

Getting Sure Start Started

By Mog Ball, National Evaluation of Sure Start, Implementation Team

Sure Start is a cornerstone of the Government's drive to tackle child poverty and social exclusion. It aims to improve the health and well being of families and young children under 4, particularly those who are disadvantaged, so that children have greater opportunity to flourish when they go to school. This study describes the development of the Sure Start programme at the national level as well as the experiences of those involved in setting up a local Sure Start programme.

Key Findings

- The nature of relationships on the Sure Start partnership, between partner members from statutory and voluntary agencies and between professionals and practitioners and parents, was the most significant factor in setting up a local programme
- Sure Start catchment areas emerged early in the planning stage. Local people were usually involved only after this decision was made by professionals
- Consultation has been most effective in areas where there is some existing infrastructure for community consultation
- Parents had been involved in the appointment of programme managers and other staff
- The programme manager is a pivotal role in a local Sure Start programme and requires a broad range of skills – these are more likely to be managerial and planning skills rather than experience of early years work
- Building or refurbishing suitable buildings has taken longer than anticipated in many areas. This has meant that some programmes do not have sufficient bases from which to deliver services, or that the bases that exist are less than ideal
- Finding suitably-skilled staff, changing existing working practices, consulting and involving parents, bringing partners together, working in partnership and collecting all the information required for the final plan, were the most challenging issues in developing and setting up a Sure Start programme
- Programme managers felt the flexibility of Sure Start was a key element in the successful delivery of the programme after approval of the final delivery plan

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Background

Sure Start is delivered through community based local programmes containing on average between 400 to 800 children under 4. The first 260 programmes have been rolled out in stages – each 'round' has approximately 60-70 programmes.

A comprehensive national evaluation will assess the impact, implementation and cost effectiveness of Sure Start. The Implementation study will analyse how Sure Start has been set up and delivered, what services are provided and how these are organised locally. It will also look at how far Sure Start has re-shaped or added value to existing service provision. The findings presented here form part of the Implementation module of the evaluation.

Aims of the study

The aim of this study is to describe the origins of Sure Start and to investigate the experiences of those working in local areas, from planning their Sure Start programme to actually delivering services. This study compliments the report on *'Early Experiences of Implementing Sure Start'*, which reports the findings from a survey of round 1 and 2 programme managers¹.

Methods

Information was collected from October 2001 to February 2002 from 12 local Sure Start programmes, with additional material gathered from a further 10 programmes. Information was gleaned from documents and interviews with officials in the Sure Start Unit and Sure Start Unit Advisors, practitioners and managers of partner agencies, local Sure Start programme staff, parents and other members of the community.

Main findings

A number of key themes emerged from the study, around which this summary is organised. They include, the nature of Sure Start partnerships; the process of choosing the Sure Start area; engaging and consulting parents; the role and responsibilities of programme managers; and turning the plan into action.

Sure Start partnerships

Local areas are required to form a partnership of statutory and voluntary agencies, parents and other members of the community to plan and manage the Sure Start programme.

As the partnership got underway and began planning the programme, smaller groups were usually formed from the main partnership board to take forward particular aspects of the plan. Smaller partnerships tended to recruit or co-opt partnership members for this purpose. These working groups commonly reflected the five core Sure Start services, but there were many other issues such as buildings, play areas, staffing, finance, transport or the needs of minority groups that had their own working groups.

Some partnerships decided to establish a group for parents only, at which they would receive training and support in participating in meetings. Often parent representatives would be elected from this group to the partnership board. In such a partnership where this process occurred, a respondent felt that parents should have contributed to the partnership earlier in the process;

"I don't think parents were equal to it until their own network was formed...so we ended up getting input from parents rather too late in the process, and when we did invite them to contribute there was a good deal of tension in the atmosphere."

Most partnerships did include local parents. The average number of parents on the partnership board was two, but in some cases, parents formed the majority of partnership members. Where the number of parents on the partnership was small, parents could feel isolated. They could be prevented from contributing to partnership business for a variety of reasons including:

- the use of jargon and acronyms between professional staff, which could be unwittingly excluding to parents
- bureaucracy - partnerships quickly generated many documents
- a sense that professional (statutory and voluntary) agencies had already decided how Sure Start funding would be spent
- community divisions, which meant that some parents excluded themselves.

