



## **North Hartlepool Sure Start Partnership**

### **Local Evaluation Summary, 2003**

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**North Hartlepool Sure Start Programme:  
Local Evaluation Summary, December 2003**

**Introduction**

This 2003 Local Evaluation Summary for the North Hartlepool Sure Start Partnership Programme has been prepared by Dr Rob Hyland of the Sure Start Local Evaluation Team (Dr C. Bagley, Dr J. Rattray, Dr R. Hyland, Ms C. Ackerley) at the University of Durham, Queen's Campus (Stockton). It has been compiled with the co-operation and assistance of the North Hartlepool Sure Start Programme Manager, Margaret Holdforth, and members of the Sure Start Team.

This is an overview of ongoing evaluation work within the North Hartlepool Sure Start programme with some issues highlighted for consideration. It does not set out to report upon all aspects of the programme, or on the detail of the fulfilment of the Delivery Plan. A more detailed evaluation report will be presented at the end of March 2004 at the conclusion of the current evaluation contract between the programme and the University of Durham.

Though the North Hartlepool Sure Start Partnership Board and the Sure Start Regional Office are the immediate audience for this summary, it is designed to be read by anybody with an interest in how the evaluation of the North Hartlepool Sure Start Programme is progressing. Any comments or responses to this summary report can be addressed to the author through the programme office.

**The North Hartlepool Partnership Sure Start**

The North Hartlepool Partnership Sure Start programme began its work as a 3rd Round programme in October 2001. It covers three distinct communities in the north of Hartlepool: West View, the Central Estate and the Headland.

Hartlepool North Sure Start started after Hartlepool South Sure Start (2nd Round) and before Hartlepool Central Sure Start (5th Round). The three Hartlepool projects have many common objectives, collaborate over important aspects of their work, and share a few individual staff members. Nevertheless, each programme is distinct and develops its own specific objectives in consultation with the local community

There have always been particularly close links between the North and South Sure Start programmes. These close links are reflected in the evaluation work carried out, including this report.

## **Issues emerging from the 2002 report**

The 2002 Local Evaluation Report (presented in January 2003) focused upon the progress of the programme in its first year. The report outlined some of the clear successes, but also commented on the way the programme was dealing with some significant challenges arising from the start-up phase.

In particular, as a consequence of slow progress with the capital strategy, the programme experienced significant problems over the provision of appropriate accommodation from which to operate services. There were also some delays in recruiting the full complement of staff with the necessary skills mix. These difficulties – neither unique to this Sure Start programme – combined together to slow the development of the non-statutory services offered to the local community. By the end of 2002 the North Hartlepool Sure Start programme was showing visible signs of overcoming many of the significant problems experienced in the start-up phase; the 2002 report observed ‘a real sense of new possibilities and opportunities for faster progress in 2003’.

The 2002 evaluation report raised some issues for consideration by the programme and its partnership board:

- the importance of ensuring that the construction and refurbishment of all the planned bases progressed on schedule;
- the need to involve a wider group local parents in the running of the programme and to develop ways of making such involvement more attractive to newcomers;
- the importance of clarifying the complexity of decision making when decisions often involved partner agencies and three partnership boards;
- the importance of building evaluation more firmly into the working of the team and the partnership;
- the possibility of involving a group of staff and parents to be in evaluation with support and training from the University team.

The 2002 report concluded that there was an observable but understandable tendency for all involved to sometimes focus on the frustrations of the start-up phase. This could lead to the underplaying of positive achievement when some ‘occasional self-congratulation’ would be in order.

## **The focus of evaluation in 2003/04**

The evaluation strategy for 2003/March 2004 covers work carried out by the programme team and work supported by local evaluators.

### *Internal evaluation*

- Statistical analysis of developments relating to programme and target population: births, number of families accessing the programme, and geographical spread; monitoring attendance for activities and services offered.
- Analysis of the activities and services delivered during 2003 and how these link to Sure Start objectives.
- Review of how the Sure Start team develops, plans and reviews programmes of activities and services delivered at each Sure Start building.
- Cost effectiveness exercises.
- Service-user evaluation sheets relating to activities & services.
- Detailed evaluation of specific activities and services e.g. Summer Holiday Activities Programme; The Parent Held Record of the Pathway of Care.
- Review of Governance – Board development sessions.
- Team development.

