

# Local Evaluation of Sure Start Thornhill

## Year 2

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Introduction	

Sure Start Thornhill has now been delivering services for over a year. Whilst this is still of course a short time in which to gauge the medium and long term effectiveness of such an initiative, nonetheless ongoing evaluation is essential to assess the extent to which this particular intervention is working, and to identify the specific areas of activity which are making the most difference to local children and their families. In addition, it is useful to consider information about services which are having more difficulty in reaching planned targets, in an attempt to constantly reflect on the scope and process of all current and future activities. This evaluation has been structured to incorporate three main areas of investigation:

**1. The extent to which Sure Start Thornhill is meeting (or is likely to meet) its own stated strategic objectives**

**2. A review of the working practices and processes which have been developed**

**3. A broad assessment of the cost efficiency of the services provided, in an attempt to clarify the relationship between effectiveness and value for money.**

Clearly, these areas overlap and much of the data collection supporting this evaluation will be relevant to all three strands. However, it is our intention that by focusing on these areas the research outcomes uncovered will form a useful tool not only in the identification of good policies and practices, but also in providing insight into the complex factors involved in successful initiatives in order that successful interventions can be consolidated and further developed.

## The process of the research

### *Strand 1*

1. The extent to which Sure Start Thornhill is meeting (or is likely to meet) its own stated strategic objectives

These objectives include:

*Work with young adults, local parents and existing agencies to develop early intervention strategies which strengthen parents' and carers' bonds with their children; to help reduce family breakdown; prevent social exclusion and build community capacity.*

*Raise awareness, knowledge and understanding about healthy living and provide the advice, support and services which families need to become and stay as healthy as possible.*

*Raise awareness, knowledge and understanding about young children's development, and provide support and services which help communities to meet children's emotional, intellectual,*

*physical and social needs so that they can benefit from the opportunities afforded by statutory education when that time comes.*

*Provide information, advice, support and practical help to bridge the gap between universal and specialised services so that families and children with special needs are not further disadvantaged or excluded from community activity and opportunities.*

As Sure Start Thornhill is in its early stages in terms of developing and providing services, it is difficult to gather reliable evidence at this point which would clearly indicate the extent of its success in meeting these objectives. In future years it will be possible and relevant to assess the extent to which children in their first years of statutory education have benefited from early participation in Sure Start. Data concerned with patterns of health and illness, absenteeism and behavioural problems will be available. At this time however, the most appropriate evidence is that gained from local parents themselves. Such qualitative evidence is by no means an inferior source of information however, and is in fact likely to provide very useful insights into the likelihood of the success of the above objectives. As in the previous evaluation, the views of a selection of parents, carers and children who currently use any of the services provided by both centres have been both formally and informally interviewed. This sample, whilst providing an extremely worthwhile contribution about their (overwhelmingly) positive experiences of Sure Start is of course nonetheless a self-selecting group who are likely to be satisfied with the service provided, by virtue of the fact that they partake of them. The most important focus for this part of the evaluation has been those parents and young people who do not use the centres. Contact with representatives of this group presents more difficulty but a varied and flexible approach to gaining access to local people has been adopted and has been successful in allowing the voice of a much wider range of local residents to be heard. As before, an attempt has been made to obtain the views of people from as wide a range of social, educational and economic backgrounds as possible. In addition, a smaller sample of local parents from neighbouring areas have also been invited to give their views on their local facilities, and their perceptions of Sure Start at Thornhill. In total, 248 parents (22 male); 31 young people between the ages of 11 and 16 and 10 children under the age of 10 have been formally consulted. Approximately 30 other local parents have also contributed to this research process in a less structured way.

The views of members of the Sure Start team have also been sought to explore the rationales for the measures and activities chosen to achieve the aforementioned objectives. Investigation into not only what is going on, but what is working well and why, has formed the basis of this part of the research process. It is clearly important to be able to identify how well local policies and activities meet both the expressed needs and wishes of local families, and the overall aims of Sure Start and to be aware of any reasons why these may not always coincide. The professional expertise of the Sure Start staff has been vital in helping to clarify many of the issues raised by parents participating in this research, and also in highlighting areas for possible future study which may add to our knowledge and understanding of Sure Start over a longer term.

## *Strand 2*

### *A review of the working practices and processes which have been developed*

The main focus of the overall evaluation has been to consider whether Sure Start Thornhill is making a difference to the lives of those it seeks to have an impact on. Another issue that also needs consideration is whether the institution of Sure Start is in itself a different type of service provider from other previous models, and if so, whether this difference allows it to operate in more dynamic ways whilst at the same time delivering worthwhile returns for the public monies invested in it. In order to gather evidence which could cast any light in this area, a range of detailed interviews have been carried out with members of the Sure Start team with the purpose of identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the multi-professional working that is a feature of this initiative. The experiences of local parents who had required services or support prior to the opening of Sure Start have also been sought, although of course this does not represent a true comparison of models of provision, as much of Sure Start's work is aimed at not only increasing the uptake of existing services but also in developing new, more creative initiatives, largely in response to parents' expressed needs. However, Sure Start does aim to take a new approach to tackling the social, health and educational disadvantages experienced by certain groups and therefore it is important to try to assess whether the policies and institutional framework established at Thornhill are likely to lead to success in this area. A small number of interviews have also been carried out with representatives of other agencies working within the same location. This has been useful in providing a wider perspective of how Sure Start is perceived by other professionals providing similar services. The process of seeking the views of other agencies (albeit in a limited way to date) has in itself made an important contribution to the structure of the research by illuminating the issue of professional 'rivalries' or more specifically the competition for limited resources within a framework of inadequate knowledge about other agencies and the services they provide. This issue in particular has been examined in detail, to try to establish whether Sure Start has been successful in cutting across professional boundaries to provide a more holistic approach to those seeking its services.

### *Strand 3*

The relationship between effectiveness and value for money

This has been a difficult aspect of the evaluation process as it has sought to extract information concerning the *effectiveness* of various interventions and then to link this with the relative *cost-efficiency* of the same service: to try to establish how much benefit is produced per unit cost. The main components of an analysis of cost effectiveness generally include:

- a. research to establish the effects of doing one thing rather than another
- b. research to establish what it costs to produce the same desired effects by different means
- c. the ratio of costs to benefits for each course of action

The relevant data would then lead to a conclusion about which course of action produces the most benefit for the least cost.

For this evaluation, this is clearly problematic on several fronts. At this early stage of Sure Start it is difficult to establish the extent to which it is having a positive effect; whilst there may be a 'feel-good' factor surrounding the venture, 'hard' data is only likely to be available as the programme matures. We have used an appropriate formula to measure in very basic terms the cost of the major services, but in the absence of any information about other similar services managed by other providers any attempt to compare real costs is impossible. It is also important to confirm that neither costs nor benefits are restricted to monetary factors and that combining monetary and non-monetary factors in the same analysis is itself problematic- for example, how much should Sure Start be willing to pay for an intervention requested by families which does not appear to meet any of the overall objectives but which does illustrate a responsiveness to an expressed need and help individuals to engage with the centres? Any economic analysis obviously entails making moral judgements about whose interests should take the highest priority when setting the costs for one party against the benefits to another. However, some understanding of the comparative costs of each service provided can only be a useful addition to management information, and it is to this aim that such analysis has been directed.

