



Felling Sure Start: Local Evaluation

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Felling Sure Start Evaluation Team

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In moving onto phase 2 of the evaluation, two aspects were recognised as important:

1. That continuity from phase 1 evaluation work should be embedded. Here the focus had been on a specific service for parents (usually mums) and young babies, *Nappy Days*, and on parental and community participation in decision-making and policy development, through a focus on *The Parents' Network*.
2. That consideration would need to be made in relation to future developments within the Children's Centre agenda. Local authorities have been advised of the requirements for developing Children's Centres between 2004 and 2006 during which period the funding for local Sure Start programmes will cease in its current form.

With these aspects in mind, it becomes important for the evaluation to support service development in relation to the core offer for Children's Centres. All Children's Centres must offer access to the following core services:

- Early education integrated with childcare
- Family support and outreach to parents
- Child and family health services

In addition, they will act as a service hub within the community for parents and providers of childcare services for children of all ages – offering a base for childminder networks and a link to other day care provision, out of school clubs and extended schools. Centres will also have links with local training and education providers, Jobcentre plus and Children's Information Services.

Clearly, many of the innovative and integrated services developed during the life of local Sure Start programmes will be an essential part of fulfilling the core offer for Children's Centres. Decisions may need to be made about which services to take forward and the local evaluation can inform these decisions through its ongoing work. The evaluation should also be revealing the general characteristics of those services that, in particular, attract and retain parents who, in the past, have preferred, for a range of personal reasons, not to access public services, perhaps to their own and their family's detriment. Whilst government documentation has used the term 'hard to reach' to describe such families, within the evaluation, we have adopted the term 'widening participation'. This puts the emphasis on the service to be attractive, accessible and participative rather than on the service user to take up the offer of whatever is available.

Research directions over the next 18 months

Three main strands of activity aligned with current Sure Start aims and objectives (as of September 2004, Sure Start web site) were subsequently agreed for the continuing local evaluation. These are described below along with the associated research and evaluation processes:

Strand 1: From parental involvement in decision-making to strategic development decisions.

Linked Aim: Increasing the availability of childcare for all children; supporting parents as parents and in their aspirations towards employment

Leading on from the phase 1 focus on the Parents' Network, it was agreed that this focus should continue. As the phase 1 evaluation drew to a close, the Parents' Network had reached a new phase of development where parents were beginning to take greater responsibilities for managing the meetings. The evaluation had identified the need for training and support for parents and also, it seemed timely to more explicitly detail the emerging relationship between the Parents' Network and other decision-making groups within the Felling Sure Start programme, such as the Felling Sure Start Executive and the newly emerging governance structure relating to Children's Centres.

Evaluation personnel would continue to attend Network meetings, to receive minutes from all meetings and to discuss with staff and parents their views on ongoing progress, challenges and achievements.

The first phase of evaluation had focussed primarily on parents' perspectives, with some discussions with staff. It was recognised that this now needed to be extended and that other senior officers and possibly elected members' views would be sought on aspects of parental and community involvement in decision-making processes relating to the development of new services.

Towards the end of October a member of the evaluation team asked to attend a forthcoming meeting of the Parents' Network to ascertain how the parents felt the Network was developing in light of the new way in which it was functioning. Arrangements were made to have a slot within the meeting to talk with the attendees. Unfortunately the November agenda was full and could not allow for the time for related discussion. In addition, it was explained to the evaluator that the Parents' Network meetings had become rather "ad hoc" over the previous months with the focus being on the planned residential weekend. With this change in plans, the evaluator decided to use the available time, with the parents' permission, to observe the meeting and note points of discussion.

The observed meeting was held on Friday, 26th November 2004 at the Bede Community Centre on the Old Fold Estate. Those in attendance included 2 Sure Start workers, 9 mothers (including one from a minority ethnic group, 1 grandmother and 2 fathers. Three of the parents were first time attendees and three were mothers-to-be. A crèche was available. The meeting was chaired by the community support worker at the request of the attending parents.

Although it is not the intention to describe in detail the topics raised, one is of particular relevance - the management of Network meetings. This aspect has implications in relation to the development of Children's Centres within the Gateshead area. Guidance from the Sure Start Unit has reiterated the importance of active involvement of parents in the development of any local

Sure Start programme. Within Sure Start Felling one of the mechanisms whereby parents have had this opportunity for involvement has been through the Parents' Network. Until late summer 2004, meetings have been chaired by a staff member but more recently, following on from advice and encouragement by the Community Development Worker some interested parents have had an opportunity to chair meetings if they wished.

