

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is the final report of an evaluation of Denaby Main & Conisbrough Sure Start that was conducted between November 2003 and October 2003. Over that period a great deal has happened and there have been substantial changes to the way in which the programme has operated and the manner in which it is perceived. As a Trailblazer amongst Sure Starts, Denaby Main & Conisbrough was always in the position of having to learn by its mistakes but, to its credit, it has done so. In short, Denaby Main & Conisbrough Sure Start has been transformed from a programme that lacked leadership, direction and focus, and which was failing to engage positively with key partners to one that is having a positive impact, building stronger relationships with its stakeholders and has an infrastructure in place that should enable it to take on the challenges that lie ahead.

Partnership Board

Issues

The original Board was variously described as 'chaotic', 'intimidating/daunting' and lacking in its ability to demonstrate meaningful commitment/support/leadership'

Achievements/Outstanding Issues

The need for training of some less experienced Board members was recognised and addressed, and pre-meetings for parent representatives have been very well received. Most crucial though has been the reconstitution of the Board into a more parent-led body, which has shown itself to be more committed and more focused than the original Board. Even so, the relevance of some bodies was queried (i.e. those with no direct responsibilities for users/potential users of Sure Start services), and there remains a need to increase the number of male representatives.

Staffing

Issues

Any organisation whose complement of staff rises as quickly as they have within this Sure Start is going to be presented with some difficulties. Not least of these has been ensuring that staff at all levels developed positive relationships with external groups. In addition, the fact that there has been a gross under-representation of male staff, may have served to reinforce stereotypical attitudes to the roles of men and women in taking responsibility for children and their development.

Achievements/Outstanding Issues

However, for all of these difficulties a lot of enthusiasm generated amongst staff, and this has been consolidated by recent improvements to the way in which this Sure Start is operating. There is also a growing sense of staff recognising what is required of them, manifested in the introduction of questionnaires and job review forms that have recently been circulated. It is also apparent that staff have been fostering better relationships with external groups.

Accommodation

Issues

Differing views were expressed by parents as to the accessibility of Story Book House (SBH), especially for those living in Conisbrough, although some people clearly find it difficult to access the building. It was also apparent that some users initially found the building unwelcoming/too formal and that some still do. The need for a parents room was a common request and pressure was clearly being put on available space by the growing demand for nursery places.

Achievements/Outstanding Issues

There is now a much more comfortable feel to the building, and no doubt visitors have become more accustomed to it over time. Plans to provide transport to SBH, to develop a new building in Conisbrough and more use of outreach/other facilities should all help more people to access Sure Start services. In addition, the planned extension to SBH will increase its capacity.

Operation of the Programme

Issues

There is no doubt that all Sure Starts faced a challenging agenda, not least in having to get up and running and commit expenditure very quickly. There were also local issues in terms of how the programme was received by mainstream service providers and schools, with some envy and even resentment having been expressed in some quarters. For its part, DM&C Sure Start did not initially do all that it might have done to assuage any criticisms. Furthermore, in spite of its initial popularity, there was a need for more meaningful engagement with parents who were accessing only a very narrow range of services, as well as a need for engagement with a much broader range of families.

Achievements/Outstanding Issues

More recently DM&C has begun to make progress in realising some of the key aims of Sure Start, in promoting more effective joint working and customer focussed service delivery. The adoption of new management tools and a more outward looking approach will undoubtedly have helped in this regard. Sure Start has already brought significant benefits to parents/children but DM&C recognises that there is an ongoing need to encourage more meaningful engagement and broader engagement. There is scope for the male Inclusion worker to help re-shape services more generally and a need – common to many organisations – to improve communications with parents and other carers.

External Relationships

Issues

As mentioned previously, Sure Start received a mixed reception from external bodies, not helped by the absence of constructive (or any) dialogue between DM&C and some of its key partners. This will also have contributed to duplication of/competing provision.

Achievements/Outstanding Issues

The early designation of DM&C as a Children's Centre has been crucial, with the audit of early years provision in the area, review of the strategies of relevant organisations and development of a strategy and action plan producing direct benefits and leading to the development of much more positive relationships. It is hoped that in due course there can be more positive engagement with parents attending other playgroups.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Sure Start has come a long way over the past 6 months, thanks to a tremendous amount of hard work by its staff (led by a determined senior management), supported by a much more effective new Board.
- It will be important to ensure new Board members remain involved in Sure Start activities and do not become detached from them.
- Most of the issues identified in the early part of the evaluation have been or are being addressed.
- Sure Start has brought significant benefits to some parents, but there remains concern about engagement of hard to reach groups.
- There is scope for better targetting of potential candidates for services and there may be a need to adopt more flexible approaches to service delivery better suited to hard to reach groups.
- There is a need to communicate information on activities more effectively.
- There is a need to develop a clear strategy, setting priorities, establishing target outputs/outcomes and developing exit strategies for activities that are justified in being sustained. The 2004-06 Delivery Plan could be the vehicle for this.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 This final evaluation report builds on the interim report first submitted in June 2003 and re-submitted in August 2003. The evaluation commenced in November 2002 and concluded in October 2003.

1.2 This report is based on the following:

- A review of Sure Start policy documents and of literature specific to the Denaby Main and Conisbrough Programme;
- Interviews with Sure Start Board members, both from the original Board and the current Board;
- Interviews with Sure Start staff;
- Attendance at a Sure Start 'away day';
- Consultations with relevant statutory organisations and voluntary groups operating in the Sure Start area; and
- Consultations with parents.

1.3 During the period from the start of the evaluation to the time of drafting this report, there have been a number of significant changes. In particular, issues raised by interviewees/through consultations carried out in the early part of the evaluation have been or are in the process of being addressed. In order to provide a fair and balanced picture, this report discusses both these perceived shortcomings and the actions that were subsequently taken to address them.

1.4 The two most significant changes relate to early designation of Sure Start as a Children's Centre and the award of Neighbourhood Nursery status. Whilst each of these events have clearly impacted on Sure Start and therefore merit comment in this report, they are not themselves the subject of detailed evaluations.

2.0 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Sure Start nationally was initially designed as a 3 year programme, with general aims and objectives but no firm guidelines as to how they might be achieved. As each individual programme has felt its way and developed its role within the community in which it operates, it is inevitable that mistakes will have been made and lessons learnt. Indeed, there is a view that bids were rushed through and not all stakeholders were engaged as fully as they should have been – something that has certainly been said about this particular programme.
- 2.2 Denaby Main and Conisbrough (DM&C) is one of 6 Sure Start programmes operating in Doncaster. The lead body for the programme is Doncaster West Primary Care Trust (PCT). Over the 5 years of its proposed lifetime (now extended to March 2006), it will have received £1 ¼ million in capital funding (largely to pay for its new premises) and £5 million in revenue funding.
- 2.3 The original Sure Start concept was that the programme be community driven, and that it should add value to mainstream service delivery. Initially this related to all children between the ages of 0-4, but this was subsequently changed to conception to 4.
- 2.4 Since this evaluation began, DM&C Sure Start has secured two notable awards that will shortly enable it to expand the services it offers: early designation as a Children's Centre and Neighbourhood Nursery status.

Children's Centre

- 2.5 DM&C was put forward by the Family Support Strategy Group and Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership as Doncaster's sole bid. Following a sift at regional level it was put forward as 1 of 11 candidates and was subsequently chosen as 1 of only 3 bids regionally and 34 nationally to be awarded early designation.

