had some relationship with JCP. In only a few could this be described as strong and sustained. For example, in East Riding, each JCP office has a trained FIS champion and JCP lone parent advisers had access to the FIS database and were trained to be able to search for childcare provision. In Westminster, FIS staff regularly visited job centres and attended sessions with lone parents in conjunction with JCP staff. In Middlesbrough, the FIS carried out work at an 'Options and Choices' event for lone parents held on employers' premises.

In other FISs, JCP staff could flag any customer citing lack of childcare as a barrier to work and ask the FIS to decide if this was reasonable. The FIS could also be brought in to provide a brokerage service to help parents to find childcare if they had struggled to do this themselves. In some areas, JCP staff wanted to increase this area of working to enable people to progress into employment or training but were frustrated by the FIS.

The Childcare Sufficiency Audit process has been a major driver for partnership working with JCP, as Jobcentres try to increase their knowledge of the barriers to getting an increasing number of lone parents back into work. In some cases, this has led to the systematic sharing of information about where gaps in childcare provision are, so that JCP customers can be reassured that sufficient provision is available for their needs.

Relationships with JCP are also closer in those FISs that have a remit covering recruitment into childcare. For instance in Bolton, the two services carry out training sessions with each other's staff so they are aware of services provided. In Middlesbrough, the FIS contributes to a childcare recruitment website and updates JCP about local vacancies; as well as putting together a childcare information pack for JCP customers. Both these relationships are supported at a higher level by JCP attendance at FIS steering and network meetings.

Southend's work with JCP is described in Box 6 below.

Box 6

Southend - Job Centre Plus

The JCP district covering Southend and its neighbouring local authority areas works closely with Southend FIS to run joint events (sharing speakers) such as Job Fairs in children's centres. However JCP have their own arrangements for the Options and Choices events for lone parents, although the FIS provides advice. JCP notify local FISs of any perceived shortages in childcare though this is not such an issue with Southend as provision is quite good.

Lone Parent Advisers (LPAs) are all aware of the FIS so they can refer customers on where childcare is an issue. FIS staff have worked with JCP staff so that the LPAs can give out information about when children can be left alone and other queries that parents may have about childcare.

The JCP Childcare Partnership Manager attends the Children's Centre Development Groups, strategic partnership meetings with the FIS, as well as regular monitoring meetings. This means that mutual information sharing takes place with these services about relevant changes in policy or support that is available for lone parents. Southend was one of the pilot districts for Pathways to Work so a lot of the partnership work that is now taking place with other FISs elsewhere in the district was developed earlier in Southend.

Health

Some had relationships with parts of the health service though these were not generally comprehensive. Relationships were largely at an operational rather than strategic level. Generally, PCT staff working with children were aware of, and signposted to the FIS, but there was often a lack of wider cooperation. An exception was North Lincolnshire where there was cooperation in distributing information and proactive referrals to the FIS by PCT staff. In some local authorities such as Bolton, the relationship with health services had been facilitated through Children's Centres, which can act as places where PCT staff can hold clinics. In some, the relationship was with staff working in HR to promote childcare information (for example, developing joint information packs) and advice to staff. Elsewhere, the relationship was purely at a practitioner level: for example, a few FISs targeted health visitors who could inform parents about the service and how it could help them and parents groups (such as postnatal groups) supported by the PCT.

Housing and regeneration

Only one FIS had developed relationships with Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) which provided community development activities with a focus on reducing unemployment and raising incomes among their tenants. The FIS outreach staff in Westminster, for example, attended events to encourage women into work or learning and organised festivals together based on social housing / regeneration areas and collected information on the activities for children run by the community development teams.

7.3.3 Private and voluntary sector

Working relationships with community and voluntary organisations in their area tended to be relatively low key.

- A few FISs had contacts in umbrella organisations to update web based information;
- A few FISs had forged links with specific community groups (e.g. particular BME groups) and projects as part of their outreach work to inform people about the FIS;
- One FIS (East Riding) had the local umbrella group for voluntary organisations (ERVAS) on its steering group. This was the only example of a FIS with a steering group that included such a voluntary sector organisation;
- One FIS (Bromley) had a relationship with the local representative group for private and voluntary sector providers in their area, their local Early Years and Childcare Development Partnership (EYDCP).

These relationships were driven and maintained through the provision of mutual support, as well as particular local circumstances. In Bromley for example, most childcare provision is in the private and voluntary sector; whereas other local authorities have a more mixed economy of provision. The chair of the EYDCP attends the Children's Trust Board; the FIS can use the EYDCP as a two-way conduit for information e.g. on staffing levels; and private providers benefit from passing on up to date vacancy information through the FIS. In East Riding, ERVAS encourages voluntary sector groups (such as those providing sports activities for young people) to go through formal procedures such as CRB checks, in order that their information can be publicised through the FIS.

7.3.4 Employers

Most of the FISs had not undertaken any work with specific employers apart from the council and the PCT. Two FISs had worked with local businesses to advise about childcare voucher schemes. For example, Middlesbrough FIS organised face to face visits with local businesses who expressed an interest in further information about childcare voucher schemes as a result of a large scale mailing. North Lincolnshire FIS organised a local Childcare Award Ceremony in partnership with BMW and Huggies. Although the event was successful in raising the profile of the FIS and childcare in general, the FIS manager felt that maintaining strong links with business would be challenging.

8. Staffing and financial arrangements

8.1 Summary

We would expect from the DCSF Guidance standards to find:

- An integrated information service strategically led by the local authority;
- Suitably qualified and trained staff;
- Promotion of information services.

We found from the managers survey:

- 44% of managers felt their local authority had very or quite effective strategic planning and oversight of the FIS;
- A third of FIS managers did not know how much budget was allocated to running the FIS while just fewer than half of FISs had an annual budget of £100-300k;
- Over half of managers felt supported with marketing and publicity from the local authority;

We found from the FIS case studies:

- Line managers for the FIS managers generally provided support on organisation and resource issues and around the development of integrated information sources, and so provided most of the strategic leadership;
- Priorities around the integration of information services varied though most were addressing some of these, including legacy systems;
- Team sizes varied and as a consequence some had staff with more specialised roles and dedicated more staff to information management, outreach and publications for example;
- A few had increased and reorganised staffing in recent years;
- A few required staff providing information, advice and assistance to have an appropriate level 3 qualification; some had relatively inexperienced staff in these roles;
- Most had prepared staff for the extended Information duty and most ensured staff received appropriate training and development;
- Many had used networking and learning from neighbouring local authorities;
- Most of the FISs had budgets for promotion and marketing and could draw on support from elsewhere in the council; in a few budgets were small and were not held by the FIS managers.

8.2 Position within and working with the local authority

8.2.1 Case studies

FISs have developed in different ways. Most senior managers responsible for the service explain this is a consequence of the perceived key linkages of the service.

Most case study FISs were situated in early years / childcare development teams within the local authority's Children's Services departments. This is largely because of the historical legacy of being a children's information service focusing on provision for those aged 0-5. In general, staff in these councils were happy with this arrangement as childcare is still the main focus of FIS work, but also because there tended to be good links with children's centres and extended services.

The main exceptions are FISs in the libraries service (Bolton) and in corporate service teams. For example in North Lincolnshire the FIS is in the central customer service team and in Bromley, the FIS was moved from the early years service to the central, Strategic Performance, Planning and Communication function.

There does not appear to be any linkage between organisational location and the integration of the service with other services and leadership of the information duty. While some have taken strategic decisions about the service to move it away from early years management, good and extensive working relations with other council services and outside the council were equally strong in these settings.

Many use both informal and formal means to integrate their work with other services and the development of their information resources and advice services. Some have described formal strategic arrangements to develop their information resources in line with other children's services such as information hub developments for the common assessment framework. A few have strategic arrangements to integrate legacy systems which are not yet integrated and to integrate telephone enquiry services. Progress varies and the extent of strategic working tends to affect the extent to which FISs provide additional information (as described in paragraph 5.2 above) and have effective partnerships (as described in paragraph 7.2.1 above).

Line managers for the case study FIS managers had varying involvement in the day to day running of the FIS. In most cases they supported the service through working with and developing relationships with partners and in working on information strategies for children's services and their integration with other information services. Priorities varied depending on the local authority's strategies for information and customer service. In general they did not undertake any activities linked to providing information, advice and assistance but they did lead on organisational and resourcing matters. Managers also generally have varying strategic input into other parts of children's services, notably Children's Centre development and the childcare workforce (for those FISs involved in recruitment activity), and acted as internal 'advocates' for the FIS service. Almost all were third tier managers.

Co-location with other teams in some cases has had beneficial effects on service linkages. For instance in Middlesbrough, the FIS office is used as a base for the council's children and disability advisers, allowing informal links to be made and knowledge to be shared. For others though it is people not organisational arrangements that make a difference.

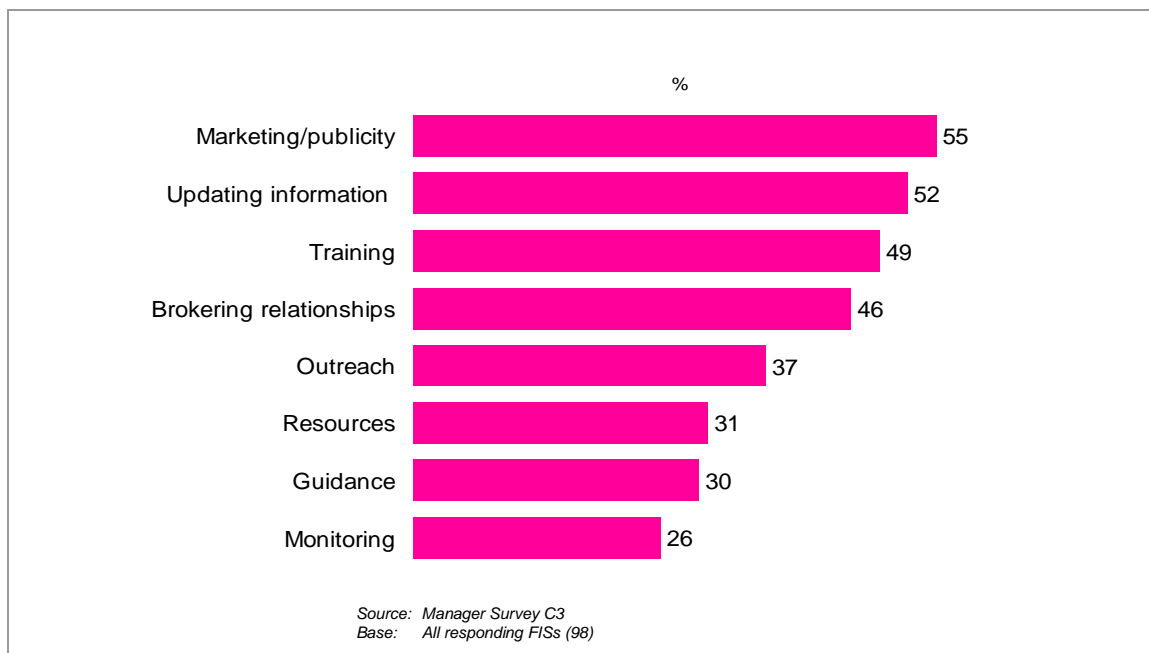
8.2.2 Managers survey

FIS managers were asked how effective they felt the local authority's strategic planning and oversight was for their FIS (Figure 14). 44% of FIS managers felt their local authority provided quite or very effective strategic planning and oversight. In comparison only 13% felt that the local authority's input was quite or very ineffective. A third of FIS managers (34%) thought their local authority's strategic planning and oversight was neither effective nor ineffective and a further one in ten (9%) did not know.

Figure 14 Effectiveness of the local authority's strategic planning and oversight of FIS	
	%
Very effective	11
Quite effective	33
Neither effective nor ineffective	34
Quite ineffective	9
Very ineffective	4
Don't know	9
<i>Source: Manager Survey</i>	
<i>Base: All responding FISs (98)</i>	

Figure 15 shows the proportions of FIS managers who felt that local authority staff offered the FIS support in various different areas, such as marketing or training for example. FIS managers were also asked to rate the different areas of support mentioned, on a scale from excellent to very poor. Just over half (55%) of all FIS managers stated that their local authority supported their FIS in terms of marketing and publicity; of these 63% felt this support was good or excellent. Similar proportions of managers said that their local authority provided support in terms of updating information (52%) and training (49%). 79% of those who mentioned the local authority's support in terms of training rated this support as good or excellent. Assistance in updating information was rated lower, with 59% of those who received this assistance, rating this as good or excellent.

Local authority support was also recognised by 46% of managers in brokering relationships, of these 76% rated this service as good or excellent. Around a third of all FIS managers mentioned that the local authority provided support for outreach programmes (37%), and also in terms of resources (31%) and guidance (30%). The fact that local authorities assist FISs in monitoring was highlighted by a quarter of all managers (26%).

Figure 15 Areas where local authority staff support the FIS

Managers who said that local authority staff provided each type of support were asked to rate the support provided, on a scale from 'very poor' to 'excellent'. 63% said that the support provided for marketing / publicity was good or excellent. 59% rated the support they received on updating information as good or excellent. The numbers receiving the other types of support were too small to allow reporting of the ratings.

FIS managers were asked to give any suggestions for improvements to the way in which the local authority supports the FIS.

Some managers felt that the local authority needed a greater understanding of how the FIS worked and its duties in order to improve budgeting and increase publicity;

"Better understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the FIS in order to pool budgets in order to achieve aims and objectives. A larger budget which supports staff salaries, marketing and general resources".

"Improved understanding of the services we deliver, which in turn will raise the profile and will help to ensure inclusion where appropriate".

Some managers highlighted that the local authority could help as a mediator between different points of contact who provide information to families to help build partnerships and in order to prevent repetition and duplication.

"Help with getting into schools, this is not easy and not sure that you are contacting the best person. They need our help for them to signpost and not duplicate information".

"More joined up strategic oversight on which services within the LA are designed and targeted to act as the Information 'Hub', to avoid duplicating and conflicting data. More awareness of / guidance on data protection and information sharing duties".

"It would be useful at a higher strategic level for an effort to be made to encourage other teams to share information with us, in particular about services / activities to be included in the Families' Service Directory".