Parents are presently being encouraged to think about how best they could manage these meetings themselves, with support from Sure Start staff. It is acknowledged that some parents would prefer related training before participating in this way. A staff member would still attend to act as a conduit for information sharing but their level of participation would be minimal.

The rationale given by the Sure Start worker was that if the meeting was the parent's own meeting then they would have ownership of it and, hopefully, this would give them the drive to see and to make the changes that they wanted and/or wished for.

At the time of writing this interim report some discussions had occurred between members of the Network on the idea of several volunteers acting as the Chair of the meeting on a rotational basis until the necessary training had been completed. Discussion amongst the group members identified that it would be inappropriate, at this point in time, to have a fixed "chair" for all Parents' Network meetings.

The November meeting was well-attended and every person was able to contribute to the discussion/s if they wished. However, it was also apparent the current format for the meetings can also allow more confident parents/contributors to 'hold the floor' for long periods and this might, potentially, inhibit contributions from less confident or new parents.

A senior member of the Sure Start staff has also met with the local evaluators to discuss the facilitation of formal links between the Parents' Network, the Felling Executive and the Joint Executive to support the move towards local Children's Centres. A suggested model was to synchronise the dates of the respective meetings so that an Executive could be preceded by a Parents' Network meeting and allow sufficient time for a briefing meeting for representative parents prior to the full Executive meetings. The Executive agenda might have a standing item of 'Issues from the Parents' Network' whereby parents could prepare (in the briefing meeting, supported by Sure Start staff) their items for discussion and so feel fully participative and active on behalf of the parents they are representing.

Strand 2: Children and parents learning

***Linked Aim:** Increasing the availability of childcare for all children; Improving health education and emotional development for young children.*

The phase 1 focus on Nappy Days had shown real benefits for parental support (particularly for mothers and for those mothers who had experienced

post-natal depression) from having regular access to informal and locally based activities staffed by an integrated professional workforce. There were clear benefits for mothers and children. As a result it was decided, with parental permission, to track some of the children and their parents as they 'graduated' Nappy Days to see whether/if they benefited from continued involvement in Sure Start services. A cohort of 4-6 children was identified as an appropriate number. This work has started with three sets of parents-children, with their permission and it is hoped to extend it in the near future.

Having participated in the evaluation of Nappy Days, the community mid-wife was keen for a new, related service to now be included in the local evaluation. This was an ante-natal drop-in service which had been developed in an area of the ward where there had been traditionally low attendance at ante-natal services amongst pregnant women. It was recognised that if accessible and user-friendly services could be developed for pregnant women, then the chances of retaining their ongoing involvement in future activities would be enhanced. Visits are underway by the evaluation team and discussion with related staff about evaluation procedures are ongoing. It is recognised as important to not upset the dynamic of the activity with parents because of evaluation procedures.

Strand 3: Strengthening families and communities

***Linked aim:** Supporting parents as parents and in their aspirations towards employment*

A user-satisfaction survey.

The need for a survey of this kind had been a pre-requisite of Sure Start local programmes from the early days. In mid 2004 two joint training sessions relating to designing and conducting user satisfaction surveys were undertaken with a group of parents and staff from both Felling and Deckham Sure Starts. These training sessions were run by members of the evaluation team from Northumbria University. Following this training a number of parents and staff from Felling Sure Start have been involved in the face to face delivery of the questionnaires. In addition, the headmaster at Carr Hill Community Primary School agreed to send out questionnaires to families of all children in the nursery and reception classes. To date 53 questionnaires from the Felling area have been completed.

The questionnaires are currently being analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) Version 12. A session will be held on the 24th February 2005, at the Elgin Centre, when the results will be fed back to the combined group of parents and staff, plus any other interested individuals. This feedback session will also report on other emerging aspects of interest from the two evaluations. The findings from the survey will be reported in the next annual report, due in July.

Originally, the survey was required at the start and end point of the local evaluations; with the coming of Children's Centres, it will now be necessary to clarify whether this is still the case.

Returning to work and training within local Sure Starts.

In a context of strengthening families and communities, and, given the links between Children's Centres and Jobseeker aims and aspirations, a decision was taken to undertake 4-6 case studies of parents who had returned to work or, whose work was supported by Sure Start activity. The parents, subject to their permission would be interviewed.