- 2.6 The designation took effect on the 1st of July 2003. It provided £40,000, ostensibly to employ a member of staff (thought likely to be a teacher) to undertake an audit of early years provision in the area, review the strategies that underpin it and devise a strategy and action plan for the integration of services. Although the resource was made available until the end of March 2004, the exercise would need to be completed by December 2003 in order for the findings to feed into DM&C's Delivery Plan for 2004-06.
- 2.7 Given the Summer break and the settling in period in schools after the start of the new school year, the exercise was thought unlikely to begin in earnest until mid-September. Furthermore, appointing a competent individual who is available and willing to work on a short term contract was acknowledged by DM&C at an early stage as unrealistic. Consequently, discussions took place with local schools, exploring the potential for a number of part-time secondments, and with the local education authority and the local Education Action Zone (EAZ).
- 2.8 This resulted in the formation of a team of teachers from local schools who, at the time of writing this report, are actively engaged in conducting an audit of early years provision locally, covering schools, play groups, childminders and home care. The exercise began in early September – earlier than had been expected – and started with a review of schools, carried out by the Deputy Head Teacher of one of the local primary schools. She led on the exercise up until half term in October, committing a day a week to the exercise. Since then, the assignment has been carried out by 3 teachers from local schools each of whom is contributing a day a week to the drafting of an action plan and setting future objectives. Their work, which also involves the EAZ, is designed to dovetail with the preparation of the Sure Start delivery plan.
- 2.9 From April 2004 a teacher will be attached to the Children's Centre on a full time basis. A job specification is yet to be agreed as is the level of seniority of the position. In part, this will be determined by the level of resource available to each Children's Centre. Doncaster MBC has been allocated £1.3 million a year to help fund 14 Centres, and is currently considering its options.

- 2.10 One important feature of the designation is the extension of DM&C's remit to children aged 5. This overlap with school reception classes is what is driving the need to integrate early years provision. Given the uncomfortable relationships that have previously existed between DM&C and some local schools (as discussed later in this report) this is an ideal opportunity to promote much more positive relationships and, most importantly, for all parties to deliver better standards of services to children and parents.
- 2.11 One issue to be considered will be how to respond to the encouragement being given to develop Children's Centres to a size capable of offering nursery provision for every eligible child in the locality. Another is how this Children's Centre will develop in the local context of falling birth rates and potential competition between the Centre and local schools in respect of early years provision. Quite clearly, the Centre/Sure Start will need to find its niche, and ensure that its provision complements/adds value to other provision locally. In this regard, its ability to offer 'wraparound' childcare is likely to be a particularly important factor.

Neighbourhood Nursery

- 2.12 At the end of June 2003 a bid was approved for DM&C to become a Neighbourhood Nursery. This provides capital to extend its existing nursery and revenue funding for a 3 year period. The number of nursery places will roughly double (to 73) and, for the first time, nursery provision will be available on a Saturday morning.
- 2.13 In addition to the £75,000 of capital made available as a result of this designation, the DM&C Board is to be asked to consider releasing £78,000 of Sure Start money to contribute towards the cost of the overall building contract which as well as the nursery extension will include development of a room for parents and a toy library.

3.0 PARTNERSHIP BOARD

The Original Board

- 3.1 Initially, the Board comprised 18 people, divided equally between those representing statutory bodies, community organisations and parents. This division had been agreed by the parties as being appropriate.
- 3.2 Elections for parent representatives on the original Board were held in May 2000. The 6 parent representatives covered a wide range of interests, being involved in local residents groups, local playgroups, and breast friends, and included a new mother, a father and a grandparent. Community representatives were drawn from a variety of organisations, including: Conisbrough and Denaby Development Trust (CDDT).
- 3.3 The first Board meeting of the original Board was described by more than one interviewee as having been 'chaotic'. Indeed, several interviewees commented that their first Board meeting was very nearly their last, such was the unpleasantness of the experience. One interviewee went so far as to suggest that there had been a deliberate attempt by one Board member to intimidate/exclude colleagues by seeking to dominate proceedings. Subsequent meetings were said by many to have been poorly structured.
- 3.4 Interviews with original parent representatives suggested that they had been motivated to become involved with the Board by a strong sense of commitment to their local communities and a desire to ensure that Sure Start operates in a manner which most effectively meets the needs of those communities rather than based on what people outside of those communities thinks might be appropriate.
- 3.5 None of the original parent representatives interviewed had previously been involved in anything like Sure Start, nor indeed in boards or committees. The first Partnership Board meeting was therefore a very daunting experience, and little effort seems to have been made by many of the other Board members to allow for the lack of experience of parent representatives.

- 3.6 Subsequently training was provided to parent representatives by Doncaster CVS, covering not only the roles and responsibilities of Board members but also seeking to instil more confidence into parent representatives about participating more actively in Board meetings. Subsequently, parent representatives described themselves as being much more confident.
- 3.7 The Sure Start Manager Chairs meetings of the parent representatives, which take place prior to Board meetings and are designed to ensure that parent representatives are fully briefed on agenda items. These sessions were highly valued by these Board members, and the proposal to continue these sessions with new Board members is heartily endorsed (albeit that the time demanded of Board members may pose difficulties for some individuals).
- 3.8 Original community representatives interviewed said that they had been motivated to join the Board out of a feeling that Sure Start could really make a difference to an area which was suffering a lot of problems and because they wanted to make whatever contribution they could to trying to ensure the programme's success.
- 3.9 No training appears to have been offered to community representatives, although a visit to another Sure Start programme (in Sheffield) was arranged. One of those interviewed felt that they had more to offer the Board but had not had the opportunity to offer their skills. Community representatives regarded the Board fairly positively and believed that they had a good rapport with staff.
- 3.10 In respect of statutory bodies, some concern was expressed that the lead agent, PCT, had been too dominant, which had impacted on the direction and development of the programme. There were also accusations that attendance by representatives from some statutory bodies had been poor, which had added to frustrations felt by other Board members at their perceived lack of commitment, especially when meetings have had to be cancelled as a result of their non-attendance.

- 3.11 Some of those interviewed believed that many of those on the original Board simply didn't understand what it was Sure Start was doing in the area, and hadn't even bothered to try to find out. It was said that most of the original Board members had only visited Story Book House for Board meetings and never visited to see what happened at the Centre at other times. Many interviewees were highly cynical of the motives of some original Board members, believing that they were only ever interested in adding to their CVs. The accusation is that they saw an association with a Sure Start trailblazer as offering kudos, but without believing that they owed Sure Start any commitment in return.
- 3.12 The original Partnership Board was not regarded by Sure Start staff as having offered them any support or leadership. Some staff members felt that they were perhaps unaware of what their role was supposed to be and/or how they could perform it effectively. There were also suggestions that the original Board had failed to take responsibility for the programme and also seemed unable to appreciate the urgency with which some issues required to be dealt. Some original Board members were accused of not knowing what was going on and not caring much either, being more concerned with their day jobs. The Board's perceived failure to act or slowness to act on certain issues caused frustration and resentment amongst some staff and some parents. Indeed, there was some concern amongst staff that the perceived ineffectiveness of the Board reflected badly on them as they were left with having to explain to parents why certain things hadn't happened. One of those interviewed went so far as to say that the stance of some Board members was to try to look for reasons why they should not support certain ideas rather than reasons why they should.

