



# Evaluation January 2004

A Review of the Evaluation  
Activity Undertaken by Sure  
Start Myton and St. Andrew's



[Consortium] Hull

## **Sure Start Myton and St Andrews - An Overview of Evaluation Activity to Date**

Sure Start Myton and St Andrew's are currently undertaking a wide programme of evaluation activity. A Monitoring and Evaluation Officer is in post to oversee the day to day monitoring and evaluation of the local programme. In addition, Sure Start Myton and St Andrews have contracted independent evaluators to conduct more in-depth evaluation. As part of their commitment to evaluation, the local programme initially commissioned the following pieces of work:

- A Community Consultation Exercise – this was conducted to inform local families about Sure Start. A 'parent wish list' was generated, capturing what it is that families would like from services.
- A Mapping Exercise of Locally Delivered Services – this was conducted to support partnership working and avoid overlapping. There was a particular focus on involving services for asylum seekers.

More recently, Sure Start Myton and St Andrews has undertaken the following:

- Encouraged and supported staff to ensure that evaluation is an important part of any activity
- Attended workshops on evaluation to ensure effective input into the evaluation strategy
- Informed parents about evaluation and supported 'Parent Voice' to be involved in the evaluation
- Encouraged formal and in-formal feedback from parents and professionals
- Produced a portfolio of monitoring material to evidence the work of the Sure Start Local Programme

The Sure Start Monitoring and Evaluation Officer has been focusing on the monitoring of particular groups and activities by looking at the numbers of registered and un-registered children and adults attending. The Officer has also been capturing the comments of people attending these groups and activities. The groups and activities include The Ladybirds Parent and Toddler Group, Busy Babes (play group), and various day trips and parties.

By examining these activities and services, Sure Start Myton and St Andrews have established that:

- The Sure Start Local Programme provides a wide range of social, cultural and learning opportunities for local families
- Families are generally happy with the activities and services provided
- Parents have ideas on how to develop activities
- Other agencies are working closely with Sure Start and this is resulting in positive outcomes

In order to move the evaluation forward, the Sure Start Myton and St Andrews now needs to concentrate on:

- Effectively documenting the evaluation process and fully analysing the data collected in order to inform service development
- Developing a creative and varied approach to evaluating activities
- Involving and engaging more parents and children in the evaluations
- Ensuring that people are aware of the findings and resulting actions

## Independent Evaluation

Sure Start Myton and St Andrews invited several organisations to tender for the completion of various evaluation activities. A local independent evaluation team was appointed to carry out the following tasks:

- Advise Sure Start managers and their management boards on evaluation strategies and assist in the development of strategies to also include cost-effectiveness
- Address progress and challenges to date for staff
- Address issues such as partnership and governance with the Management Board
- Review all monitoring and evaluation activity to date, advise on gaps and give recommendations
- Assess the outputs and outcomes of the programme in relation to targets and identify possible factors effecting performance
- Conduct a study regarding the Community Friends service and their partnership working with the Community Wardens
- Undertake an exploration of how the Sure Start programme is working with diversity

To date the independent evaluation team have:

- Worked closely with the Sure Start local programme and have involved a wide range of stakeholders in the evaluation process
- Established an evaluation sub-group that will steer the evaluation process. The sub-group consists of members of the evaluation team, the Sure Start Programme Manager, the Sure Monitoring and Evaluation Officer, and Parent Representatives
- Interviewed key staff, tackling issues such as stress management, joint working and professional development
- Investigated systems to enable the study of cost-effectiveness to be easily incorporated into the evaluation process
- Collected and reviewed all evaluation activity that has been conducted to date by the Sure Start Local Programme
- Drawn up a key recommendations list to assist staff in conducting small scale evaluations of the activities for which they are responsible
- Begun analysing data collected in order to address key themes with the Management Board
- Designed and commenced data collection for the two themed studies exploring the role of 'Community Friends' and 'Working with Diversity'

The independent evaluation activities are to be conducted over a two and a half year period and are due to be completed by 31<sup>st</sup> March 2006. The Sure Start Local Programme will work closely with the evaluation team to ensure that potential lessons make a positive contribution to service delivery.

## **Sure Start Myton and St Andrews - Exploring the Evaluation Work Undertaken**

Sure Start Myton and St Andrews have been evidencing their work by collecting monitoring data and requesting feedback from parents and carers. This report provides an independent overview of the materials presented to date and gives recommendations about how this work can be developed in the future.

### **The Ladybirds Parent and Toddler Group**

To evidence the work of the group, a graph was produced to illustrate the numbers of children and adults in attendance. The graph shows that attendance started off quite high with over 40 children attending. Over the following weeks attendance declines to only 5 in the third week. Attendance then picks up again in the fourth week. A monitoring chart is also included that highlights the numbers of children and adults that are attending but that are not registered with the Sure Start Local Programme. Reasons for session cancellation are also mentioned, for example school holidays. A copy of the programme is included demonstrating a commitment to inclusion as the programme has been translated into other languages.

