

Buildings in Sure Start Local Programmes

By Mog Ball and Lisa Niven¹

Introduction

Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLPs) support children under 4 and their families by integrating early education, childcare, health services and family support in disadvantaged areas.

Each SSLP received funding to develop suitable buildings to deliver their services, and this study looks at how buildings have been planned, designed and built and are being used in SSLP communities.

Key findings

- ▶ In a relatively short period of time, SSLPs have built or redeveloped a significant number of buildings in their communities. By late 2004 in the first 260 SSLPS, 215 new buildings had been built and a further 420 buildings had been converted.
- ▶ Sure Start buildings have successfully avoided the stigma which can be attached to other public service premises by developing familiar, easily accessible buildings where parents feel they can relax. However some new buildings are considered too 'clinical' by significant numbers of parents.
- ▶ Centrally situated, conspicuous buildings have enhanced the local profile of individual SSLPs and can increase a programme's visibility and the numbers of families which use it.
- ▶ Many SSLPs share buildings with other agencies. This brings benefits – larger buildings, with more going on in them and more inter-agency working – but can also cause difficulties. Sharing a single building has proved easier for SSLPs when they are the dominant partner in financing and managing the building and where the other agencies also work with children, ideally not much older than the Sure Start age of under 4.
- ▶ Being consulted about the design and appearance of buildings increases a sense of ownership among users, but being consulted and ignored or over-ruled is disappointing and alienating.
- ▶ Neither Sure Start Partnerships nor Programme Managers were experienced in planning or project-managing building development. Support was available from the Sure Start Unit, centrally and regionally, but many managers needed more. Some specific preparatory training would have been useful to them.
- ▶ Often buildings took much longer to complete than planned, and in the areas where this happened service delivery was affected.
- ▶ The single factor that enabled building projects to be completed quickly and efficiently was the backing of a strong Partnership – particularly the willingness of the statutory partners to facilitate the wishes of local people.

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Background

Sure Start Local Programmes are community based and deliver services to, on average, 400 and 800 young children under 4. The National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) is assessing the impact, implementation, community characteristics and cost effectiveness of the first 260 programmes, which have been rolled out in four stages.

The Implementation module of NESS has been looking at the way services are provided by SSLPs, how these are organised locally and how far existing services have been reshaped by Sure Start. This study is one of a series looking at themes of particular interest in the delivery of services.

Each SSLP received a minimum of £750,000 capital funding. By far the biggest demand on these funds has been the provision of buildings. They are needed as bases for services that will be changed and expanded, to become more accessible and flexible and to be delivered in new ways.

Aims of the Study

The study aimed to provide an overview of the buildings, extensions conversions and other settings developed by SSLPs, including the numbers and types of buildings created, the combinations of building used, the significance of buildings to service delivery, their impact on children, families and neighbourhoods, and their affects on the relationships between practitioners and users. It also investigated the experience of SSLPs as they developed their buildings.

In particular the study looked at practice which was working and had overcome the difficulties inevitable in the development of capital projects by people who were often new to commissioning and overseeing them.

Methodology

The research study had three elements.

- Information from the National Survey² and from case studies³ was combined with an examination of documents on capital plans and data from the Sure Start Unit to provide a catalogue of the buildings being used by SSLPs in Rounds 1 to 4.
- A telephone survey of programme managers in 60 SSLPs, randomly selected from each region in proportion to the numbers of SSLPs in that region, collected additional information including the appearance of buildings, use, development, sharing premises, history, community involvement and evaluation. Photographs and publicity about buildings was also included.
- From the information collected at the first two stages of the research, a number of approaches to building development were identified. A series of visits was made to 15 SSLPs that illustrated these approaches, regionally distributed. Interviews were conducted with programme management, always including the SSLP manager and sometimes members of the Partnership; with other staff including practitioners and administrative staff; programme users (usually parents but sometimes grandparents and friends); and, where applicable, users and practitioners from services other than Sure Start that shared the building. Observations were carried out of the interior and exterior of buildings, and the behaviour of those within them, especially of children and parents.

²A survey of programme managers was administered to Round 1-2 SSLPs in 2001, 2002 and 2003 and to Round 3-4 programmes in 2002 and 2003.