The Current Board

- 3.13 Until November 2002 the Board was chaired by a community representative, who is also a local councillor. During the latter part of 2002/early 2003, the Board was essentially moribund. At the end of May 2003 the new Board met for the first time. Its make up is now as follows
- 6 parents (2 vacancies at present)
 - lead body representative (Doncaster West PCT)
 - Doncaster MBC (Social Services)
 - Job Centre+
 - Conisborough & Denaby EAZ
 - Doncaster Royal Infirmary Trust (Children's Services)
 - Conisbrough and Denaby Development Trust.
 - Sure Start Manager
- 3.14 The Board will now meet monthly. A Chair and Vice Chair (both parents) have been appointed. In addition, there are to be half-yearly Partnership Group meetings, to which there is an open invitation to all stakeholders. The first meeting of the Group was held on the 1st of May 2003 and was attended by 6 people. The next meeting is scheduled for October, to plan for the year ahead.
- 3.15 The perceived shortcomings of the original Board and the hiatus during which it was not operating to any effect, present considerable challenges to Sure Start management and the new Board. The reconstitution of the Board and the potential for parents to have a louder voice (in relative terms) provides a good platform on which to build for the future. New members will need training and support, and the Board as a whole should take account of comments made above in order to avoid repeating mistakes of the past. There is also a challenge to develop the Partnership Group to encourage much more participation. In time, the composition of the new Board may need to be revisited, not just to inject new blood in due course but specifically to address the issue of the absence of male Board members.

- 3.16 Parent/grandparent representatives on the new Board all had some involvement with Sure Start as a parent/grandparent prior to joining the Board. This means that they were able to bring – and still do bring – user perspectives, which are extremely useful and not just based on their own experiences but also those of other users with whom they are acquainted.
- 3.17 All of the members of the new Board appear confident in their roles, and the balance of interests represented on the Board now seems much more appropriate. There seems to be a greater sense of local/user ownership of Sure Start, and this is likely to be consolidated once the two vacancies for parent representatives on the Board are filled. That having been said, some questions were raised as to why local community groups were represented, given that they have no specific remit in relation to children. It may be more appropriate to involve local organisations that do provide services for children/their parents, such as the Ivanhoe Centre.
- 3.18 There appear to be some concerns that not all of the issues that some Board members would like to raise are covered in Board meetings. This may be due to lack of time and a need to prioritise what business is done. If so, this ought to be communicated to Board members, not least to reassure them that any concerns they might have are being taken seriously.

Summary

- 3.19 Overall, the new Board is much more committed and far more sharply focused than its predecessor body. It has already tackled many of the difficulties it inherited and offers a very sound platform for the future development of DM&C Sure Start.

4.0 STAFFING

- 4.1 At the outset (July 2000) the Sure Start team consisted of the Manager, the Centre Co-ordinator and an administrator, based in an office in Doncaster. In October 2000 this team moved into the original Story Book House. In July 2001 the next phase of recruitment began with the hiring of nursery nurses and in January 2002 staff moved into the new Story Book House, which opened to the public the following March.
- 4.2 The senior management team consists of the Sure Start Manager, (previously supported by a Deputy Manager - position vacated in October 2002) and the Co-ordinators of the Centre, the Family Support Team (FST) and the Early Years Team (EYT). During the period in which the Manager was absent on maternity leave, her deputy took on her responsibilities.
- 4.3 The members of the management team have been assessing their own roles, not least in the context of a significant increase in staff numbers, which at the time of writing this report stood at 67. Amongst all staff, there are 4 males (up from 1 at the start of this evaluation), including a male inclusion worker). About 20 of the staff live within the Sure Start area and attempts are made to recruit local people whenever possible.
- 4.4 Sure Start staff seem very enthusiastic about the programme and committed to what it is trying to achieve. They are also very appreciative of having access to levels of resources to which Sure Start type activities had been denied previously.
- 4.5 However, there are concerns that staff are being poached from Denaby Main and Conisbrough Sure Start programme to work on other, newer programmes. On the other hand, interviewees commented on the commitment of staff to want to see the programme through in Denaby Main and Conisbrough.

- 4.6 Other professionals that have used Sure Start facilities report finding the staff enthusiastic, helpful and friendly and the community cafe as also being good. Such comments were largely echoed by parents accessing Story Book House, although some concerns were raised about the quality of service provided not being of an acceptable standard. There were also negative views expressed by some professionals and volunteers from other organisations and parents accessing other childcare/play groups, who reported that Sure Start staff's determination to take control initially rather than enter into a true spirit of partnership had been unhelpful.
- 4.7 However, it is important to record that during the course of this evaluation that Sure Start has done much more to try to work with external groups. Inevitably, these groups remain a little cautious about Sure Start's motives for now seeking to engage with them, but sustained effort and a transparent approach on Sure Start's part should help to dispel any lingering doubts.
- 4.8 In September 2003, each of the secondee managers working within Sure Start was given a questionnaire, designed to make them consider the past and potential future contribution to Sure Start. More specifically, each was asked to detail what they have done in their current post, what objectives they've met, whether they wish to continue in their current position and, if they do, what roles they might perform in future. In addition, these questionnaires were circulated more widely to current and prospective partner organizations in order to determine the scope for future secondments/other collaborations.
- 4.9 At the time of writing this report, no analysis of these questionnaires had taken place. Nevertheless, irrespective of the responses received, the exercise itself is likely to have proved valuable in focusing the minds of all concerned on whether/to what extent each individual/organization can continue to contribute to the pursuit of Sure Start's aims and objectives.

- 4.10 The current period (Autumn 2004) is also important in terms of starting to address issues relating to staff contracts, a number of which expire at the end of March 2004, with Children's Fund posts resourced up until April 2004. Given the differing lengths of time for which people have been employed, they enjoy different employment rights, something which will clearly need to be considered. In the meantime, all staff were issued with job review forms in September 2003, requiring them to describe what it is they do, how they contribute to Sure Start, what skills they offer, the positive and negative aspects of their job and how they would like their role to develop in the future.
- 4.11 Clearly, this process may have implications for individuals, but at organisational level offers a useful tool to enable people to be matched with specific roles and teams to be organized in the most effective ways.
- 4.12 At the time of writing this report, it was envisaged that preliminary findings from the staff reviews would have been fed back to the Board by mid-October, with a staffing plan ready for the Board meeting on 6th November. This plan might then require approval from other bodies, such as Doncaster West PCT, not least because there may well be implications for the PCT as their employer, given the employment rights conferred on those staff members with more than 4 years service in the NHS. Nevertheless, it is hoped that a clear way forward can be agreed by Christmas. We would endorse this approach, especially given the need to reassure certain staff about the prospects for their continued employment. Failure to be able to do so this side of Christmas might result in some staff leaving for what they perceive to be more secure jobs elsewhere, and/or any uncertainties over contracts may well adversely affect staff morale.

Summary

- 4.13 Problems created by the rapid rise in staff numbers are now being dealt with, as is the need for more effective management of external relationships. As such, the somewhat overzealous attitude of some staff members is being replaced with a more measured approach which is seeing the energy and enthusiasm of staff channeled much more positively.

5.0 ACCOMMODATION

- 5.1 In October 2000 Sure Start began operating from the original Story Book House. Early Board meetings were said to have been dominated by discussions on the new building, with some lively debates on what was being proposed and what it was going to cost. Staff moved into the new Story Book House in January 2002, which opened to the public the following March.
- 5.2 The demolition of a building to which some local people had an emotional attachment in order to make way for the new Story Book House clearly provoked some controversy. Ironically, this may have helped to raise Sure Start's profile in the area. What was apparent though was that the original building was too small and insufficiently equipped for the range of activities that the programme was seeking to deliver.
- 5.3 There are differing views in relation to how accessible Story Book House is to residents of Conisbrough. Some of those interviewed believed that public transport was perfectly adequate, although most of them did not actually use local buses themselves. Others saw the distance and the hassle of travelling by bus as representing barriers to attending activities at Story Book House. Indeed, it was pointed out that the Windmill Estate is a long way away from Denaby Main, and parents may have some distance to walk before getting onto a bus route. Some interviewees also mentioned a fear of walking down the 'crag's'.
- 5.4 The design of Story Book House is not particularly welcoming. Whilst there needs to be a balance between promoting ready access and ensuring the safety and security of Centre users (especially children) and staff and of the building and its equipment, that balance might not have been struck in quite the right place. Nevertheless, as users have become more familiar with the surroundings they do appear more comfortable.