### *Additional elements in the research process*

In addition to the various types of interviews conducted and the quantitative data collected in the course of the cost-benefit analysis, a range of other means have been employed in order to uncover as full a picture of the current and future impacts of Sure Start. These have included consideration of the local publicity materials, attendance at a selection of relevant meetings of both Sure Start team members and parents and support of the internal evaluation processes being considered by many members of the staff group. The four themes used to analyse much of the data in our previous report have remained relevant and will be used to provide a broad overview of the strengths and any weaknesses of Sure Start, and to give an understanding of how much has been achieved in a relatively short time. These themes are:

- Communication
- Partnership
- Inclusion
- Perceptions
- Ethical Considerations

As in our previous evaluation, everyone participating in this study has been fully apprised of their rights in respect of their contributions. No material has been included or referred to without the express consent of individuals. All verbatim quotes used are anonymous, and the principle of confidentiality has remained paramount.

## Strand 1

### Is Sure Start meeting or likely to meet its stated objectives?

A range of measures have been used to assess the extent to which the aims of Sure Start are likely to be achieved in the medium and longer term. An assessment of how appropriate the various activities and services are in linking explicitly to the specified desired attainments has been undertaken. Discussions have taken place with staff members on their procedures for evaluating specific activities. A broad sample of parents, carers and children using the facilities or having engaged with Sure Start in some way has generated a lot of information about the perceptions of many of the service users. The most detailed research has, however, taken place with members of the local community who could visit Sure Start or make use of its services, but have not done so to date.

Sure Start Thornhill provides a very full range of activities at both centres which are clearly designed to promote the physical, intellectual and social development of babies and children, both by offering support and guidance to their parents and carers and also by engaging children in stimulating environments likely to have a beneficial influence on their achievements in many areas. Activities range from courses designed to help parents develop their work potential (Joblink); sessions concerned with practical skills which can improve health awareness (Cooking on a budget); activities which engender both health and social objectives (Splash swimming group) and services which offer both group and individual support and advice (Breastfeeding Support Group; Supardads and the Speech and Language referral systems). Response from parents and carers participating in these activities is overwhelmingly positive:

*I came up for the Joblink day .. got some leaflets to take home with me and my little boy went into the crèche so I could speak to the woman easily . I'm thinking about what to do when he starts school.*

*The cooking sessions are good because we eat chips a lot and my lad is always eating sweets and burgers which can't be good for him. I found it very helpful*

*Not many Dads come but I've met one or two who I see around sometimes.*

*The baby massage sessions were brilliant- I would like some for adults too.*

One service which was very favourably mentioned by most participants is the sale of fresh fruit and vegetables. This has been seen by those using it as a very helpful practical resource.

*You can buy fresh fruit without trailing down to the supermarket*

*My two (children) have learned the names of everything they sell and they're beginning to work out things with money too*

*We can always buy fruit now for a snack rather than giving sweets to the kids.*

Criticisms voiced by parents using the centres were largely concerned with the perceived differences between the two venues.

*There are loads more courses on at Overthorpe*

*Speech and Language sessions are always on up there (Overthorpe) It's not fair we have to trail up there all the time*

*It's much nicer at Overthorpe- the staff are very welcoming and there's always flowers and things to make it look nice*

*I live in Thornhill but I like that one more- the Parent and Toddler Group is much better there*

Whilst it is difficult to measure the validity of more subjective views about the atmosphere and welcome there is no observable evidence that one centre has more courses or activities than another. Comments about the Speech and Language sessions were common however, with parents seeming to want an explanation of the arrangements. The issue of communication is a major factor arising from the interviews with all local parents and will be returned to shortly.

Discussions with members of the Sure Start team suggest that there is some attempt to measure the satisfaction offered by particular courses or sessions, mainly through the use of questionnaires given to participants. Whilst this is clearly giving a message to parents that their voice is important, it is less clear whether the information gained by such surveys is analysed effectively, or is, in fact, used to inform subsequent provision. A few parents commented about this process of evaluation:

*We were all given a form at the end- I had to ask my mate about what a venue was*

*How can we know what would be more suitable- we don't know when the workers are available*

*X has been very good to me so I didn't think I should complain about the sessions*

A number of parents requested a suggestions box which could be emptied every month and the ideas displayed on the notice board, with comments from the staff about the practicalities of carrying out these ideas. Effective evaluation of all the services provided would appear to us to be a clear priority in informing the decision making process of the various professional groups working within Sure Start. There is some evidence that thought is given to such evaluation, but this does not appear to be a formal procedure, (apart from the statistical monitoring data required) and this may illustrate a weakness in the development of reflective practice.

## *Communication*

In the previous evaluation of Sure Start, the issue of communication was seen as of vital importance in raising the awareness of the local population about the services offered by Sure Start. Extensive investigation about this issue has been undertaken with parents and carers and young people (aged between 11 and 16). The sample participating includes both users of the service and those who currently have not engaged with Sure Start. In addition to an analysis of the actual written materials produced by Sure Start, an assessment of the actual process of communication between Sure Start and the local population has been thoroughly explored. As before, a range of leaflets publicising the aims, policies and services of Sure Start appear helpful in informing other agencies working within the local and wider location. However, from the (albeit limited) discussions with representatives of other agencies, there appeared to be generally little knowledge of the aims or objectives of Sure Start, or much understanding of what the local initiative was adding to the existing services. Very few individuals could remember ever seeing a leaflet, but expressed interest in the service nonetheless.

A wide array of information-giving material is constantly available at both centres. Wall displays appear to be very popular and most parents who have visited the centres could recall the subjects mentioned. There is less interest in the leaflets displayed, and some of the language used in them appears to be quite elaborate and may not be easily accessible to all. The booklet giving information about the Treasure Baskets is well detailed and informative, but some parents questioned had found this too complex to understand and had not purchased it. Whilst it is clear that there will always be a range of educational abilities amongst parents and carers, it can seem to be rather divisive to produce and promote material that emphasises literacy skills, when 14% of the local population are statistically likely to have difficulties reading and writing.

The newsletter is well structured and informative and is distributed to all households within the area which is excellent. Organisational problems with the distribution have been acknowledged and processes put in place to ensure a more efficient production and distribution of this useful source of publicity. Whilst less than 20% of those questioned could remember any information from the previous newsletter, its regular distribution is likely to have a slow but nonetheless relevant impact on the local community. The parents who were initially encouraged to be involved with the production of the newsletter felt that they had been overloaded with responsibility without having acquired the necessary skills. However, the later approach of observing the compilation of one newsletter and being allowed to develop confidence in their abilities before becoming (or feeling) responsible for its production appears to be much more satisfactory and has generated a lot of enthusiasm amongst this group. Such an activity is of course likely to encourage the acquisition of a range of transferable skills such as time management, computer literacy and so on, which is a very worthwhile outcome.

