



# The Great Family Activity Treasure Hunt

Why finding family activities feels like searching for buried treasure:  
A 2026 review of local authority Family Information Services

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## Executive Summary

Local Family Information Service (FIS) websites should be a primary channel through which parents and carers discover activities for their children. This research reviewed the FIS sites of local authorities in the South West of England and found that the vast majority are failing to adequately serve this purpose.

This report details how effectively the FIS websites of 15 local authorities enable families - including those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) - to find activities, and reveals a significant gap between what families need and what is currently being delivered.

Data was captured in January 2026 through manual assessment across five areas: SEND activity discoverability, general access activity discoverability, usability, content quality and use of AI. Each council was scored against a structured rubric to produce fair and comparable results.



## Headline Findings

The average overall score for a local authority was 27% - a result that represents not just technical underperformance but real daily burden for families trying to find suitable activities for their children. Only one council achieved a 'good' rating, and thirteen fall into 'poor' territory. The median score of 22% means that most families face significant friction in discovering what's available, with particular challenges for SEND families who may have less avenues for finding relevant information elsewhere.

Key findings include:

- Most councils scored poorly across all dimensions: total scores ranged from 60% to 11%, with thirteen out of fifteen councils scoring below 40%.
- SEND provision is minimal for most areas, with seven councils scoring below 10% for SEND activity discoverability, meaning their FIS websites provide very limited information for families with SEND needs.
- Information for general access (i.e. non-SEND specific families) is worse, with roughly half of the councils studied providing effectively no information
- Quantity does not equal discoverability: councils that are publishing information lack the metadata, filters, and search quality to make them findable. Basic provider-only listings force families to do significant additional research.
- Zero AI adoption. No council has implemented AI-powered features such as chatbots, conversational search or intelligent recommendations - capabilities that families will soon expect as standard from digital services.

Systemically low scores suggest causes such as the use of legacy platforms built 10-20 years ago, under-resourced teams stretched across multiple responsibilities and councils that treat FIS as a compliance function rather than a strategic service for family engagement.

The cumulative effect is that many families simply give up on council FIS websites and turn to alternative sources - undermining the core purpose of statutory family information services.

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## Methodology

Each council's FIS website was assessed manually against a structured rubric covering five top-level categories. Within each category, subcategories were scored on a 0-4 scale (0 = none, 1 = poor, 2 = fair, 3 = good, 4 = excellent). Weighted averages were used to produce percentage scores for each category, and a weighted combination of category scores was used to produce an overall percentage score for each council.

### Assessment Areas

Council FIS websites were assessed across five categories:

**SEND activities:** discoverability of one-off events, regular groups and classes, fixed attractions and outdoor recreation for families with SEND needs (see further detail below). Scored on comprehensiveness of listings at both a provider level and activity level of information.

**General access activities:** assessed using the same approach as for SEND activities, but done for activities not focussed on SEND needs.

**Usability:** UX and design quality, search functionality, filter options, map implementation and technical accessibility.

**Helpful, up-to-date content:** presence of contact details, proportion of working links and visibility of "last updated" dates.

**Use of AI:** implementation of chatbots, conversational search, intelligent recommendations, voice interfaces, or other AI-powered features that improve discovery and matching.

### Activity Categories

Activities were assessed across four categories:

**One-off events:** Single date/time happenings such as festivals, workshops, performances or seasonal events (e.g. Easter egg hunt, summer fair, drama workshop etc.).

**Regular groups and classes:** Recurring sessions such as toddler groups, sports clubs, music classes or support groups that meet on a regular (e.g. weekly, monthly) basis.

**Fixed attractions:** Permanent venues or facilities such as museums, soft play centres, leisure centres, libraries or visitor attractions that families can visit anytime during opening hours.

**Outdoor recreation:** Parks, playgrounds, nature reserves, walking trails, beaches and outdoor spaces that are freely accessible.