- 5.5 The interim evaluation report noted that the reception area had “the air of a doctor’s surgery and there is very little room for those visiting the Centre (especially in large numbers) to wait comfortably and without getting in the way of other visitors and/or staff”. Since then, efforts have been made to decorate the walls in such a way as to make the building feel more like a community facility than the office environment that many visitors felt characterised the building initially and to make better use of the very limited space around the reception area.
- 5.6 Parental planning sessions held in the old building are reported to have been very popular, which was attributed to the informal and open manner in which they were conducted. In the new Centre they are not thought to be going so well, which is believed to be due to the nature of the new building, which is said to have a rather more businesslike and formal atmosphere, which some parents are said to be rather daunted by. Indeed, such a meeting held at the new building in Spring 2003 attracted only one parent.
- 5.7 There appears to have been a consensus amongst staff and parents that the creation of a parents room would be a great asset, offering parents somewhere to meet informally whilst their children were taking part in activities in the Centre or just before/after they had done so. One of the parents took it upon herself to investigate the possibilities and drafted a report for consideration by the original Board which months later it had still failed to consider, much to the frustration of the parent concerned and the staff. The determination of the Sure Start manager to bring about this provision is now manifest in including the provision of a parents room as part of the planned building works at SBH. This process has been overseen by a sub-group of the Board, which is believed to have operated effectively.
- 5.8 There were also suggestions amongst interviewees that extensions should be undertaken, to provide a larger meeting and playrooms, and that there ought to be some sports facilities for older children. Rather than seeking to take forward any such developments itself, there may be more merit in Sure Start approaching local schools and other partners with a view to sharing their facilities.

- 5.9 In respect of the planned extension to Story Book House, Sure Start agreed with Doncaster MBC that tenders were to be invited from construction companies to be submitted by the end of July 2003. The expectation was that, given an anticipated construction period of 8-12 weeks, the extension would be completed by October 2003. However, at the time of writing (end October 2003) work has yet to begin.
- 5.10 It would appear that Doncaster MBC, with whom Sure Start is setting up a service level agreement to deliver the construction contract, has failed to meet Sure Start's deadlines. Indeed, due to staff changes the tendering process had not even begun by early October 2003, and this has only recently been communicated to Sure Start. This lack of progress has clearly been a source of considerable frustration amongst parents, staff and Board members, but appears to be a situation beyond Sure Start's control. With planning permission secured and the necessary finances in place, the main cause of the delay appears to have been DMBC.
- 5.11 This delay has also required interim measures to be taken. From the 1st of September another room within Story Book House (Denny's Den, previously used as a drop in but authorised for nursery use) has been used to accommodate nursery provision temporarily. It is currently catering for 24 children. The need to provide this facility was driven by the length of the waiting list for nursery places and concerns that failure to meet this demand would result in childcare being sought elsewhere, which in turn might have meant having fewer users than expected once the extension was completed. What little capacity remains will be fully taken up by the end of December, based on advance registrations.
- 5.12 In order to accommodate Sure Start activities displaced by the use of Denny's Den for nursery provision, arrangements have been made to use Conisbrough Library and St. Peter's Church Hall in Conisbrough, as well as the Youth Club in Denaby (for the after school club). In addition, more after school activities will take place away from Story Book House (e.g. taking young people skating).

- 5.13 Unfortunately, these changes have not been effectively communicated to users, resulting in confusion and some resentment in relation to the lack of awareness and the non-availability of Denny's Den to its previous users. The net effect of these changes seems to be that some of these previous users have declined to use the replacement facilities, but equally use of these replacement facilities appears to have attracted some new users, especially people in Conisbrough who found accessing Story Book House difficult/inconvenient.
- 5.14 It is proposed that a satellite building be constructed at the Wellgate Centre in Conisbrough, which it was hoped would be open by late Summer 2004, prior to the delays reported above. An added complication is that there is a sitting tenant on the site who will need to be persuaded to vacate and at the time of writing this report was not minded so to do. It is however hoped that a contract will have been let by the end of October 2003.
- 5.15 In the early part of this evaluation, there were mixed messages about the degree of consultation in Conisbrough in relation to the proposed new Sure Start building. Some of those interviewed thought there had been a lot of consultation whilst others reported that plans had been drawn up by Doncaster MBC without any consultation as to the appropriateness of the proposed site or the design of the building. In particular, there was criticism of a failure to draw on the experience of those who had worked in and used Story Book House. A number of interviewees said that they had not been invited to take part in any discussion as to what is needed, what purposes the building would serve etc. At the same time, they believed there to be exciting opportunities to establish something creative, innovative and offering significant benefits to local parents/children.
- 5.16 However, it ought to be recorded that amongst the consultations that did take place was a 'Planning for Real' exercise with residents of Conisbrough and Denaby Main. Sure Start staff went into schools and built a model of the area with children from Year 6. The model was then taken to 14 different events and people were able to pick 'flags' with issues of interest/concern and 'spike' them into the model in the corresponding areas.

- 5.17 Furthermore, potential uses for the building and some design issues were discussed with local people at a consultation day in Conisbrough on the 16th of August 2003. Consultations were conducted with a total of 133 people (91 females and 42 males), 36 of whom were under 12 years of age. A full report is available separately from Sure start, but the key findings were:
- The most popular facility/activity requested was a soft play area, followed by family fun days, day trips and an after school club (for 5-8 year olds).
 - Most of the adult attendees were parents with either 1 or 2 children under 5.
 - Most of the adult attendees were in their 20s.
- 5.18 The cost of the new building is estimated to be around £250,000 and capital monies will be sought in the context of DM&C's designation as a Children's Centre. It is unlikely to operate as a nursery (given existing/planned provision at Story Book House) and is more likely to provide space for a multiplicity of uses. One specific option being considered is to provide soft play facilities, subject to reviewing other possible locations for such a facility locally, given the current absence of any provision in Conisbrough. There is likely to be a kitchen, to provide catering facilities, and a small amount of office space to which some staff currently based at Story Book House would relocate.
- 5.19 Indeed, the opening of the Conisbrough facility may require some redeployment of staff but might also offer another option for the delivery of some services, such as those provided by Health Visitors. It might also enable some extension of Sure Start activities, such as breakfast and after school clubs. In addition it is hoped that some entirely new activities/facilities might be provided, in particular soft play.
- 5.20 In respect of sustainability, it is also important to note that the proposed new building in Conisbrough could generate income through the hiring of facilities to other organisations as well as local people (children's birthday parties etc.).

Summary

- 5.21 Considerable efforts have been made/are being made to address issues relating to accommodation. In this regard, it is impossible to please all of its users all of the time, but once its plans come to fruition, Sure Start should be able to please most of the people most of the time. In particular, plans to provide transport to SBH, to develop a new building in Conisbrough and more use of outreach/other facilities should all help more people to access Sure Start services. In addition, the planned extension to SBH will increase its capacity, in terms of offering more nursery places and providing a room for the use of parents.

6.0 OPERATION OF THE PROGRAMME

6.1 Whilst it is easy to be wise after the event, it now seems clear that the amount of time required to get the programme operational was significantly underestimated. It also appears that there was pressure from the National Sure Start Unit to spend the allocated budget.