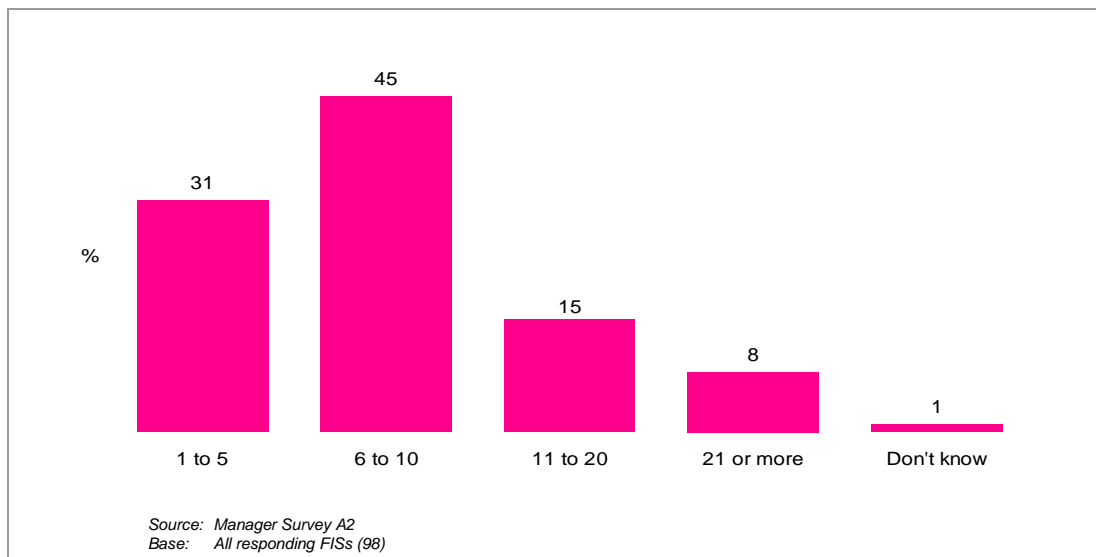
8.3 Staffing

8.3.1 Managers survey

The number of employees involved in delivering FISs ranged from 1 to 21 or more. Figure 16 shows the breakdown of the sizes of FISs measured by the number of employees.

The majority of FIS teams had fewer than 10 employees, with 31% of managers having 1 to 5 people involved and 45% having 6 to 10 people involved in delivering their FIS. Only 8% of managers had over 21 or more people involved in delivering the FIS. The people who were involved in the delivery of FIS were all employed in either a full time or part time capacity. Not surprisingly FISs with lower budgets tended to have fewer staff - 84% of those with a budget up to £200,000 per year had fewer than 11 people involved in delivering the service, compared with 59% of those with a budget greater than £200,000.

Figure 16 Number of people employed in delivering FIS



8.3.2 Case studies

Direct staffing levels in the case study FISs varied from about 3.5 FTEs to about 7.5 FTEs. Typically this was a mix of full time and part time staff. In Gateshead, for example, staff in a contact centre supplemented the staff of the FIS. Senior managers explained that the staffing level generally reflects the funding which can be obtained.

In some cases staff had other duties. For example the managers in Southend and Gateshead had other work which they managed.

In the larger teams staff tended to have specialised roles around information management, enquiry handling and outreach. In the smaller teams staff were more generic and much less time tended to be spent on outreach activities and in quality assuring data.

In only one FIS had staffing grown as a result of the duty with a dedicated member of staff to develop the information resources about older children. In several others though there had been increases for information database roles and outreach in the last few years and in one an intention to fill two new posts which would increase their FIS capacity.

8.4 Training and development

Training and development was assessed in the case studies only. Only a few of the case study FISs had established requirements for staff to have a level 3 in IAG though most had at least one member of staff who had a qualification. Even so almost all service managers in other services felt that FIS staff had sufficient knowledge and ability to handle enquiries effectively. Managers seek recruits who are passionate about their work with the ability to interact successfully with parents.

In a few cases there were inexperienced staff responding to users. These tended to be administrative or entry level staff with little or no experience of the sector and with little or no training in customer service or advice and guidance. As a consequence they could provide less advice and assistance than staff who had a qualification or longer experience of the service and knowledge about providers. More generally experienced trained staff were dedicated to responding to enquirers while carrying out either outreach or information management roles. In Gateshead, for example, contact centre staff had been provided with extensive training and support to take on the management of enquiries, with one of the team taking the lead in keeping staff up to date and coordinating with the FIS.

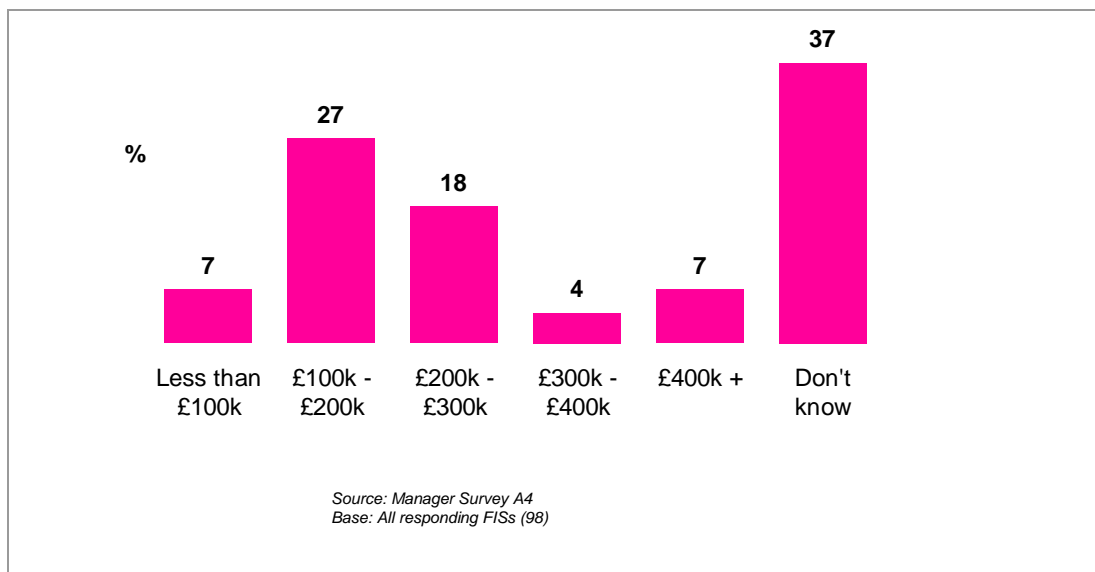
In most FISs staff had been prepared for the extended duty from briefings and information cascades. In some, specific staff had been given responsibility for ensuring that different parts of the guidance were being implemented. In general, DCSF guidance was received favourably. It was principally managers who attended training and networking events and who met with managers of other FISs. In a few FISs staff had also received ad hoc internal training from other services (e.g. teen pregnancy, bullying and disability) so that they could handle calls more sensitively and effectively. Some had attended NAFIS and NACAB courses to handle enquiries on affordability. In Middlesbrough for example, the FIS had employed the services of a consultant to look in particular at the interface between FIS enquiries and the Common Assessment Framework, training staff on how to identify parenting difficulties and refer parents on to support services.

8.5 Budgets

8.5.1 Manager survey

Gross total annual budget

The managers were asked what the gross total annual budget was to run their FIS, considering all sources which were available to them. Figure 17 shows the range of budgets between FISs, from less than £100k to over £400k, but also highlights that over a third of managers, 37% chose Don't Know as a response and so do not seem aware of their total budget available. Over a quarter of FIS total budgets (27%), were between £100k and £200k, whilst 18% of budgets were stated by FIS managers to be between £200k and £300k and 4% between £300k and £400k. 7% of managers respectively said that their total FIS budget fitted into the extremes of the scale, with either less than £100k available or more than £400k.

Figure 17 Total budget available to run FIS**Budget Breakdown**

The managers were then asked to break the stated budget into differing cost areas, and were asked to think of staff costs, office costs and overheads, marketing, travel costs and other costs.

Staff costs

7% of managers allocated less than £100,000 for staff costs, 18% stated their staff costs were between £100,001 and £150,000, a further 10% allocated between £150,001 and £200,000 to staff costs whilst 15% said their staff costs were over £200,001. The remaining 49% of managers either did not state an answer to this question or chose Don't know.

Office costs

Over half (57%) of all managers who responded to the survey did not know or did not provide an answer to this question. The majority of those who did answer, 40% said their office costs were up to £50,000, and the remaining 3% chose between £50,001 and £100,000,

Marketing costs

Similar proportions of FIS managers either did not know the budget breakdown for Marketing costs or did not include them in their budget breakdown, with 47% not stating an answer to this question or choosing the Don't know option. Around half of all managers (48%) stated that their costs for Marketing were under £50,000 and 5% between £50,001 and £100,000.

Travel costs

Over a third of FIS managers (37%) said that they spend under £50,000 on travel costs, the remaining 63% either did not give an answer to this question and or chose the Don't know option.

Other costs

35% of FIS managers stated that under £50,000 of their budget was allocated for other costs. A further 5% said between £50,001 and £100,000, and just 1% of managers chose either the £100,001 - £150,000 or the £200,001 - £250,000 options. Nearly two thirds of the managers asked either did not state other costs in their budget breakdown or answered by choosing the Don't know option.

8.5.2 Case studies

Some of the FISs had budgets for their promotion and marketing; the largest was £50,000. They also could draw on support from elsewhere in the organisation and use corporate services without charge. In several, budgets had not been aligned with the service and were not clearly delegated which made for frustrating management and uncertainty. In some cases, this is linked to dependence on non-mainstream funding.

9. Performance monitoring and management

9.1 Summary

We would expect from the DCSF Guidance standards to find:

- Feedback about gaps in childcare provision from advice and assistance;
- Regular updating of the needs of parents;
- Regular consultation, review and evaluation of services.

We found from the managers survey:

- Nearly all FISs said they had some form of monitoring of the service, mostly in the form of user feedbacks forms;
- Fewer than half of managers said they monitored the service and fed back externally;
- 85% of managers said their FIS worked towards the S12 guidance, however two thirds were also still working towards the 2003-2006 DCSF guidance.

We found from the FIS case studies:

- Few have any targets and performance indicators which are closely monitored either internally or externally;
- Some have operational plans and strategies which cover the FIS but these generally have very broadly defined goals for the service around information (access and coverage) and partnerships;
- There is limited monitoring of service standards around responses to enquiries and service take up
- Most use advice and assistance given to gauge needs and gaps in childcare provision; few do any surveys or research needs;
- Most periodically review and adjust their services; some can point to research and consultation in the past which has informed this.

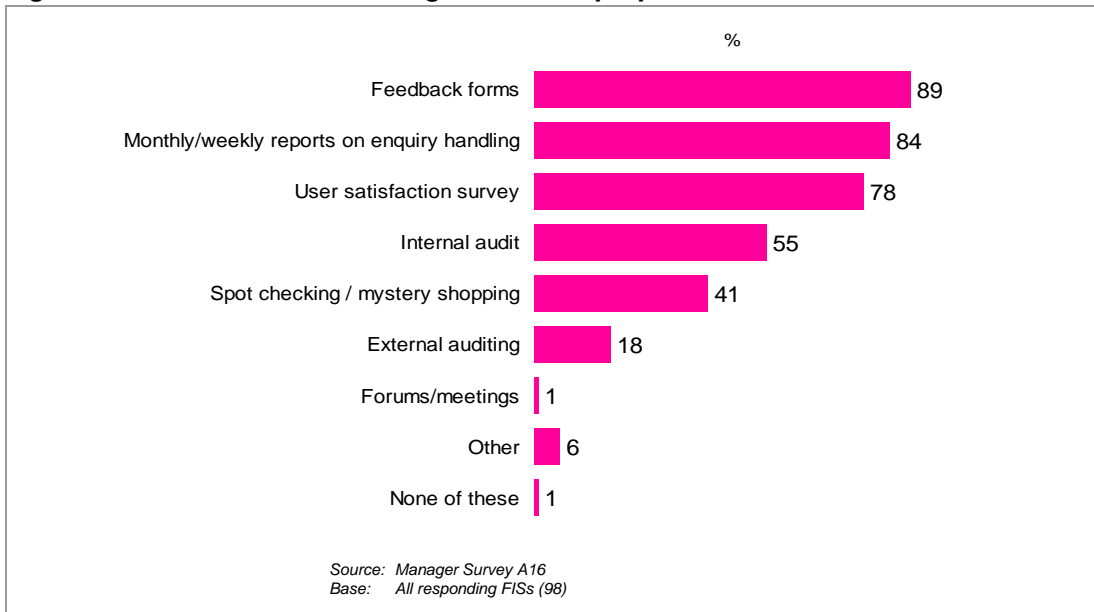
9.2 Managers survey

Figures 18 and 19 show the proportions of FISs undertaking various internal and external monitoring processes. It was left to the respondent to interpret the difference between external and internal monitoring, however internal monitoring can be assumed to be for the purposes of improving the service by using feedback received and processing this within the FIS. External monitoring implies that the results will be shared and scrutinised outside the FIS for example wider within the local authority.

The vast majority of FISs perform some kind of monitoring for internal purposes (99%). Types of monitoring for internal purposes which were used by the largest proportions of the FISs were feedback forms (89%), regular reporting at weekly or monthly intervals (84%) or a survey of users' views (78%). Over half of FISs did internal audits (55%) and just under half (41%) perform random spot-checking and mystery shopping exercises for internal monitoring

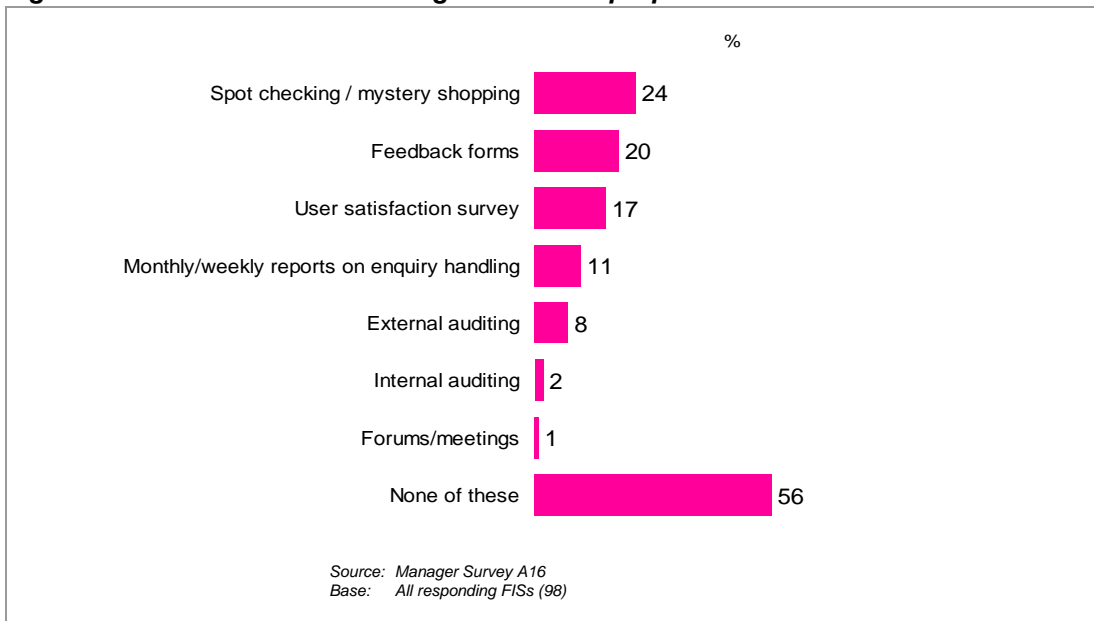
purposes. 18% of FISs had external auditing, very few had forums (1%) and 6% had other ways of monitoring their FIS for internal purposes.