## *Inclusion*

The theme of inclusion has emerged as an important concept for Sure Start. It is a framework by which the Sure Start team can measure both the *extent* of the exposure to Sure Start and its services in terms of the number of parents, carers and children and also assess the *social diversity* of service users. This latter analysis is highly relevant in gauging the success of Sure Start in reaching those families who may be more difficult to reach for a variety of reasons. The sense (or lack) of inclusion in Sure Start Thornhill is also a common theme amongst families interviewed and has highlighted a range of interesting responses which indicate areas of excellent practice

and also suggest some ways in which an even broader mix of families can be encouraged to benefit from the wealth of professional expertise and commitment in evidence at Sure Start.

### *Families with additional needs*

Every member of staff participating in this research mentioned the difficulty in attracting the children and parents of families living in more challenging or stressful situations. The fact that such a concern is uppermost in the minds of those delivering services is clearly excellent, but this does not always appear to be translated into measures which may improve the situation, but rather often remains as an unresolvable anxiety.

*I know of several families who find things really hard, but I can't persuade them to come here*

*I keep saying 'Come along to the centre, but she never does, and we're not really equipped to keep going out there unless she has a particular difficulty'*

*I worry that we're not really reaching those families that we should be... that we've got to reach really*

Obviously the very nature of this client group, being traditionally defined as harder to reach, will make any overtures consistently problematic, but at the same time the rewards for successfully encouraging engagement between Sure Start and members of this defined community are likely to be very significant, both in terms of meeting the objectives and in personal terms for those individual families.

The difficulties encountered by Sure Start in engaging with some families and individuals has of course been replicated in this evaluative process. Whilst it is absolutely vital to identify what factors are likely to encourage more reticent families to take advantage of the support services available, actually obtaining any information and views from this group is by definition problematic. However, we feel that a meaningful discourse has emerged with a representative sample of those families with additional difficulties, and these views may be informative in the reflection and planning processes of future services and activities.

Questions concerned with the nature of any difficulties experienced by parents living in Thornhill elicited a range of responses but nearly all with a common theme of a feeling of stress and inability to cope with the perceived challenging behaviour of their children:

*I just can't be doing when she starts... she's really naughty ... out of control*

*I want to put him in the play group because he needs to learn to share*

*If I could get a job it would be better because I wouldn't be stuck here with him all the time*

*It's hard being with the kids all the time... you can't get babysitters easily and he's too young yet...(referring to an older child of 9)*

These responses represent a typical cross-section of the views of parents who had not visited the centres and whose children were between eighteen months and four years old. When asked their views about Sure Start, a number of different themes emerged. Many parents (all female) mentioned the desirability of someone coming to their house to help with more practical problems on a regular basis.

*Can you get anyone to come here so I could go off to the shops on my own?*

*It's all the ironing and cleaning up and being here all the time with the kids.. it gets you down when you're doing it all on your own*

*Can you just leave your kids in the centre then and go off to town? I might do that. How much is it?*

Discussion about living in Thornhill and the facilities and services available at Sure Start demonstrated varying degrees of awareness, ranging from some knowledge that the buildings existed but no clear idea what they were for, to a fuller grasp that helpful or interesting activities could be going on, but that they wouldn't want to go along 'cold' to either of the centres, and few people spoken to seemed to know anyone else who did use the facilities. Three mothers temporarily living at the Coombs Centre were enthusiastic about Sure Start although only one had actually been to either of the centres. The regular presence at set times of members of the Sure Start team is seen as very valuable and one mother commented that she had received a great deal of support with her child and other problems. The idea that families living there would visit one of the centres independently was not thought to be very realistic by those individuals forming part of this discussion. Reasons for this were varied:

*It's miles up the hill*

*I wouldn't want anyone to know I was living here*

*My little boy is really naughty at the moment.. he'd show me up having a tantrum or something.*

The one parent who had visited Sure Start was very enthusiastic about her experience.

*I have been up there X (staff member) took me. I've been a few times and went to the swimming group. It's been great and really helped me with J. (aged 2). I hope there's a similar sort of place when I've moved*

Despite this very positive experience, this parent expressed her reluctance to go along alone to a Sure Start in another area.

Discussion with representatives of families who form part of the group that Sure Start needs to attract has illustrated some interesting issues related to the concept of inclusion. For families

experiencing stressful times, the provision of practical support is often mentioned as very desirable. Whilst it appears that such assistance is deemed to be part of an immediate response in a crisis situation, many of the Sure Start team appeared to be of the opinion that practical help on a longer term would not be appropriate.

*If a mother needed a babysitter for a hospital visit or something like that I would go down myself. but it's not a service that's offered*

*Volunteers may be willing to help out with the ironing and other chores, but that's not really their role...*

*Lots of parents say they want this [practical help] but we're not there for that are we?*

Obviously, the function of Sure Start is not to provide a domestic cleaning or babysitting service. However, it may be useful to consider providing practical assistance with domestic chores or childcare as a planned intervention over a medium term, with the express aim of making connections with families experiencing stress. Such assistance may also have a public relations value if other families get to hear about its availability and of course it would be important to incorporate this help into a longer framework of contact with Sure Start, in which a more proactive attitude can be developed with families.

The very positive responses from parents housed in the temporary accommodation suggest that outreach based activities may be more effective in making initial connections with more isolated families. There appears to be occasional institutional resistance to providing services which can be seen to undermine the independence or motivation of local parents and carers:

*Parents have got to show they are helping themselves*

*We can't just provide an easy option for parents, they've got to get up and be willing to actively take advantage of what's on offer here for them. we can't go and give it to them, that's not helping them*

Whilst it would be clearly inappropriate to encourage a passive dependency on Sure Start or individual team members, it does appear that some initial more active connection with all the community is more likely to result in an uptake of services by a more diverse sample of local families than currently seems to exist. Clearer recognition of the mind sets that more disadvantaged families may experience (in terms of low self-esteem) and their lack of motivation to engage with new contexts may help in the expansion of more creative ways in which to reach those families who could arguably benefit the most from Sure Start.

### *Inclusion and smoking*

Perhaps a less important factor but one which has again emerged as a relevant issue for quite a significant proportion of those parents interviewed (27%) is that of smoking. Anecdotal evidence of patterns of smoking in Thornhill appear to suggest that members of those families with multi-deprivations (including low income, history of physical or mental illness,

acknowledged behavioural difficulties with any children, serial relationship breakdown, exposure to domestic violence) are more likely to smoke. Of those parents and carers interviewed who have children under the age of four but have not made any contact with Sure Start, 76% regarded themselves as heavy smokers (20 or more per day). Of this group, there was a large proportion (78%) who had tried to give up smoking on at least one occasion and who expressed the desire to be successful at this at some stage. Most people acknowledged the risks to their health and that of their children of smoking, but a significant group (42%) felt that they would find it difficult to visit one of the centres if smoking was disapproved of. Interestingly, it was more this fear of disapproval rather than any difficulties with not smoking for a period of time that was most frequently mentioned as a problem.