### Activity-Level Listings vs Provider Listings

A critical distinction in this assessment is between activity-level listings and provider listings. An activity-level listing describes a specific session, event or opportunity that a family can attend – with (e.g.) a date, time, location, age suitability and what to expect. A provider listing describes an organisation that runs activities, without detailing individual sessions.

For groups and classes in particular, we assessed whether sites list individual activities (e.g. "Sensory Play - Tuesdays 10am at Southmead Community Centre, ages 0-3, free, drop-in") rather

than simply listing providers (e.g. “ABC Ltd - sensory play”). Provider-only listings require families to do significant additional research to find something relevant, which reduces the value of the family information service to them. Sites listing activities at the session level therefore scored materially higher.

## Scope and Limitations

This is a point-in-time assessment (late January 2026) of 15 local authorities in South West England. Scores are intended to reflect what a parent would experience when visiting each site, and does not assess backend data quality or operational processes. Some sites may have changed since assessment.

## Overall Rankings

The table below ranks 15 South West councils by their weighted overall score. Colour coding indicates performance bands.

#	Council	SEND	Non-SEND	Usability	Content	AI	Overall
1	Gloucestershire County Council	65%	65%	80%	85%	0%	60%
2	BCP Council	50%	50%	75%	80%	0%	51%
3	Cornwall Council	25%	50%	60%	80%	0%	42%
4	Dorset Council	37%	37%	50%	60%	0%	37%
5	Somerset Council	35%	13%	65%	55%	0%	32%
6	South Gloucestershire Council	12%	12%	80%	70%	0%	31%
7	Bath & North East Somerset	4%	0%	45%	90%	0%	24%
8	Torbay Council	8%	33%	33%	40%	0%	22%
9	Swindon Borough Council	8%	6%	25%	70%	0%	19%
10	Isles of Scilly	6%	0%	30%	70%	0%	18%
11	Plymouth City Council	2%	0%	45%	50%	0%	16%
12	Wiltshire Council	8%	0%	40%	40%	0%	15%
13	Bristol City Council	0%	0%	38%	50%	0%	15%
14	North Somerset Council	2%	2%	25%	40%	0%	12%
15	Devon County Council	2%	0%	35%	30%	0%	11%

Percentage scores for each category are weighted combinations of their subcategory scores. Overall score is a weighted combination of all five category scores.

	75%+ (Excellent)
	50-74% (Good)
	25-49% (Fair)
	0-24% (Poor)

Only two councils (Gloucestershire & BCP) achieved a “good” overall rating, with four councils reaching the “fair” band and the remaining thirteen councils falling into “poor” territory. The distribution is heavily skewed towards lower scores, with a median of just 22%.

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## SEND Activities

Councils have a statutory duty under the Children and Families Act 2014 to publish a Local Offer: information about provision available for children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities. This includes activities, leisure opportunities and support services. The Local Offer must be accessible, comprehensive, and kept up to date.

Council	One-off Events	Groups & Classes*	Fixed Attractions	Outdoor	Total
Gloucestershire County Council	3	2.3	3	2	65%
BCP Council	3	3.0	1	1	50%
Dorset Council	0	2.0	3	1	37%
Somerset Council	2	1.7	1	1	35%
Cornwall Council	0	1.0	3	0	25%
South Gloucestershire Council	0	2.0	0	0	12%
Torbay Council	0	0.3	1	0	8%
Swindon Borough Council	0	0.3	1	0	8%
Wiltshire Council	0	0.3	1	0	8%
Isles of Scilly	0	0	1	0	6%
Bath & North East Somerset	0	0.7	0	0	4%
Plymouth City Council	0	0.3	0	0	2%
North Somerset Council	0	0.3	0	0	2%
Devon County Council	0	0.3	0	0	2%
Bristol City Council	0	0	0	0	0%

Subcategory scores are out of 4. Total is a weighted percentage. \*Groups & Classes is a composite of activity listings and provider listings subscores - see Methodology.

## Observations

Most councils are minimally meeting their statutory duty to publish accessible SEND information.

The median SEND score of 8% (mean 18%) demonstrates how most councils are failing to make SEND activities discoverable. We often found this requirement being met by a single webpage with a relatively small number of activity providers listed.