Figure 18 Performance monitoring for internal purposes



The prevalence of monitoring for external purposes was far less widespread than for internal purposes with 56% of FIS managers stating that they do not use any monitoring for external purposes (Figure 19). A quarter of FISs did undertake spot-checking and mystery shopping exercises and a fifth provided feedback forms. 17% ran a user survey to provide information for external purposes, whilst 11% produced weekly or monthly reports and 8% had some external auditing. Very low numbers undertook internal audits for external purposes (2%) and similarly very few had a forum (1%).

Figure 19 Performance monitoring for external purposes



FIS managers were asked whether their FIS worked to any of a list of standards. They were able to select as many as applied. The majority of managers reported that their FIS worked to DCSF standards, including the DCSF S12 guidance (85%) and the DCSF 2003-06 guidance (64%). Other standards including local authority defined standards, NAFIS quality standards, and Matrix award standards were also used by significant proportions of FISs. Only 2% of FIS managers said they did not work to any of these standards (Figure 20).

Figure 20 Standards the FIS currently works to	
	%
DCSF S12 guidance	85
DCSF 2003-06 guidance	64
Local authority defined standards	40
NAFIS quality standards	38
Matrix award standards	35
Chartermark	4
None of these	2
Other	5
Base: All responding FISs (98)	

9.3 Case studies

In general case study FISs had few targets which were linked into higher level plans for their council's children's services and were not as a consequence closely monitored externally or internally.

9.3.1 Strategies and plans

Some case study FISs had operational plans for their service. In the ones made available these generally only had activities such as 'to improve the website' or 'to improve access to the service' with no indicators or targets set to determine progress and no targets for numbers to assist with finding and taking up childcare.

Some councils had activities to be delivered by the FIS principally in higher level plans, including the Childcare Sufficiency Assessment (CSA) and plan. Our check of the sufficiency assessments and plans showed that only broad targets for the FIS were included with no clear targets set against which to measure improvement. In one typical example, the activities for the FIS of publicising existing childcare provision for parents of children with SEN or disabilities and undertaking research about the need for additional out of school or holiday places were stated but there was no information about how this would be achieved or measured. Another emphasised the importance of engaging with employers who can support employees with children and states the need to *'develop and maintain links with the Local Employment Partnership and Economic Development Unit to promote the FIS and generally raise awareness of childcare to employers in the borough'*. Many sufficiency assessments highlighted the lack of awareness amongst users of the FIS and, of those, most stated the broad aim of improving access to information and awareness of provision. None included any detail about how and when this would be achieved.

As a consequence there were also:

- Few examples where FIS staff had personal development plans with service delivery targets;
- No evidence that service statistics were generally collected for monitoring performance outside the service.

An exception was Westminster where there was a target to assist lone parents into work through advice giving which is linked to a council target around employment. Middlesbrough FIS was also tasked with contributing to the uptake of WFTC. Although there was no specific target, they recorded whether enquirers were taking this up (and refer on when they may have been eligible).

9.3.2 Monitoring and quality control

All the case study FISs undertook some monitoring of their service but this did not appear to be systematic and regular in any FIS. For example, most FISs collected some statistics about enquirers but these were not generally summarised to share with us and only a few managers indicated that they regularly reviewed these. As stated above in paragraph 4.4 these did not generally include demographic characteristics in order to assess trends in access.

Equally all case study FISs conducted some level of self-evaluation. Generally, this meant sending out a paper feedback form for enquirers to complete and post back. However, inevitably these were only filled out by some users and non-returns were not chased. Only a few FISs regularly analysed these returns in any detail.

Only a few checked the following which can help to assess and improve their service delivery and effectiveness:

- Web searches and particular uses of web based information; in one this was done to monitor use of new pages and search words;
- The take up of printed material which is distributed; in one this was counted;
- The take up of outreach sessions where in one this was done to review the timing and location of both regular and irregular sessions and redistribute time allocated.

As a consequence none of the FISs appeared to monitor their performance against any standards they may have had in terms of speed of response, accuracy, reach, coverage of enquiries and satisfaction.

More commonly managers and staff responded to enquiries received and immediate informal feedback in adapting their services. This is accepted good practice for information, advice and guidance workers operating at Level 3 or above.

9.3.3 Periodic review

Many of the case study FISs had carried out some review of their effectiveness though this was not carried out on a regular basis. Some could point to work to prepare for their sufficiency plan which included assessing where enquirers' needs for childcare could not be met and surveys which the council had commissioned. Service reviews have largely been driven by local authority reorganisations in children's and young people's services.

Some FISs had consulted parents and young people about branding and the development of marketing materials and many FISs consulted with parents to more generally shape their service through focus groups and parent forums. None could point to mystery shopper exercises (other than the national TNS one, which some found helpful and others annoying) and there were few examples of focusing consultation exercises on more disadvantaged parents.

A few FISs pointed to some adjustment and response as a result of periodic review. In Gateshead, for example, the transfer of enquiries to the contact centre arose from a strategic review of the quality of service provided and future needs. It was apparent that to provide an enquiry service for longer hours every day and with opportunities for people to come in, a contact centre offered an improved service.

10. Changes made as a result of the extended Information Duty requirements

10.1 Summary

We would expect from the DCSF Guidance standards to find that FISs had made changes to extend their services beyond childcare and early years information.

We found from the managers survey:

- Around a half of managers felt that their FIS was meeting the requirements of the extended information duty, but there is no independent assessment of whether this is actually the case;
- The resource and staff changes that managers reported making to meet the extended requirements included putting extra resources into the outreach programme, increasing staff numbers, increasing information and training for staff, and increasing marketing;
- Most managers said they had needed to develop new working partnerships or relationships, most commonly with Youth services and with Schools/education.

We found from the case studies:

- Some had developed their services to respond to section 12 requirements and the increasing use by users of phone and email;
- Some had anticipated the changes and most had been developing their service delivery channels over the last few years.

10.2 Managers survey

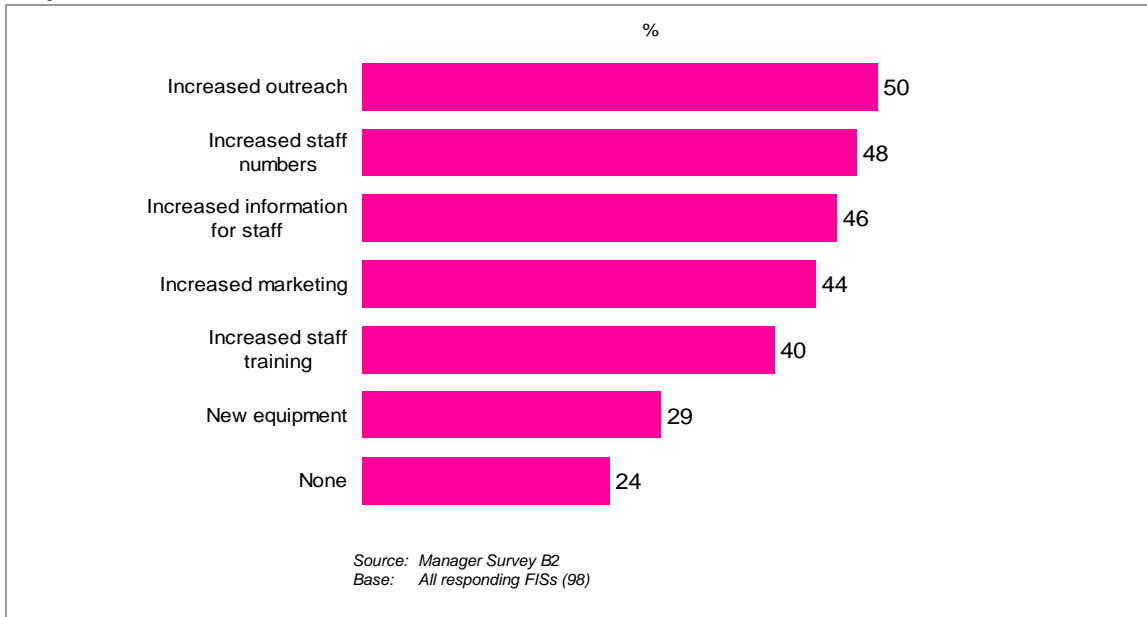
FIS managers were asked about whether changes had been made to meet the extended information duty, in respect of local authority support, resourcing / staffing changes, services provided, working partnerships, and publicity/marketing.

Overall, around half of managers (51%) said that their FIS was fully meeting the requirements of the information duty. 41% said they were not currently meeting the requirements, and 8% did not know. However, this assessment does not correspond with that of the case studies (see Section 10.3), and it may be that managers are not fully aware of what the information duty requirements are. In the absence of external performance monitoring against information duty requirements, it is not possible to say to what extent the managers' self assessment matches against the actual requirements.

The 40 managers who felt they were not meeting the requirements were asked in what respects their FIS was deficient. The most common response was that there were gaps in the service that was being provided - 15 managers said this. 12 said that they were still planning. 9 said that although they were not meeting targets, target dates have been set for them to achieve this. 11 said that target dates had not been set. Staffing issues were mentioned by 8 managers.

All managers were asked about the ways and extents to which FIS's have had to make resource and staff changes in order to assist in the delivery of the extended information duty. Half of those FIS managers asked had put extra resources into their outreach programme, a similar proportion had increased staff numbers (48%). 46% had increased information for staff, 44% had increased marketing and 40% had increased the amount of training for their staff. New equipment had been introduced in 29% of the FISs to help assist in the delivery of the extended information duty. A quarter of all FIS managers said that no resource or staff changes had been made (Figure 21).

Figure 21 - Resource / staff changes made to assist in delivery of extended information duty



FIS managers were asked if they were planning to develop any new ways for users to contact the service or to extend existing ones in the next few months in order to meet the information duty. For a set of provided responses Managers were asked to indicate if this relationship was developing as new, extending existing or neither, Figure 22 shows this breakdown for each of the contact methods provided.

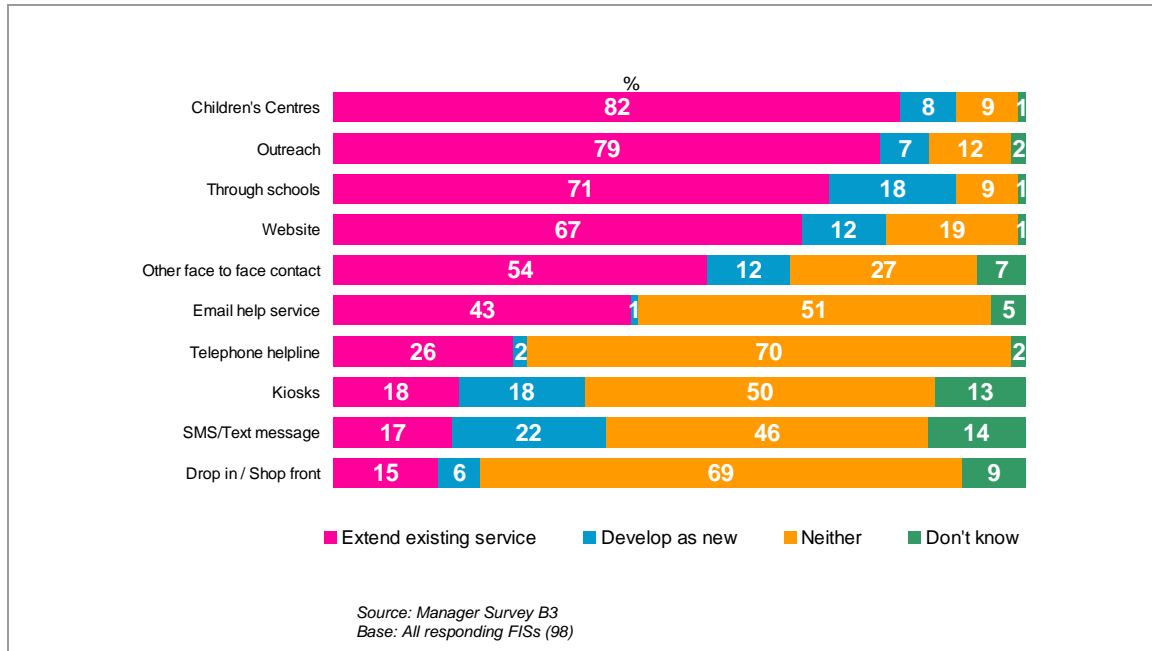
Most FIS managers (82%) suggested that they would be extending their existing contact with users through Children's Centres and a further 8% will be developing this as new. The opportunities for users to contact the FIS through outreach programmes (79%) and through schools (71%) were two other main areas which are going to be extended by FISs to meet the information duty requirements. Additionally 18% of FISs appear to see the value of reaching users through schools and will be developing this method as new. Around two thirds (67%) of FIS's will be extending and improving their current website and over half (54%) will be extending their current face to face contact with users, over one in ten FISs will also be developing these two contact methods as new (12% each).

43% of FISs will be extending their email service in light of the extended information duty requirements, 51% will not be making any changes to this service however, presumably as it is already a developed contact method. Similarly telephone services seem to be a standard method with which to contact FIS and as such only 28% of FIS will either be extending or developing this as new, whilst 70% will not be instigating changes in this service to meet the information duty requirements.

Kiosks and SMS/text seem to be attracting new interest from some FISs as possible contact methods to meet the information duty; 18% will be developing Kiosks as new and a further 18% will be extending their service, however 46% will not be looking into making changes to this contact method and 13% do not know. 22% of FISs will be developing a new SMS/text service and 17% will extend their existing service (46% neither and 14% Don't know).