¹The report from the national survey entitled 'Early Experiences of Implementing Sure Start' and a summary of findings can be obtained from DfES Publications (contact details on last page) quote ref; NESS/SF/01 for summary; quote ref NESS/FR/ 01 for full report.

Partnerships did not choose lead partners by any formal process. It was often the case that the agency that had the most capacity to take on this demanding role, did so;

“The Lead Partner was chosen because it had the personnel and time to do the Delivery Plan and cope with the extra work.”
(Partnership member, round 2 programme).

The staff that actually took on the role of writing the plan were not usually involved in delivering services directly to children and families, rather, they were more likely to have experience of planning and writing similar plans, and have skills in information management or service planning. Sometimes a more appropriate agency was asked by the partnership to take on the role of lead partner, often a voluntary organisation.

Participation in partnerships was a burden for all agencies, taking more time and requiring more effort than was anticipated at the outset. The demands were especially difficult to meet for small voluntary organisations, particularly where such organisations had few paid staff. Although the Sure Start Unit made funding available to support the planning process, small voluntary organisations were often severely over-stretched by the process.

Partnerships could be dominated by one member, usually the lead partner, which had considerable power to dictate the contents of a programme. For example, in one area, a parent who was a member of the partnership reported;

“The most difficult part of the planning process was knowing that no matter what was said, the agenda was already written. A small group on the partnership had made all the decisions.”

In the first two rounds of Sure Start programmes, statutory agencies were sometimes represented on the partnership by senior or middle managers. The involvement of staff from higher levels was slightly more likely among trailblazer and round 2 programmes, than later programmes. In all rounds however, agencies were usually represented by local practitioners.

Statutory agencies did not always supply partnerships with the information for example, baseline data, or other support they needed. Sometimes information was not readily available, sometimes senior officers had not instructed staff to cooperate with the Sure Start partnership.

The nature of relationships on the partnership was the most significant factor in setting up a local programme. Where

statutory and voluntary agencies were able to put aside their own interests and respond to the views of local people, partnerships worked well. Relationships on partnerships tended to settle once the planning process was over. Statutory partners became more responsive to the results of consultation with families. However, both statutory and voluntary sector partners often experienced conflicts of interest. Members of partnerships were expected to put the interests of their own organisation aside in the interests of children and families in the Sure Start area. But partnerships often commissioned services from other partnership members. The dilemma is summed up by the Chair of a local voluntary organisation in one area, who said

“I went to meetings for a while but (another voluntary organisation) had its foot in the door and it looked as though they were going to get the funding. It didn’t really seem worth the effort, really.”

Partnerships felt that the planning process could have been made easier if the role and remit of the partnership and the responsibilities of members was clearer. Partnerships expressed the need for more detailed guidance on the legal status and functions of a Sure Start partnership.

Programme areas

Sure Start areas tended to emerge early in the planning stage and were not chosen through any single process. They were often chosen prior to the formation of the Sure Start partnership;

“A sub-group of the EYDCP dealt with Sure Start at first, and decided on the area and the lead partner... (the area) was chosen because it scored high on the index of deprivation and is a distinct area of the borough”
(Partnership member, round 2 programme).

Other partnerships had several areas in mind and invited all local organisations working with children to a meeting to discuss and choose the most suitable area for the Sure Start programme.

Local families were usually involved only after the choice of the area had been made by professionals

“At that stage there was no consultation with local people – we didn’t want to raise false expectations.”
(Member of local partnership).

Partnership members explained that since the criteria for choosing areas was the level of deprivation, there was

some delicacy about involving parents in the discussion - they felt sensitive about labelling people because they lived in a disadvantaged area.