Families with SEND would appreciate specific information that general listings rarely provide: sensory environment details, staff training levels, support ratios, accessibility features etc., but given that basic availability of appropriate events, groups and attractions is not being met this extra level of provision feels some way off.

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## General Access Activities

Even without having specific SEND requirements, families need to discover activities quickly and easily, including e.g. by date, age band, cost and location. While there is a legal requirement for councils to provide SEND local offer information (however well this is being fulfilled) there is no legal requirement for general access information and subsequently this is met even more minimally.

The median general access score is 6% (mean 18%), with six councils scoring zero - meaning their FIS websites provide no meaningful way to discover non-SEND activities.

Council	One-off Events	Groups & Classes*	Fixed Attractions	Outdoor	Total
Gloucestershire County Council	3	2.3	3	2	65%
BCP Council	3	3.0	1	1	50%
Cornwall Council	2	3.0	3	0	50%
Dorset Council	0	2.0	3	1	37%
Torbay Council	0	1.3	3	1	33%
Somerset Council	0	0	1	1	13%
South Gloucestershire Council	0	2.0	0	0	12%
Swindon Borough Council	0	0	0	1	6%
North Somerset Council	0	0.3	0	0	2%
Bath & North East Somerset	0	0	0	0	0%
Isles of Scilly	0	0	0	0	0%
Plymouth City Council	0	0	0	0	0%
Wiltshire Council	0	0	0	0	0%
Bristol City Council	0	0	0	0	0%
Devon County Council	0	0	0	0	0%

Subcategory scores are out of 4. Total is a weighted percentage. \*Groups & Classes is a composite of activity listings and provider listings subscores - see Methodology.

## Observations

Of those councils with meaningful listings, regular groups and classes tended to be better represented than one-off events or outdoor activities. However, many of these listed only providers rather than individual activities - forcing parents to visit multiple external websites to find a suitable session, which significantly reduces the value of the directory.

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## Usability

Well-structured content is only valuable if families can find it. Usability measures how effectively each site's design, search, filters, maps, and accessibility features support discovery.

Council	UX	Search	Filter	Map	Access.	Total
Gloucestershire County Council	4	4	3	2	3	80%
South Gloucestershire Council	4	4	3	2	3	80%
BCP Council	2	4	3	3	3	75%
Somerset Council	4	2	1	3	3	65%
Cornwall Council	2	4	1	2	3	60%
Dorset Council	1	4	1	2	2	50%
Bath & North East Somerset	3	3	0	0	3	45%
Plymouth City Council	3.5	1.5	0	1.5	2.5	45%
Wiltshire Council	2.5	2	0.5	0	3	40%
Bristol City Council	2	2	0.5	0	3	38%
Devon County Council	4	0	0	0	3	35%
Torbay Council	2	2.5	0	0	2	33%
Isles of Scilly	3	0	0	0	3	30%
Swindon Borough Council	3	0	0	0	2	25%
North Somerset Council	3	0	0	0	2	25%

Subcategory scores are out of 4. Total is a weighted percentage.

## Observations

Councils with a comprehensive search that works across their full directory scored higher than the majority offering only basic search or no search at all. Filters are inconsistently implemented, and while some sites offer category filters, key options like age band, SEND attributes, cost and day/time are frequently missing.

Map functionality is widely underutilised or poorly implemented. Several councils offer no map view at all, and those that do often limit the number of results shown, defeating the purpose of a geographical discovery tool. Meeting technical accessibility standards was broadly good.

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## Helpful, Up-to-date Content

Families need to act on the information they find. Accurate contact details, working links and knowing when content was updated are essential to convert discovery into attendance.