The Drop in / shop front service will be extended by the lowest number of FISs at 15% and will only be developed as new by 6%, 69% will not be making any changes to this service.

Figure 22 Plans to extend services to meet the information duty



Of the FIS managers asked, 37% felt there had been an increase in local authority support to assist in delivering the extended information duty, only 1% felt the level of support from their local authority had decreased. 57% of FIS managers felt that the local authority support had remained the same, but of these 36% felt the level of support was sufficient to deliver the extended information duty, whilst 21% felt it was not sufficient. 5% of FIS managers did not know if there had been a change in local authority support.

All FIS managers were asked whether they have needed to develop any new working partnerships and relationships to meet the information duty requirements. 73% of FISs have needed to develop new working partnerships or relationships to meet the information duty requirements. When asked what new partnerships they had developed, the most common response was with Youth services (38%) and with Schools/education (33%). The full list of responses is shown in Figure 23.

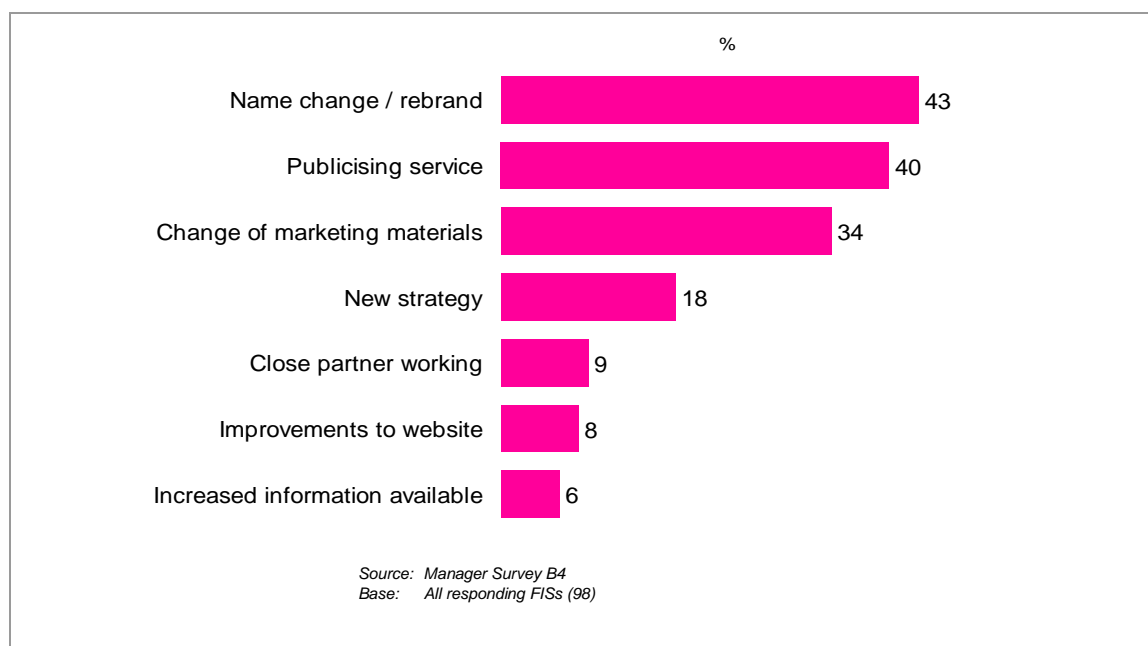
Figure 23 New partnerships developed to meet the information duty requirements

	%
Youth service	38
Schools/Education	33
Community services (e.g. housing)	19
Children’s Centres	18
PCT/Health services	17
Local voluntary groups	14
Job Centre Plus	14
Other LA departments	14
Parent Partnership services	13
Libraries	10
Connexions	8
Disabled groups	8
Employers	8
Sports facilities	4
Others	47

Base: FISs that have developed new working relationships (72)

FIS managers were also asked what changes to marketing and or publicity had been made following the change in branding to the Family Information System. Those changes mentioned by at least 5% of managers are shown in Figure 24. The most commonly mentioned changes were the name change or rebranding (43%), publicising the service (40%) and a change in marketing materials (34%). 18% of FIS managers reported a new strategy as a result of the changes, whilst others mentioned working closely with partners (9%), improvements to their website (8%) and increasing the information available (6%). Only 2% of managers said they were not making any changes to the way the FIS is publicised or marketed, and a further 10% said that funding or proposals had not yet been agreed.

Figure 24 Changes to marketing and publicity following the change to FIS



In response to this question one FIS manager said *'We have increased the marketing for the service since the name change. We currently have a campaign running on local buses which has been very successful'*.

Another FIS manager described a very different marketing strategy, stating that they *'undertook a 'leaflet drop' whereby a flyer was put through the letterbox of every house on some chosen estates. Our supermarket road show in July will be used to promote the CIS, EYFS, free nursery education and tax credits. We also produce a parents newsletter that is delivered to every household with at least one child up to the age of 11 - articles feature about the CIS, brokerage service etc'*.

Some FIS managers highlighted the restrictions of budget on the changes to marketing and publicity;

'We are changing to a new, more memorable, geographic, non-0845 number to reduce costs to our customers. Also increasing marketing of text facility, specifically for quick information and childcare provider vacancies. We would like to increase marketing and profile, but budget and marketing costs prohibit this'.

'New leaflets and posters have been produced and circulated in the community : we would like to develop a new online identity as a landing page linking to databases but are having problems identifying funding for this. No budget has yet been allocated to the Service and this is hindering our progress in planning marketing and publicity'.

Managers were asked whether they had used any external support to meet the extended information duty requirements. Only 24% of FIS managers had used external support in implementing and meeting the extended requirements, 70% had not, and 5% did not know.

Those who had used external support were asked what support they had used. The CIS regional project was used by 14 FISs, and NAFIS by 12 FISs. 7 managers said they had used commercially purchased support. In each case where support had been used, each source was unanimously seen as having been useful.

Overall, whilst 39% of FIS managers had not encountered any problems moving towards providing the extended services, 57% did report experiencing some difficulties (4% did not know).

Those who had faced difficulties in reaching the extended requirements were asked to explain what these were. The most commonly mentioned difficulty experienced was a lack of staff mentioned by 30% of those with difficulties.

One FIS manager said that *'releasing team members to attend training and to do research and reading has also been problematic whilst trying to maintain service delivery standards. Because we operate a call centre training these front line staff has created obstacles. However out of the difficulties we have encountered we have managed to gain new and positive directions'*.

Another outlined that *'Local Authority recruitment procedures have also impeded employing suitable staff. The increased responsibilities that are reflected in the Job Description we have compiled for people working in the Service has meant that people will not apply for the job when it is graded at such a low level - procedures to get grades changed are long-winded.'*

Some other difficulties mentioned by FIS managers were to do with funding and resources; *'Resources and capacity are the main difficulties. Covering a wider remit without any extra resources'*.

'Not having a budget has hindered the development of the Service'.

'Funding and staffing and buy in from the Local Authority or Children's Trust. They do not necessarily see the FIS as an important service'.

Another FIS manager felt there had been *'No strategic lead and therefore no understanding of the level of resource required for Section 12.'*

10.3 Case studies

Not all of the case study FISs reported that the channels of service delivery had changed as a result of the introduction of Section 12. However some FISs had anticipated the changes, in particular those relating to extending the coverage of information held about activities for children aged over 5; and many FISs perceived that they were meeting at least some of the Section 12 requirements. For instance, the FISs in Bromley and Bolton had always held some information about activities for over 13s (the former as a result of responding to parent demand; the latter because of its position in the libraries and cultural service of the local authority).

The other main actions precipitated have been:

- Developing their websites to make them more comprehensive and integrated where this had not been the case;
- Going forward with hub and spoke developments, in order to widen the professionals that are able to access and use data managed by the FIS.

Even so most have been actively developing their service delivery channels in some ways over the last few years to increase the availability of information and advice to a wider audience. Examples include:

- Revising the access points where sessions are run to respond to demand and testing out new ones. Westminster, for instance, moved sessions from one of their one stop shops to a JCP building and started sessions at a VCS centre for people with disabilities. Middlesbrough had sited its FIS in the main bus station in order to make the service more visible;
- Routing all telephone and email enquiries through a contact centre where they are handled by a group of staff. Gateshead achieved this during 2007; very few calls have to be handled by staff responsible for the on-line information. In one FIS, callers were routed through a call centre but the calls were generally all put through to the FIS team. However a few other FISs, such as Bromley, had carried out scoping work to do this, but had decided not to involve a call centre because of the variety and complexity of some of the enquiries. The process for setting up a contact centre response in Gateshead is described in Box 7 below;
- Enabling web page and website users to search for information and improving the searches possible and information that can be accessed. Gateshead staff, for example, check search words used to improve the search facility;
- Bringing together website information and reducing duplication; with active work in many such as Southend and Bolton.

For many case study FISs the speed and nature of their response has been limited by the partnerships they have established within their councils and the staff resources they have had. These were described in chapters 7 and 8.

Box 7

Gateshead council - contact centre

Gateshead Council's FIS was based at a training centre for children's services in a residential area some distance from the council's other customer services. In a team of four several staff responded to enquiries about childcare and employment mainly over the phone. The FIS had developed a comprehensive web based information resource called Solution Finder but development was held back by the time staff spent on enquiries. Staffing also often restricted response times to callers.

The Council was seeking to expand the services provided by its new contact centre in Gateshead town centre where a team of over 40 staff respond to enquiries over the telephone and face to face. The contact centre could offer opening hours of 8 to 7 Monday to Friday and Saturday mornings for personal callers as well as telephone and email callers. Staff are trained to NVQ level standards for customer care.

To make the transfer, they developed responses to common questions to route contact centre staff to answers and developed standard searches to produce reports for enquirers wanting information about childcare with specified needs. They supplemented this with training for the pool of staff who would respond to FIS enquiries. By keeping the FIS telephone number they can route calls to the specified pool of staff. Staff are expected to deal with an enquiry so if they have to do some research and call back they are expected to stop taking other callers and complete the work on the enquiry even if it takes an hour.

In the early stages, they built up responses to other questions and extended the range of enquiries they could handle. One of the team provides guidance and assistance to the pool, liaises with the FIS, and participates in outreach events.

The FIS has a service level agreement and receives monitoring data on calls and responses. All enquirers are called subsequently to check whether the information provided was what was needed.

11. Users' views

11.1 Summary

We found from the users survey:

- Users surveyed were very satisfied with the service received, and had few criticisms of the service or the information provided.

We found from the discussions with hard to reach parents in the FIS case studies:

- Many relied on information provided face to face when they needed it;
- Many valued the outreach and information and advice from practitioners they came into contact with;
- About half had used the service;
- Many were aware of the service.

11.2 Contextual information

The survey reported here accessed FIS users only, and as noted earlier was reliant on FISs themselves to provide users' contact details. This means that the survey provides no information on what proportion of target families were aware of or had used the FIS services, and there may be some concern that the users surveyed were not fully representative of the user population.

The DCSF's Childcare and Early Years Survey 2007⁶ provides some comparative data to allow these issues to be considered. The Childcare and Early Years Survey is a nationally-representative survey of parents of children aged up to 14. At the time of the most recent survey (2007), FISs had not yet replaced Children's Information Services. In total, 7% of parents said that they had used the Children's Information Services (CIS) within the last year. CIS were more likely to have been used by parents who had used formal childcare in the last week (11% of this group had used CIS). CIS were more likely to be used by parents of children aged under 8, than of children aged 8-14.

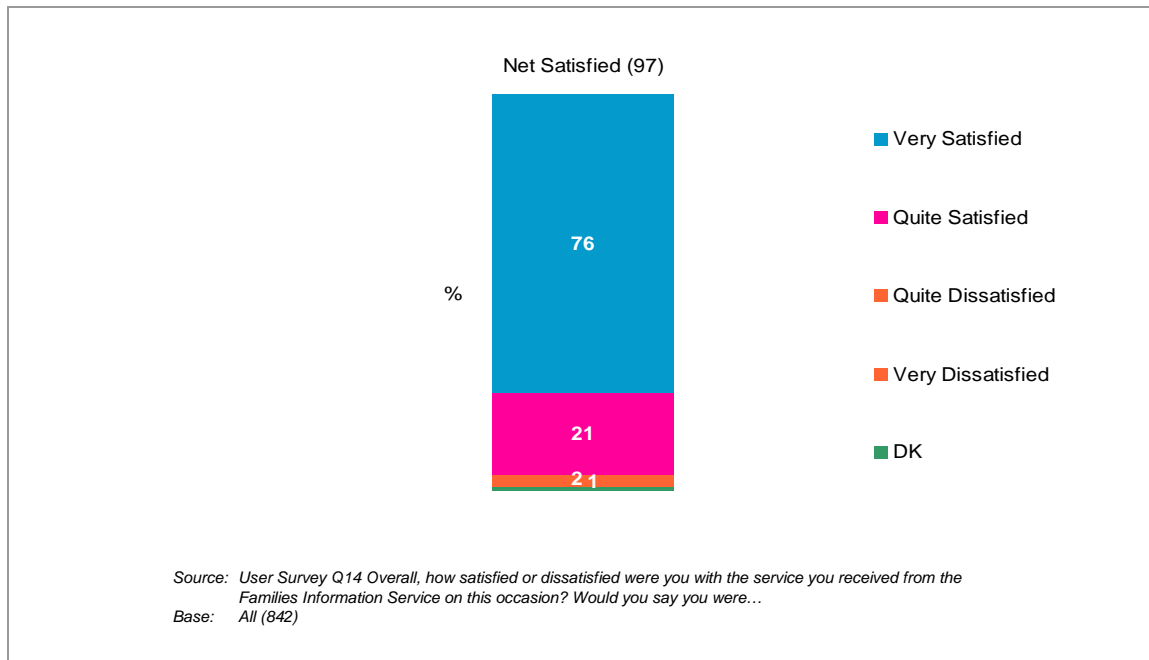
The great majority of parents who had used the CIS (87%) found the information provided very or quite helpful.

Parents who had not used CIS in the last year were asked whether they were aware of it, and whether or not they had ever used it. In total, 29% of parents were aware of CIS. Overall 13% of parents had ever used CIS.

11.3 User survey

Figure 25 shows that three quarters of users were very satisfied with the service they had received from the FIS and a further fifth of the users were quite satisfied with the service. Overall the vast majority of users, 97%, stated that they were satisfied with the FIS service they received. This is higher than the 87% 'helpful' rating from the Childcare and Early Years Survey 2007, although both surveys recorded very high levels of satisfaction.

