

## **SureStart Abbey Bucknall 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. Abbey-Bucknall 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 programme boards. 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 52 respondents cannot be regarded as representative of all parents eligible to receive services from SureStart Abbey-Bucknall. 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.

## **Workstart**

Abbey-Bucknall has won a national SureStart award for Workstart – a project aimed at supporting lone parents with training and employment advice in partnership with the local Workers Educational Association, Citizen’s Advice Bureau and JobCentre Plus. The project provides advice, counselling, training, child-care and transport (where needed) to unemployed lone parents. An evaluation is currently being designed, taking into account the needs of stakeholders. A questionnaire will be designed and interviews will be carried out with beneficiaries of the project, Workstart staff and other key informants. The

aim of the evaluation will be to discover what it is about this project that works for which groups of people in what circumstances. The evaluation design will maximize the use of existing monitoring 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. The Chair of Abbey-Bucknall SureStart is a parent and she has been very supportive of the need for evaluation and expressed a great deal of interest in the customer satisfaction survey findings. 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.