6.2 The operation of the programme in its early days seems to have subsequently been hampered by a number of issues:

- the split between the two communities, despite their close geographical proximity, made all the more severe by difficulties in accessing Denaby from Conisbrough.
- The ineffectiveness of the original Board.
- The initial absence of a coherent approach to developing/funding activities (e.g. no appraisal information for projects, no monitoring information), leading to both duplication of provision and lack of continuity, which is confusing for parents.
- An apparent mistrust on the part of statutory providers, which was said to have damaged initial partnership working with the Sure Start Programme. (e.g. it was initially envisaged that the centre would be used by other health professionals, such as CPN and Dietician, but this hasn't really happened).
- The adoption of a somewhat insular approach, with Sure Start being very focused on what it is doing, but in doing so failing to involve itself in things going on in wider the community.

6.3 Nevertheless, more positive views indicated that Sure Start has been a catalyst for joint working and that has shown statutory service providers an alternative and aspirational model of service delivery to the community, being more customer focussed.

6.4 In addition, it is to be noted that most of the issues described above have been or are being addressed. Specifically:

- difficulties in accessing facilities in Denaby from Conisbrough, should be addressed in part by the proposed new building in Conisbrough and also by plans to improve transport links (mentioned later in this section).
- The reconstitution of the Board has resulted in the formation of a more dynamic and committed body.
- Project appraisal forms have been developed, and new monitoring procedures are being put in place in line with DM&C's designation as a Children's Centre.
- Attempts are now being made to work with community/voluntary groups locally. One example is the financial contribution made by DM&C to physical improvements to St. Peter's Church Hall, which hosts a thriving play group.

Family Support Team (FST)

6.5 This team brings together services previously delivered by mainstream providers, in terms of nursery provision and health visitors, but faces the considerable challenge of tackling issues that were addressed by the mainstream providers in a different fashion.

6.6 Some interviewees regarded this work as historically being about ticking boxes, i.e. carrying out visits to families with new babies for the sake of recording that visits have taken place. The emphasis was said to have been on quantifying these exercises rather than considering them in qualitative terms i.e. assessing the extent to which some parents were having difficulties and the extent to which visits were helping them to address these difficulties or were pointing them towards possible solutions.

- 6.7 The FST seeks to develop relationships with individual parents in order to try to focus attention on the specific issues that they face and to be able to deliver targeted support. Progress is considered to be slow, but this is thought to reflect the nature of the local area, in terms of the numbers of parents with difficulties, the complex nature of some of these difficulties and the unwillingness of many parents to recognise that they need support and be prepared to accept it. Indeed, it is recognised that some parents are reluctant to access such support and in some cases are hostile to the notion. A lot of time and effort therefore has to be expended on simply persuading parents to visit Story Book House.
- 6.8 A continuum has now been established which clearly sets out which members of the FST should be making visits, when they should be making them. The outcomes of these visits are recorded, as are any implications/recommendations for future actions. Such a system offers the considerable advantages of ensuring transparency of service delivery, with team members knowing what is required of them and how what they are doing fits into the package of support being delivered. It also ensures that beneficiaries receive a comprehensive package of services and yet are not being swamped with approaches from several individuals at the same time.
- 6.9 A system is in place which identifies every woman whose pregnancy is confirmed ('books in pregnant', in the local jargon). An initial visit is made to every pregnant woman and return visits subsequently made in order to ensure that each individual is offered every encouragement to access the range of support services available to them. This continues after the birth of the baby, with a health visitor visiting the family home within 12-14 days of the birth. Thereafter there are many different routes through which the FST seeks to engage with families, such as playgroups, tumbletots, baby clinics etc. There are also birthday parties held each month for children whose birthdays fall within a particular month.

- 6.10 Having developed and maintained such links, members of the FST will then refer families to other Sure Start colleagues where they believe that other forms of support would be beneficial. To that extent, it is clearly very important that Sure Start staff are well informed about all Sure Start activities and that they do not see families as just their customers but potential beneficiaries of a much wider range of support services.
- 6.11 A group of parents meet on a weekly basis to plan activities and trips, taking responsibility for every aspect of their organisation. Under the Sure Start banner, and with support from a Sure Start Health Visitor, they organised 4 activities during the Summer of 2003. Generating interest was done purely by word of mouth, by both parents and the Health Visitor, and is regarded as the most effective means of advertising such activities within the local area.
- 6.12 Aligning a range of services within the FST has not been without its problems, but this is hardly surprising given that it has involved bringing together people from different service providers, each used to their own cultures, working practices and approaches to tackling their own particular jobs. These issues are reported to have been resolved, and any tensions such as they exist are considered to be no more significant than those that might be found between members of any team working in the type of environment within which the FST operates.
- 6.13 In some cases though, benefits to families come not so much from accessing support services from statutory bodies as socialising and interacting with other families. Quite often, parents derive enormous benefits just from talking to other parents, giving them an opportunity to escape from what can for some be an oppressive and lonely environment within the home, to share their experiences with others, to empathise with others and to learn from others.

- 6.14 Although a lot of effort has had to be expended in engaging with mothers, the FST believes that it is being successful, especially by targeting schools and parent and toddler groups. However, attempts to engage with fathers have met with very limited success. This is attributed to a number of factors. First, the culture of the local area is said to be such that childcare has been seen traditionally as primarily the mother's rather than the father's responsibility. Second, rates of male employment are thought to be higher than rates of female employment, reinforcing the view held by some that caring for children is the responsibility of the mother but also meaning it more likely that mothers rather than fathers will be able to access Sure Start activities during the day. It would therefore be interesting to explore whether any activities that might be organised during evenings or weekends (when Story Book House is presently closed) would elicit a better response from fathers, possibly based around activities at the new leisure centre. Thirdly, the female-dominated environment – with all FST staff being female and the vast majority of their active clients being mothers – is thought to be off putting and even intimidating to fathers, and again reinforces the stereotype of childcare being the responsibility of women. Story Book House is said to be viewed very much as a place where women rather than men go. Fourthly, some of those interviewed believed that Sure Start represents a challenge to men to change their attitudes to caring for their children and involving themselves much more fully in the early years development of their children. It was suggested that this was a challenge which many men were simply not prepared to meet.
- 6.15 Beneficiaries of services delivered through Sure Start are probably unaware of the programme in many instances, believing that they are seeing a Health Visitor in much the same way as they and/or their friends and family have done before. Whilst in some respects this doesn't matter, there would be benefits in establishing the Sure Start brand, not least in challenging misconceptions about what it stands for by demonstrating its key responsibilities. Some staff believe that it may have taken as long as a year for Sure Start to properly find its feet and for it to become recognised within the local communities.

- 6.16 It seems that a lot of parents/children attend some of the more social activities, such as childrens' parties, but do not get involved in the more overtly educational activities. Indeed, there is a concern amongst some staff that events/activities in respect of which there has been an incentive offered to attend may have achieved their short term aim of encouraging participation but might actually have harmed the prospects for more meaningful long term engagement. On the other hand, some interviewees were concerned that charges for some services/activities were too high and were putting off some potential users.