⁶ *Childcare and Early Years Survey 2007: Parents' Use, Views and Experiences*, Research Report No. DCSF RR025, DCSF 2008

Figure 25 Satisfaction with FIS service received

Users were then asked to explain their satisfaction levels in an open-ended question.

Only 16% of users gave negative explanations for their lower satisfaction levels. Some of the reasons given covered topics such as, insufficient or incomplete information (5%), unhelpful information (5%) or a slow response (2%). One user was not so satisfied with the service for example *'because the information was out of date for the job I applied for'*.

However the vast majority of users at 86%, provided a positive explanation to high satisfaction levels. Figure 26 depicts the main topics of positive responses given by users to explain their satisfaction level (all topics receiving mentions by over 4% are shown). Half of all users (52%) mentioned that they had got what they needed, or received the information requested from the FIS service; one user said *'The information was all there. It was all I asked for'*.

A third of users (31%) made a reference to the helpful, friendly, polite staff they had encountered at the FIS and a quarter (23%) mentioned that a prompt, quick response was a reason behind their satisfaction level. One user felt the *'staff were prompt & helpful'*. Another user felt the person they spoke to *'gave me all the advice I needed and I felt they knew what they were talking about'*.

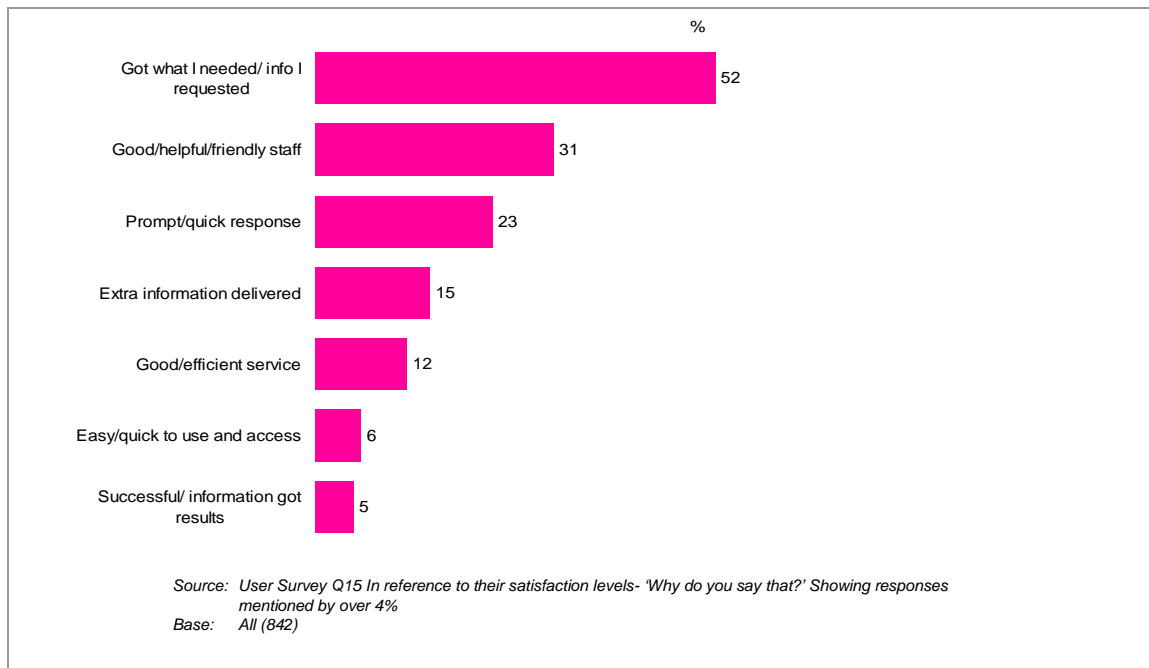
One user was satisfied because the person at the FIS was they *'spoke to was personable polite and very helpful. She was also very helpful and understanding'*

15% of users were pleased that extra information had been delivered. It was thought by one user that the FIS staff *'tried hard, but there was a lot to listen to. So it was a good back-up that they sent out more information. So I could sit back & read it.'*

A further 12% were impressed with the good and efficient service; *'I rang and straight away the information was here'*.

The FIS service was seen as easy to use and access and this was stated as a cause of satisfaction by 6%. 5% of users felt that the information received from the FIS had led to results and was deemed successful and so explaining their satisfaction.

Figure 26 Reasons for level of satisfaction



When thinking about the person who had helped them at the FIS the last time they contacted it, almost all users (98%) thought they had been helpful, of which 87% thought the person had been very helpful and 11% thought they had been quite helpful.

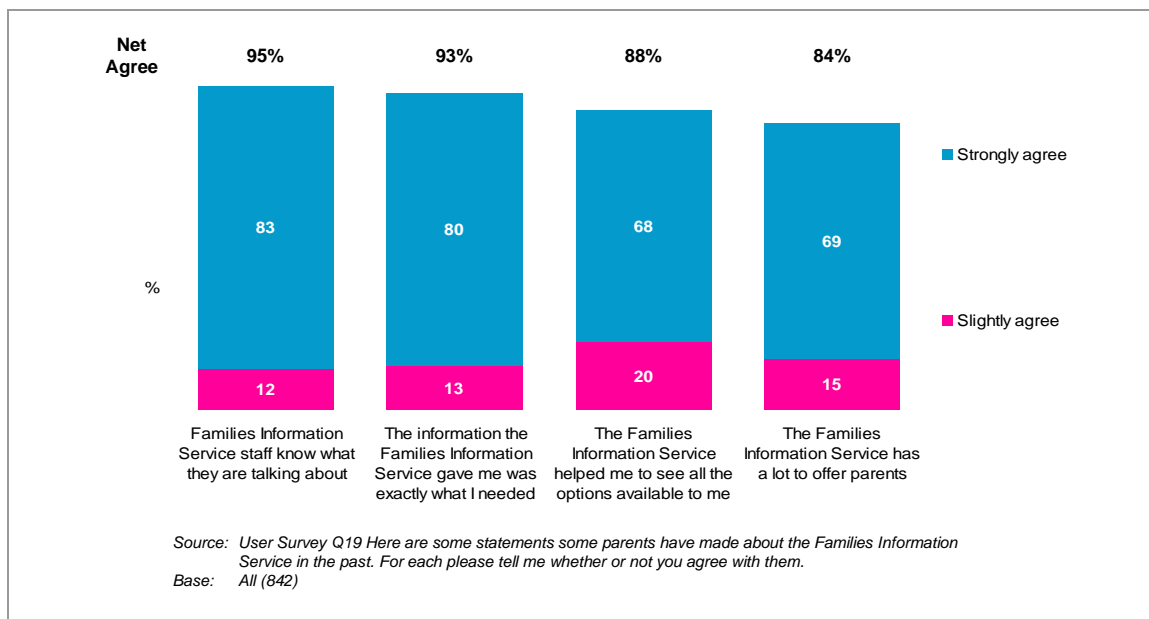
To try and further gauge user opinion, users were given a set of statements about the FIS and asked to choose their level of agreement with each one. Figure 27 shows that all of the statements received very high agreement levels from users.

The statement which received the highest level of agreement was 'Families Information Service staff know what they're talking about'; 83% of users strongly agreed with this statement and a further 12% slightly agreed, only 2% disagreed with this statement.

Users appeared to feel that 'The information The Families Information Service gave me was exactly what I needed', as 93% of users agreed with this statement, 80% strongly agreed, 13% slightly agreed and just 5% disagreed.

The statement 'The Families Information Service helped me to see all the options available to me' was strongly agreed with by 68% of users, slightly agreed with by 20% and disagreed with by 6%.

'The Families Information Service has a lot to offer parents' was the statement which received slightly lower agreement levels and yet this still was strongly agreed with by over two thirds of users (69%) and a further 15% slightly agreed. This statement was only disagreed with by 2% of users however, this statement received the highest level of don't know responses out of the four statements at 13%. This could be due to the fact that a quarter of people who had contacted the FIS had done so on a professional basis and therefore may not have been parents or ringing on behalf of their own family.

Figure 27 Agreement with statements about the FIS

When asked if they could think of any improvements for the FIS over two thirds of users (64%) could not think of any improvements that should be made. Of those users who did have recommendations three areas of improvements came up more than others:

- the need for better and more detailed information,

'they should send people info on preschools as they are approaching 3-4 years'

'more info on the website ie leaflet downloads'

'A bit more information could be included. It was very brief and to the point'

- the need for better advertising

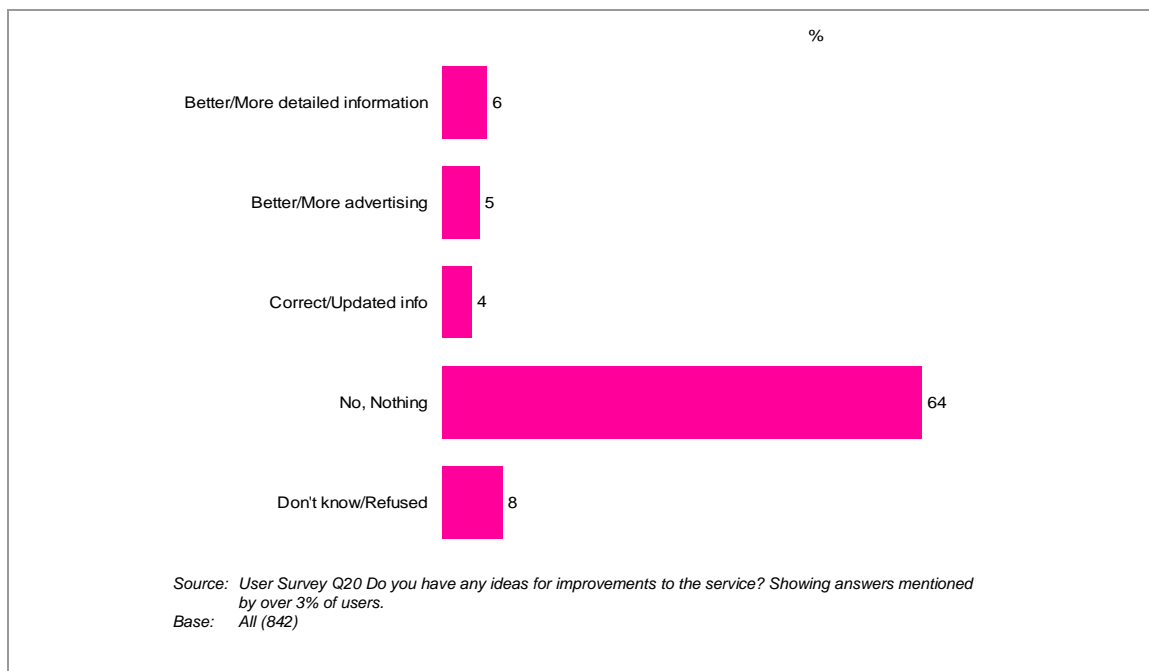
'More information made available to the people who need it by putting information in prominent places such as Doctors surgeries. I haven't seen much information at all'.

'Just to be able to find the number more easily – that's why I ended up at the library because when I spoke to the county hall I was passed about all over the place'.

- the need for up to date correct updated information.

'They should involve some of the schools so that you know at what age a school would accept the child. Get lists from schools to see what schools have places because I wasted so much time contacting schools that had no places even though the list said they did'.

'The information I received was slightly out of date so I think they should check all info is up to date'

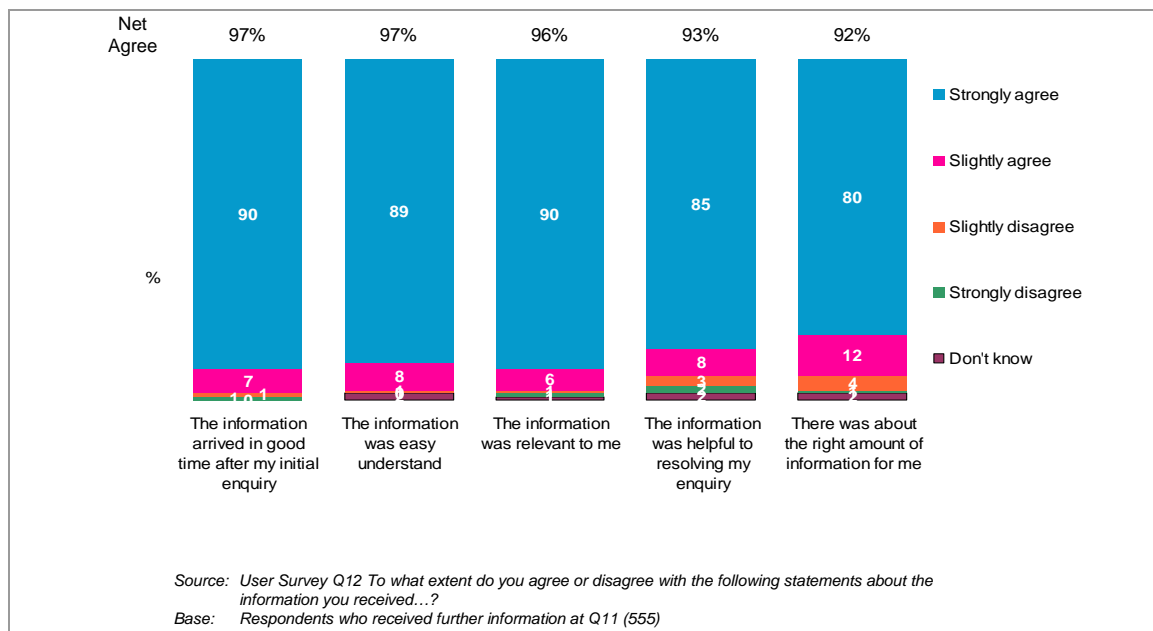
Figure 28 Ideas for improvements to the FIS

Overall users seemed very pleased with the service they received from the FIS. Nine out of ten users said they would be likely to use the FIS service again (94%) and similarly nearly all users (96%) would recommend the FIS service to a friend.

When asked how they felt the FIS dealt with their enquiry overall users were very positive, with 85% feeling that their query had been answered entirely. A further 11% felt their enquiry was partially answered, 2% did not know and 3% did not feel that the FIS could answer their query.

Figure 29 shows that the information that was actually given to users of the FIS was rated exceptionally highly by the majority of users. Users were asked to indicate their level of agreement with five different statements about the information received. All statements received over 90% agreement. 97% of users agreed that the 'information arrived in good time after my initial enquiry' and the same number agreed that the 'information was easy to understand', the majority of these users were actually within the strongly agree category with 90% and 89% respectively.

