Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLPs) support children under 4 and their families by integrating early education, childcare, healthcare and family support services in disadvantaged areas. This study looked at the ways programmes helped parents move from feeling isolated, anxious or vulnerable to feeling that they had an increased sense of control over their lives. It looked, too, at the ways programmes encouraged parents to help and support one another.

Key findings

- There is substantial evidence that SSLPs have empowered individual parents, so that they feel less isolated, more valued (especially as mothers) and more confident in their parenting activities. As a result, individual parents report feeling a closer bond with their children, whom they say are happier, easier to relate to, mixing better and better prepared for learning.

- Some SSLPs have also empowered groups and communities by encouraging mutual support between parents and families and by involving parents in volunteering and community-oriented activities.

- Among the SSLP approaches which encourage individual empowerment are: outreach; flexible services that adaptable to the needs of individuals and groups in area, and; the provision of regular information for those with and without English language skills.

- SSLPs have empowered their communities by balancing the needs of particular groups with those of the general population and by being sensitive to local history and culture, and the history and culture of minority groups.

- Empowerment has grown where staff across all professional disciplines and at all levels, have worked and engaged with parents in an open, accessible, informal, non-judgmental way, listening, respecting and learning from parents’ own experiences.

- Empowering SSLPs had a robust, holistic ethos; open to all the situations and dilemmas which might confront families. Such an ethos combines community development approaches with specialist services for family support, preventive health, along with good quality play, early education and childcare.

- A supportive environment in an SSLP enabled parents and communities to express what would help them to bring up their children and resulted in a respectful dialogue between groups in the community when there were competing needs for different types of services and support.

- In order for staff to develop services which responded creatively to local needs, local programmes needed enough freedom to respond flexibly to what parents were saying about those needs.

- Creative and sensitive working with cultural difference involved fostering diversity, community links, solidarity and pride in an area. The universal and positive appeal of children’s well being and happiness could provide the basis of engagement with all parents.
Background

Sure Start Local programmes - which are now Sure Start Children’s Centres - worked in neighbourhoods where there were between 400 and 800 children under four. 524 programmes were rolled out in six stages or ‘rounds’. The National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) is assessing their impact, implementation and cost effectiveness, by examining the first 260 programmes - the first four rounds. The earliest of these programmes began operating at the end of 1999, the later ones by early 2002.

SSLPs were required to empower parents by enabling them to access parenting support, to become active users of services and to develop their confidence. The aim was to produce positive effects for their parenting, particularly for their relationships with and the well being of their children. SSLPs were also encouraged to deliver services in a responsive and inclusive way, avoiding stigma, recognising the strengths of families rather then seeing them as ‘problems’ and enabling parents to determine their own requirements. As one of the area-based initiatives designed to combat social exclusion, SSLPs also had a role in challenging perceptions about particular communities through community development and through raising awareness of the needs of different groups.

What Does ‘Empowerment’ Mean?

Drawing from the research literature four essential features of empowerment can be identified. These can operate for individual parents, but they can be extended to the Sure Start programme and the community more widely.

Respect: Feeling valued as an individual, secure and not judged, having a sense of dignity, confidence and self-esteem for what and who you are; developing mutual respect.

Voice: Being able to articulate what you need, to participate and be listened to.

Self-Determination: Having access to, and being able to make use of knowledge, skills, support services, material and cultural resources to enhance the capacity to take action to improve your own and others’ circumstances and opportunities.

Inclusive Recognition: Feeling included, having a sense of belonging, having moral worth as a parent, a member of the community and as a member of a social group such as mother, father, lone parent, disabled parent or member of a minority ethnic or religious group.

Research evidence has shown also the importance of the role played by self-help and mutual support in generating parental empowerment. Self-help describes a wide range of activities, including: informal self-care, like household cooking and repairs; the direct exchange of help between people known to each other, like baby-sitting between families and friends; mutual support, where groups share an interest or adversity, and; the more organised forms of community self-help and volunteering.

Aims of the Study

This research study investigated how far the activities, practices and ethos of SSLPs created the conditions which encouraged and sustained the key features of parental empowerment and fostered the well-being of parents and children. In doing so it focussed on the opportunities created for self-help, mutual support and collective action and asked questions including:

• what kinds of parental involvement and self-help activities exist in SSLPs?
• what kind of self help do parents set-up for themselves; what needs does it address?
• how have these activities developed in the SSLP?
• how are they organised?
• what do parents’ think of the role of professional services and staff in the development of empowerment?
• how have parents and their children benefited?
• who is involved in collective self-help? What are the barriers to taking part?
• what encourages participation in activities, what activities should be provided and what encourages marginalised groups to join in?
• what does organised collective activity tell us about what parents want?