Early Years Team (EYT)

- 6.17 The EYT is managed by a qualified nursery nurse who has responsibility for a team of 30 working in the private day nursery and is the Children's Fund Team Leader. Previously the EYT provided childcare sessions in the creche in the old Sure Start building, as well as a lot of one-to-one sessions with families in their own home and within a local nursery.
- 6.18 The nursery offers 38 (full time equivalent) places, shared amongst 129 children. 50% of places in the nursery must go to children from families living within the local Sure Start area. The actual ratio is more like two thirds local and one third external. Interestingly, given questions raised over the accessibility of Story Book House for Conisbrough residents, there are more children in the nursery from Conisbrough than from Denaby (roughly a 60/40 ratio) although most of those on the waiting list are from Denaby.
- 6.19 The nursery has the equipment and trained staff to accommodate children with special educational needs but does not currently have any such children in the nursery. In January 2003 it was reported that the day nursery had achieved 72% occupancy, projected to rise to 83% by April and 100% by June 2003. This was achieved, and the nursery is now at full capacity.

- 6.20 Unlike the FST the EYT is much more Centre-based. It mainly attracts interest from mothers and grandparents and recognises a need to engage much more effectively with fathers. The EYT's main task is to educate parents about the benefits of pre-school education. Whilst parents who have themselves experienced the benefits of education do not need convincing, it is believed that many people in the local Sure Start area are much less aware of how important pre-school education can be. In addition, there does not yet appear to be evidence that the Male Inclusion worker is involved in re-shaping services as opposed to just running his own project in isolation.
- 6.21 Discussions with users of the nursery gave rise to mixed views, with some parents fulsome in their praise but others expressing misgivings in relation to the standard of care on offer. Other Sure Start activities, especially Baby Massage and Breast Friends, received very positive comments. This seemed to arise in relation to the activities themselves, the manner in which they were provided and the social interaction they encouraged between parents. At the same time, there is a view that Sure Start was being used as a crèche by local parents who were not getting involved in other activities, which is a fundamental element of the Sure Start ethos.
- 6.22 Some users expressed disquiet about what they felt was a focus on children whose places in the nursery was being funded (by the State). It was reported that some activities available to all children had been withdrawn during school holidays when 'funded' children were not in attendance. Whilst there may be good reasons as to why they have been necessary, such practices have clearly been divisive and do not promote the inclusive approach that Sure Start ought to be striving to adopt. They can also be a source of resentment amongst families that pay considerable sums for childcare.

- 6.23 Nevertheless, parents of children who have benefited from the EYT's work, especially those with older children who are able to make direct comparisons, report being able to see real benefits. In particular, those whose children participated in EYT activities and have now started school, have noted how much better prepared these children were for school compared with older siblings. This is in terms of both their learning development and their ability to interact positively with other children and with adults. However, as noted later in this report, this view is contradicted by comments from local schools that they had not yet seen any noticeable improvement in the quality of intake.
- 6.24 There were reports of difficulties in engaging with some families, and much of this was blamed on misconceptions of what Sure Start is all about. It appears that some people within the local community believe that Sure Start is about providing help to 'problem' families, those whose children with learning difficulties or who are involved in drug/substance abuse. To that extent, there seems to be a stigma attached to Sure Start and therefore a reluctance amongst some local families to associate themselves with the programme. The perception that Sure Start is focused on disadvantaged families is thought to put off a large number of people – both those who do not want their children to mix with disadvantaged families and those who feel patronised by being classed as disadvantaged. There is a clear need for Sure Start to sell itself as a resource for ALL families.
- 6.25 There remains a feeling that Sure Start could do more to engage effectively with parents, both in terms of engaging with a larger number/broader spread of families and in consolidating existing relationships with parents that may only access a narrow range of Sure Start services. In both instances this might be addressed through more effective communication with parents and other carers.
- 6.26 Other than in respect of nursery provision, most of the families that the EYT deals with are from Denaby, as there appears to be problems in accessing Story Book House from Conisbrough, or at least a reluctance on the part of some parents to do so. In order to try to resolve this issue, the EYT collaborated with the Early Years (Development and Childcare) Partnership in Doncaster in carrying out consultations with families in Conisbrough.

- 6.27 As a result, consideration is now being given to acquiring 2 people carriers to be used to transport people across to Denaby, as Sure Start staff believe that more families would participate in activities at Story Book House if they had access to convenient and reliable transport services. Furthermore, this could also be used to employ male drivers thus providing clear evidence that Sure Start is something in which men can play an active role. Adopting these sorts of tactics was agreed at a recent Regional Co-ordinators network meeting as an effective means of engaging with men.
- 6.28 With the extension of the nursery will come an extension of opening hours, to include Saturday mornings. It is envisaged that the extension of nursery opening hours to Saturday mornings will attract new and possibly different types of parents to Sure Start. This of course remains to be seen, but it seems unlikely that this change will attract some of those families that have proved harder to reach.

Central Development Team

- 6.29 The Centre Co-ordinator is a Human Resources professional recruited from the former Doncaster Health Authority. In addition to HR matters she leads on liaison with Doncaster West PCT (the lead body for the Sure Start programme), administration, programme monitoring and publicity.

Projects

- 6.30 Detailed evaluations were conducted of 4 Sure Start projects:
- Male Inclusion Worker
 - Day Nursery
 - Drop in Services
 - Time Out for Parents
- 6.31 Separate reports on each of these projects appear in the Annex to this report. Key findings emerging from these evaluations were:

Male Inclusion Worker

- The project has established productive links with local / regional / national initiatives working with fathers;
- Dearne Valley Dads provides strong support and guidance for the work of the Male Inclusion worker;
- The project needs to play a key role in re-shaping the Sure Start Programme and not just focus on delivering activities;
- All Sure Start funded projects need to overtly contribute to the male inclusion agenda;
- The length of time required to see tangible results cannot be underestimated;
- There is a need for a clear and consistent approach across the Sure Start Programme in working with fathers / men;
- The project needs to establish a clear action plan with targets and milestones to assist monitoring of progress.

Day Nursery

- The project has established strong links with external partners;
- Whilst parents are encouraged to become involved there are concerns that local people are simply using Sure Start for basic childcare provision and are not seizing the other opportunities and activities available;
- The project provides a professional and flexible approach for local parents;
- The project adheres to all quality standards for childcare provision.

Drop in Services

- A lack of documentation including project appraisal and monitoring reports hampers full assessment of the project;
- Both the Early Years Team (EYT) and Family Support Team (FST) have experienced a lack of referral from a number of partner organisations;
- A failure to provide activities outside normal 'office hours' and at weekends has potentially limited the number of users of both projects;
- The project has successfully used a number of alternative venues to facilitate access for users and engage with a greater number of parents and children;

- The Parent Planning Group of the FST has experienced poor attendance and more work is required to strengthen the role and function of this group;
- Both the EYT and FST have tested a number of approaches thus providing a flexible approach to project development;
- More focussed promotional work is required to raise awareness of the services provided by the EYT and FST across the Sure Start area.

Time Out for Parents

- A lack of documentation including project appraisal and monitoring reports hampers full assessment of the project;
- The project needs to maximise referral from a range of partner organisations;
- The project provides a strong example of partnership working with the WEA;
- All attendees strongly support the project;
- The project has experienced difficulties in involving local fathers;
- The project needs to consider developing specific tailored training packages to encourage attendance from hard to reach groups (e.g. fathers, teenage parents);
- The project needs to consider running sessions from a range of other sites to facilitate access to and take-up of training places;
- More formal links need to be established with informal / formal training provision for attendees wishing to pursue further educational development;
- More focussed promotional work is required to raise awareness of the project across the Sure Start area.

Future Operation

6.32 In August 2003 a list of all Sure Start projects was drawn up, including those that had run their course, those that were ongoing and those that were planned. A comprehensive review of projects was instigated by the Sure Start Manager in September 2003. This required the individual leading on each project internally (at whatever level) and externally to complete a form, offering a description of the project, detailing its objectives, identifying its target audience etc., to be returned by 3rd October 2003.