*You'd just feel that they didn't think you were looking after your kids properly or something like that if they knew you smoked, or you had to keep nipping outside*

*She visited me at home and said it wasn't good to smoke with the baby and everything... well I know that, and I'm not doing it deliberately am I. I haven't got anything else I do*

*Look- my kids are happy, I never hit them, the lad's doing well in school, I work hard all the time but I'm supposed to feel bad because I smoke*

In the light of the objective relating to raising awareness about health issues, obviously an anti-smoking approach is completely valid. However, whilst it is essential that the Sure Start buildings and environs are smoke-free areas, any promotion of the anti-smoking campaign; means or strategies to aid giving up; or establishment of a support is unlikely to attract members of the group for whom such an initiative would be most useful (and of course, these individuals are also likely to be part of the harder to reach families).

Interest in giving up smoking was very apparent however, and several parents made interesting suggestions:

*What about holding a regular meeting in the pub- say once a fortnight?*

*Could Sure Start sell all those patches and things cheaply- if these were at the playgroup we could get them easily*

*Why can't we have a sort of Weightwatchers' type group- maybe pay in what we don't spend on smoking and go out for a meal or something*

The above comments were made by people who do not visit Sure Start. Comments made by people who do use the facilities include:

*We've had sessions on baby massage- we could hold counselling sessions on not smoking perhaps*

*Relaxation techniques would be good for smokers*

There does appear to be quite a lot of interest in reducing smoking levels amongst local people. However, much of this interest is completely untapped and therefore a wasted resource in the development of links between Sure Start and residents of Thornhill. The intrinsic positive values attached to non-smoking, whilst laudable in themselves, are occasionally acting as barriers in the meeting of the wider objectives—more creative responses as suggested above have been dismissed by some staff members:

*You can't ask staff to hold any meetings in a smoky environment.*

*People have just got to show they're committed to giving up by coming here*

*It's one area which I find quite difficult- it upsets me when mums carry on smoking when they're pregnant*

Apparent value judgements about smoking do appear to be being transmitted to some parents (by other parents too, of course) Whilst such attitudes obviously exist in the wider community, if Sure Start wants to have an impact on levels of smoking it may be that it will have to develop an outreach approach to gaining meaningful contact with parents who smoke. It may be worthwhile considering a whole community approach to this, with the establishment of smaller groups meeting at a variety of times at different venues throughout the area.

### *Parents in paid employment*

The concept of inclusion was most vociferously referred to by working parents, many of whom did not make use of the services available, but who expressed annoyance and dissatisfaction that they and their children were excluded on a practical basis by Sure Start. Many parents interviewed did have paid employment, with most working part-time, but a significant number either working full-time or having a variable shift pattern. By contrast, the majority of parents using Sure Start were less likely to be working at all. Many of these had very young babies, but increasingly mothers are returning to work at an early stage after the birth of children, and many of this latter group expressed feelings of isolation and the wish to have their specific needs at least considered, which many did not feel was being done. Some parents had responded to a survey some months earlier asking for more activities for themselves and their children outside the conventional working week, but had been discouraged as no further communication had been forthcoming at all, and there was an element of resentment that nothing had apparently been done:

*Sure Start is all about giving pre-schoolchildren the best start in life. How can you improve working parents' children because there is nothing available? (a response from the questionnaire*

*circulated by the Parental Support Co-ordinators)*

*It's always closed in the holidays when we could come*

*Surely it could be open at the weekends?*

*If it was open on Saturdays or Sundays, their Dad could wander over with them too*

*I went to one of those soft play places which was open on a Sunday and sold bacon sandwiches and had the papers out to read [newspapers] It was great because T [children's father] took them out and they had a nice time knowing he was there and so did he, and I had a break*

Some lone female parents were clearly unhappy with the lack of any visible support for themselves. It is not possible for them to attend the few evening events as there is no crèche available at that time. The range of courses and interesting sessions appealed to them and many of them were left feeling frustrated that they could not participate. Some working parents with babies also mentioned their need to have more flexible access to advice about health or social matters, and suggested that an evening clinic run by the health visitors would be useful.

Conversations with staff members about a more flexible approach to opening hours revealed a range of different attitudes, which will be more fully discussed in the section on working practices, and it is noted here that there has recently been a lot of debate with regards to opening hours, leading to the running of a pilot scheme to evaluate the efficiency of extended opening. However, some resistance from some staff members to work outside what they regard as their 'normal' pattern has been apparent, and may have led to the apparent delay (as perceived by parents) in formally discussing the matter. This issue clearly links to the effectiveness of communication, in that having consulted a sample of parents about their views, often no further action is seen to be taken. Parents, especially working parents would appear to need a much more responsive link between themselves and Sure Start, even if this is in the form of a 'holding' measure.

### *Older children*

As in the case of working parents, a number of parents of older children (whether they had younger ones or not) were unsatisfied that they appeared to be of no interest to Sure Start. This is clearly untrue and initiatives such as the Baking Group are very well attended by older children, and appear to be meeting identified objectives very well. However, several parents of children at the schools referred to the lack of before and after school provision, and thought the Sure Start centres would be ideal for this. The focus of Sure Start is rightly concerned with younger children, but again an approach to all members of the local community is likely to establish a more widespread feeling of involvement with Sure Start which could gradually encourage a wider uptake of services from the harder to reach groups.

### *Teenagers*

A number of informal conversations have taken place with young people between the ages of 14 and 19. The views of many of this group were very positive about the presence of Sure Start in the area, believing it to be a source of support for parents and young children, and one which the girls in particular could see being useful if they were to start a family in the future. Two of those spoken to had attended a session on babysitting and had found that very helpful.

Many made interesting suggestions about activities that they would be keen in having access to. These included greater access to family planning measures such as condom machines with subsidised prices, the much easier availability of the 'morning-after' pill, and evening sessions where teenagers could go for mainly social interaction, but where a youth counsellor could be on hand for anyone that wanted to talk about any issues.

## *Partnership*

The Service Delivery Agreement (HM Treasury 2000) defines one of the overall aims as to:

*'promote the participation of all local families in the design and working of the programme'*

The role of partnership remains a complex issue, and our research has tried to establish the meaning such a concept holds for both the Sure Start team and also for local people. There are clearly differences between the theoretical values of partnership which can be seen as underpinning the whole existence of Sure Start and the ways in which this notion can be understood and practically engaged with by those using Sure Start. Much of this evaluation has focused on the ways and means by which parents and families are encouraged to participate, not only in the activities and services on offer, but also in the broader context of organisational involvement. Attention has also been directed at identifying how the Sure Start management and staff regard the concept of partnership and the values embedded within it.

A number of different ways of encouraging parental involvement in the institutional framework of Sure Start are in evidence. These include the formal Partnership and Management Board meetings which are attended by staff and board members and to which parents are actively invited to attend. Some attention has been given to the timing of these meetings in order to make them accessible for the widest number possible, and the regular variation between daytime and evening gatherings seems the most sensible option. This has not however, resulted in much change in the numbers of parents attending, which would suggest that this is not a forum that many parents either feel comfortable in, or believe is relevant to them. Meetings tend to be extremely formal and dominated by submissions from staff members. Any parents who do attend are generally fairly confident already, but there remains little evidence that even these parents are a part of the official process in terms of contributing to the agenda and this is likely to be a structural impediment to the longer term aim of encouraging much more direct involvement with Sure Start and its organisation.