³In depth case study analysis of 20 representative SSLPs during 2002-2004.

The researchers were supported by an Advisory Group which included building specialists and an architect.

Findings

Numbers and Types of Buildings

On average each SSLP uses 9.2 buildings, with some delivering services from as many as 18 places. 84% of SSLPs have undertaken at least one major construction project. Almost all programmes have converted at least one building and 64% of SSLPs have both built and converted premises. By the end of 2004 at least 215 new buildings had been built by these 260 SSLPs, and 420 buildings had been converted.

The most common new construction is usually a 'Sure Start Centre', containing offices for Sure Start management and administration as well as facilities for services. Centres have also been created by converting premises, including schools, family centres and health clinics, to Sure Start use. In a Centre, all the activities are clearly associated with the Sure Start programme. Almost all SSLPs were working on more than one building conversion, and in urban programmes, where land is at a premium, this was sometimes the only option. In London, new buildings have often been on sites owned by local authorities, who have donated the land to the programme. Converted buildings are sometimes already landmarks, like the Victorian swimming baths used in one area, so are known by families already. Many SSLPs also use domestic buildings, like local houses or flats.

Conversion of a domestic building

A derelict end of terrace bungalow, owned by a local authority, was renovated at a cost of £12,000 from the SSLP and £5000 from the local authority, and now has: a children's playroom, a small interview/training room; toilets for children and adults, a kitchen, an office and a garden. It is used for behaviour support groups, counselling sessions and meetings. Some of the refurbishment was carried out by local parents.

Patterns of Building Distribution

The most common pattern is for there to be one or two Sure Start buildings in an area, new or converted, which house staff and deliver services including daycare, and a series of satellite venues offering services close to families' homes – like the bungalow described above. In SSLPs which cover a group of distinct smaller communities, there may be a Sure Start building in each. There are also SSLPs with no Centre, which use a range of existing community buildings in the area. Such programmes have a strong community development ethos and have decided to deliver services as closely as possible to families. For the same reason it is common for SSLPs which cover larger geographic areas to use mobile means of service delivery as well as buildings, often a Sure Start bus.

Sharing Buildings with Other Agencies

Over 58% of buildings which have had Sure Start investment are shared with other agencies, which may also have invested in them, or be sharing them under reciprocal arrangements. Premises are most likely to be shared with statutory agencies, or with voluntary organisations and nurseries run by statutory, voluntary and private sector partners. Almost 13% are shared with schools.

Good Practice in Sharing with a School

The head teacher of a two-form entry primary school, the manager of an SSLP and a local authority architect worked together from the outset on an extension to the school. They shared a vision of an integrated building which would not look extended either inside or out. The community wanted separate entrances for the school and for the early years provision. Many facilities are used in common, including the school hall, an IT room, outside play areas and a medical room. The Sure Start part of the building has its own reception which gives a view into a community café. The school now has space for breakfast and after-school clubs. The close liaison at the beginning of the planning process has been central to making this shared building work.

Sharing buildings offers advantages both economically and in terms of interagency collaboration. Sharing works best when all the agencies are working with children and there is potential for overlap between the services offered. It enables practitioners who are based in the building, or come to it to deliver services, to communicate with one another easily, quickly and informally and it gives users the feeling that services are coherent and 'joined-up', and inspires confidence in them.

The External Appearance of Buildings

Some Sure Start centres are prominent and visible in the community, and these raise the profile of the programme, and can increase the numbers of parents who use the building and its services. However, there is also an important role for inconspicuous, very local buildings which parents felt belonged to them and which they were comfortable using. A minority of programmes reported that they had constructed environmentally-friendly buildings, although limited measures, like low-energy features in conventional

buildings, were more common. Parents are attracted to buildings which clearly signal the association with young children through design features or decoration: murals, out-door play equipment, child-friendly garden furniture for example.