In each area the researchers interviewed:
• parents involved in SSLP activities with a significant degree of mutual support, like parent-led groups or volunteering;
• parents involved with management or consultative structures of the Programme;
• parents involved in the organisation of other community support self-help groups;
• parents who use Sure Start services but were not involved in any self-help activities.

Methodology

Information was collected from six SSLP areas, selected by reviewing the research data on local programmes collected by the Local Context Analysis and Implementation modules of NESS. In-depth interviews were carried out with parents (81), staff (41) and others active in community development, community groups and organisations. Researchers also examined SSLP documents and observed programme activities as part of their investigations.

The six programmes were led by different agencies - local authority Early Years departments, Primary Care Trusts, a major national voluntary organisation and a Social Services department among them. All represented fairly typical areas for the Sure Start intervention. For example, one area was a large-post-war outer city housing estate, with a white working class population, high unemployment, high rates of lone parenthood, with a poor local reputation but some history of youth work and local early years activities. A further example included a densely populated inner-city area of a former textile town, with British Asian families, mainly Pakistani and Bangladeshi in origin, and diverse minority groups, poor housing, drug-related crime, high Asian self-employment, poor child health, five main languages and community centres but little provision for childcare or support for parents. The other four areas represented similar features but to differing degrees.

Findings

The study has been able to gain further understanding about the Aspects of Empowerment for Parents, Groups and Communities. It also shows How Parents are Empowered and what local programmes can do to Enable Empowerment to Happen.

Aspects of Empowerment for Parents, Groups and Communities

The empowerment of individuals can take four different but linked routes:

Getting By - coping from day-to-day, leading to gains in confidence.
Getting Better - at parenting, partnering, sociability and skills, leading to confidence, warmer relationships and respect.
Getting On - finding paid work, children happy and doing well, leading to aspirations being realised, ability to make choices.
Getting Out - leaving the area/community - realising aspirations, becoming self-determining.
In the same way, the empowerment of groups and communities can take a progressive path:

Getting Together - sharing support within friends and family leading to increased self-esteem, expanding networks.
Getting Involved - getting and sharing/receiving more varied support, leading to new skills, meeting new people, confidence.
Getting Organised - in actions which support the community – gaining in expertise and recognition.

How Parents Are Empowered

The following types of experience have helped parents become empowered. As a result they have embarked on the process of ‘Getting By’ described above, or their empowerment may fit elsewhere on the ladder.

- **Through enhancing self confidence and basic skills**

This could be achieved by reassuring parents that they were doing well in their parenting or by enabling them to learn new skills. For example, reading and writing, child care, cooking, by being a representative on a management board or becoming a Sure Start worker.

- **Through contact with other families and through friendships**

Drop-ins, support groups and other settings enabled parents to meet, share experiences and to listen to one another in confidence. Often relationships in these settings were easier to make because there was a subject of common interest (parenting skills, for example) and a worker to make sure that nobody felt excluded.

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**Contact with Others and Friendships**

Making friends with other mothers and fathers in the area with children of similar ages was important to parents for different reasons.

**Combating isolation:**
“When I look back, when I used to go to college I had loads of friends and I really enjoyed it but I didn’t have children. When I had children I stopped going. I was back at home again, and I felt on my own again. When I started coming to these groups, I made loads of friends, you know, it’s just a good way because the children have things to do and it meant I could go out and make friends and it just gave me my confidence back.” (Mother)

**Keeping sane:**
“It’s helped me be a bit more sane, a bit more myself, plus seeing other parents, it gives you ideas on what to do, you swap stories don’t you?” (Mother)

**Mutual support:**
“If we’re down a bit we can ring each other up, or go round to each other’s houses, babysitting, just simple little things that some people take for granted.” (Mother)

**Sharing knowledge, problems and experiences as parents:**
“It is nice to talk to other mum’s and find out what routine they found best for their baby. Because I was taking her up to bed ten minutes before I went to bed, and they were like I took my baby up from this time and they were fine. And you think, will it work for my baby? So then I took her two hours before I went to bed and got some time to ourselves.” (Mother, volunteer)
• Through participating in peer support and volunteering in Sure Start services

It is not a big step from the kinds of friendships and relationships which emerged from Sure Start activities to participation in more structured activities designed to enable parents to help one another in a sustained way. SSLPs offered training, support and resources, like equipment and administration and the services of a practitioner to help parents to such structures. The following example is typical of the approach, started in this case by a Sure Start practitioner. Activities might also be started by parents themselves, or by non-Sure Start practitioners.