Similarly of the 96% of users that agreed that the information received was relevant to them, 90% strongly agreed and 6% slightly agreed. The information received from the FIS was deemed to be 'helpful to resolving my enquiry' by 93% of the users, of which 85% strongly agreed. Again the vast majority with 92% of users agreed that there 'was about the right amount of information for me'; 80% strongly agreed and a further 12% slightly agreed with this statement.

Figure 29 Ratings of the information received

11.4 Case studies

Parents spoken to in the case studies were generally those who are considered 'hard to reach' and the views below should be considered as a sample of views from this group who may not be represented in the user sample.

The majority of parents stated that informal channels of information such as recommendations from family and friends were a major source of information. While a few parents used the Internet frequently for research, others who did not have a computer in their home or were not confident in their IT skills preferred to obtain information face to face. Schools, nurseries, and increasingly, Children's centres were seen as the main sources of information.

While those that had used FISs had mostly had a positive experience, the more face to face experience of encounters in a children's centre was preferred by one group of mothers with disabled children: *'I trust the children's centre, they're really informed about issues facing parents of disabled children. You can ask the staff about anything when you come in to the coffee morning. I just don't think the FIS has stuff specifically for disabled children'*. For this group of women, sharing of information at parent coffee mornings, for example, was another valued channel of information.

Fathers who had recently taken part in a drug rehabilitation programme, tended to access information through their health workers and the majority reported positive experiences of children's centres: *'I ask my health worker or social worker about most things, I don't really need to go to other places'*.

Parents (we spoke mostly to mothers) stated that they required information and advice about benefits and allowances, activities and programmes for disabled children and their families, parents groups, after school clubs, holiday care, childminders, leisure activities, advocacy and how to complete local authority paperwork. Fathers (except lone parent fathers) generally took little interest in information for their children. This was usually seen as being their partner's responsibility. In one FIS area, parents were not sure of the meaning of the term 'registered' provision and had assumed that this meant that provision had been vetted

for quality. The FIS had begun to alter the way they dealt with calls in order to explain the distinction more clearly.

About half of the parents had heard of their local FIS, though most of them still knew it as the CIS [or other former name]. Few were aware that the FIS had taken on extended responsibilities with a requirement to provide information about older children. Most parents that had not heard of the FIS thought that it would be useful to them and they would contact it. There is a considerable demand for advice and assistance with finding activities for older children. It was also generally felt that FISs could provide information and advice on parenting (e.g. in relation to bullying or behavioural problems) which would be useful.

All of the parents felt the FIS service offer should be more widely publicised. Some parents expressed a preference for receiving information leaflets through the door while some parents highlighted the importance of holding local events in community venues. The information about the FISs held by the staff working in council, health and JCP services is obviously important to many hard to reach parents.

12. Assessment, Barriers and Recommendations

In this section the survey and case study FISs are broadly assessed against the DCSF guidance standards.⁷

12.1 Childcare information

Guidance standard

FISs are expected to provide comprehensive expert information advice and guidance to parents on childcare and early years services in their area. This includes information about registered childcare, non-registered childcare, the free entitlement to early years provision, and childcare settings suitable for children with disabilities and special educational needs.

Significant strengths

- 100% of FISs surveyed had a telephone helpline and email service, and 99% said users were able to access a website for information
- 76% of FISs update the information on registered childcare providers at least fortnightly
- All case study FISs were maintaining and ensuring accuracy of registered provision
- All case study FISs were collecting and maintaining additional information on registered providers and non-registered provision, and much of this information was available online
- Most case study FISs were networking and learning from neighbouring local authorities

Significant challenges

- Many case study FISs were not updating additional information on registered and unregistered providers very frequently
- Some case study FISs had incomplete coverage of non-registered provision in extended schools and youth services particularly, or had to refer enquirers to other sources; coverage on websites in particular could be improved
- Data quality assurance standards were not in place, and many case study FISs were not quality assuring their information

⁷ An additional standard on safeguarding children was not assessed in this research.

12.2 Advice and assistance - brokerage service

Guidance standard

FISs should provide a brokerage service, whereby further assistance should be offered to parents who do not find childcare that readily meets their needs.

Significant strengths

- 97% of users were satisfied with the service they received
- 55% of users received further information regarding their query by post, a further 11% were emailed with follow-up information, and 3% received a follow-up phone call
- 85% of users who had previously contacted another organisation with similar queries said the information provided by the FIS was better (45%) or the same (40%)
- All case study FISs were providing advice and assistance face to face and over telephone/email
- All case study FISs were providing some advice on sources of support
- All case study FISs were generally aware of gaps in childcare provision within their area drawing on experience of advice and assistance

Significant challenges

- Many case study FISs need to actively and systematically check on whether the quality of advice met users' needs
- Some case study FISs were not actively promoting sources of support with target groups who may find affordability a problem; some need to do more to work with JCP and others consistently
- Few have a clear policy on when to provide brokerage assistance

12.3 Information about other services, facilities and publications

Guidance standard

FISs should provide information about other services, facilities and publications that may be of benefit to parents and prospective parents. There is no definitive list of what should be provided, but this should be decided by the local authority and FIS.

Significant strengths

- All case study FISs were broadly making available information on national services, facilities and publications on websites

Significant challenges

- Some case study FISs have not yet got information on local services, facilities and publications covering education, employment, health, leisure and parenting of value to parents of children aged over 13
- Some case study FISs have not integrated this information within their on-line resources
- Web-based information is of variable quality

12.4 Information on services for disabled children, for children with special educational needs and for disabled parents**Guidance standard**

FISs are required to provide information about whether particular childcare is suitable for disabled children, and about services, facilities and publications which may be of particular benefit to disabled children, young people or their parents.

Significant strengths

- All case study FISs were providing *information* for parents of disabled and SEN children about childcare

Significant challenges

- Not all case study FISs were providing *information about services and facilities* for parents of disabled and SEN children

12.5 Access to the information service**Guidance standard**

Local authorities need to be pro-active in establishing and maintaining their information services in ways that best facilitate access to it, in particular, that reach out to people who might otherwise have difficulty in taking advantage of the service.

Significant strengths

- 97% of managers said their FIS provided outreach services
- 53% of FISs provided shop front or drop-in facilities for access
- 50% said they had increased outreach to assist in delivery of the extended information duty
- Almost all case study FISs had increased their range of delivery outlets - kiosks, outreach sessions, enabling access by staff in other services - in addition to telephone / email / face to face
- All offer choices about how enquiries can be made
- All case study FISs were actively promoting information services

Significant challenges

- Many case study FISs do not have a wide range of delivery outlets; some are yet to enable key people working with children and parents to have access
- Many FISs were not providing opportunities for access by the socially excluded at a range of suitable places, the extent and nature of outreach varied significantly
- 47% of surveyed FISs were not currently offering a drop in or kiosk service, and only a minority said they were planning to extend or develop these services in future
- Few case study FISs targeted their promotion of information services at specific areas or groups
- Few case study FISs updated their understanding of needs of parents from surveys and feedback on a systematic basis

12.6 Service delivery**Guidance standard**

It is for local authorities to determine the most appropriate delivery arrangements for their area. However, information should be provided as part of a joined up and co-ordinated offer to parents with other support services including health, education and parenting support services. Information should be delivered by suitably trained and qualified staff.

Significant strengths

- All case study FISs were taking responsibility for leading on the information duty to develop integrated information resources
- Most case study FISs were coordinating their information provision with other council services and complementing it
- All case study FISs were making adjustments to improve their service over time
- Managers reported that their FISs were working closely with a range of other local authority services including Children's Centres, libraries, extended schools and youth services

Significant challenges

- Many case study FISs had not yet joined up their provision with other public services (JCP, PCT) nor the third sector in their area
- Few FISs surveyed were working with private or third sector organisations, or with local employers
- Work with extended schools and youth services could be improved
- Progress with integrating information resources varied, with some focusing on legacy systems, others on integrating resources for children's services

- Not all case study FISs had suitably qualified staff able to provide advice and assistance; staffing levels vary significantly which does affect the breadth and depth of service provided
- Few case study FISs had quality assurance systems for their information
- Few case study FISs had regular consultation and review of their service

In general the managers' survey suggests FISs' greater compliance with the DCSF's Guidance standards than the more detailed information from the case studies. This is particularly so around access, outreach, coverage of information and monitoring and reflects the more detailed questioning, checking and probing possible from depth interviews. Though we must caution against extrapolating from the case studies in the same way as we can from the survey data, we have drawn significantly on the findings to make our overall assessment.

12.7 Barriers

We understand from the managers' survey and the case studies that the following are genuine barriers to addressing some of these challenges.

- Co-operation within councils: there are difficulties within some organisations that seem to override the local authority's duty to provide the FIS. While most can demonstrate progress in drawing together information about non-registered childcare and activities from leisure and youth services, Connexions and extended schools, some have found blockages in some of these services where managers do not appreciate the requirement. In some cases information silos continue to exist which does not help parents or practitioners.
- Co-operation from partners: there are difficulties in some areas of identifying staff in some partners to build relationships but it is more often reported that partnership working is more limited by the FISs themselves. Some are not actively building relationships with JCP and some have weak working relationships with the third sector, for example.
- Information system development: FISs are at different stages in integrating and expanding their web based information. Some are grappling with legacy systems and some are developing hubs for children's services.
- Resources: staffing levels are the biggest difference and tend to constrain two key activities; outreach (and the related partnership working which follows from this) and updating information. It could also affect the extent that brokerage can be provided. Few have large budgets for printing and promotion which could be reassigned to paying for additional staff if these means of providing information are no longer cost effective.

12.8 Recommendations

We would suggest that DCSF:

- Consider the strategic priority given to FISs within local authorities and how to emphasise that meeting the information duty is the local authority's responsibility, not that of the FIS.
- Reinforces requirements for services, such as Connexions and youth services, and extended schools to cooperate with FISs.
- Uses this report to draw out where FISs have shortcomings compared with the Guidance standards and what they could learn from other councils' FISs in particular around outreach, partnership working and increasing other workers' access to information to enable them to meet these standards.
- Provides guidance on key performance indicators which FISs could use for operational monitoring so that they can set meaningful targets and measure improvement.

13. Technical appendix

13.1 Manager survey (TNS)

13.1.1 Sample

The manager survey aimed to be a census of all managers of FISs in England. The DCSF provided a list of all 149 managers in England, along with contact details including email addresses for each.

13.1.2 Survey

The survey was offered to every FIS manager in England in the form of an online self completion survey. Some email addresses provided were personalised to the respondent while others were the same email address as for general enquiries to the FIS. The survey was not compulsory and this was made clear in the invitation email.

149 FIS managers were invited to take part in the study via an email including an individual link to the survey on 4th June 2008. Managers could return to the survey at any time should they be unable to complete the survey in one sitting. This was particularly important as some questions required information about the FIS that the manager may have needed to look up in order to complete the question.

13.1.3 Response

The survey was in field for four weeks and a reminder email was sent out to non-responding FISs after two weeks. The survey closed on the 30th June with 98 responses submitted, resulting in a 66% response rate.

13.1.4 Limitations

As the survey was non-compulsory and self completion managers could choose whether or not to complete the survey. Although the response rate was high for a self completion, it was not 100% so not wholly representative of every FIS in England. It is not possible to determine whether or not there may have been commonalities between FISs that chose not to respond, which were not picked up in the survey.

13.2 User survey (TNS)

13.2.1 Sample

Sample for the User Survey was collected from FISs that had responded to the managers survey. In the first instance, 20 FISs were chosen for the case studies (Section 13.3.1) and removed from the sampling frame for the user survey. 39 of the remaining 78 responding FISs were randomly selected representing FISs from a range of locations, of different sizes, with different budgets and staffing levels in order to provide a representative selection of users from across FISs.

Each FIS was informed that they had been chosen to assist with the user survey and asked to collect the contact details of users who had contacted their FIS (by any contact method). FIS advisors asked users whether or not they agreed to have their details passed on to TNS for the survey, and FISs provided lists of user names and telephone numbers to TNS in batches of 50 as they were collected. For FISs with small numbers of contacts, these were submitted to TNS in smaller batches to reduce the delay between first contact and re-contact

by TNS. Of the 39 FISs approached, 20 agreed to provide sample. Users who agreed to take part were re-contacted by TNS by telephone and interviewed at a convenient time over the phone.

13.2.2 Survey

The aim was to contact users as soon as possible after their initial contact with the FIS so that the contact was fresh in their memory. On average users were first contacted within 3 weeks of their contact with the FIS. Interviews were conducted over the telephone, at a time convenient to the user. The users were given opportunities to make an appointment at a later date should the timing of the call be inconvenient. The interview lasted 15-20 minutes on average and nine telephone interviewers worked on the user survey.

13.2.3 Response

In total 1204 pieces of sample were provided to TNS, from which 842 interviews were achieved representing a response rate of 70%. 93 of those who did not complete the survey were incorrect numbers, 124 refused to take part. The remaining 145 contacts could not be reached during the fieldwork period. Interviews were conducted from 15 September 2008 - 10 November 2008.

13.2.4 Telephone validation

Validation is conducted on a minimum of 5% of all telephone interviews, monitoring from the introduction through to the close, i.e. a full interview. TNS attempts to monitor every interviewer on each project.

13.2.5 Limitations

The user survey sample could only be collected from FISs who had initially responded to the managers survey. As discussed in Section 3.2 and 3.3 it is not possible to determine the characteristics on non-responding FISs and their users.

It should also be noted that as respondents were required to 'opt in' to the survey, on invitation from their FIS contact, we do not have any information on those users who either did not want to take part in the survey, or who were not asked to take part by their FIS contact. Therefore it is not possible to assess to what extent the users in the survey are fully representative of the whole population of FIS users.

13.3 Qualitative case studies (GHK)

13.3.1 Sample

Qualitative fieldwork was conducted in a sample of ten FISs across the country⁸. These were selected from the 98 FISs responding to the survey with a target for FISs in two London boroughs, two metropolitan districts, two urban unitaries, two rural unitaries and two counties. To ensure a balance of demographic and socio-economic characteristics the selection included no more than two from any region and no more than four from the same third of the IMD index. Respondents were recruited from among specified practitioners below and group participants were recruited from among the specified groups below and those available during the fieldwork period.

