

SureStart Longton South Annual Evaluation Report 2003

Compiled by Pam Carter, Senior Evaluation Officer, February 2004

The Senior Evaluation Officer was appointed in August to provide an evaluation service to three wave five SureStart programmes and to facilitate a Stoke-on-Trent city-wide evaluation across six programmes. This report details progress between August and December 2003.

Familiarisation

Since taking up post, the Senior Evaluation officer has been getting to know the programme. An advantage of an internal evaluator is the ability to gain an in-depth understanding of the way that the Programme works and to be able to work closely with local parents. The Programme is fast-moving and handling complex change. Longton South SureStart has now made most of its investment decisions and will be facing the exciting challenge of merging with a local nursery to become a Childrens' Centre. It is hoped that evaluation findings will be able to inform the planning and delivery of services within the new organisation.

Baseline Data

The baseline delivery plan provides a description and an analysis of some of the needs in the programme area. Since the delivery plan was produced, further data sources have been identified, including anonymous aggregate data supplied by the Hospital Trust, the City Council library service and the local child health records system. Data has been drawn from these sources to complete the M5b annual monitoring return to SureStart Unit. Detailed analysis of uptake of individual services, including the characteristics of parents who do and do not take up SureStart services, will be carried out and will be greatly assisted by the implementation of a new, more sophisticated database.

Evaluation Strategy

This has been produced in draft format and discussed with the programme board. The strategy focuses on evaluating partnership effectiveness of the programme board and evaluating commissioned services that have now been operating for approximately twelve months. It has become apparent that the strategy will need to take account of SureStart Unit's requirements to carry out cost-effectiveness reviews and the local and national research governance framework. It is hoped that local university students may be able to carry out some evaluation work and that other partner agencies may be able to commit resources in kind. The strategy is expected to remain flexible and responsive.

Customer Satisfaction Survey

Data was collected before the Senior Evaluation Officer was appointed. Following appointment, the survey analysis was a priority task. This has been completed and a report produced that was circulated to the programme board. Sampling was not carried out scientifically and so the sample of 54 respondents cannot be regarded as representative of all parents eligible to receive services from SureStart Longton South. The report contained a recommendation to the Board that in future, sampling methods should be considered. An article about the survey findings was publicised in the programme newsletter. A summary of the findings has also been produced and widely disseminated amongst local partner agencies.

Evaluating partnership effectiveness

This is being evaluated in partnership with Health Action Stoke. This is a local health improvement agency that has emerged from the now defunct Health Action Zone. The methodology relies on a tool-kit that has been developed by the Health Development Agency from acknowledged best practice in partnership working. A pilot was carried out to test the “parent friendliness” of the tool-kit process. It was found that, although there was quite a lot of jargon in the tool-kit, with the help of an experienced facilitator, parents were able to engage well in the process. The tool is being used in a two-stage process.

The first stage develops consensus answers from a sample of board members to questions designed to diagnose effectiveness in areas of partnership working. These include leadership, use of resources, community consultation, learning etc. Following the initial diagnosis, areas of concern are identified and followed up with each member of the programme board completing a structured questionnaire in a face to face interview. This process should be complete by the end of March. The result will be a report to the programme board that identifies strengths and weaknesses and recommendations for future action to improve partnership effectiveness.

Baby-gym / Busybodies

This is in the process of being evaluated. Originally called the baby-gym, the group is now called Busybodies. This is a “SureStarter” service offering a weekly drop-in at a local Church hall. An evaluation is being carried out to establish what benefits families gain from attending the group and reasons why some families no longer attend. The co-ordinator has been interviewed. Monitoring data is being collated and a survey is being devised in consultation with some of the parents.

Research into the reasons why some families do not take up SureStart Longton South services.

A sampling frame is being drawn up of parents who have had an initial contact with the programme but not accessed any services. This will be categorised by the four neighbourhoods that make up the programme area to achieve geographic spread. Quotes for ethnicity will ensure that black and minority ethnic families are sampled. Informed consent will be obtained and an incentive in the form of a prize draw will be offered to recruit participants. An in-depth face-to-face interview will be administered with a sample of 20 families and analysed to explore themes of acceptability, perception that the programme is for poor families or for women, and other themes will be generated from the data.

Support for monitoring to enhance performance management

Programme monitoring is not formally the responsibility of the Senior Evaluation Officer. However, it is clear that robust routine monitoring systems can usefully inform evaluation. The programme has adopted the use of “logic and results grids” as a performance management tool and the Senior Evaluation Officer has provided assistance to some staff in completing these. The logic grids state the assumptions, risks and the theory of change that underpins delivery of the SureStart service. Results are predicted annually and reported quarterly to the programme board. In addition, reliable data sources for most of the SureStart Public Service agreement targets have been identified. The Programme has reviewed its current database and identified some limitations. A new system will be able to perform more sophisticated analysis of routine monitoring data.

Engaging parents

Several parents volunteered to carry out the customer satisfaction survey and used their knowledge of the local area to access other parents as interviewees. Parent board members have been consulted on the draft evaluation strategy in an informal workshop. Parent board members have also been involved in the partnership tool-kit work and crèche provision is made available for parents who need it.

Research was carried out into the availability of training for parents in research skills. There are several courses on offer locally including an Open College Network level 2 accredited course in “How to do a Community Survey”.

Professional development

The Senior Evaluation Officer has enrolled on a Certificate in Research Methods course and completed modules for Research Design and Process and Research Skills. The completion of one further module this year will lead to the award of the certificate. Networking with other evaluators has proved beneficial and led to mutual learning and exchange of useful advice and experience. Academic mentoring is being provided from the University of Keele.

Challenges for the year ahead

- An urgent task is to reconcile the need to conduct research ethically in accordance with research governance requirements while responding to the evaluation needs of the local programme.
- The City-wide evaluation strategy needs to be agreed and work commissioned
- The local evaluation strategy needs to become more focussed to meet the local programmes' needs as well as to meet the SureStart unit requirements, especially with regard to cost-effectiveness, as laid out in Annexe 6.