These activities are evidenced in internal documents.

### *Evaluation supported by local evaluators*

- Staff perceptions of the development of the programme.
- User perceptions of Sure Start services: a comprehensive user satisfactions survey; service user interviews.
- Evaluation: basic skills course for parents, team and community members.
- Review of the operation of the Partnership and the Governance of the Programme.

## ***Evaluation activities supported by local evaluators***

### **Evaluation workshop**

An evaluation workshop was held with some members of the programme team and the board. This explored some of the following issues:

- The nature of evaluation.
- Identifying priorities.
- Involving parents.
- Cost effectiveness.

In addition, this workshop introduced the possibility of holding an Evaluation basic skills course for small group of parents and team members drawn from Hartlepool North and Hartlepool South Sure Start programmes. It was explained that this course would have the purposes of:

- developing the knowledge and skills of parents, team and community members in evaluating programme activities;
- introducing participants to the practical skills involved in doing evaluation; and
- allowing team members and parents to share responsibility for aspects of evaluation.

The proposed course was promoted to professionals within the team as a staff development opportunity. It was suggested that the course could be offered to parents as an opportunity to gain skills that would be potentially useful in both extending their involvement in the programme and for other employment opportunities.

### **Evaluation Basic Skills Course**

The 'Evaluation: basic skills' course was held jointly with Hartlepool South. Starting in May, and consisting of six fortnightly sessions (led by Dr Julie Rattray, Dr Rob Hyland and Clare Ackerley), the course had twelve participants at the outset, including two parents and four team members from Hartlepool North.

The course introduced participants to research ethics, ways of gathering data using questionnaires and interviews, analysing data, and constructing and presenting a report. Working in small groups participants were required to carry out a small inquiry and prepare a presentation. The two practical investigations in Hartlepool North focused upon:

- The Newsletter.
- Holiday Activities.

A very successful presentation event was held in November at which the groups outlined their findings to an audience from the two programmes.

The two parents from Hartlepool North dropped out due to other commitments; the four staff members successfully completed the course. A certificate confirming that participants had successfully completed the course was awarded.

Although the course was short and always pressured for time, and though the two parents from this programme dropped out, it did provide very useful experience for developing possible future initiatives to involve community members in evaluation work.

### **Parental perceptions of Sure Start services**

There are two aspects to this part of the evaluation:

- a large scale user satisfactions survey;
- service user interviews.

A user satisfaction survey was conducted by means of an anonymous postal questionnaire posted to all families registered with the programme with a return envelope to the University. The objective was to provide more quantitative data on users' contact with Sure Start. The questionnaire was very comprehensive and sought feedback on the wide range of services and activities offered across the different bases. Despite the inducement of an entry into a prize draw, the response rate was somewhat disappointing. This is not an unusual problem when using unsolicited questionnaires, but it does raise questions about the possibility of alternative methods. The user satisfaction survey data is currently being analysed at the University and will be reported separately.

Small scale service user interviews are conducted by the local evaluator on the basis of informed consent and anonymity of reporting. Interviews are normally taped; it is explained that this is for the use of the evaluator alone.

As users of services who come into one of the bases, such interviewees are not fully representative of the programme population as a whole. They have at least some degree of involvement in the programme. Directly seeking these parents' perceptions, however, can illuminate how the programme is perceived by some of its beneficiaries.

#### *Provisional observations:*

- Interviewees are positive about their experiences of Sure Start services.
- It is word of mouth or the direct encouragement of team members in core services that brings people to activities in the first instance.

- The professional team is perceived as supportive and encouraging.
- The programme is seen as responsive to requests and suggestions.
- Parents who are actively involved in programme groups may see others who 'just sign up for trips' as benefiting unfairly...
- Parents place a high value on activities being available in the immediate neighbourhood.
- Greater involvement in the Partnership has to be gradual and progressive; parents don't start off with this in mind, but may become open to it over time.

### **Staff perceptions of the Sure Start programme**

Interviews with members of the staff team are conducted by the local evaluator on the basis of informed consent. The limitations of anonymity in reporting, when the significance of functional role is often central to the observation made, are always clarified.