Good Practice in Sustainable Construction

A Sure Start building will open onto a park. The SSLP manager says *"The emphasis in our new building is sustainability. There will be lots of re-used material in it. The bricks from the building that has been demolished on the site will be used for the surrounding wall. There'll be a giant sandpit in the middle, open to the air. There is no car-parking, but space for bikes outside and buggies inside."*

Visible play areas signal the function of the building and attract families, but can be hard to provide on some city sites. Outdoor play areas which were not attached to buildings also drew attention to Sure Start, though the link with the SSLP was less likely to be made by families.

There had been no attempt in the Guidance from the Sure Start Unit to programmes to prescribe a 'Sure Start style' for buildings, and none has emerged. The majority of extensions have taken their style from the original structure of the building to which they were attached, be it a school, health centre, family centre, community centre or nursery. Some new Sure Start buildings are very striking to look at, but they tend to be striking in different ways, with no sign of a particular Sure Start style emerging.

Both single storey and multiple storey buildings have been used successfully with benefits and disadvantages in both types of design. A second floor gives an opportunity to separate offices from communal spaces so that the ground floor does

not have a bureaucratic 'feel'. But stairs and lifts create their own difficulties.

Security is a significant consideration in buildings that young children use. The requirement to keep them safe can affect the welcoming aspect of buildings and SSLPs have had to strike a balance between protecting children and being open and welcoming. Most have made fencing as discreet as possible and also provided other safeguards, including CCTV cameras.

Good Practice in Identifying Sure Start Buildings

Most SSLPs have mounted large signs on or near their buildings. Sometimes these have been made as part of community arts projects, in conjunction with local youth projects and schools, or with the families and children who use the programme. In one area a community artist worked with children to create coloured footsteps on the pavement showing the way to the building, in another an artist was employed to create a sign in the shape of the tree that stands in the grounds of the Sure Start building. In some cities Sure Start buildings are indicated by public signs of the same type as those which indicate town halls and bus stations, which makes them much easier to find.

Inside Sure Start Buildings

The use of space inside Sure Start buildings is governed by four main functions:

- service delivery – eg meeting rooms to provide space for group sessions and/or smaller 'interview' rooms for one-to-one discussions or counselling;
- administration – ie office space;
- social spaces for parents – eg cafes, lounges, kitchens;
- spaces for children – eg nurseries, crèches, play areas.

Most Sure Start buildings are multi-functional and internal spaces work best if they are integrated, so that activities inhabit the whole building and children, families and staff feel at home while acknowledging each other's territory.

Large numbers of offices, especially with closed doors, are reported by parents as off-putting. On the other hand, the co-location of workers in a Sure Start building can enhance their joined-up working and improve communication. In an area where all staff work out of one building a Sure Start Manager said: *"We've achieved a wonderful level of joined-up working. Relationships between staff are very rich. Everyone gives and gets a great deal from one another. Parents share in this – they have richer relationships with staff themselves. The Sure Start building sends a message that we compliment and enhance one another. The (partner) agencies are not in competition here."*

In some areas staff are spread around several Sure Start buildings so that no one building are dominated by office accommodation. Meeting rooms, as well as offices, are required by staff, and these are often shared with more informal, user-led activities, which change the 'feel' of the building. In some areas the office space is in a separate area and staff can enter or leave without drawing attention to the fact that there is a space not open to families. More commonly, parents are not encouraged to enter offices – but can pop in to say hello or ask questions.

Reception Areas

The importance of the impression on entry to the building was emphasised everywhere. Families respond to the visual impression. They like to be able to see what is going on inside a building before they enter. They don't like having to struggle with difficult doorways, and they dislike high ceilings or too much written information on

display. SSLPs reported that they had removed display boards and replaced them with children's toys, because this made a more attractive welcome for families.

Features of welcoming reception areas included:

- rooms that opened out from entrances so that visitors could orient themselves and see immediately what was on offer in the building;
- a receptionist, who might be a member of the administrative staff with a work station in the reception area, but was someone to welcome visitors;
- relaxation space - this could be a corner with a sofa or a full-scale café;
- attractive use of colour and light - reception areas with light tubes through the roof to allow natural light to illuminate the space;
- good quality toys for children - parents report that one of the reasons they enter Sure Start buildings is because their children like to go there. Soft play areas are particularly attractive. The presence of good quality play equipment near to entrances attracts children and parents.
- meeting and training rooms - multi-functional spaces with some flexibility so that smaller and larger groups can be accommodated.
- smaller, consulting-type rooms - where parents can speak to staff confidentially. SSLPs point out that thought must be given to confidentiality in Sure Start buildings, and that this applies both to what may be seen as well as what may be overheard.
- learning and play rooms for children – often with direct access to outdoor space.
- purpose-built rooms - day nurseries, kitchens, (for teaching nutrition or preparing children's food); laundry and changing rooms.