- 6.33 In respect of ongoing/planned projects, project leaders were also required to submit details of the full resource implications of running the project from April 2004 onwards, including staff time. In respect of completed projects, an explanation had to be provided as to why the project ended. The overall aim of this review is to ensure that projects (continue to) meet Sure Start aims and objectives.
- 6.34 Provided that the information generated by this process is analysed properly (i.e. through the application of objective criteria) – and there is no reason to believe it won't be – this internal review should provide an excellent means of ensuring that Sure Start activities remain focused, well balanced and cost-effective.
- 6.35 Indeed, more generally, hitherto there has been a lack of information generated/procured which could have helped Sure Start to determine how it could add value to historical mainstream service provision. It is therefore encouraging that this is now being addressed, both internally and externally.
- 6.36 From April 2003 Job Centre Plus introduced the new post of Childcare Partnership Manager (CPM) in each of its district offices, designed to address the issue of childcare as a barrier to employment. The postholder in Doncaster has spent a large part of her time over the past 6 months networking in order to explain and promote her role. She joined the Board of this Sure Start in June 2003 and is on the Boards of 4 of the other 5 Sure Starts in Doncaster. All of the Childcare Partnership Managers across Yorkshire and Humber meet every 4 weeks in order to share experiences/best practice.
- 6.37 One of the key contributions JC+ can make is to provide Sure Start with a profile of its target audience, for example producing statistics on lone parents, workless families etc. with children within particular age brackets. This information could be taken by Sure start to assess the extent to which it is engaging with hard to reach groups, especially when allied to its own monitoring/management information.

- 6.38 The CPM for Doncaster has reviewed this Sure Start's Implementation Plan in order to understand what the programme is seeking to achieve and therefore consider in an informed manner what assistance JC+ can provide. In addition, the CPM has secured a place for Sure Start on the Community Partnership Board.
- 6.39 The potential contribution of the CPM ought not to be underestimated. Information that the CPM can provide is likely to represent a powerful tool and should feature prominently in Sure Start's 2004-06 Delivery Plan in terms of establishing the nature and scale of the groups on which Sure Start services ought to be targeted as a priority.
- 6.40 In addition, there may be a future role for JC+ to use sure Start as a vehicle through which to offer benefits advice, through lone parent advisors and other staff. Clearly though, this will need to be properly planned and resourced, and is therefore unlikely to feature in the short term. Nevertheless there is exciting potential for longer term collaborations which might involve Sure Start and JC+ offering a package of services to local parents designed to ensure that they receive their full benefits entitlement whilst at the same time seeking to address barriers to employment, particularly in relation to childcare.

Summary

- 6.41 DM&C Sure Start faced a challenging agenda, and initially it struggled to cope. Moreover, at a time when it should have been seeking to win friends it appears to have made some enemies. However, this situation has been turned around and DM&C is both getting to grips with the job in hand and doing so through much more positive partnership working. It is important to recognise its achievements in bringing significant benefits to parents/children but also to acknowledge that more still remains to be done in encouraging existing users to participate in a broader range of activities and to embrace harder to reach groups.

7.0 RELATIONSHIPS WITH MAINSTREAM AND VOLUNTARY SECTOR SERVICE PROVIDERS

Health and Social Services

- 7.1 Relationships with external bodies are said to be mixed. Whilst there is excellent co-ordination of activities with some organisations others are reported to have wanted nothing to do with Sure Start and therefore have refused to co-operate or share information. This seems to have been motivated by a feeling amongst some statutory bodies that Sure Start is stepping on their toes. Nevertheless, some organisations are said to have come to accept Sure Start over time, especially those able to appreciate that it can add value to their mainstream provision and should therefore be regarded positively.
- 7.2 The implicit criticism of mainstream provision in establishing a new mechanism for and new approach to service delivery appears to have created tensions between Sure Start and some of its partner organisations. It is perhaps understandable that there might be some resentment amongst mainstream service providers of the resources that have been made available to Sure Start, especially in view of the squeeze on their finances over many years. However, it might be argued that the focus of attention ought to be on meeting the needs of families rather than who is providing services and how they are going about it i.e. adopting a consumer-led rather than a producer-led approach. It was suggested by one interviewee that the jealousies of mainstream providers had manifested themselves in actions which deliberately sought to undermine the work that the FST has been doing. Whether this is true or not, there appears to be something of a war of attrition between the FST and mainstream providers that cannot be good for any of the parties and certainly not for the people that each of them has responsibilities towards.

Local Schools

- 7.3 Within the Sure Start area there are: 1 secondary school (Northcliff), 5 feeder schools for Northcliff, 1 Roman Catholic school that feeds into an RC secondary school, 1 special school and 1 separate infant school. Of the 93 schools in Doncaster, one of those in Denaby Main comes 93rd in a league table reflecting proportions of pupils on free school meals and from single parent families.
- 7.4 There are two schools in Denaby and two in Conisbrough which have nurseries that accommodate children from the Sure Start area. Each of them is provided with Sure Start nursery nurses for four sessions a week, providing the nurseries with a valuable staff resource at no cost to them.
- 7.5 However, whilst such support is welcome, some local schools are clearly dissatisfied with what Sure Start was delivering and how it was operating until recently. Joint working is said to have been carried out on Sure Start's terms and appeared to be something Sure Start felt it had to do rather than wanted to do. In some instances schools had rejected this approach and in one case claimed not even to have been given the opportunity to work with Sure Start. More generally, local schools felt that –from their perspective - health hasn't been as good a vehicle for taking Sure Start forward as education would have been.
- 7.6 In some instances, the absence of constructive (or any) dialogue had led to duplication of/competing provision - schools offer out of school clubs in structured sessions, whereas Sure Start offers clubs that are for play. Consequently attendance at the school sessions has been limited and concern was expressed that children aren't getting the educational support they require.
- 7.7 In addition there was concern that Sure Start's nursery programme is damaging school provision. Sure Start can take children earlier and thus has been able to accept some of the children that would have used school provision.

- 7.8 There was particular concern about the lack of positive impact of Sure Start on local schools, as they haven't witnessed any evidence of improvement in the children entering into the school system - in particular in literacy and language development - even though Sure Start has been running for a number of years. A possible explanation is that the targets of Sure Start and the local schools haven't been aligned, and thus it is difficult to determine whether the Sure Start programme is contributing to the development and progress of children.
- 7.9 In this context, the early designation of DM&C as a Children's Centre is all the more crucial. The audit of early years provision in the area, review of the strategies that underpin it and development of a strategy and action plan for the integration of services should address the practical issues raised and promote much more positive working relationships. In this context, Sure Start appears to have taken all reasonable steps to engage with local schools with early years provision, albeit that some have been more willing to collaborate than others.

Education Action Zone

- 7.10 The local EAZ was established in April 2002, although the Manager did not take up her post until September 2002. It is the only one in Doncaster Borough. It has a number of aims: to raise levels of achievement for all children in literacy, numeracy and the sciences; to address social inclusion; to involve more parents in their children's learning; to promote greater use of ICT; and to remove barriers to learning.
- 7.11 To date liaison with the EAZ has been limited, in spite of there being considerable scope for developing complementary strategies, co-ordinating activities and exchanging information. It is to be hoped that the early designation of DM&C as a Children's Centre and the appointment of the EAZ Manager as a Sure Start Board member will encourage more effective collaborations in future.