#### *Provisional observations:*

- Members of the programme team are clear that there has been definite progress in 2003; key members of the staff team who have been with the programme for some time express a much greater sense of progress when compared to earlier interviews.
- There is a real sense of identification with the Sure Start team; the mutual learning which has been necessary to create a multidisciplinary team is recognised.
- The benefits – to both staff and programme families – of working in a multidisciplinary programme team are emphasised (the negatives are minor).
- Working in several bases is demanding for professionals, though recognised as meeting the expressed needs of the communities served by the programme. There is a feeling that provision is sometimes stretched.
- The management and communication structures within the team are clear to members and work well; the operation of the Partnership Board is more of a mystery!
- The new team accommodation is awaited with hope and expectation.

## **Summary observations on the Hartlepool North Sure Start Programme**

The completion of building work at West View Sure Start Centre (operational from January) and St. John Vianney Early Years Centre (operational from April) has meant that a wide range of services can be effectively delivered, particularly to the West View community. The opening of the new centres, added to the existing provision on Northgate and serving the Headland community, has enabled a considerable move forward in the programme's work of delivering a range of locally accessible services.

Local neighbourhood availability of services is highly valued by families. The administrative arrangements of a multi-site operation do have implications for staff.

There is a sense of anticipation that the new Sure Start Centre under construction (adjacent to the Ainderby Walk temporary team accommodation) will soon provide a more suitable base for the team and the delivery of services in the area.

Discussions and workshops have been held about the programmes and the relationship of the Partnership Board to the programme. Though a new constitution has been developed for the Partnership, its operation needs to be kept under review.

Parent and community involvement in the running of the programme is seen as important. The programme is quite dependent upon a small number of activist parents in the operation of the Partnership and Sub-groups. The Volunteer Training initiative may well serve to encourage more community members into closer involvement in the Partnership. Greater involvement in the Partnership has to be supported in a progressive way.

The general staff perception of working for a programme which is successfully providing its core services and now developing its wider range of initiatives seems well founded. Receiving the Sure Start Partners in Excellence Award has been a significant achievement and given valuable external recognition.

## **Evaluation Issues for immediate consideration**

A new structure for the local evaluation has to be developed for April 2004 onwards. The Partnership needs to take a considered view of the future local evaluation requirements of the programme in the light of the demands set out by the Sure Start Unit and NESS (National Evaluation Sure Start).

The Partnership has to consider how its evaluation plans can best be supported beyond March 2004 and what external expertise and help it requires. The current local evaluation contract has not been realistic in terms of time available

and evaluation demands. All future evaluation proposals must include a more accurate costing of the time (whether internal or external) necessary to carry out the plans.

The processes of evaluation are being built into the working of the team and the Partnership, but this would benefit from a more formal structure. The suggestion was made at the conclusion of 2002 report that a Programme Evaluation Sub-group might be established to take the evaluation forward. It is now both more pressing and more feasible that this suggestion be considered as part of the review of evaluation.

A start has been made to establish a system for judging cost-effectiveness. This requires more sustained attention in the first quarter of 2004.

The limited response rate to postal questionnaires, and the lack of wider attendance at 'have your say' events, suggest a clear need to devise alternative research strategies to canvas the opinions of those who make little or no use of services. It may be appropriate, for example, to train a group of local parents to administer a short interview schedule (or face-to-face questionnaire) as a means of canvassing opinion.

The qualified success of the introductory Evaluation Skills course does show the realistic possibility of involving a group of staff and parents in further evaluation work. Such a team would need further support and training. A number of potential issues would need to be resolved:

- The need to create protected working time for any staff involved in such work.
- Confidentiality issues, particularly in the use of parents and community members (these are legitimate concerns, but should not be exaggerated).
- The advantages and disadvantages (including contractual issues) of remuneration for 'volunteers'.
- The delivery of training and the judgement of 'suitability' to undertake specific tasks.

### **Concluding comment**

It may be an entirely unscientific concept – and can be dismissed as merely the personal observation of one local evaluator – but the Hartlepool North Sure Start Programme *feels* appreciably different at the beginning of 2004 compared to even just a year ago. There is a real sense of having overcome start-up difficulties and making progress. 2004 will show whether or not this is the case.