

Implementing Sure Start Local Programmes: An Integrated Overview of the First Four Years

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Sure Start local programmes (SSLPs) support children under 4 and their families by integrating services such as early education, childcare, health and family support. Sure Start services are delivered through community based local programmes and support between 400 - 800 children under 4.

Introduction

A comprehensive national evaluation is assessing the impact, implementation, community characteristics and cost effectiveness of SSLPs by examining the first 260 programmes in the first four rounds⁴. The earliest of these programmes were approved in late 1999, the later rounds by early 2002.

This report provides an overview of the quantitative and qualitative data around implementation issues collected, between 2001 and 2004, on the first 260 SSLPs in Rounds 1-4. This includes surveys of programme managers, case study analysis and information from specific issue based 'thematic' studies. The purpose of this report is to integrate and synthesise these data on programme activity and achievements in three key areas:

- facilitating access;
- transcending organisational and professional boundaries; and
- establishing a new approach to service delivery for children and parents.

The findings are organised around three key themes which highlight the main trends in implementation activity, and where appropriate, identify lessons for implementing the current agenda for children's services.

Key findings

The Continuum of Access

In order to maximise access to services by children and parents in the local community, programme staff have to 'think in the long term'. Reaching families is never a one-off task but an on-going, continuous process. In effect, this constitutes a 'continuum of access' as described below.

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⁴ SSLPs have been rolled out in 6 stages or 'rounds'. The National Evaluation of Sure Start investigated the first 4 rounds, that is, the first 260 programmes.

A five point continuum of access operates at the programme level, which reflects the main styles in which programmes forge links with parents. These are:

- 1) Making initial contact - for example leafleting, face-to-face outreach work
- 2) 'Introduction' to the service - for example, meetings with individual parents to discuss relevant available services
- 3) Autonomous take up of at least one Sure Start Service - where a parent/carer makes a decision to use a service on their own
- 4) Autonomous take up of more than one service, where a parent/carer is more confident and proactive about taking up services
- 5) Autonomous take up of services, other than those provided by Sure Start - where a parent/carer is confident enough to look beyond targeted SSLP services.

Parents appear to have three styles of service use:

- 1) Autonomous - take up services without prompting or extra support
- 2) Facilitated - parents may need more encouragement to take up services
- 3) Conditional - parents will take up services if specific, individual conditions are met.

Many parents in SSLPs may lack the confidence to initiate take up of services. Programme staff need, therefore, to devise a range of creative/innovative and flexible strategies. Such efforts can help parents overcome their apprehension, and will be especially helpful in engaging groups with more complex needs. The two following examples give an indication of breath of strategies deployed.

Example One

In one programme a mother had gone from not leaving the home and suffering serious post-natal depression to going to the SSLP a few times with her child, then starting to take her child there on a regular basis, engaging with staff and subsequently with other parents. She commented, *"It's really lovely because [the programme] does not just ask how my child is but how I am ... I have now started to go to a gym. Even on my own, and I would never go anywhere on my own before. So that whole confidence thing has worked for me."*

Example Two

In some programmes, the library services provided routes into a range of other interests and activities for parents. In one SSLP, a mother was encouraged through her use of the toy library to visit the community library where she could access a wider range of books for her child. While there, encouraged by the literacy work in the SSLP, she started borrowing books for her own use and after a few months, was encouraging her next door neighbour to go with her and do the same.

Increasing Access

SSLPs are employing many strategies and developing their ways of working in order to make using services easier and better for parents. These include:

- **Outreach activity** - this is fundamental to increasing reach and access and needs to include outreach into the home and outreach into the wider community.
- **Signposting** - by programme staff to other services. Another important way of facilitating access across the programme.

- **Trust** - this is fundamental to parental engagement. Building trust is a long-term task for programmes, with cultural and ethnic dimensions also taken into account.
- **Professionalism** - parents are discerning consumers of services and do not, as is sometimes assumed, hold stereotypical (negative) views about 'professionals' and stereotypical (positive) views about being a 'friendly person'. They want staff members who combine, where appropriate, both sets of characteristics. Sometimes professional expertise is essential. At the same time, parents value it being delivered by a sensitive, friendly and accessible individual.
- **Confidentiality** - the building of trust is facilitated by programmes demonstrating they have a consistent and uniform policy on confidentiality. This is particularly important where programme staff themselves live within the boundary of the SSLP programme.
- **Childcare** - the provision of childcare is crucial in enabling parents to use services. In particular, the availability of childcare for parents participating in training courses or management meetings increased the likelihood of parents using services.
- SSLPs were demonstrating high levels of commitment to both the principle and the practice of working together, at the level of the organisation and of individual professions.
- Inheritance matters - the extent of pre-existing positive relationships has tended to determine the degree of success achieved by programmes in working together.
- High levels of funding have clearly been influential in encouraging other organisations to work in partnership with SSLPs.
- Some mainstream services, e.g. social services and GPs, have experienced greater challenges than others, in working together with SSLPs. The origins of these challenges differ. In some cases they may derive from differing professional cultures, such as the traditional autonomy and relatively high status of GPs. In others cases, specific legislation, such as the child protection responsibilities of social workers, has worked against the development of shared priorities.
- A clear, shared understanding of purpose between stakeholders is a key factor in facilitating progress in working together.