Some awareness of this is clearly in evidence, and more diverse forums for the exchange of views have been successfully implemented. The smaller Parents' Forums which are broadly structured around the objectives, have certainly encouraged parents to contribute in group situations which are more informal and are likely to build confidence in those who may need extra support in

expressing their views. The decision to devolve autonomy to the various groups in terms of what they focus on and how any suggestions may be implemented is likely to enable all group members to feel equally part of the wider structure. The time - limited approach to these discussion groups is also likely to be relevant in that parents may feel more able to commit a definite amount of time to such activities, rather than an open- ended obligation. These forums promise to be important in attracting and maintaining the interest of local parents in developing a more influential role in the organisation as a whole. It will be interesting to consider the impact of these forums at a later stage when they are either more established, or have fulfilled their current objectives.

Views from members of staff in relation to the role of partnership have been sought, and often reflect similar points that emerged in the previous evaluation.

*Many parents are happy to have whatever's on offer but won't get involved in it themselves*

*I got them to fill out evaluation sheets but they didn't really say anything useful- lots of parents are passive*

*I think it's all about enabling parents to get to a position where they are in control of what goes on*

Whilst all staff are clearly committed to the value of partnership, much of the focus so far has perhaps rightly been on developing the range of activities which will attract local people in to the centres. Obviously, until parents and carers feel confident in accessing the facilities, there is little opportunity to encourage a more developed involvement.

Discussions with parents who are regular visitors to Sure Start suggest a mixed response to partnership. As mentioned earlier, those engaged with the Parents' Forums were very positive about the links they were making with Sure Start.

*We might really be able to make some changes to the area*

*Things need doing and I've learned such a lot from being involved*

*I was depressed... crying all the time... I feel much happier now, much more confident*

Other parents were less enthusiastic about becoming more involved in the management of the organisation.

*I can't come out in the evenings*

*I haven't got the time*

*It's not really right, they're all paid to do these things, I'd do it if I had a job there*

Other views expressed by some parents using the centres seemed to illustrate some dissatisfaction with the way they were encouraged to play a more formal part in the establishment and yet adequate support or training to do so was not forthcoming. There was also evidence of parents feeling reticent about putting themselves forward, partly because of the large number of professionally-trained members of staff, making the involvement of untrained parents seem inappropriate. The views expressed by these parents tend to suggest at least some interest in becoming involved and the points raised therefore are a useful insight into the possible results which a different approach may have.

*I'd be willing to do something if there were a group of us*

*I helped with the newsletter but we were just left with it*

*I'd like to have some training and help with the kids, it would be good to get like a certificate or something to show you've been involved in that sort of work*

*I think it would be useful to see what the jobs are that people do here so then you would know what you wanted to get involved with*

The willingness of some parents to get involved, but the frequent expression of lack of confidence in their ability raises the inevitable question about preparation or training. For some parents, lack of knowledge about the nature of different professional roles was a factor in their feelings of inadequacy about their own skills. For others, a clearer focus on their own training needs before becoming more involved with any initiatives was thought to be helpful. Another view quite commonly expressed was the running of more short courses leading to an actual qualification or development of transferable skills. Sessions involving IT or administrative skills were commonly mentioned. The idea of 'shadowing' members of the staff team was mentioned. This would undoubtedly add pressures to the workload of particular members of staff, but could be seen as a useful way in which to engender a more comfortable atmosphere enabling parents to feel on a more equal footing with the professional group.

The issue of jobs for local people at Sure Start was raised again by several local parents, and from some the view was expressed that residents of Thornhill were only likely to be employed in manual jobs such as cleaning. This remains a difficult issue in the promotion of more extensive involvement by local parents. There is a common feeling amongst local people that Sure Start will only become a true community resource when there is a more widespread engagement with local residents generally, irrespective of whether they are part of the 'targeted' group. A wider appeal to all the households in the area is likely to provide a broader base of support and involvement from which a more formal partnership approach may be developed and consolidated.

### *Inclusion and ethnic diversity*

The parents and families who currently use Sure Start are nearly all of a British or Irish white ethnic background. This of course reflects the wider population of Thornhill. One element of this evaluation has been to gather the views of a sample of families living in the area nearby Thornhill

but currently not strictly living within the catchment area of Sure Start. To achieve this aim, a small number of parents (38) living in Thornhill Lees have been informally interviewed and their views recorded. Of this number, 27 were from an Asian ethnic background, the remainder being white British families. This latter group expressed great interest in Sure Start; appeared to have quite a lot of knowledge about it; and articulated some resentment about the fact that they were excluded from benefiting from it. Members of the Asian community were less enthusiastic. They had mostly heard of Sure Start, but did not appear to think it was relevant to them at all, as it is seen as a 'white' service. Very few of these parents expressed any interest in visiting any of the centres, although two mothers did mention that they might consider the ante-natal clinic at the Thornhill centre of Sure Start. A few parents asked if there were any Asian members of staff.

Conversations with local parents attending the centres about opening up the access of Sure Start to families living in other areas, highlighted a limited range of responses mainly concerned with either the loss of Sure Start as a distinct feature of Thornhill and its community, or with anxieties about an ethnic mix which would change the nature of the services.

Ethnic diversity is considered a positive feature by all members of staff. The culture of the two centres does however appear to be an homogenous 'white British' one. There are some leaflets in additional languages, but neither centre gives the impression of being part of a multi-ethnic society, which could be emphasised, despite or perhaps because of the fact that all staff members and service users represent only one ethnic group.

It appears that by widening the boundaries of Sure Start the uptake of services will be improved, but this is unlikely to address the needs or wishes of members of ethnic minority groups living nearby. The notion of community has only been mentioned by parents in relation to issues of ethnicity, but this may signify a more deep-rooted concern about different values and practices which may need addressing before future plans are made.

## Strand 2

### A Review of Working Practices and Processes

*Although obviously parental satisfaction is a key indicator in the likely success of Sure Start achieving its targets, it is not the only way in which its effectiveness can or should be measured. Sure Start has been established as a unique organisation in which the culture of inter-agency working is paramount. The ways in which such working is able to promote new relationships and the breakdown of traditional barriers between different professional groups is also an indicator of how successful a venture is likely to be- we are asking not only if Sure Start is making a difference but whether it is, in fact a different form of structure which is more appropriate to the dynamic, creative enterprise which Sure Start aims to be.*

Sure Start Thornhill employs staff from a number of different professional backgrounds. Representatives of the health profession, social work, social care, community development work, childcare and child welfare services are amongst the many groups who form part of the staff group at Sure Start. This suggests an opportunity for members of agencies who usually work in isolation to become much more aware of each other's roles, priorities and ways of working with the same client group. It also affords the possibility of much easier lines of communication between staff members, as all are actually working in close physical proximity. This evaluation has focused on trying to assess the extent to which this original approach to delivering services is providing the most responsive and satisfactory means of meeting the targets of Sure Start for both the professional groups involved and also the service users.