• Through becoming active in effecting change in the local area

The Sure Start approach required SSLPs to include parents in programme-planning and decision-making, and to support parents to do so. This and other experiences which increased their confidence meant that parents could become involved in activities which tackled aspects of their community that were troubling themselves and others. The involvement in community activism was empowering in itself, giving parents a sense that they could be effective and work with others to make changes. In the account below a parent describes how she became an activist.

The importance of support outside of ‘family’:
“Sometimes my family have their own problems, and there’s some things that you don’t feel like talking to them about, well I don’t want to get… I don’t want to get my parents upset and…. I kept everything in and I was getting really…. but then when you hear other people and you think you’re not alone, other people have got those problems as well.” (Mother, parent staff member)

Peer Support for Breastfeeding Mothers

The scheme was developed by a midwife, who recruited peer supporters from mothers in the area who had successfully breast fed for three months. The peer counsellors attended antenatal care sessions given by health practitioners and a 12 session La Lèche training programme. The SSLP produced written materials in five local languages, included culturally sensitive advice for use during home visits and provided continued support to the peer counsellors. Besides undertaking the training, the parents gave support to friends, family members and people referred to them, maintained records of contacts and sessions, attended monthly support meetings, antenatal groups and sessions at a baby café. In this example, peer supporters were in contact with mothers who had not stayed in contact with services in the past, and, in an area with residents of mainly Pakistani heritage, they could be better at communicating with other women.
encouraged parents to articulate their own needs and to define their own problems.

Respect and reciprocity were particularly important values for service providers to demonstrate because these could be a positive influence on parents’ relationships with each other and with their children. A supportive environment also made it easier to develop respectful discussion when parents had competing needs or conflicting priorities.

• By the programme ethos
SSLPs with a commitment to empowering parents had a robust programme ethos which combined an emphasis on personal and community development, community responsiveness, inclusion and involvement. This was reflected in the priorities and actions of staff, the dialogues between staff and parents and between staff working in different aspects of the programme, including management, team leaders and the front-line. The vision in these programmes, led by the manager or management team, was about: different ways of delivering services; transforming the user/provider relationship; having a holistic and preventative approach to problems and problem-solving; an interdisciplinary approach to professional expertise, and; a constructive approach to parents and communities.

How SSLPs enabled Empowerment to Happen

There was evidence that SSLPs were helping all these aspects of empowerment.

• By the style of service delivery
SSLPs could enhance the confidence of parents by offering services in welcoming, friendly, informal, facilitative and respectful ways. This meant supporting families without judging them and valuing the knowledge and experience of parents by having a respect for, and an interest in, their ethnic and cultural identities. These programmes
By the nature of the services provided
Empowering services were flexible, in order to be as easy to use as possible. Where families were not using services for practical reasons - timing, transport, venue, speed of response, language - SSLPs empowered families by dealing with these difficulties. They made services accessible by:

- providing services and activities at a number of local sites.
- providing a transport service for those with mobility constraints.
- taking services to people through home based service delivery.
- regular outreach to inform parents of services and opportunities.
- telephone contact with parents to inform them of new opportunities and services.
- delivering information, such as a newsletters and leaflets to every household.
- providing all services free or at low cost.
- translating information orally or as texts into minority languages.
- offering a parent befriending service.

Outreach services were particularly significant in helping families to use what SSLPs had to offer. “You have to go out to them. You have to meet them where they are at, to empower them you need to meet them, in their houses.” (Outreach Worker)

Other services which provide a platform for empowerment were:

- Training for Parents: opportunities ranged from general courses and workshops on team-working, improving confidence and public presentation, to specific courses such as football coaching or sports leadership.
- Information: staff helped by passing on information about training opportunities and funding local projects.
- Opportunities: both to participate in SSLP management, but also to shadow SSLP staff, volunteer on programme services and to be employed by the SSLP, often as family support workers.
- Personal Development and Progression: in one SSLP, which had a volunteer scheme with a coordinator, meetings with individual volunteers and group events were designed to enable people to discuss their personal interests and aspirations for development. These resulted in

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2 See NESS Report No (2004) Improving the Employability of Parents, for more on this
the development of training and activities in response to needs expressed by parents.

- **By enabling parents to volunteer**
  All programmes in this study involved parents as volunteers both in direct service delivery and in befriending and peer support. Most had staff with specific responsibility for recruiting, coordinating, training and supporting volunteers; some had staff for which this was the sole responsibility.