Working together: Transcending Organisational and Professional Boundaries

SSLPs do not operate in isolation but rather have to work with other local agencies in areas which have often been dominated by fragmentation of services between different local agencies. Programme staff are deploying considerable effort in developing networks with other agencies in order to facilitate meeting children's needs in a more holistic way.

- Generating a sense of equity and mutual respect between organisations is helpful in sustaining partnerships.
- The role of programme managers is crucial in maintaining programme partnerships. Motivated programme managers could incentivise and encourage front line staff and maximise the development of collaborative working styles.

- Staff valued professional qualifications on the part of the programme manager, regardless of what they are e.g. health, education or social work.
- High turnover of programme managers is a factor in undermining the robustness of programmes.
- The ongoing roll-out of new policy initiatives, such as children's centres, resulted in additional pressure and/or stress for programmes and could, in some cases, undermine community confidence in the SSLP.
- Outreach, in an SSLP context, is a multi-faceted concept which spans activities including: raising awareness; befriending; exploiting existing networks, e.g. health visiting services; as a gateway to other services; and the provision of specialist services in people's own homes.
- There is no one-size-fits-all prescription for the balance between the provision of services across multiple venues and the provision of services in a "one-stop shop". For some communities the best option will be a selection of venues, for others a one-stop shop, and the latter certainly can have clear advantages for both staff and parents.

A new approach to service delivery?

Programmes are delivering services in a variety of ways, e.g. group and individual based services and centre-based and outreach services, and these different service combinations are enabling programmes to meet a variety of individual and community needs.

- Programmes sought to deliver services, which both addressed the goal of maximising child development, i.e. 'putting the child at the centre of services', and supporting the family. Programmes sometimes seemed to find the latter focus more straightforward, possibly because adults can more easily articulate their own needs. On the other hand, as parents are often the key to the programme making contact with the child in the first place (even in the context of outreach) it was clearly important for the programme to spend time and effort engaging the adult as a first stage in identifying and meeting the child's needs.
- Outreach is fundamental to service delivery at every point along the continuum of access to services. The amount of staff effort and financial cost of the work involved should not be underestimated.
- Delivering services via groups can achieve more than one end, that is, not only the delivery of the service itself but it can also create opportunities for interaction between parents leading to increased confidence and the development of personal networks. Group based services can be very important in minimising levels of parental isolation.
- One-to-one provision is appropriate in cases where intensive support is required, or where parents/carers may require extra encouragement to access certain services.
- Father involvement in SSLPs is low as compared with that of mothers. In all aspects of programme interaction, for example in involvement in the management of the SSLP or the take up of services, few fathers get involved
- Programmes have developed different approaches to father involvement, and some are more pro-active than others. Where SSLPs employ father involvement workers and prioritise father-engagement, success rates in involving fathers in the programme are higher.

- The majority of SSLPs were providing services within a '9-5', Monday to Friday timetable. Some programmes are beginning to make services available in the evenings and weekends to accommodate working parents but, overall, this attracted low priority since many of the parents who wish to use SSLP services are mothers who are not working while their children are very young.
- Childcare is a key component of SSLPs and there appear to be four overlapping specific functions for childcare in the SSLP context in addition to the positive effects good quality childcare can bring to children. These four functions include a) a service for working parents, b) a means of supporting opportunities for parental development, c) as part of a family support package (e.g. providing respite for parents) and d) as training and support opportunities for people wishing to enter employment in childcare.

Policy and practice recommendations

The implementation of the current agenda for children's services entails both an acknowledgement and understanding of the following set of tensions. While these are far from new and recur throughout the empirical and theoretical literature on social policy, they impact on a day-to-day basis on all the stakeholders in any SSLP, including staff, partner agencies, parents and children. These tensions include:

- selectivity versus universality
- locally expressed need versus centrally determined need
- the needs and rights of children versus the needs and rights of parents and
- *evidence-based* versus *entitlement-based* services.