Council	Contact Details	Working Links	Last Updated	Total
Bath & North East Somerset	3	4	4	90%
Gloucestershire County Council	3	4	3	85%
BCP Council	4	4	0	80%
Cornwall Council	4	4	0	80%
South Gloucestershire Council	4	3	0	70%
Swindon Borough Council	3	4	0	70%
Isles of Scilly	3	4	0	70%
Dorset Council	3	3	0	60%
Somerset Council	2	3	1	55%
Plymouth City Council	3	2	0	50%
Bristol City Council	1	4	0	50%
Torbay Council	3	1	0	40%
Wiltshire Council	0	4	0	40%
North Somerset Council	0	4	0	40%
Devon County Council	0	3	0	30%

Subcategory scores are out of 4. Total is a weighted percentage.

### Observations

Working links is the strongest subcategory overall, with several councils scoring full marks. However, this can be somewhat misleading - councils with very few listings naturally have fewer broken links to find.

Last updated visibility is the weakest content metric. Only three councils make update timestamps visible at all. Without freshness signals, parents cannot distinguish current listings from stale ones, reducing trust in the entire directory.

Contact details vary widely. Best practice includes a named organiser with direct phone or email and a booking link. Weaker practice provides only a generic departmental contact or nothing at all.

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## Use of AI

Artificial intelligence (AI) represents a transformative opportunity for family information services. AI-powered interfaces can fundamentally improve both how families search for activities and the quality of results they receive. Despite this potential, no council in this review appears to have implemented any AI capabilities in their FIS system.

### The Opportunity

Modern AI technologies enable capabilities to significantly improve the experience for families using FIS systems:

- **Conversational search:** Families can describe what they need in natural language (“My 5-year-old loves dinosaurs and has autism, what’s on this Saturday morning?”) rather than wrestling with filters and keywords.
- **Intelligent matching:** AI can understand context, synonyms, and intent. A search for “toddler groups” would also surface “baby and me classes”, “parent and child sessions”, and age-appropriate activities even if not explicitly tagged as “toddler”.
- **Multi-modal interaction:** Voice interfaces allow hands-free searching while driving or caring for children. Visual interfaces can show activities on a map with one-tap booking.
- **Semantic search beyond keywords:** AI can understand the meaning behind queries, not just match keywords. It can pull relevant context from activity descriptions, reviews and accessibility notes to provide genuinely helpful recommendations.
- **Understanding relationships:** AI can understand connections between activities, venues, providers and user needs - surfacing relevant options that standard keyword searches miss entirely.
- **Personalisation:** AI can learn from search patterns and preferences to surface relevant activities proactively, reducing the burden on families to search repeatedly.

### Current State: Zero Adoption

Not a single council in this review has implemented AI-powered search, chatbots or intelligent recommendations. The most advanced sites offer basic keyword search and category filters - technology that has been standard for two decades.

This represents a significant missed opportunity, and as families increasingly come to expect conversational, intelligent interfaces in other domains, councils need to keep up with meeting the expectations of their population.

### The AI Advantage

AI implementation offers two distinct advantages to the user: a better interface and better results.

The interface advantage is immediately visible - natural language chat or voice interaction is faster and more intuitive than repeated searching and navigating filters. But the results advantage is potentially more important: AI systems don’t just make existing listings easier to find, they make connections that traditional search cannot.

For example, a family searching for “sensory-friendly activities for a 7-year-old who struggles with loud noises” might receive recommendations for quiet library sessions, early-morning museum visits, nature walks with small group sizes, and art classes in calm environments - even if none of those activities are explicitly tagged “sensory-friendly”. The AI infers suitability from descriptions, reviews, venue characteristics, and similar users’ choices.

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This is the next frontier for family information services. Councils that adopt AI-powered search and recommendations will deliver materially better outcomes for families while reducing the operational burden of maintaining complex filter taxonomies and fielding information requests.

## Strategic Insights

Beyond the individual scores and observations, several structural patterns emerge that potentially explain why performance is so consistently low across the region. These insights reveal systemic challenges that require strategic, not just tactical, responses.