Community/Voluntary Playgroups

- 7.12 Some of the local playgroups, such as those held at the Ivanhoe Centre and St. Peter's Church Hall, appear to be attracting many of the parents/children that Sure Start would like to access. However, rather than opting to work with these groups to try to build on what they are doing, the approach adopted during the early programme period seems to have been to try to compete with them for the attentions of parents. As these groups had already attracted parents/children, a more sensible approach would have been to see what could be done to support these groups and what more could be done with what is essentially a captive audience.
- 7.13 In the early part of the evaluation period, it was apparent that links with the community and voluntary sector locally could have been much better. Such groups have been established longer than Sure Start, have credibility locally and operate networks that could be used for Sure Start's benefit. However, such opportunities were not being exploited.
- 7.14 More recently, a much more positive approach has been adopted. For example, St. Peter's Church Hall has been given Sure Start funding to reinforce the floor, install new lighting and redecorate. Furthermore, there is a clear desire on the part of the Sure Start Manager to continue to support this and other play groups locally.
- 7.15 Amongst parents taking their children to these playgroups there was a mixed response, with some having used Sure Start being positive about the experience, but more generally an overwhelming lack of understanding about what Sure Start was offering. Nevertheless, with better links having been established, it is to be hoped that in time Sure Start may be able to use these groups as conduits through which to engage much more effectively with local parents/other carers.

Wider Links

- 7.16 Whilst it is recognised that partnership working is happening with other Sure Start Programmes, there is a feeling that it needs to be taking place at a number of levels (board, management and staff).
- 7.17 There is a Family Support Group, which is a sub-group of the LSP and also an EYDCP. It has not yet been possible to determine the extent to which this Sure Start Programme has engaged in this agenda.
- 7.18 More generally, there has been a movement towards more outreach work, which has helped Sure Start to develop closer working links with partner organisations, to reach new people and facilitate greater participation by existing beneficiaries.

Summary

- 7.19 The mixed reception Sure Start was given by external bodies was not helped by the absence of constructive (or any) dialogue between DM&C and some of its key partners. This will also have contributed to duplication of/competing provision in respect of activities such as after school clubs. However, the early designation of DM&C as a Children's Centre has been crucial, with the audit of early years provision in the area, review of the strategies of relevant organisations and development of a strategy and action plan producing direct benefits and leading to the development of much more positive relationships.

8.0 OVERALL ASSESSMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- 8.1 As a Trailblazer amongst Sure Starts, Denaby Main & Conisbrough was always in the position of having to learn by its mistakes but, to its credit, it has done so. During the course of this evaluation it has been transformed from a programme that lacked leadership, direction and focus, and which was failing to engage positively with key partners to one that is having a positive impact, building stronger relationships with its stakeholders and has an infrastructure in place that should enable it to take on the challenges that lie ahead.
- 8.2 The general view appears to be that although many local parents could have coped without Sure Start that they have nevertheless enjoyed significant benefits from what the programme has been able to offer. However, those that have benefited are described as the more motivated parents and those more receptive to the sorts of opportunities that Sure Start has presented. There is still concern that Sure Start has been unable to engage with those which, by definition, are hardest to reach and yet who might have the potential to benefit most from what the programme has to offer.
- 8.3 In order to meet what is undoubtedly its major challenge for the future, Sure Start may need to adopt an even more flexible approach to service delivery in some instances. The types of people that would fall into the hardest to reach groups may not be attracted to Story Book House and all of the formalities that are perceived to go with it. Furthermore, protestations that Sure Start is not focusing on those with drugs or other such problems may have been interpreted by some as meaning Sure Start was not for them rather than not just for them. However, even if these people could be persuaded to come into the Centre, this may not be well received by other users who may not wish to be associated with them or have their children interact with the children of parents with particular problems.

- 8.4 Clearly the Sure Start Board and management would not want to see the goodwill which the programme has built up dissipated. Whilst considerable effort will need to be invested trying to engage with those who have not fully participated in the programme, careful consideration will need to be given as to how this can be achieved in a way which does not undermine other aspects of Sure Start's work. One specific possibility is to work with local schools and Job Centre+, who could help Sure Start target more deprived families as they have records of children who receive free school meals, lone parents etc..
- 8.5 The restructuring of the Board and the introduction of new members appears already to have had an impact and, along with the hard work put in by senior management and staff, can be credited with addressing a number of the points raised in the interim evaluation report. Nevertheless, there is clearly a need to guard against repeating past mistakes and in particular to prevent any distance developing between the Board and the staff. In addition, many original Board members failed to take ownership of the programme and to guard against new Board members becoming disengaged one suggestion would be for individuals to become a lead member in respect of specific issues/projects. This would promote active involvement in the work that Sure Start is doing, would improve communications between the Board and staff/parents and would enable projects to be scrutinised more closely by a Board member which should in turn facilitate the process by which projects seek to gain board approval.
- 8.6 Until recently, the programme has been driven by the supply side rather than the demand side. That is to say, the generous resources available have been spent on activities designed to appeal to the greatest number of people and/or based on assumptions about what parents/children might want and benefit from. They have not been directed on the basis of a careful consideration of target groups and individual needs, nor have they taken full account of support available to parents/children from mainstream and voluntary sector service providers. Worse still, where Sure Start should have been working with such organisations it was, on occasion, working against them, and in some instances there was a complete breakdown of the relationship between Sure Start and what should have been an important stakeholder.

- 8.7 It should however be made clear that this description applies to how Sure Start operated (and perceptions of how it operated) during its first two years or so. In certain quarters Sure Start had become known as 'No Start'. It should be stressed however that the early cynicism of some of Sure Start's partners was not matched by the parents and children who had benefited from and valued its services. Indeed, one parent reported that her child had come to refer to the programme as 'My Start'. It was however recognised that improvements needed to be made, and during the course of 2003 much has been done to address DM&C's weaknesses. Whilst insufficient time has yet elapsed to enable substantial progress to have been made in addressing these issues, there is no doubt that over the past 6 months efforts have been made to lay much firmer foundations on which the programme can now build.
- 8.8 In particular, success in gaining early designation as a Children's Centre and the award of Neighbourhood Nursery funding are achievements in themselves but also provide means of addressing some of the key issues raised in this report. At the same time, given that there appears to be some confusion in relation to what Sure Start is seeking to do and who it exists to serve, the early designation as a Children's Centre threatens to muddy the waters still further. This adds even more weight to the need to address the issue of communicating clearly with local families.
- 8.9 In order for Sure Start to be more effective it must develop a clear strategy as a matter of urgency. To date, there has been no comprehensive assessment of the needs of local parents/children and the extent to which other organisations are meeting those needs or could be helped by Sure Start to meet those needs. As such, it has not been possible to set priorities and establish target outputs/outcomes. Even within the activities in which the programme is engaged, there has been inadequate consultation with providers of similar or complementary services/facilities and therefore the added value that has been generated has been much less than it could and should have been. In addition, little thought has yet been given to the sustainability of Sure Start activities once its funding has run its course, including the nursery and community café.

8.10 In order for Sure Start to be able to identify where the gaps and shortcomings are and respond accordingly, there are a number of key questions that it needs to address (and it is acknowledged that it is now doing so/intending to do so):

- How does it relate to the early years development plans of each of the local schools?
- How does it relate to the strategy and action plan of the EAZ?
- How does it relate to the activities/facilities provided by local voluntary groups?
- On which groups should it target its provision?

8.11 The vehicle for addressing all of these issues is the Sure Start Delivery Plan. The current Delivery Plan covers the period up to the end of March 2004. A new Delivery Plan for 2004-06 is in the process of being prepared. Much of what has been put in train over recent months should enable Sure Start to answer the questions posed above. Should it be able to do so, this would mark a very important milestone on what has been a difficult journey over the past year or so, and which could see the initiative make even further progress down what ought to be a much less bumpy road ahead.