The findings summarised above cannot be expected to resolve all of these tensions but they are of obvious relevance for the roll-out of complex community initiatives such as SSLPs and in particular, for children's centres.

Targeting and boundaries

- The SSLP experience points to the advantages of delivering services on a universal basis for children and families as well as for the optimum management of resources. Designing services with restrictive 'boundaries' (on the basis of either geography or age), raises serious problems for children and families such as:
 - 1) failing to meet the needs of children across their developmental life course, that is, beyond the age of 4
 - 2) failing to maximise access to services
 - 3) increasing the risk of a sense of stigma, which can deter people who need services from using them.
- Our findings are compatible with current policy in respect of children's centres and extended schools. These policies already reflect a reduction in 'boundary-rigidity', with children centres providing for children up to 5, and extended schools offering out of hours care.
- Area boundaries can have potential disadvantages, such as the exclusion of potentially appropriate existing services such as family centres, sometimes located just outside an SSLP boundary. Removing such boundaries can mean workers who are in short supply can be deployed more rationally and the scale of inter-agency collaboration can be maximised.

Workforce

- It needs to be recognised that the workforce, which is entrusted with the role of meeting the needs of children and their families (e.g. health visitors, speech therapists, and social workers) is currently insufficient in size and in some cases insufficiently skilled (e.g. child care workers). These issues have the capacity to put at real risk the successful implementation of community level programmes, such as SSLPs and children's centres.
- There needs to be a clear acknowledgement of the value to parents of a range of professional workers who maintain their own professional identity and expertise. In addition to these professional skills, staff need to develop networking skills, engaging with parents, particularly vulnerable parents; working in a multi-disciplinary environment way with other agencies, professionals, para-professionals and volunteers and also understanding the wider context within which professionals now operate.
- The gender and ethnicity of workers are important factors in the extent to which communities engage with the programmes. While it is desirable that the professional workforce for children's services, as far as possible, reflects demographic trends, especially ethnicity and gender, this may well be an unrealistic objective so that imaginative compensatory strategies will need to be explored.
- Remedying the gender imbalance in the childcare and social care workforce requires a sustained, long-term strategy. Opening up educational and training opportunities; removing barriers in the form of existing pay levels; and addressing the perceived low status of such work all need to be addressed at central government level.

Maximising the chances of working together

- Purposeful thought should be given to the identification of opportunities to enhance the potential for each agency to collaborate with other agencies. Such services need to have permeable rather than fixed boundaries.

Example One

Childminders are in a position, if encouraged, to work in a flexible child-focused way in collaboration with social services departments. They can comprise a component of either a family support or child protection package.

Example Two

The employment, location and career development of health visitors needs to take account of their similar potential role as joiners-up of services (e.g. between housing departments and health services, between child health services and adult health services and between social services and health in the context for example, of domestic violence concerns).

- Data protection policies and problematic relationships with some relevant agencies can, in some cases hamper consistent and comprehensive access to data sources. Given the current development of national policy in respect of a database for children, these findings merit further exploration of the consequences of working together in small, local areas.

Engaging with the community

- The commitment inherent in SSLPs to robust consultation has been an important element in the positive profile of SSLPs and can play a vital role in the design and delivery of local services. Consultation is a useful tool

in the building up of community awareness and ownership of services.

- Reach is not a one-off task and sustained effort needs to be deployed from the point of initial contact right through to service use. This is a message of relevance to many different staff groups who work with children and families and transcends the remit of SSLPs.
- Outreach is fundamental to engaging all those members of the community who may benefit from services. A reduction in the capacity of local services to undertake outreach activity can only have a negative effect on their ability to attract and engage parents, a hazard, which is particularly serious given the current scale of change at the local level (i.e. children's centres, Children's Trusts).
- Very serious thought needs to be given to the design and delivery of services in geographical areas within which there is no 'critical mass' of one particular minority ethnic group. In the absence of specific strategies, there is a much reduced likelihood of participation from such groups. Guidance would be helpful to encourage staff within discrete local areas to seek collaborators in nearby geographic areas with a similar minority ethnic group population.

Further work on the Implementation of SSLPs

Work is ongoing in the investigation of how SSLPS are being delivered, largely through the themed studies series⁵. Work is also ongoing to identify characteristics of effective programmes.

Further information on the studies summarised in this report can be found on the National Evaluation website: www.ness.bbk.ac.uk

⁵Forthcoming thematic studies include an investigation on the impact of SSLPs on black and minority ethnic groups, parenting education and support, speech and language service in SSLPs, domestic violence, support for children with special needs and safeguarding and child-protection.

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