A later report was produced illustrating how the sessions are organised and which of the Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets it is aiming to achieve.

### **Busy Babes**

Busy Babes was well attended and evidenced in a similar way to the Ladybirds Group. Parents and carers were encouraged to write comments on cut-out teddy bears. Five people wrote on the cut-outs and these comments were all positive, signalling that the group was fun, friendly and engaging. Later a comments list was completed by parents and carers and again this provided further positive feedback.

## Day Trips, Parties and Outings

The portfolio contained a series of evidence relating to day trips, parties and outings. These were:

- A trip to Hornsea Freeport
- A theatre trip to see Peter Pan
- The Halloween Party
- A trip to see Noddy at Hull Theatre
- The Christmas Party
- A trip to Sundown Adventure Land
- A trip to Bridlington
- Picnic in the Park
- Toddle in the Park

For each of the trips, parties and outings a register of the number of children and adults attending was kept. These showed that attendance was generally good. People were asked to give feedback about the day. This was usually collected on themed cut-outs, for example parents wrote comments on pumpkin shapes for the Halloween party. Some questionnaires were distributed, for example for the Sundown Adventure Land trip parents and carers were asked via a questionnaire what they had enjoyed about the day, how the day could be improved, and what other trips they would like to see.

Generally comments from parents and carers were very positive. For the Peter Pan trip parents wrote;

*'Got to be the best activity yet, very well organised...'*

*'My kids loved it, first time in ages we've done something together'*

For each trip, party or outing, a graph detailing the positive comments was constructed in order to show what families had liked the most about the day. This was usually the entertainment, the fun the children had experienced, and the fact that things had been well organised.

Also included for the majority of activities was a checklist to ensure that all safety considerations had been accounted for. In addition, examples of publicity were produced in other languages to ensure that non-english speaking families were able to be involved.

### **National Sure Start Month Fun Day – June 2003**

A series of evidence was collected to describe the Fun Day held in June. This included a newspaper article that highlighted the success of the event and a testimonial from the Action Officer. Several graphs were included to illustrate a breakdown of the costings of the event and also the positive comments made by people attending the day. Another graph showed what people would like to see at future events.

### **Testimonials and Thank You Cards**

Testimonials and messages of thanks provide a personal perspective to evaluation activity. Sure Start Myton and St Andrews had collected testimonials from nursery teachers about activities. They also kept a number of cards from parents who had been happy with the support they had received and also from students who had enjoyed being on placement with the local programme.

### **Staff Away Day**

23 questionnaires, completed by Sure Start staff, were included in the portfolio of evidence. The questionnaires asked what staff had found useful about the day, what was not useful and if they would like another staff away day in the future. Generally all staff had had some benefit from attending the day. The main themes stated were being able to come together as a team, celebrate their achievements, understand more about the programme's aims and objectives and contribute to improved communications.

A number of positive conclusions can be drawn from the evidence provided in the portfolio. These are:

- The services appear to be working effectively and have been well evidenced in terms of monitoring data
- There is clear evidence that parents and carers are being consulted about the services provided
- There is high level female parental and carer involvement
- The services appear to be improving confidence and social skills in families
- Sure Start appears to have an excellent reputation
- Parents appreciate the informal approach of Sure Start and the local delivery of services
- The Sure Start Local Programme has made positive links with other service providers and agencies
- Several services are well grounded particularly in terms of delivering PAS targets

Further work and analysis must be undertaken to identify those findings that may present challenges to the Sure Start Local Programme. A full exploration of the positive findings coupled with those findings that highlight potential difficulties will lead to a more informed strategy for the future development of the programme. The following section of the report gives suggestions on how Sure Start Myton and St Andrews could evaluate services more effectively so that they can then capture and make use of these emerging lessons.

It is also important to note that the portfolio provided to the independent evaluators does not cover all the activities provided by the Sure Start Local Programme. Some particular activities and programmes such as the Home Safety Scheme and other health related sessions were notably absent. This was probably due to the fact that the Sure Start Local Programme is in the early stages of evaluation and many of the services are still in infancy. Independent evaluators are keen to support any in-house evaluation activity and will offer advice where needed.

## **Adopting a more Effective Approach to In-House Evaluation of Services and Activities**

Although there has been significant work undertaken to monitor the services and activities provided by Sure Start Myton and St Andrews there remains a need for the Sure Start Local Programme to fully evaluate provision by undertaking a more thorough analysis of this work. When producing a portfolio of evidence for evaluation purposes it may prove to be more effective to follow a format as outlined below.

### **1. Providing context**

Understanding the background is a vital part of the evaluation of services and activities. It is important to know what the service and activity is trying to achieve. If the evaluation loses sight of this it will not be possible to determine whether or not a service or activity is operating effectively. In a small scale in-house evaluation, a paragraph detailing the aims and objectives of the service or activity along with a description of what actually goes on should provide sufficient context.