### Implications for Families

An average overall score of 27% and a median of just 22% is not an abstract statistic - it represents a daily burden for parents and carers trying to find suitable activities for their children. In practical terms, it means most families face:

- **Significant friction in discovering what's available:** multiple searches across poorly indexed sites, provider listings that require further research, broken links and missing contact details.
- **No reliable way to find SEND-appropriate activities:** seven councils score below 10% for SEND provision, leaving families with additional needs to rely on word-of-mouth, social media groups and direct outreach to providers.
- **Wasted time and missed opportunities:** stale information, unclear eligibility and inadequate filtering mean parents often research activities only to find they're unsuitable or unavailable.
- **Inequity of access:** digitally capable families who know where to look and can navigate poor interfaces fare better than those who rely on council sites as their primary information source.

The cumulative effect is that many families simply give up on council FIS websites and turn to alternative sources - Facebook groups, parenting forums, paid directories, or direct provider websites. This undermines the core purpose of statutory family information services and risks excluding the families who most need support.

### The Technology Gap

Most FIS platforms in use across the South West are legacy systems, before modern baseline expectations. These platforms were designed for a different era - when parents would visit a desktop computer to browse static directories rather than expecting instant, mobile-friendly, conversational search.

The consequence is not just an aesthetic gap but a functional one. Modern activity discovery requires semantic search, dynamic filtering, geolocation and real-time availability - capabilities that legacy platforms cannot easily retrofit. The contrast with commercial services that families use daily (travel booking, restaurant discovery, entertainment listings etc.) is stark and erodes trust in council provision.

### Resource and Process Constraints

Behind a lot of FIS websites sits a small team - managing not only the directory but also enquiry handling, partner liaison, safeguarding responsibilities and reporting requirements. These teams

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are rarely equipped with content management resources, developer support or budget for platform upgrades.

The result is a vicious cycle: limited resources mean content goes stale, which reduces user engagement, which reduces political visibility, which keeps resources constrained. Without dedicated content governance processes - automated staleness checks, partner submission workflows, link validation - quality inevitably degrades over time. The teams managing these services know the problems intimately but lack the organisational support to address them.

## **SEND Provision Falling Short**

While all councils in the review publish some form of SEND information to meet their statutory Local Offer duty, the quality and practical usefulness of that provision varies dramatically. Seven councils scored below 10% for SEND activity discoverability, meaning their FIS websites provide minimal information that would help a family with SEND needs find a suitable activity.

The challenge is not simply legal compliance - it's whether the information published is sufficient for its intended purpose. A SEND page that lists generic service categories or provides only a small number of provider contact details, without activity-level listings, session times, accessibility metadata or sensory environment details may technically exist but effectively fails to serve the families who depend on it.

## **Why Zero AI Adoption?**

The complete absence of AI-powered features across all 15 councils reflects several intersecting factors: procurement cycles that move slowly, risk aversion in public-facing technology, and a potential perception that FIS is a statutory compliance function rather than a proactive strategic service. AI implementation requires budget, technical capability and organisational commitment - resources that appear to not be prioritised for family information services.

More fundamentally, most councils do not yet see their FIS as a customer experience problem to be solved with modern technology. Until FIS is recognised as a critical touchpoint for family engagement - not just a directory to maintain - investment in AI-powered search and recommendations will likely remain low on the priority list.

## **Conclusion**

This review reveals a significant gap between what families need from council Family Information Services and what is currently being delivered across South West England. An average overall score of just 27% indicates systemic underperformance, with real consequences for the families trying to use these services.

The Strategic Insights section identifies why this gap exists: legacy technology platforms that predate modern web standards, under-resourced teams stretched across multiple responsibilities, SEND provision that meets minimal requirements without delivering practical utility, and zero adoption of AI-powered discovery tools that families now expect from every other digital service.

These are not inevitable constraints. The path to improvement is clear, and the most impactful changes - minimum volumes and standards for listings, structured metadata, better search and filters, content governance - are achievable. Councils do not need to solve every problem at once,

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but they do need to recognise FIS as a strategic service that shapes how families engage with their communities.

Councils that act on these findings will not only serve families more effectively but will also reduce the operational burden on their information services teams. Modern, well-maintained activity directories deliver higher engagement, better outcomes, and stronger trust - outcomes that benefit both families and the councils serving them.