⁸ These were Bedfordshire, Bolton, Bromley, Cumbria, East Riding of Yorkshire, Gateshead, Middlesbrough, North Lincolnshire, Southend on Sea and Westminster

13.3.2 Interviews

In each FIS, semi-structured interviews were conducted with:

- The FIS manager and staff providing the service;
- Other local authority staff - the line manager for each FIS and staff delivering other services we would expect the FIS to work closely with, such as Children's Centre managers; area managers for children's services; extended schools co-ordinators, teenage pregnancy co-ordinators; and library service staff;
- Managers and practitioners in other local services, such as Jobcentre Plus (JCP) and the Primary Care Trust (PCT);
- Staff in local private and voluntary organisations that have worked with the FIS, including organisations or networks representing private and voluntary sector providers; and,
- Groups of parents that could be 'harder to reach' (including parents in disadvantaged areas, fathers, parents with disabilities, lone parents, unemployed parents, black and minority ethnic parents).

In total 85 individuals were interviewed in 10 local authority areas and 10 focus groups were conducted between late August and mid October 2008. No incentives were offered. 5 interviewers conducted the interviews.

13.3.3 Limitations

Please note that the results of this qualitative research are indicative and cannot be projected onto the overall population.

14. Discussion Guides and Questionnaires

14.1 Topic Guide for Family Information Service Managers

1 INTRODUCTION

- Background to the project and why we are undertaking interviews following the survey
- Confidentiality
- Ask if it is okay to record the interview to refer back to.

2 SERVICE DELIVERY

- Can you tell me what services the FIS is currently providing? How are each of these delivered? (Probe: availability / opening times, staffing, how each has been developed).
- What is your understanding of the extended information duty?
- How has the service offered by the FIS been developed in response to the duty?
- To what extent does the FIS currently meet the extended information duty? How are you judging this? What do you still need to do?
- Are there any further changes planned over the next 12 months? What are these?

3 ENGAGEMENT WITH USERS

- What analysis have you done on who your users and what their needs are? How have you done this? Who are your priority user groups?
- What marketing and publicity do you use to raise awareness of the FIS among potential users? How does this vary for different services? How effective do you think the marketing and publicity is? (Probe for strategies and success in reaching priority user groups).
- What other channels do you use to raise awareness of the service and deliver support to potential users? (e.g. working with partners such as Children's Centres, libraries and schools; undertaking outreach). How effective is this in engaging users?
- On average, approximately how many enquiries does the FIS handle per week? How many of these are through each of the different delivery channels?
- What types of queries are most commonly raised by users? What advice and guidance does the FIS typically provide to users?
- What information do you record about users? How systematic is this? Are there any gaps?
- Generally speaking, how do those who contact the FIS reflect the population in this area? How do you know? Are there any groups that do not access the FIS at all or as frequently? Why do you think this is? What are the barriers?

- What strategies have you developed to increase awareness and use of the FIS among particular groups? How well has this worked? How can you tell?

4 LOCAL PARTNERS AND STAKEHOLDERS

- Which other publicly provided services do you work most closely with? (Probe for Children's Centres, schools, Jobcentre Plus, libraries, youth services).
- How have you built these relationships? How easy or difficult has it been to develop these relationships? What barriers or challenges have you experienced?
- How closely do you work with each of these services? What activities do you carry out collaboratively? How do you assess the quality of the relationships?
- To what extent do you think these relationships have made the FIS more easily accessible and / or more effective in delivering information? What more could be done?
- What relationships have you developed with community and voluntary organisations and businesses in the area? Please describe any joint working that takes place.
- How have you developed these relationships? What more could be done?

5 INFORMATION

- What are the main sources of information that you use? How has this changed in relation to the extended information requirement?
- Are these sources of information easily accessible? How reliable and up to date do you think the information is that you receive?
- How often does the FIS update its information? (If less than once a fortnight, why is this?)
- What, if any, additional data would you like to have available to you to improve the FIS service?

6 STAFFING

- How many staff does the FIS currently employ? (Probe total number and FTE).
- How have staffing arrangements changes since taking on the extended information requirements? What, if any, gaps are there in staffing in relation to service provision?
- How well equipped are staff to deliver the information, advice and guidance? What training do staff receive? Are there any areas in which extra training is required or would be beneficial but is not available?
- How easy or difficult have you found recruiting new members of staff with the skills and experience you are looking for? Why is this?

7 MANAGEMENT AND SUPPORT ARRANGEMENTS

- What is the management structure of the FIS? Is there a service delivery / business / strategic plan in place for the FIS? How is progress monitored and evaluated?
- How would you describe your relationship with the local authority? What contact and support do you receive from the local authority?
- Who are you in contact with at the local authority? What part of the local authority is the FIS aligned to? How well does this work?
- What funding did you receive from the local authority in the most recent financial year?
- What other support does the local authority provide? How effective is this? What support is provided by any line management in the local authority?
- What other sources of income and / or delivery support, if any, do you make use of? How effective are these in supporting the delivery of the FIS?

8 EFFECTIVENESS AND NEXT STEPS

- Overall, how well would you say that the FIS is performing? How do you know? What criteria do you use to assess performance?
- Has the FIS had any impact on increasing the take up of childcare in the local authority? How do you know?
- Please describe any particular good practice within the FIS.
- In what areas is the FIS performing less effectively? What more could be done?
- How else would you like to develop the FIS?
- What more could the following organisations do to support you?
 - DCSF
 - The local authority
 - Other partner organisations such as NAFIS

Do you have any other comments?

Thank you for your time

14.2 Topic Guide for Family Information Service Practitioner

1 INTRODUCTION

- Background to the project and why we are undertaking interviews following the survey
- Confidentiality
- Ask if it is okay to record the interview to refer back to.

2 BACKGROUND

- Can you tell me about your role within the FIS? What do you do?
- How long have you been working at the FIS? How has your role developed?

3 ENGAGEMENT WITH USERS

In relation to your role:

- In what ways do you engage with FIS users? What contact do you generally have with them? (Probe for each type of delivery channel e.g. helpline, online, outreach).
- Approximately how many users do you generally engage with per week? Does this vary at different times of the year? How is this distributed across the different forms of delivery?
- Which client groups do you typically engage with? What types of enquiries do they make?
- Generally, how well do you feel that you are able to address the needs of FIS users effectively with the information and materials available to you? What types of needs are most difficult to meet? Why? What works well / less well?
- Do you provide any follow-up support to users? If so, what is this?
- Do you check to see if the information you have provided met their needs? If so, what reaction have you had?

4 LOCAL PARTNERS AND STAKEHOLDERS

In relation to your role:

- Which, if any, other public services do you work most closely with? (Probe for Children's Centres, schools, Jobcentre Plus, libraries, youth services). What is the nature of the relationship? How have you developed these relationships? How effective has this been in helping to meet the needs of FIS users?
- What relationship, if any, do you have with voluntary and community organisations and businesses in the area? How have you developed these? Please describe any joint working that takes place.

5 MANAGEMENT AND TRAINING

- How are you managed and supported within the FIS? How effective is the current arrangement? Why?
- What training have you received in relation to the FIS? What training have you had in preparation for the additional responsibilities related to the extended information duty? How useful was this? Why?
- Are there any areas in which you feel you need, or would like, extra training but it is not available?

6 INFORMATION

- How often does the FIS update its information? (If less than once a fortnight, why is this?)
- To what extent is the information you have usually up to date and relevant to users' needs? How has this changed with the introduction of the extended information requirement? Could this be improved?

7 EFFECTIVENESS AND NEXT STEPS

- From your experience, how well would you say that the FIS is meeting the needs of users? Why is this?
- What is currently being done by the FIS to improve service delivery?
- Is there anything more that the FIS could do using existing resources to improve engagement with users? If so, what?

Do you have any other comments?

Thank you for your time

14.3 Topic Guide for Local Authority Senior Management of FIS

1 INTRODUCTION

- Background to the project and why we are undertaking interviews following the survey
- Confidentiality
- Ask if it is okay to record the interview to refer back to.

2 CURRENT LINE OR CONTRACT MANAGEMENT ARRANGEMENTS

- What are the current line management arrangements for the FIS and how do they work? What are your responsibilities for the FIS? Which activities do you carry out or support?
- Are any other services managed together with the FIS? If so, what is the rationale for this?
- How is the funding for the FIS managed? Who is responsible for setting the budget each year? How has the extended information duty impacted on the budget?
- What are the FIS's main strategic objectives? How is achievement of these planned, monitored, reviewed and evaluated?
- What performance monitoring does the local authority undertake in relation to the FIS? Are any specific performance indicators used? What are these?
- How have these arrangements come about? How has the extended information duty impacted on them? What other factors influenced them?

3 CO-ORDINATION WITH OTHER SERVICES

- What arrangements exist for internal co-ordination between the FIS and other children's / parental services?
- What arrangements exist for external co-ordination with other key partners (e.g. Jobcentre Plus, NHS)?
- For both of these, how have these relationships been developed? How are they supported? Are there any gaps?

4 OTHER SUPPORT

- What arrangements are there for providing the FIS with other support services? (e.g. a call centre, IT / online facilities and marketing)
- What other support, if any, do parts of the local authority provide to the FIS?
- How have these arrangements come about? How has this developed over time, particularly with the extended information duty?

5 WHAT WORKS WELL

- How does the FIS contribute to the achievement of the local authority's strategic objectives?
- To what extent does the FIS help to improve outcomes for children, young people and families? Has it had an impact on the take up of childcare in the area? How do you know this?
- What do you think works well in the FIS? What has enabled this? Please describe any good practice or particular successes that the FIS has had in increasing take up or receiving positive feedback.
- Are there any areas in which you think the FIS could improve? What are these?
- How well do you think the current management arrangements support the FIS? Why is this? Is there anything that could be improved that might make the FIS more effective?
- How effective do you think the organisational linkages are between the FIS and other services? Is there anything that could be improved?
- Is there any further support that the local authority might be able to provide for the FIS that would help it to improve?

Do you have any other comments?

Thank you for your time

14.4 Topic Guide for Private and Voluntary Sector Stakeholders

1 INTRODUCTION

- Background to the project and why we are undertaking interviews following the survey
- Confidentiality
- Ask if it is okay to record the interview to refer back to.

2 RELATIONSHIP WITH FIS

- What are your current arrangements or relationships with the FIS? Please describe any activities that are undertaken collaboratively.
- How do they work in terms of service planning / service delivery / service review and monitoring? For each of these, what formal and informal arrangements exist?
- How have the current arrangements come about? How have they changed in relation to the extended information duty for the FIS?
- What has driven any changes? (Probe: government policy, local authority, voluntary and community sector). What gaps have been filled? What improvements have been made?
- How well do the formal / informal arrangements work? What activities do you consider to be successful? Why? How could they be more effective?
- How well does the FIS meet the needs of the groups that you champion? (Probe for quality, accuracy of information, accessibility, format of information).
- What works particularly well? What areas are there for improvement?

Do you have any other comments?

Thank you for your time

14.5 Topic Guide for Other Service Managers

1 INTRODUCTION

- Background to the project and why we are undertaking interviews
- Confidentiality
- Ask if it is okay to record the interview to refer back to.

2 RELATIONSHIP WITH FIS

For the services that the interviewee is responsible for (e.g. Children's Centres, extended schools, libraries), tailor questions around the following areas:

- What are your current arrangements or relationship with the FIS? Please describe any activities that are undertaken collaboratively.
- How do they work in terms of service planning and service delivery? For each of these, what staff links are there? What other formal and informal arrangements exist?
- How have the current arrangements come about? How have they changed in relation to the extended information duty for the FIS?
- How well do the arrangements work? What activities do you consider to be successful? Why? How could they be more effective?
- Looking forward, how are the arrangements being developed? What plans or proposals currently exist?

Do you have any other comments?

Thank you for your time

14.6 Topic Guide for User Focus Groups

1 INTRODUCTION

- Background to the project and why we are undertaking focus groups
- Confidentiality
- Ask if it is okay to record the interview to refer back to.

2 AREAS TO EXPLORE WITH USER GROUP:

- What is the level of understanding and knowledge of the service provided by the FIS?
- Test familiarity with the brand, services and printed information (with examples to show to the group)
- How well do these convey the service being offered?
- What use is made of the FIS in their area?
- For those that have used the FIS: what reasons did they have for using it? How did they hear about it? Can they describe their experience of engaging with the FIS? What method of contact did they use? Who did they speak to? What information and advice did they receive? What other sources of information have they used?
- For those that have not used the FIS: have they heard of the FIS? If so, why did they choose not to use it? What, if any, barriers exist to contacting the FIS? What alternative sources of information have they used and why?
- How likely are both groups to use the FIS in the next 12 months? Why is this?
- What has their experience been of the FIS?
- For those that have used the FIS: what did they like / dislike about the service? How helpful was the information and advice given to them? To what extent did it meet their needs? What difference has it made to them since? What could be better about the service? How does this compare for those accessing the FIS through different methods? How does it compare with any other sources of information that they have accessed?
- For those that have not used the FIS: what experience have they had of alternative sources of information? Would they consider using the FIS? What would encourage them to use the service? How could any barriers that have been identified be overcome?

Any other comments

Thank you for your time

14.7 Questionnaire for FIS manager survey (CAWI)

As you may already know, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) has commissioned an evaluation of Families Information Services supported by local authorities in England. They wish to establish a full picture of the operation and delivery of FIS and the research is being conducted by the independent research agencies TNS and GHK.

Completing the survey is voluntary but your views are important to the DCSF and we would be grateful if you could find the time to give us your thoughts. We have been given your name as the appropriate contact within the FIS, however if this is no longer the case, then please pass this onto the most relevant person.

We hope you will be able to assist in this piece of work, and we would like to assure you that everything is confidential and that no FISs or individuals will be identified at any stage in the reporting.

Firstly please type in your job title:

(DON'T KNOW ALLOWED AT ALL QUESTIONS)

SECTION A: Current delivery standards and mechanisms

1. What are the opening working hours of the FIS?

Weekdays:until.....

Saturdays: until.....

Sundays:until.....