Interviews with all the key personnel have been analysed around the themes of communication, job satisfaction, attitudes to the management structure and overall view of their role in Sure Start and any suggestion for ways in which improvements could be made if necessary.

#### *Communication*

A common theme emerging from all the discussions with key personnel was the difficulties in establishing clear lines of communication. All members of staff expressed irritation with the existence of two centres and the complex practical issues that arose from this. There appears to be a very fragmented and unclear system of communicating between the centres, with what may be considered by some to be established procedures, unknown to other members of the staff team. Several individuals mentioned their annoyance at only finding out something after it had taken place:

*The xxx session was cancelled and I trailed up there only to be told that someone had phoned down to let me know.*

*We try desperately to keep up lines of communication but it is problematic and it causes a great deal of tension*

*That was information about one of my families, so I went out there completely unaware that this had happened.*

*Some particular staff members had constructed means of communication between themselves which is effective, but is not necessarily known to any wider group of people and may leave other staff members feeling excluded. Communication difficulties between the two centres seems to add to the somewhat ambivalent attitude that some workers display about the centre which is not their own 'home' base.*

*It seems ridiculous that we have to have to spend so much time working in the building, providing cover, when we should be getting out there to meet the families that we need to encourage.*

*The two buildings have taken priority over what we should be doing- the cover we have to provide is really tying - it would be better to get a caretaker type person to be here if we need to provide that*

*The two centres seem to operate differently. That one is more organised. This one seems a bit of a shambles sometimes and the atmosphere between some staff members is a bit fraught.*

The concept of communication was expanded in discussion to cover the ways in which the different backgrounds of staff members had an impact on the relationships between them

## *Gender*

As in the previous evaluation, the relationship between gender and attitudes to Sure Start remains fairly predictable. As much of the focus of Sure Start is rightly directed towards children and families, it is unsurprising that it is mainly mothers who engage with the centres and the various activities. Both centres continue to challenge gender stereotypes through literature and toys and in informal discussions. Conversations with younger men have illustrated some awareness of Sure Start and the positive benefits it may bring to children and their families, but the centres themselves are perceived as places to which mothers would go. Clearly, Sure Start cannot be alone responsible for cultural shifts in gender attitudes, but although there is an excellent male role model involved with the children's play scheme, and the Supardads group is in existence, there remains a dearth of males visible at the centres and many activities appear female orientated. A broader emphasis on reaching out to families in the area in general with more initiatives that may attract males may be helpful, as may the more obvious strategy of employing men at the centres, although of course the work force employed in the fields of health and social welfare does itself often display a gender imbalance.

## *Weekend Access*

Whilst much of the discussion about the opening hours of the centres have been considered earlier in relation to the children of working parents, there is still a need to stress the commonly held view

of many local individuals and families that Sure Start is likely to have a greater impact if it responds to the frequently expressed needs of the local community in terms of being available as a resource outside of the traditional working day.

*The place should be open at weekends for stuff. That's when there's a lot of pressure at home, when we're all there, and it would be a good place to go to*

*The kids are home all weekend...sometimes it's a nightmare*

*It just seems like an office doesn't it? It's not really a centre like where kids could go or us.*

Discussions with local parents who do visit the centres and those who have never been to either were directed towards the issue of staffing the centres at weekends. Many parents spoken to suggested different ways of resolving this, which ranged from a volunteer rota system drawn up by those groups specifically using the resources at any particular time, to a paid caretaker role who could oversee the security of the buildings. Some parents mentioned the fact that staff already employed by Sure Start could have more flexible patterns of work like many of them. The issue of weekend access to the buildings appears to be one which is causing some resentment amongst certain parts of the local population, and is not helped by the fact that there has been very little communication with local families and certainly no justification of the opening times to date. Several parents spoken to had been asked their views on a range of matters including this issue (in a survey carried out by the Parental Co-ordinators). There appears therefore, to some parents, to have been a complete rejection of a number of parents' wishes, and this has to some extent undermined the expressed desire of Sure Start to show its responsiveness to meeting parents' needs when verbalised.

### *Perceptions*

As in the earlier evaluation, the views of local people have been extensively sought in order to gain some understanding of their experiences of living in Thornhill. Perceptions of the Sure Start team as to how they feel Sure Start is meeting the needs of local families have also been gathered in an attempt to compare the important concerns and issues raised within the two groups.

### *The Sure Start Environment*

Some of the areas of concern raised in the previous evaluation have proven unfounded. The anxieties expressed by both staff and local people about the existence of two centres in the area (in connection with the issue of bringing the community together) have largely been dissipated. Of those families who visit the centres, many are happy to attend sessions at both if there is a particular activity which interests them.

*I live up here (near the Overthorpe) centre, but I generally go to that one (Thornhill) because I go*

*with my friend*

*It's a bit of a trek but it gets us out for a walk too.*

*I don't really go to that one much. I've been there but this is easier.*

Some parents did express preferences; the centre at Overthorpe appears to be favoured by both many parents and members of staff, although the reason for this is rather intangible.

*It's so much nicer there (Overthorpe)*

*It looks like the same from outside but it's much more friendly when you get in*

*It's more relaxing than the other one*

And from Sure Start team members:

*This is my base and I don't really like going there that much.. all my stuff is here*

*People talk about how that one (Overthorpe) is nicer and I agree but I don't know what's different about it*

*I think (O) is more organised, someone always welcomes parents when they arrive*

This last comment does seem to have a resonance with some parents, many of whom have noted the homely touches in the living area.

The buildings overall are generally liked by both staff and parents who do access them, but from those who have yet to, comments were forthcoming about the image portrayed by both centres which appear to many as offices. This seems to inhibit the engagement with the centres for some people as it reinforces the idea that Sure Start is part of a more formal statutory agency which would not be a useful place to go, unless specific advice is sought. This is in fact a very relevant point, and several parents attending the centres commented that, although they do find the activities helpful, they often felt

*Like we're intruding in someone's workplace*

*People always seem busy and you think you might be disturbing them if you ask for something*

*It's ok if you go there for a session or something but I wouldn't go there for.. you know, just dropping in*

## *The activities and services offered*

A range of attitudes about what is offered by Sure Start is evident amongst various staff members. Most are extremely enthusiastic about a lot of the areas they are involved with. Many have made some attempt to survey the parents they see about future activities, and appear to try to accommodate any forthcoming suggestions. For a significant number of team members however, the issue of outreach rather than centre-based activities and services was seen as a vital but unrecognised way of promoting Sure Start more successfully in the local community.

*(that activity) had about six mothers every week and they did all enjoy it, but that's not enough and there are loads of mothers out there who could benefit but don't know about us*

*What's the point of having to cover these buildings if there's no-one here: we could be doing something useful in terms of PR*

*There are some groups of parents who will never, ever come here on their own, so why keep on bleating about these harder to reach families if we're not going out to find them. It's ridiculous.*

*More community activities in the community are needed. We need to be much more visible out there.*

Whilst more community-based initiatives would seem to be recommended as a way of furthering the relevance of Sure Start in the minds of the local population, many parents made suggestions of the types of courses and activities they would like to see at the centres.