In addition, the Job Linkage Worker would, with permission, be contacted and conversational interviews undertaken at regular intervals to record and discuss with her the ongoing impact of her role re employment. It was hoped that this aspect would also address and illuminate the widening participation agenda.

Progress so far:

Two of the four interviews with parents returning to work have been completed. The evaluation team are currently seeking to identify whether any other parents should be added to the sample, as provided to us by the Community Development Worker.

Supporting a return to employment and training

In line with all citizens, families living in the Sure Start Felling area have, as their right, access to the more usual means of obtaining information about benefits and/or employment through the work of relevant agencies, both within the statutory and voluntary sector. Throughout the borough of Gateshead there are a number of Economic Development Officers who are employed by Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council. However, these officers often lack the specialist working knowledge of the tax credit system such as Child Tax Credit, Working Tax Credit and other benefits that would be applicable to the families involved with local Sure Start programmes, information which is crucial to economic security in a context of returning to work and training. In the past there had been an arrangement whereby one [or more] of these Economic Development Officers had been seconded into the local Sure Start programmes but more recently, this arrangement had ceased to be available.

Within Sure Start Felling, unemployment and its resultant negative effect on financial security is a key issue. It is also widely known that, within certain communities in the Felling area, there is a general reluctance to become involved with agencies that the population perceive as being both "threatening" and also potentially "stigmatising". As a consequence, people existing on very low incomes may not receive access to benefits that may be theirs by right.

Within their original delivery plans, several Sure Start programmes had identified a need to have more ready and acceptable access to information about seeking financial benefits and obtaining appropriate employment. This position was to be known as a Job Linkage Worker (originally, there had been tentative discussions to share the position between three Sure Start programmes within Gateshead but this arrangement has not, so far materialised).

The first Job Linkage Worker came into post in mid August 2004. This worker, who is employed on a full-time basis, is funded by two local Sure Start programmes. The position is currently based in the Civic Centre and her week is divided between Sure Start Felling and Leam Lane Sure Start (2 days equivalent each per week), with the remaining day spent in the Civic Centre.

Methodology

As part of the on-going evaluation of Sure Start Felling it was decided to follow the development of the role of the Job Linkage Worker and the impact that this resource is having on families involved with Sure Start Felling.

Data collection would come from a variety of sources involving both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Interviewing techniques would, initially, involve both face-to-face and telephone interviews with the Job Linkage Worker using a semi-structured interview schedule. In addition, monitoring data would be collected by the worker in relation to the numbers and types of contacts made/activities undertaken/services provided. Many referrals come from mid-wives who are learning about their pregnant client's economic circumstances during informal conversations. One mother who has made links with the worker has recently received arrears of £500 from the Inland Revenue in relation to her Working Tax Credit. A key service the worker can offer is to calculate whether a return to work is financially viable for parents on benefit.

To date a member of the evaluation team from Northumbria University has undertaken two in-depth face – to - face interviews with the Job Linkage Worker, the most recent one in late November 2004. In addition there has been communication by telephone and also by email regarding the development of her role.

Some emerging themes and findings

Developing the role requires a sensitive approach so that service users come to trust the worker and access the information/advice that she is able to provide. From having worked in a Jobcentre and, more specifically, in the Jobcentre in Felling, the Job Linkage Worker perceives that a number of people living in the area see:

“Sure Start as “social services”

and, this seems to be a negative perspective for them.

The Job Linkage Worker believes that her own experiences as a lone parent, linked with her local knowledge, give her unique insight into the feelings and experiences of similarly situated parents and as a result, she is able to empathise with this aspect of parental experience:

“I mean when I go and talk to the parents anywhere, I always say, “I was a lone parent”, I have a little girl and I know how hard it is, I know what you are going through, I have been there and I know how hard it is to go to work on the bus...”

Empathy and understanding are important to any vulnerable parent, more especially so, if they are to alter their perspectives on who and what might improve the quality of their own and their families' lives.

Trust also plays a considerable part in trying to “dismantle” barriers that have existed within these areas of Felling for many years. Whilst the Job Linkage Worker admits that she personally has no ready answers to how such barriers can be quickly overcome, she feels that it is very important that she is seen as non-judgemental. Her role is not “to police” the situation re access to benefits. It is recognised that some parents become so concerned that their benefits will be reduced that they would rather not take the risk of claiming benefits to which they are actually entitled. As the worker explained this reluctance to claim what a person/family could be entitled to may make a significant impact on their weekly income:

“So they would rather take the risk and lose that money but if you have a new baby you are talking of £40 per week...”