2. How many people are involved in the delivery of your FIS in total?

PLEASE INDICATE THE TOTAL NUMBER OF INDIVIDUALS EMPLOYED IN ALL AREAS INCLUDING BROKERAGE, CHOICE ADVICE, CALL CENTRES, WHETHER FULL OR PART TIME

3. And how many of these are employed:

a) Full-time _____

b) Part-time _____

c) On a voluntary basis _____

4. What is the gross total annual budget from all sources available to run the FIS?

£ _____

5. And please break this total into costs for

Staff costs £ _____

Office costs / overheads £ _____

Marketing £ _____

Travel costs £ _____

Other costs £ _____

6. How are people able to contact the FIS?

PLEASE INDICATE ALL WHICH APPLY

Telephone helpline

Website for information

Email help service

Drop in / shop front

Outreach

Other face to face contact for providing information

Via intermediaries/other organisations

Through Children's Centres

Through schools

Other _____

7. Which, if any, of these are provided outside your normal working hours? (*asked for each contact method coded at Q6*)

IF TELEPHONE HELPLINE PROVIDED AT Q6 ASK

8. How is the FIS telephone helpline managed?

General call centre

Call centre with dedicated staff

Dedicated staff not in a call centre

Other _____

IF ANY OUTREACH IS CONDUCTED AT Q6, THEN ASK Q9. OTHERS TO Q10

9. Please describe briefly any outreach that is conducted

10. Does the FIS currently work to any of these standards? (tick all that apply)

None

NAFIS quality standards

Local authority defined standards

Matrix award standards

DCSF 2003-06 guidance

DCSF S12 guidance

Other (specify) _____

11. Does the FIS have a marketing and awareness strategy or plan?

Yes

No

Don't know

12. How regularly does the FIS update the core information held on registered childcare providers? If it varies, please select the most usual frequency.

Daily / weekly

Fortnightly

Monthly

Less frequently

13. Where do you obtain the updates for the information you provide from?

Ofsted

Local authority

PSLA

NCMA

NDNA

4Children

Jobcentre Plus

DCSF LA email

13b. FOR EACH SOURCE SELECTED AT Q13 ASK:

How helpful do you find this source?

Very helpful

Quite helpful

Quite unhelpful

Very unhelpful

14. How closely does the FIS work with each of the following services / organisations in your local authority? *(For each choose: very closely / quite closely / work with but not closely / do not work with at all / relationship under development)*

Children's Centres

Extended schools

NHS childcare co-ordinators

Job Centre Plus

Private / voluntary / independent childcare providers

Libraries

Local voluntary organisations such as women's refuges, alcohol advice, drug advice etc
Childminders' Association
Day Nursery Association
Pre-School Learning Alliance
Citizens Advice Bureau
Local Employers
Youth Services
Parent Partnership Service (or equivalent)
Other (please specify)

15. What type of management information is collected about users contacting the FIS? (This does not include those contacting the FIS through Outreach.) (tick all that apply)

Name
Contact details such as address, email or telephone number
Gender
Age
Age of child(ren)
Ethnicity
Enquiry type
Disability
Disability of child(ren)
Enquiry type / content
Call outcome i.e. whether able to assist/ provide required information
Whether & what further or follow-up action is required
Others _____

16. Which of the following methods are used to monitor the performance of the FIS? (TICK ALL THAT ARE USED WHETHER FOR INTERNAL OR EXTERNAL PURPOSES)

Monthly / weekly reports on enquiry handling
Regular user satisfaction survey
Feedback forms
Internal auditing
External auditing
Spot checking / mystery shopping
Another way _____

SECTION B: Extended delivery scope and delivery mechanisms in moving toward the extended information duty

1. Has there been any change in the level of local authority support to assist in delivering the extended information duty?

Yes - there has been an increase in local authority support

Yes - there has been a decrease in local authority support

No - the local authority support has remained the same and is sufficient to deliver the extended information duty

No - the local authority support has remained the same and is not sufficient to deliver the extended information duty

2. What, if any, resourcing / staffing changes have there been to assist in delivering the extended information duty? (click on all that apply)

Increased staff numbers

Extended hours of service provision

Increased information and guidance for staff

Increased training for staff

Increased marketing / publicity

Increased outreach

New equipment (including technology)

Other (please specify)

3. Is the FIS planning to develop any new ways for users to contact the service or to extend existing ones in the next few months to meet the information duty?

CHOOSE ONE OPTION FOR EACH FROM

DEVELOP AS NEW

EXTEND EXISTING

NEITHER

Telephone helpline

Website for information

Email help service

Drop in / shop front

Outreach

Other face to face contact for providing information

Through Children's Centres

Through schools

SMS / Text message

Kiosks

Other _____

4. Are you making any changes to the way FIS is being publicised or marketed following the change to FIS?
-

5. Is the FIS fully meeting the requirements of the information duty?

Yes

No

If no - in what respects? Does the FIS have a target date to do this?

6. Has the FIS needed to develop any new working partnerships and relationships to meet the information duty requirements?

No

Yes (please specify)

7. Has your FIS experienced any difficulties in moving towards providing the extended services?

Yes - (specify)

No

8. Has the FIS used any external support to assist in implementation?

Yes

No

IF YES AT Q8 ASK Q9. OTHERS TO SECTION C Q1

9. What sources of support has the FIS used?

NAFIS

Commercially purchased support or training

CIS Regional Project

Other _____

10. How useful have these sources of support been? (ASK EACH SOURCE AGAINST THE SCALE)

Very useful

Quite useful

Not very useful

Not at all useful

SECTION C - Relationships with the Local Authority

1. Who within the local authority does the FIS manager report to directly?

Job title and description of their role

Department in the local authority

2. How effective do you think the local authority's strategic planning and oversight of the FIS is?

Very effective

Quite effective

Neither effective nor ineffective

Quite ineffective

Very ineffective

3. Do other local authority staff support the FIS with any of the following?

Guidance

Training

Updating information

Brokering relationships with local services / organisations

Marketing / publicity

Outreach

Monitoring

Resources?

Other (please specify)

None

4. ASK FOR EACH WHERE SUPPORT PROVIDED AT Q3 And how would you describe the support the local authority provides with....?

Excellent

Good

Fair

Poor

Very Poor

5. Do you have any suggestions for improvements to the way in which the local authority supports the FIS? _____

FINALLY - Comments / good practice

Please type in any other comments you have. If possible please describe any good or innovative practice in your FIS that you would like to highlight

14.8 Families Information Service User Survey Questionnaire (CATI)

PART 1

(DK AND REFUSED WILL BE ALLOWED AT ALL QUESTIONS)

Good morning / afternoon, my name is XXX from Taylor Nelson Sofres, which is an independent research agency. We are conducting research on behalf of the Department for Children, Schools and Families on the information which is provided to families in your area.

We understand that you recently contacted your local Families Information Service (or Children's Information Service) for information or guidance and agreed to take part in further research. The purpose of this survey is to seek users' opinions of the service in order to improve the service for all in future.

Q1a Would you be able to spare up to 15 minutes to tell us about your experience of using the Families Information Service?

Yes

No

IF YES CONTINUE, IF NO CLOSE AND MOVE ONTO NEXT SAMPLE

READ OUT

Before I go on to the first question, I just want to reassure you that everything you tell me is confidential and will not be passed on to any third parties or used for any purpose other than research. TNS is bound by the Market Research Society code of conduct.

Q1 Firstly can I just check that in the last few weeks you contacted your local Families Information Service?

Yes

No, I do not remember contacting them

IF YES GO TO Q3, ALL OTHERS GO TO Q2

Q2 We have a record that you contacted a local support service to enquire about xxxxx (*from sample*). You may remember being asked if you would mind taking part in some further research. Do you remember this?

Yes - GO TO Q3

No - CLOSE

Can't remember - CLOSE

IF YES GO TO Q3, ALL OTHERS CLOSE

Q3 How did you contact the Families Information Service?

READ OUT

By phone

By email

Through the "Contact us" page on their website

By text

In person

Other SPECIFY BOX

Q4 How did you find out about the Families Information Service?

READ OUT

A friend told me about the service

Someone at the council told me about the service

Another professional told me about the service

Through a school/nursery

Through a Children's Centre

Through the Families Information Service website

Through the local authority website

Through a search on the internet

Through another website

Through directory enquiries

Local advertising

Health visitor or other health professional

Through the local authority magazine

I saw a poster

I had called them before for something else

Other SPECIFY BOX

Q5 Did you contact the Families Information Service for advice for your own family, or on behalf of someone else's family?

For my own family

On behalf of a friend or relative's family

On behalf of a family that you represent in a professional capacity

In a professional capacity with a general query

Q6 How easy or difficult was it to find contact information for the Families Information Service? Would you say it was...

Very easy

Quite easy

Neither easy nor difficult

Quite difficult

Very difficult

Q7 How easy or difficult did you find it to get through to an adviser at the Families Information Service, whether on the phone, in person or over email?

Very easy

Quite easy

Neither easy nor difficult

Quite difficult

Very difficult

IF VERY EASY, QUITE EASY OR NEITHER EASY NOR DIFFICULT, GO TO Q9, ALL OTHERS TO Q8

Q8 Why do you say that? PROBE What could make it easier?

OPEN ENDED QUESTION

Q9 When you contacted the Families Information Service on this occasion, was it for any of these reasons...?

READ OUT (CODE ALL THAT APPLY)

Finding local childcare / early years education providers in the area

Finding local schools in the area

Prices of childcare / early years education provision

Finding out about support to help pay for childcare / early years (3 & 4 year olds) education

Rights of working parents

General services and benefits available to new parents

Support services for families such as parenting classes, relationship advice, support helplines, mobile phone or web services designed for parents

Specific support for parents / carers of children with special needs and/or disabilities

Specific support services for parents / carers of teenage children

Specific support services for fathers

Support and advice for disabled parents

- Specific information and advice for parents/carers about child online safety
- Healthcare for the family including dentistry
- Expectant or new parent information, such as Ante-natal classes and mother and baby classes
- Holiday or after school clubs
- Sport and leisure activities for children
- Other (SPECIFY)

Q10 Which of these best describes how the Families Information Service dealt with your enquiry overall?

- They answered my query completely
- They partially answered my query
- They could not answer my query

Q11 Following your contact with the Families Information Service, have you received any further information from them as a result?

CODE ALL THAT APPLY

- Yes by post
- Yes by phone
- Yes by email
- Yes by text
- No

IF NO GO TO Q14, ALL OTHERS GO TO Q12

Q12 To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the information you received ...?

SCALE

- Strongly agree
- Slightly agree
- Slightly disagree
- Strongly disagree

STATEMENTS

- The information arrived in good time after my initial enquiry
- The information was easy understand
- The information was relevant to me
- The information was helpful to resolving my enquiry
- There was about the right amount of information for me

Q13 Once you had contacted the FIS, how would you have preferred to receive the information you were searching for?

By email

By mobile

In print sent through the post

Over the phone

Q14 Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied were you with the service you received from the Families Information Service on this occasion? Would you say you were...

Very satisfied

Quite satisfied

Quite dissatisfied

Very dissatisfied

Q15 Why do you say that?

OPEN ENDED QUESTION

Q16 How likely would you be to recommend the Families Information Service to a friend who needed similar information?

Very likely

Quite likely

Not very likely

Not at all likely

Q17 Thinking of the person you spoke to at the Families Information Service would you say they were?

Very helpful

Quite helpful

Not very helpful

Not at all helpful

Q18 How likely would you be to use the Families Information Service again?

Very likely

Quite likely

Not very likely

Not at all likely

Q19 Here are some statements some parents have made about the Families Information Service in the past. For each please tell me whether or not you agree with them.
ORDER OF STATEMENTS RANDOMISED. SINGLE CODE PER STATEMENT

SCALE

- Strongly agree
- Slightly agree
- Slightly disagree
- Strongly disagree

STATEMENTS

- The information the Families Information Service gave me was exactly what I needed
- The Families Information Service helped me to see all the options available to me
- Families Information Service staff know what they are talking about
- The Families Information Service has a lot to offer parents

Q20 Do you have any ideas for improvements to the service? PROBE Anything else?

OPEN ENDED QUESTION

Q21 Have you ever contacted the Families Information Service before this occasion?

- Yes - GO TO Q22
- No - GO TO Q23
- IF YES GO TO Q22, ALL OTHERS GO TO Q23

Q22 Approximately how many times would you say you have contacted the Families Information Services in the past year?

READ OUT

- None in the last year
- Once
- 2-3 times
- More than three times
- Can't remember

Q23 Thinking about the time when you contacted the Families Information Service within the last week or so, did the person you contacted offer you details of another organisation, website or helpline that might be able to help?

- Yes
- No
- IF YES GO TO Q24, ALL OTHERS GO TO Q26

Q24 Did you contact or use this organisation, website or helpline that the Families Information Service recommended to you?

Yes

No

I intend to but have not done so yet

IF YES GO TO Q25, ALL OTHERS GO TO Q26

Q25 Would you say the referral...?

ANSWER 'Yes' OR 'No' FOR EACH

Was appropriate

Was helpful

Was useful

Had accurate contact information

Q26 Apart from the Families Information Service, have you ever used another source to gain information about a similar subject before?

Yes

No

Can't remember

IF YES GO TO Q27, ALL OTHERS GO TO Q30

Q27 Who did you contact?

OPEN ENDED QUESTION

Q28 And how did you contact this other source?

Phone

Website

Email

Post

In person

Q29 If you were to compare this experience of contacting the Families Information Service with contacting another organisation, would say that the information provided by the Families Information Service was....

Better than most other organisations

The same as most other organisations

Worse than most other organisations

Don't know / can't remember

Q30 And what have you done as a result of the information you received from the Families Information Service?

Not done anything

Still deciding what to do

Done something (SPECIFY WHAT)

PART 2 DEMOGRAPHICS

Q.A Gender

INTERVIEWER CODE GENDER

Male

Female

Q.B Which of the following age bands do you fit into?

PLEASE READ OUT

16-24

25-34

35-44

45-54

55-59

60-64

65+

Refused

Q.C Which of the following best describes your ethnic background?

SINGLE CODE

White

Asian or Asian British

Black or Black British

Mixed

Chinese

Other PLEASE SPECIFY

Q.D Do you normally speak any other languages apart from English at home?

Yes

No

Q.E What is your working status?

PLEASE READ OUT, SINGLE CODE

- Work full time 30+ hours per week
- Work part time 8-30 hours per week
- Work part time 0-8 hours per week
- Full time education
- Retired
- Unemployed / Not working

Q.F Which of the following best describes your relationship to the child to whom your call to the Family Information Service related?

PLEASE READ OUT, SINGLE CODE

- Parent / main carer / guardian
- Grandparent
- Other family member (PLEASE SPECIFY)
- Other (PLEASE SPECIFY)

Q.G How many children aged 16 or under are currently living in your household?

- None
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6+

IF 1+ PLEASE GO TO Q.H GRID, OTHERWISE GO TO QI

Q.H How old is your youngest child?

QUESTION REPEATED FOR EACH CHILD SELECTED AT Q.G. FOR THE SECOND "SECOND YOUNGEST", THEN "THIRD YOUNGEST" AND SO ON.

WRITE IN AGE IN YEARS FOR EACH CHILD

Q. I Do you have any children aged eighteen or under in your household with long term illness, disability or special needs which means they receive additional or specialist services?

- Yes
- No

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