Specialist spaces incorporated into some Sure Start buildings included:

- toy library rooms (with extensive storage);
- soft play rooms;
- IT training rooms;
- rooms with observation wall or window, used to observe parent-child interaction;
- 'training flats' or spaces to teach health and safety, cookery or nutrition courses.

A friendly reception area is particularly important in Sure Start buildings attached to public service settings like health clinics or schools. It signals that children and families have priority in the space.

Delivering Services

Sure Start buildings provide rooms for delivering services to groups and individuals, parents, children and parents and children together. SSLPS need:

All SSLPs had provided adequate essential spaces, as listed above and many had also provided some or all of the more specialist facilities. Although many SSLPs are pleased with the combination of facilities they have developed in their buildings, almost everybody reports that they wish they had more storage space.

Informal Spaces

SSLPs cater for families who may be living in cramped or poor quality housing, or for parents who feel isolated. An aim of some of their services is to give parents an opportunity to get out of the house with their children and meet other people. All SSLPs offer drop-in and 'stay and play' services where parents can socialise and also have a chance to meet health professionals and other practitioners in an informal way. The majority of Sure Start buildings have spaces where this kind of interaction can occur. These spaces are warm and homely and often have open-access kitchens with basics freely available, where parents can make drinks for themselves and prepare food for their children. Also, many buildings incorporate a community café which is available for other local residents besides those with young children. Many SSLP buildings have achieved a domestic feel with the use of alcoves, intimate corners and comfortable furnishings.

Lessons on Building Design

SSLPs find that buildings reveal problems only once they are in use. The following were commonly reported:

- insufficient storage space;
- inadequate space for staff;
- poor routing through buildings (for example, having to cross a crèche room to reach toilets);
- poor acoustics;
- spaces that are too large or too small for their purpose.

Some things work very well, however. Where internal spaces focus on the needs of children and have incorporated these into the design, some

lively innovation has occurred. The use of texture, shape and colour present opportunities for interaction with children. Where users have been involved in decorating Sure Start buildings, not only choosing colour schemes and furniture but actually painting them, they have developed a sense of commitment to the building.

Lessons on Building Use

No smoking is a universal policy in Sure Start buildings. Most SSLPs find that they do not need to have signs to say so. There were no reports that parents had been put off using the buildings because of the smoking ban. In some areas smoking is allowed in a specified space outside the building, and a shelter may be provided. SSLPs also report that users respect the fabric and furnishing of buildings, and particularly appreciate good quality equipment for children. Most SSLPs have concerns about vandalism occurring to the outside of buildings and play areas, but little was reported. One SSLP noted that of two centres, it was the one with the higher level of security which had been vandalised.

Sure Start buildings which broadcast that they are for children are attractive to families. Parents who use Sure Start buildings say that they do so for their children, so that they can socialise, or have access to play facilities they would not otherwise experience.

How Sure Start Buildings were Developed

Each SSLP was planned by a Partnership made up of practitioners and officials from statutory agencies working in the Sure Start area, parents and other members of the local community. Statutory representatives came from the local authority, particularly Social Services, the local Education Authority and from health Trusts, usually

Primary Care Trusts. Representatives from the voluntary sector came from organisations specialising in work with children and families. Occasionally these representatives had some experience of building development, but this was unusual.

Guidance from the Government's Sure Start Unit on drawing up a plan for the Sure Start Local Programme advised partnerships to assess whether suitable premises were available in the area which parents could reach and use, and to develop a capital investment strategy to support the new services.

