

Family Information Services

*Annex to A positive approach to a parenting:
Part 2 of the Independent Family Review*

December 2022

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1. Background on the Family Information Service (FIS)

Qualitative research with parents for Part 1 of the Family Review highlighted the need for a comprehensive source of information about local family services.¹ Section 12 of the Childcare Act 2006 requires local authorities to establish and maintain a Family Information Service (FIS) which provides information on the provision of childcare in the local authority area (including the provision of childcare suitable for disabled children) and any other services which might benefit parents, prospective parents or children and young people.²

Local authorities are required to update information on childcare provision at a minimum termly on 1 January, 1 April and 1 September.³ Statutory guidance specifies that information about Ofsted registered childcare should include the contact and location details, type of childcare provided, Ofsted rating, whether the provider offers free early years provision, the cost of the childcare, the time and duration of the childcare provided, the number and ages of children to whom childcare is provided, and the suitability of the childcare for disabled children.⁴

Local authorities face pressures in maintaining a FIS. A 2016 survey of 115 local authorities by the National Association of Family Information Service found that 66% of local authorities reported a reduction in budget allocated to FIS and 51% reported a reduction in staff over the past year.⁵ There is also churn in childcare provision which makes it difficult to maintain an updated directory of providers. Within the span of 3 months (April 2022-June 2022), local authorities experienced an average of 12 early years registered (EYR) providers leaving and 5 EYR joining as well as 7 non-EYR providers leaving and 5 non-EYR providers joining.⁶

2. Methodology

2.1 Finding FIS

The Children's Commissioner's office (CCo) used Google's search API to find the top 10 links in a search for local family services for all 122 towns and cities in England as well as for all 152 upper tier local authorities.⁷ The search term used was "[insert city or town or local authority] family services". The CCo generated a proxy for whether the link was the FIS based on whether the link title included "FIS", "Family Information" or "Families Information".

2.2 Navigating FIS

The CCo conducted user testing on a sample of 60 local authorities' FIS. Six to nine local authorities in each region were chosen randomly to ensure the sample is geographically dispersed. The CCo conducted an audit of the FIS of local authorities by testing how easy it is to navigate the website. For each local authority, the CCo checked whether it was possible to find a local toddler group and parenting course in 2 minutes of navigation on the website, given a randomly selected postcode in the local authority, whether the Family Information Directory (FID) was embedded in the FIS, whether the FID included services run by the voluntary sector, whether the FID included physical health services, whether the FID included mental health services, whether the FID allowed users to search for services by their postcode or local area, whether the FIS sign-posted the SEND local offer, whether the FID included open access leisure activities, whether the FIS could be translated into other languages and whether the FIS advertised a contact number. Results of this audit specific to childcare services are summarised in the CCo report *Vision for Childcare*.⁸

3. Results

3.1 Finding FIS

In 51% of towns and cities, the top 10 search results contained the corresponding local authority's FIS and in 35% of towns and cities, the corresponding local authority's FIS was the top result. When searching with local authorities, 70% had the FIS in the top 10 results and 41% had the FIS as the top result.

3.2 Navigating FIS

Two questions were used to test how easy a FIS website and associated directory were to use. These showed that:

- It was easy to find a local toddler group in 65% of sampled local authorities.
- It was easy to find a parenting course for parents with older children in 22% of sampled local authorities.

Some directories were difficult to find and some directories made it difficult to filter for relevant, local services, either because of a lack of working filter or broad categories of choice.

Further questions looked at the features of the FIS website and its directory, the FID:

- In 53% of sampled local authorities, the FID was embedded in the FIS website (rather than making users click to a different webpage). Sometimes it was difficult to find the directory, or family services were listed under childcare, or the children and families services directory was hosted within the wider council service directory. This could make searching for services difficult to navigate.
 - In 75% of sampled local authorities, the FID included services run by the voluntary sector. Some sites have specific sections advertising community and faith groups.
 - In 48% of sampled local authorities, the FID included physical health services. Some sites embed 'find NHS services near you' into their site, which allows people to search for local GPs, hospitals, care providers, dentists or pharmacies.
 - In 50% of sampled local authorities, the FID included mental health services.
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- In 72% of sampled local authorities, the FID allowed users to search for services by their postcode or local area. Sometimes the postcode search didn't work. Many sites include national services and helplines, but it was sometimes difficult to figure out what is a local service and what is national.
- In 83% of sampled local authorities, the FIS signposted to the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Local Offer.
- In 77% of sampled local authorities, the FID included open access leisure or play activities for children and/or families. Often these were targeted for younger children.
- In 37% of sampled local authorities, the FIS could be translated into other languages. This was typically through Google Translate embedded within the site, however the translate option can be quite hard to find, hidden at the top or bottom of the webpage.
- In 77% of sampled local authorities, the FIS advertised a phone number, email or contact form allowing users to contact the FIS team.

Quality of the FIS sites as a whole varied between local authorities, with some excellent examples that were user friendly and included a full range of services beyond childcare.

4. Recommendation

The Department for Education should work with local authorities to improve the quality of the Family Information Service published in each area. This should include sharing examples of best practice on key issues such as engaging families in service testing and promoting the FIS to families and other professionals. In the future, the ambition should be for the FIS to be available as an app and integrated with other Government services, such as the Digital Red Book.

References

¹ Children's Commissioner for England, *Family and its Protective Effect: Part 1 of the Independent Family Review*, [Link](#), accessed 10.10.22

² UK Public General Acts. 2006. *Childcare Act 2006*. [Link](#), accessed on 09.10.22

³ Department for Education. *Early Education and Childcare Statutory Guidance*. [Link](#), accessed on 09.10.22

⁴ Department for Education. 2008. *Duty to provide information, advice and assistance*. [Link](#), accessed on 09.10.22

⁵ Coram family and childcare, 2016. *Survey of Family Information Services*. [Link](#), accessed on 09.10.22

⁶ Ofsted, *Childcare providers and inspections: Management Information*. [Link](#), accessed on 09.10.22

⁷ The location for these searches was set to the United Kingdom

⁸ Children's Commissioner for England. *Vision for Childcare*. [Link](#), accessed on 31.10.22



**Sanctuary Buildings, 20 Great Smith
Street London, SW1P 3BT**

020 7783 8330

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