The programme areas chosen were generally suitable for the development and delivery of Sure Start services, although some do not “make sense to local people” (as suggested in Sure Start guidance), but had been chosen to include the maximum number of 0-3 year olds. There is concern that needy areas adjacent to Sure Start areas had been left out because there were too many children. However, it is recognised by partnerships that families from outside the chosen area may come into them to use the enhanced services.

Consultation with families

The requirement to consult with parents and the local community was observed in all areas, and while partnerships recognised the importance of doing this, there were challenges in consultation. These included the time and expertise needed to carry out effective consultation, ensuring a sufficient proportion of parents were consulted (and involving all groups of parents) and making the link between consultation and the participation of parents on the partnership board or planning groups.

Consultation has been most effective in areas where statutory agencies have a history of surrendering powers to local people, and especially where there is some existing infrastructure for community consultation. There was evidence however, that programmes in rounds 3 and 4 had learned about consultation methods from the experience of earlier rounds and were quicker to raise awareness of their programmes through community events that included entertainment and publicity.

Some programmes have found engaging parents more difficult than others **“A rural community has particular difficulty in involving parents.” (Partnership member).** In this instance, transport is a key issue and bringing families together at one venue was felt to be quite challenging, requiring a great deal of planning.

Most programmes had not employed outside organisations to conduct consultation exercises on their behalf. However, in one partnership that had done this, they felt that it had not been good value for money, as the consultants were unfamiliar with the area and the survey did not deliver new knowledge.

Once consultation events had engaged enough interested parents, partnerships tended to develop a separate forum for parents to contribute to the design and implementation of the Sure Start plan. In some areas there were plans for a

formal system of election of a representative from this body to the partnership / management board. In others, the parents ‘nominate’ their representatives. In a quarter of the programmes examined, a parent went on to Chair the partnership and in the majority of programmes, parents had been involved in the appointment of managers and other staff.

Where programmes have appointed workers to support parents and continue the consultation process, consultation has become more effective and was allowing for better insight into how services were received and were working.

Sure Start programme managers

The early appointment of a programme manager made it easier to complete the delivery plan and to marry the consultation and planning processes.

Project planning, management and development experience are important skills for Sure Start programme managers and may matter more than experience of work with children and families. However, the pool of people with the skills to manage complex local initiatives such as Sure Start is small (and growing smaller).

Partnerships found that different skills were necessary for writing the delivery plan and actually implementing it. One programme manager, recruited from the voluntary sector felt that it was an advantage to approach the area ‘untainted’ by the process of forming the partnership and writing the delivery plan. But she felt that her job would have been easier if she had been involved earlier in the planning process.

Some Sure Start managers have found themselves sandwiched between the partnership and the community.

“It is very difficult to come into an area and to have this role of guiding everyone without a background in every professional area. You are between everybody – the members of the partnership, the partnership and the parents, different groups of parents. Sometimes you wonder where your authority is coming from.” (Sure Start manager)

Programme managers welcomed the flexibility that Sure Start allowed, particularly in reshaping plans once implementation had begun, or further consultation had happened, but in particular, where the programme manager had not been involved in writing the plan;

“The plan changed significantly once I came into post... Staffing levels changed...we needed to resource

infrastructure, so we employed core staff we hadn't originally looked at...some things hadn't been thought through in detail, we had to do that"
(Programme manager, round 2 programme).

The lack of clarity about the position of the programme manager can cause difficulties in that they serve the partnership and also develop and deliver the programme, in accordance with the results of consultation with the community. These requirements have led to contradictory demands for some programme managers – particularly where one individual dominates the partnership. In the longer-established programmes links have been made between programme managers, and many have found support within partnerships. In some programmes, a good deal of trust and commitment is placed in the programme manager by the partnership than would be usual for a statutory employee on these salary bands, to experience. Where this trust is not forthcoming, programme managers can feel frustrated.

From plan to fully functioning programme

Local programmes have found that it has taken longer to start up a complete Sure Start programme, that is, offering all planned services, than was expected. This was exacerbated in some areas as plans for capital spending have taken longer than planned, resulting in many programmes having insufficient or inappropriate bases from which to deliver services.