The aims of volunteering varied, they included: enhancing the employability of parents, assisting in the delivery of SSLP services, personal development of individuals, supporting families and helping the community. As parents became more involved in SSLPs, they could become key figures, representing Sure Start to other parents, encouraging them to participate and acting as mediators for parenting advice. A mother in one programme described how she did this: “...I say to anybody, go on the parenting course, if they’re having trouble with their children, try the parenting course because it does help. I tend to tell people a lot about accessing stuff, friends, people that I know, people that I come into contact with, accessing different organisations, services, anything like that – it tends to be word of mouth a lot of the time.” (Volunteer mother)

Examples of volunteering which enhanced employability included parents:

- supporting staff by interpreting for them
- making home-visits to assess a family’s need for support
- working in community cafes
- assisting in an after-school club (In this example Sure Start volunteers worked under the club leader to help children prepare food)
- organising and working on a community allotment, and
- befriending new parents

Where the main aim of the volunteering was personal development volunteer coordinators worked closely with individual volunteers. Elements in individual plans could include confidence-raising, team-working, basic Maths and English and time-management.

Volunteering activities in the community were defined less by Sure Start services and tended to be activities which the volunteers themselves felt were needed by the community.

“We have organised picnics in the park and got football matches going in the local park. You know, we have just knocked on people’s doors, told them about it, used some of the fundraising money and organised a big event on the park in the summer. It gets people out, gets people enjoying themselves. We just organise them and then people can come along.” (Parent Volunteer)

As part of their aim to empower families, SSLPs responded with support when parents came to them for ideas for activities that they wanted to organise themselves.
By giving support to community involvement by families
Some SSLPs helped parents to act together on matters that concerned them beyond the immediate issue of raising their children. For example, in one area the programme was helping parents to develop a business plan to buy a vacant property as a base for skills training, in another support was offered to parents fighting the proposed closure of a local school.

SSLPs that had been successful in promoting community involvement had done so by:

- developing a systematic approach to getting to know the community, its people and other resources;
- understanding what people valued, as well as what they disliked about their community;
- increasing the personal confidence of individuals by listening and respecting them and their views of their communities, and encouraging them to work together at group and community level;
- developing listening and community development skills and local knowledge within multi-agency teams;
- being prepared to learn from parents;
- being informal, open and non-judgmental in their approach to parents;
- representing the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the community.

Impact of Empowerment
SSLPS which have given a high priority to empowerment can be linked to outcomes for children at 9 months, where they are likely to produce positive affects on maternal acceptance, and at 36-months, where they are likely to produce improvements in the home learning environment. Further details of these positive results can be found in NESS reports.³

Besides these national evaluation findings, SSLPs themselves reported that self-help, volunteer activity and community involvement had brought benefits to children, parents and communities.

For Children
Empowered parents provide children with good role models. Parents have often developed skills for future employment and thus provide the children with a better future. Parents whose confidence has improved have better relationships with their children.

³ Particularly Variation in Sure Start Local Programme Effectiveness: Early Preliminary Findings NESS Report 014, 2005
For Parents
Empowered parents feel confident. They have been able to share experience, skills and knowledge with one another. They have made relationships with others and are far less isolated. Some have become able to take an active role in collective action and self-help activities for the benefit of the local community, which has enhanced their status, their social networks and given them a sense of achievement.

For Programmes
An empowering approach has made services more in tune with parents’ needs and cultures. Practitioners themselves have become more confident and feel they are delivering more sensitive services because they have learned from parents, both through listening and working alongside one another.

For Communities
Supporting local community activities, and parents to participate in them, at times has meant SSLPs have been working beyond the targets of the programme. Some activities required careful negotiation to prevent existing groups from feeling they were being ‘taken over’ by Sure Start. But the outward looking approach has helped to develop a new generation of participating citizens. It has opened opportunities for parents to widen and sustain their involvement as their children grow. It has also led to some visible improvements in neighbourhood facilities.

Conclusions
The broad approach to empowering parents taken by many SSLPs has provided a wide range of benefits. But it requires a commitment to new ways of working for many practitioners and professionals, who need training in community development skills and support for the changes this will demand of them.

It can be difficult for programmes to sustain empowering approaches when key parents and staff move on (and empowered parents may move out of a community, of course) but a sensitive programme will review local needs and adjust priorities according to the human and material resources available. A particular success of Sure Start has been its multiplier effect. That is to say, the messages that parents absorb, they pass on to other parents. This means that a robust empowering ethos influences parents’ relationships, with one another, with their children and families, as well as the community at large.

One of the important assets of Sure Start has been the universal appeal of its central idea - promoting the well-being of children. Programmes which reach parents and are able to involve them, will continue to be able to build on this universal aspiration and get people together to achieve it.