- *Many more evening events*
- *Internet cafe*
- *Evening swimming*
- *Courses with a specific qualification*
- *Sign language*
- *Beauty advice*

- *quizzes*
- *social occasions for all the family*
- *weight watching groups*
- *groups organising sponsored activities*

Obviously, some of these suggested activities do not immediately seem to fit with the stated objectives of Sure Start, but the fact that many parents have made these suggestions demonstrates some interest in Sure Start which it would be useful to consolidate upon. It could be useful to use less didactic activities as a way of drawing in the local community in the first instance, and so then being in a position to promote services which relate more closely to the aims of Sure Start.

The idea of the quiz is an interesting example of this approach, with several parents who attend it being brought along by other friends, and then engaging with other aspects of Sure Start which they had not heard of before. Similarly, the 'weight watching' group idea was mentioned quite frequently.

The tension between centre-based activities and outreach based ones is much more visible amongst the staff team, but in many ways this represents the broad understanding and professional expertise of this group, and the awareness that more needs to be done in a proactive way to engage the local community. Local individuals, when asked about Sure Start, are often only responding to the way it is already perceived (as a centre-based initiative) and so are less likely to refer to other types of service provision which have not yet taken place.

### *Thornhill- the local area*

Part of the discussions with local people centred around their perceptions of what it is like to live in Thornhill. As might be expected there is no single homogenous view; opinions vary according to the socio-economic and lifestyle backgrounds of individuals. Parents and families who have accessed Sure Start appear to have more anxieties about the local area and its lack of provision for particular groups of people than in the population generally. Worries include the amount of drug use amongst young people, and the lack of any clear solution to this problem; the lack of any facilities for older children and teenagers which would alleviate the frequent rowdy gatherings in the local park; and the lack of local commercial or social facilities which again may be of interest to younger people. Ventures suggested included a café type venue selling soft drinks, but open in the evenings, and an expansion of the original fruit and vegetable shop operating as a commercial concern so that jobs could be created.

Members of staff were also aware of the problems affecting young adults in the area, but because of the focus of Sure Start on younger families, tended to have more knowledge of the levels of

deprivation affecting this group, in terms of lack of educational opportunities, inadequate childcare options, and the isolation problems of many first time mothers.

### *Access to services*

The services provided by Sure Start are clearly in line with the objectives of the programme, and many parents who were not previously aware of Sure Start agreed that some of the activities mentioned were really useful, although were less confident about actually going to the centre themselves. Parents who do take advantage of the facilities of Sure Start were on the whole very satisfied with their experiences, and felt that Sure Start was an excellent resource in the area.

*I wish it had been here when I had my other son ten years ago*

*It's so fantastic- all the things on offer and so nearby*

*It's so different from when I had my first baby- you had to go all the way to the clinic and then it wasn't very friendly*

*I've been able to breastfeed my baby which I didn't think I wanted to (do)*

### *Play*

All parents consulted with who use the centres were extremely satisfied with all the play initiatives. New parents appreciated the creative ideas for play and the very supportive groups in which ways of relating to children were discussed. Ideas for understanding and dealing with difficult behaviour in children were welcomed, and had been delivered in a non-patronising manner. Some of the groups were small, and parents often felt that not enough was known about Sure Start and what it offered in Thornhill.

### *Childcare*

A criticism, which was voiced quite frequently, was the lack of childcare facilities at Sure Start. Many parents had expected that childcare provision would be a priority but often appeared not to understand the crèche arrangement (available times etc) and suggested the need for a much more flexible system. The provision of childcare is of course a problematic one in terms of the regulatory restrictions, but does appear to be a fairly crucial criticism of quite a large number of parents. Parents using the Play group and the crèches compared the latter very unfavourably.

*The one at Thornhill is disorganised- you really have to watch some of those kids- my lad was bitten by another child*

*I don't think there's enough staff on, it always seems like a jungle*

*What's the point of having that room and the toys if it's not used all the time?*

The issue of headlice in children attending the crèche was mentioned by several parents, and many seemed to be unclear about the strategies for dealing with this condition, and indeed were quite angry that children were allowed to attend. This suggests a missed opportunity to provide some clear and accurate knowledge on health -related issues. The appropriateness of sending children with a range of other symptoms was also referred to, and again, no clear understanding of either the health implications or the policy of the crèche were apparent.

### *Health Services*

As before, these were the most favourably commented on, in part due to the ease of access to the services such as the health visitor and the midwife. These are the most high profile developments to have come about as a result of Sure Start and are very much appreciated by all new parents in the area.

*It's just brilliant. It's just up the road*

*I went to an ante-natal class and met three other mums that I've kept in touch with. We meet up there now for the baby massage group. I wouldn't have known anyone living here with a baby if I hadn't gone to Sure Start*

The take-up of the health services is excellent. In addition to the clinics and other groups held at the centres, parents were very pleased with the home visits that they had had, and many felt that these had been a lifeline at a difficult period with a new born baby.

### *Family Support*

This was interpreted in various ways by parents. The outreach visits by various members of the team were all commented on in a very positive manner, and the portage provision in particular was seen as very beneficial when there were behavioural problems with children. Similarly, the Speech and Language sessions and referral system was very valued, and had given a great deal of prompt reassurance to worried parents.

## Strand 3

### Effectiveness and Value for Money

An important part of the evaluation of a programme like Sure Start Thornhill is an examination of the cost of providing services. The purpose of Sure Start as a national initiative is not to save money or make efficiency gains in delivering services, there is instead an emphasis on joining services up so communities are served better and an emphasis on inter-professional working to provide holistic ways of intervening positively in the lives of children up to the age of 4 and their families.

#### *Explanation of Financial Model*

The financial model used for the cost benefit analysis is based on the operating budget for the individual priority areas at Sure Start Thornhill for the financial year 2002/2003. The purpose of the Cost Benefit Analysis (CBA) is to establish information on the financial costs of intervening in each of the priority areas. The CBA is not a formal financial audit and rather than providing detailed financial detail it concentrates on providing a guide to the cost of services to enable comparisons and analyses across the programme.

The calculations were performed in the following way:

- The budget for each of the priority areas was sought from the management of the programme.
- Analysis of the numbers of people accessing services in each of the areas was compiled from management information. Each worker at Sure Start is required to provide a monthly sheet detailing the totals of children and adults who have accessed facilities. The key to understanding this is the concept of the “visit”. A visit is defined as an individual who either accesses services in one of the Sure Start centres or who is visited in their home by a Sure Start worker. Each time an individual (child or parent) accesses a service it is considered a visit. Staff at the programme are required to differentiate between new clients and those who have accessed services previously and are returning. For the purposes of the CBA calculation this distinction between new and returning clients was subsumed and every visit was counted. The figures collected for this analysis began in August 2001 and ended in July 2002, representing one calendar year of activity at the programme. The figures for this calculation are listed in table 1.
- The cost of each visit in each of the priority areas was then calculated by dividing the annual budget for the areas by the number of visits made in one year.
- The next step required a calculation to incorporate the operating costs of the programme. These costs were estimated at £188,552 for the financial year 2002/2003. These costs include expenditure on administration and maintenance of buildings and equipment and the salaries of the management of the programme. Although the period on which the

operating costs of the programme were calculated did not exactly match the months for which the number of visits was collected, the operating costs of the programme are largely fixed and therefore the calculation remains sound at the level of accuracy needed for the CBA analysis.