Many delivery plans were over-optimistic, particularly regarding the kind of premises that might be used. Several programmes planned to use shop-front premises and found that these were not easy to buy, rent or convert. Some programmes had embarked on consultation and development before discovering problems with premises, further delaying progress. Even more complex issues have arisen where buildings were to be developed in partnership with other initiatives, like SRB (Single Regeneration Budget). Consultation with different groups in the community can mean conflicting preferences.

There have also been difficulties in collecting data for final plans. This was partly due to the nature of the information required, but in some areas statutory agencies were not helpful, even though represented on the Sure Start partnership.

Even where the partnership was well-balanced, with members understanding that the needs of their own agency or organisation had to take second place to those of families in the area, and where consultation with families became well-established quickly,

there could be unforeseen obstacles and difficulties. These include finding suitably-skilled staff, persuading existing practitioners to change working styles or practices and incorporating existing services into the Sure Start programme.

Recruitment difficulties have hampered more than half of the programmes studied. Some partners have complained that Sure Start has 'poached' trained staff, and in some programmes it has not been possible to make appointments, particularly speech and language specialists, midwives and health visitors. Where this has happened, planned services have been re-visited and different approaches designed, but this results in a time lag in the introduction of services, and the time lag can have an impact on community commitment.

"Demands for specific skills are high; there aren't enough skilled people to go round – and we couldn't recruit people because there were no buildings to put them in."
(Member of partnership, round 2 programme).

Some services were easier to get going than others and these were often based on existing provision such as drop-in centres and libraries. However, even though partnerships could get these services operational quickly (which is often necessary to sustain parent's interest), they were reluctant to do so without parents' involvement, as they felt parents should feel ownership of the programme. But parental interest and involvement meant that extra time was needed to set up the services.

All programmes experienced longer than anticipated delays in establishing their programme. Partnership working and the need to consult with the community, added time to every development. Although extremely important, community consultation could become unbalanced, with discussions about small details taking too much time;

"It is a lot of extra anxiety, getting all of the parties to agree that all the points in the Plan are all right, are what they all want. That's very time-consuming."

The transition of staff from many different backgrounds into Sure Start had been more complex than expected, taking longer to prepare staff for team-working.

There are anxieties in some programmes over the need to monitor development and performance and to feed back information on progress to the Sure Start Unit. The delay in start-up, which could mean that milestones and targets will be missed, has added to anxieties. This may account for complaints about increased demands from the Sure Start Unit.

The Chair of a partnership said, ***“Sure Start is a good thing but in danger of being ruined because the Sure Start Unit want too many details from us.”***

However, there is recognition among Sure Start programmes from all rounds that they, and the Sure Start Unit, are learning as they go along: ***“The Sure Start Unit is going through a learning process itself. It was refreshing: this was not a competition and the Unit helped us and were supportive. It felt as though we were doing it together.”*** (Sure Start manager)

Conclusions

Setting up a local Sure Start programme is challenging and often difficult.

The most significant factor in the successful implementation of a local Sure Start programme is the nature of the partnership. Progress was more marked in those areas where members have been prepared to contribute materially to the design and development of a programme. In addition, where partners have put the interests and needs of families in the area before the interests of their own agency or organisation, and listened and responded to parent’s views, has also been a key determinant for a successful partnership. But even in such ‘best case’ situations, unforeseen ‘events’ and obstacles have arisen. Despite clear guidance and support from the Sure Start Unit that is generally recognised as helpful by local programmes, (though with some overload of bureaucratic demands), and flexibility of resourcing, the establishment of fully functioning Sure Start programmes has been more time-consuming and difficult than partnerships had initially expected.

Further information

Further copies of this summary are available from:

DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham, NG15 0DJ
(Tel. 0845 6022260 or E-mail: dfes@prolog.uk.com)

Quote reference NESS/SF/02

Copies of the full report of *‘Getting Sure Start Started’*, are available from the above address (quote reference NESS/FR/ 02) or from the Sure Start website www.surestart.gov.uk

Further information about the National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) can be found at www.ness.bbk.ac.uk

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