Spreading the word and signposting parents to services

Previous research projects undertaken by staff within the Department of Primary Care at Newcastle University in relation to the Bede Centre and the communities on the Old Fold Estate have highlighted specific aspects in relation to the demography of the area.

The Job Linkage Worker believes that, for many lone parents, more specifically, those young lone mothers living on the Old Fold Estate there is great reluctance to access activities and information. Traditionally such young mothers, it was suggested, were not the ‘type’ of mother who would normally go along to Sure Start group activities:

“They are not the type who would want to go along to any groups, they are more the type, “This is where I live and this is where I’m going to stay and I’ve got the baby and the baby is fine, so don’t ask me any questions about my baby...”

The Job Linkage Worker sees part of the responsibility of her role to raise awareness of Sure Start and the wide range of activities/resources it could

provide for young, lone mothers and other service users, especially those who have not previously accessed local services to any great extent. Related courses are now being developed, including Story Sacks (a literacy development activity) and a Food Hygiene Course. Knowledge of the availability of the drop-in sessions at Bede Community Centre is spreading throughout the locality and numbers of service users are increasing:

“I’ve found that Bede is the place where people do just call in and say “can I see the benefit woman?”

In line with many of the earlier findings from other Sure Start local evaluations “word of mouth” remains the most important way in which parents learn of the service provided by the Job Linkage Worker. Generally a parent who has been successful in obtaining increased/backdated benefits through a meeting with the Job Linkage Worker will then inform either friends or other members of her family who will then seek an appointment at one of the various drop-in sessions that she runs. Interestingly a brief conversation between a member of domestic support staff and the Job Linkage Worker has resulted in people from the local community seeking out the “benefit woman.” Within such traditionally “hard-to-reach” communities, successful outcomes for recipients of the service may do much to help breakdown barriers in relation to fear and mistrust.

At Stoneygate

The increasing use of the drop-in sessions and “passing trade” at Bede Community Centre is in contrast, at this point in time, to the one that is held at Stoneygate Community House. The demography of the area would suggest that there are significant numbers of residents who are unemployed and in receipt of state benefits, yet attendances at Stoneygate currently remain lower than those elsewhere. This may be to do with the location of the building - people will actually have to go to the house rather than be “just passing by”; the location may not be as convenient for them.

Early evidence would suggest that the geographical location of the services can have a marked impact upon usage. ‘Passing by’ facilitates ‘dropping in’; ‘seeking out’ is less common.

Assisting in the completion of application forms

The Job Linkage Worker has identified that the completion of the necessary forms, when making applications for benefits, is difficult and time-consuming. The involved nature of the forms and the level of detail that they require deter potential claimants. They appreciate appropriate kinds of support when it is made available to them.

Difficulties in accessing appropriate resources

Although the Job Linkage Worker has vast experience of working within the statutory sector in employment and benefits related roles, working to establish

her role within the Sure Start programmes has created some initial frustrations. Reasons for this centre around the practicalities associated with the role and the tasks that it involves.

The worker offers three (one hourly) drop-in sessions per week within the Felling area as follows:

- Bede Community Centre
- Brandling Primary School
- Stoneygate Community House

Much of the work requires access to a computer as many of the necessary application forms for benefits are completed “on-line”. She does have access to a laptop computer that has an available programme that allows her to carry out Tax Credit calculations. Whilst the Job Linkage Worker is undertaking the drop-in sessions she does not have access to the on-line forms so she has to return to the Civic Centre in order to do this work. This difficulty in managing her time effectively then has implications for the other parts of her role. The hope for the future is that a networked computer will be available to support this work in the new builds at Felling and Leam Lane. Currently additional staff are also being trained to undertake the ‘better off’ calculations which provide important information for parents considering a return to employment and/or training.

Another problem with accessing appropriate resources arises from the fact that although the Job Linkage Worker’s wage is paid for from Sure Start budgets, she is employed by Gateshead Borough Council. As such she has, in theory, three line managers, her line manager in the Civic Centre together with the programme managers from both Felling and Leam Lane Sure Starts. At the same time, the role is such that the worker needs to be kept up to date with developments in relation to her expertise. This knowledge/training is not available through the local Sure Start programme itself.

We hope that further insights will emerge as the evaluation work continues.