Partnerships reported that in the early stages of making their plans they could be 'building-led' because empty premises in Sure Start areas appeared to present an opportunity for the development of a Sure Start building. Redundant schools, health buildings and community buildings were offered to Partnerships, sometimes for free, or at a token cost, provided that Sure Start took on the conversion and subsequent maintenance. After investigation these often proved inappropriate, but Partnerships could be under considerable pressure to use them.

Consulting with the Community

Consulting with parents and local people about the Sure Start Delivery Plan⁴ was mandatory, and many Partnerships found it easiest to involve parents in the plans for buildings, because they represented something concrete, about which people could express an opinion. Where an empty building was already available, consultation could be on site and parents grew excited about the transformations possible with the very considerable Sure Start funding.

Consultation Methods

- Fun-days in as many venues as possible, asking people what they thought of the venue.
- Maps of the Sure Start area, asking parents to show with stickers where they wanted buildings to be.
- Visits to completed Sure Start buildings and to other outstanding community buildings.
- Public meetings addressed by architects.
- Activities led by community arts, drawing on play, dance and other creative expression to explore matters like the use of space and colour.
- 'Planning for Real'[®], exercises, often conducted as part of a wider neighbourhood regeneration consultation, which involve making models of buildings and their surroundings.

The last two methods were considered particularly effective by the areas which used them. Parents' preferences were not always feasible, when there was no space or building for conversion in the area where they wanted it, and though these views were considered very important by SSLPs, there were many examples of them being over-ridden by pressure from local authorities. Once plans were put out to tender, parents were often involved in interviewing and appointing architects.

⁴SSLP Partnerships produced a plan of the services and buildings the Sure Start area needed. Sure Start funding was made on the basis of the Delivery Plan.

Managing Building Projects

In most SSLPs the programme manager also managed the building development. Few had had previous experience and many found the task very difficult. *“The requirements of the capital programme feel like another job on top of the full-time job you have as a Sure Start Manager” one said.*

Among the tasks was managing relationships with other investors in Sure Start buildings, including European funds, the New Deal for Communities and the Single Regeneration Budget.

Relationships with regeneration bodies have helped SSLPs with planning and construction as well as funding. In many areas capital funding from the Neighbourhood Nursery Initiative (NNI) and from other Area Based Initiatives (ABI) has made a significant contribution to Sure Start building projects.

SSLPs have been very successful in finding extra capital from non-Sure Start sources, the key to this success being the amount of support available from the local authority. However, Sure Start managers often faced a complicated array of tendering and consultation processes, where monies were dependent on other monies, before anything could be spent.

Other reasons for delays in the building process included problems in finding buildings that could be renovated or land that could be built on; increases in the cost of land in Sure Start areas; construction problems, and issues and lease negotiation difficulties; a lengthy approvals process by the Sure Start Unit; changes in SSLP managers. Various support was made available to SSLPs by the Sure Start Unit. Some of this was useful to SSLPs, but most were uncomfortable when the consultants who were providing advice

were also making recommendations to the Sure Start Unit about the approval of plans.

SSLPs have been tenacious in overcoming the difficulties presented by the capital process.

Managers report that this was easier for them when they were backed by a strong Partnership.

Conclusions

The existence of buildings is essential to Sure Start. SSLPs report that they could not operate properly until their buildings were in place, and that when there was an interruption to service delivery from a recognised site, the services declined in quality and were less widely used. In the small number of programmes which have not developed or converted buildings, the reason has been that there were usable, popular buildings already in the Sure Start area, not that buildings were not necessary.

Buildings have given a profile to Sure Start, making it widely recognised and giving a message to users about the importance of their role as parents. Since parents who use the buildings say that they do so for their children, it is perhaps surprising that no distinctive form of architecture appears yet to be evolving which reflects the age-group of children for whom the services are intended. This contrasts with the practice in some European countries, where emphasis is given to making buildings for children which enable and symbolise the learning and development which will occur in them.

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Further information

Further copies of this summary are available from:

DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham, NG15 0DJ;

Tel 0845 6022260;

Email: dfes@prolog.uk.com

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Copies of the full report 'Buildings in Sure Start Local Programmes' is available on the Sure Start website www.surestart.gov.uk

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

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