For Example:

During an evaluation of the 'Toddle About Activity Club', the evaluator would provide the context by giving consideration to the following:

- What is the activity club actually about?
- What does it involve?
- Who does it involve?
- When and where does it take place and for how long?
- How does it fit with the larger programme of activity?
- What is it trying to achieve?
- Does it aim towards specified targets?
- Costings?(where applicable)

## 2. Collecting and presenting Information

Collecting information is a central part of the evaluation process and requires much planning. Evaluators must determine what it is they want to know and what are the best methods of getting that information. Typical questions may include:

- Is the activity being well attended and if not, why not?
- What do parents hope to achieve by attending the sessions?
- What is going well?
- What is not going so well?
- What impact are the sessions having on families?
- Is everyone enjoying it?
- Is anything unexpected happening?
- How can things be improved?

This evidence can be collected using a variety of methods and different sources. Examples are:

- Collecting registers to verify attendance?
- Photographs (with consent) to give a full illustration of the sessions?
- Interviewing the activity leader to gain their perspective?
- Parents and Carers keeping reflective diaries?
- Holding a group discussion with parents and carers?
- Creatively working with children to identify their likes and dislikes?
- Producing a brief questionnaire to secure feedback from families?
- Examining records that may be kept to show the progress children have made?

The thought process behind the collection of information and the methods you used must be recorded. When producing an evaluation report, it is a requirement to describe the methodology you employed. A brief paragraph describing this will be sufficient in a small scale in-house evaluation. In more detailed research it is usual to provide a rationale for your investigations and choice of methodology.

### **3. Using the information collected**

This is fundamentally the most important part of the evaluation process as it is possible to draw valuable lessons from the information collected. The portfolio provided by Sure Start Myton and St Andrews contains a great deal of information, however there is a need for this information to be analysed in order to draw any conclusions that may be of benefit to the local programme. For example, the portfolio provided contains a lot of data relating to attendance, namely registers and contact lists. Graphs have been produced to better illustrate the levels of attendance and notes were made to account for weeks where there was no attendance. The next stage would then be to draw some conclusion regarding levels of service uptake, based on this data. It will then be possible to ascertain if any action is needed in order to bring about change. Therefore, in an evaluation portfolio it is necessary to present any conclusions that can be made from the data that has been generated.

### **4. Dealing with the lessons learned**

It is good practice in evaluation to not only identify potential lessons from the evaluation process but to also identify how these lessons can be translated into action. In a portfolio of evidence it would be useful to state the following:

- What has been learned as a result of the evaluation?
- What changes, if any, need to be made?
- How these changes will be made
- Any other information that will let people know the intentions for service development

## **Suggestions for Future Evaluation Work**

Consortium has been involved in evaluating several Sure Start programmes across the city. The following are some general points, based on their experience that will enhance the quality of the evaluation work undertaken by local programmes.

### **Creativity and variety:**

Questionnaires are often used in evaluation as they are a quick and easy tool for recording views and comments. However, people can become quite despondent when it comes to completing them due to the fact that they are faced with questionnaires and evaluation forms at every course and event. A little variety may encourage parents to take the time to think carefully about their answers. Suggestions include, closing a course with coffee and a discussion group where someone graphically records the comments made, or making a video diary of the event and asking for comments as the event is unfolding.

### **Involving Parents:**

Many of the parents using Sure Start services have skills in appraising activities gained through the completion of a ten week course in participatory appraisal. Other parents are attending courses in basic skills. It may be helpful to the evaluation process for parents to be instrumental in designing and carrying out evaluation work. This will assist parents to further develop their skills and bring variety and creativity to the process. In addition, other parents may find it easier to be more open with parent evaluators.

### **Ensuring reach:**

It is valuable to the evaluation process to secure the views of a wide range of people. Usually children themselves are left out of evaluation as adults feel that they are too young to be able to give valid opinions. However, there are ways to communicate with children that can be evidenced as part of the evaluation. It is also worth ensuring that other family members are able to contribute,

particularly fathers, as they are currently under-represented as a service user group.

**Anonymous suggestion boxes:**

Parents may wish to make comments about the services they are receiving without feeling that they may risk jeopardising the service. Perhaps anonymous suggestion boxes could be used for anyone to drop ideas into at any time.

**Relating back to Sure Start principles and targets:**

It is important to examine the purpose behind the service or activity and ensure that this is reflected in evaluation material. Evaluation is more than simply asking people what they did and didn't enjoy. It is important to also measure the extent to which the service or activity helped to achieve a strategic objective, principle or target.

**Addressing the lessons learned:**

Sure Start has made a firm commitment to evaluating the programme; as part of the portfolio, it may be helpful to indicate how this material will be used, in practical terms, to shape the service. An evaluation update could be produced to inform parents and professionals about the feedback that has been received and what action may be taken as a result.