- The operating costs were then distributed across the total number of visits made to the centre. The total operating costs were divided by the total number of visits across all priority areas. This resulted in a figure of £37.42 which represents the additional cost of each visit required to sustain the programme.
- The final cost of the visits was calculated by taking the cost per visit for each of the priority areas and adding the £37.42 from the previous step. The results of this analysis are presented in table 2.

*Table 1 - Calculation of annual visits*

<b>Priority Area</b>		<b>aug</b>	<b>01 sep</b>	<b>oct</b>	<b>nov</b>	<b>dec</b>	<b>jan 02</b>	<b>feb</b>	<b>mar</b>
Out reach and home visiting	Children	110	70	112	151	130	114	148	110
	Parents	86	91	133	182	123	115	129	110
Support for families and parents	Children	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	3
	Parents	0	0	0	0	0	5	4	4
Play learning and childcare	Children	20	48	107	110	110	75	104	6
	Parents	19	42	48	36	49	49	49	4
Primary and community health and social care	Children	2	21	23	57	27	44	44	3
	Parents	0	0	0	11	12	38	10	3
Special needs support	Children	7	6	2	5	4	0	12	1
	Parents	8	5	7		12	0	15	2
Additional activities	Children	0	18	17	17	14	0	0	0
	Parents	0	13	15	15	12	34	31	2

*Table 2 - Total cost per visit*

Priority Area	Budget	Children seen	Parents seen	Total seen	cost per visit of overheads	To
Out reach and home visiting	£66,240	1,396	1,287	2,683	£37	£6
Support for families and parents	£57,977	6	13	19	£37	£3
Play learning and childcare	£130,612	928	486	1,414	£37	£1
Primary and community health and social care	£68,540	327	119	446	£37	£1
Special needs support	£29,000	56	116	172	£37	£2
Additional activities	£18,879	114	186	300	£37	£1
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>£371,248</b>	<b>2827</b>	<b>374075</b>	<b>5034</b>		

### *Interpreting the results*

It is important to stress that the Sure Start initiative is not primarily focused on saving money or finding cost effective ways of delivering services. Work in the priority areas, particularly with parents and children who are difficult to reach may well look expensive, but success cannot be judged on cost alone. When the national Sure Start programme evaluation was launched it was the intention of the national evaluators to produce cost benefit analyses of services delivered by Sure Start and then compare these with the cost of similar services provided by other agencies such as local authorities, primary health care trusts and NGOs. This plan has now been scaled back and it is beyond the resources of the local evaluation to produce figures which can be used to compare the costs of interventions using Sure Start with those of other agencies.

Broadly speaking the cost of each visit in the priority areas are similar (within the £100 to £200) mark. The cheapest service is the Outreach and home visiting priority area, simply because of the numbers of visits made. The relatively low cost (£62 per visit) of these services belies the effectiveness of these interventions. Seeing parents and children in their own homes allows the staff at Sure Start to deliver services at the point of greatest need, and those people who may feel that a trip to the Sure Start centres is too daunting, will often agree to a home visit, especially after initial contact with a health visitor has been made.

The most expensive priority area is the Support for Families and Parents, but this high cost is created by the way in which the figures have been calculated. Only the project called "Supadads" was categorised in Support for Families and Parents which led to a misleadingly high cost. In reality, our observations of working practices at Sure Start Thornhill have indicated that the Support for Families and Parents is a sector of activity which runs across many of the other priority areas (in particular the Play learning and childcare. Included in the budget for Support for Families is the cost of the centres' administrator which also pushes the figure for each visit up significantly. We recommend that management at the centre reexamine the categorisation of activities under this area and that the costs of the centre administrator are moved to into the operating costs for the entire centre, a move which would reflect the cross cutting nature of this role.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Sure Start has been providing services to families in Thornhill for over a year. There is much evidence that for those parents and children taking advantage of the facilities on offer, a high level of satisfaction is achieved. The extensive range of activities, courses and help available is clearly linked to the specific objectives of Sure Start, and it can be confidently predicted that the children whose parents have engaged with Sure Start, will show definite health and social advantages in the coming years.

Problems remain however, in the process of communication and allowing the message of Sure Start to have as wide an impact as possible. Communication with parents, even with those attending the centres is patchy at times, and much of the useful information produced simply does not reach its target audience. The newsletter approach is a productive one, but is likely to be effective over a longer term than might be envisaged. Several different approaches need to be employed in order that the local families of Thornhill can all be party to knowledge and information about the services available, and so make an informed choice about accessing any provision.

The following suggestions include both practical ones in the process of communication, and also more structural changes which may enable Sure Start to reach those families who are harder to reach for a variety of different reasons, but who are likely to receive the most benefit from the sure Start approach.

1. A much bolder approach to publicity is required. Posters need to be displayed over the whole of the catchment area, in particular at places which are commonly visited by parents. These include the local shops, pubs, bus stops and park entrances. A number of fixed display boards would be useful, but would need updating on a regular basis.
2. The timetables giving details of activities also need to be a much more eye-catching design, with possibly additional flyers giving details of the start dates of particular courses
3. Other statutory and voluntary agencies in the area have varying degrees of accurate knowledge about what Sure Start offers. A more concerted approach to giving this information is vital, as many of these service providers may be in touch with families who would benefit from Sure Start but no clear lines of communication are visible.
4. In terms of inclusion, there are different factors involved for different groups, but the main theme common to all is that of meeting their expressed needs. For working parents, teenagers and older children there is likely to be some debate about how much they should or could be encouraged to be part of the Sure Start initiative. However research in many other similar areas has strongly suggested that the more the whole community is able to engage with Sure Start, the more successful the schemes are in attracting more reticent groups.

5. For parents and children in more disadvantaged groups, a much more focused and pro-active approach is likely to be essential. This could include a much stronger commitment to outreach activities, whether these are at the individuals' houses or as part of a community scheme such as Play in the Park. This type of scheme in particular, allows parents to 'test the water' of Sure Start, and may well lead on to a more concerted uptake of the services at a later stage.
  
6. If members of ethnic minority groups are to be included in the catchment area, much more attention would need to be given to the messages parents of the ethnic majority group currently receive. Many more multi-cultural signs and symbols would be important to engender an inclusive approach, and the employment of staff from other ethnic groups would be vital. This latter point in fact, is a useful one to consider at this stage too, as the experience of children at Sure Start currently is overwhelmingly a white British one, which may encourage feelings of difference, which may well not be appropriate or desirable.