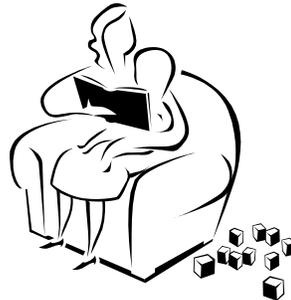


# SureStart Wallsend: Local Evaluation Annual Report



**May 2004**  
**Anne Foreman**



The Centre for Public Policy (CPP) is based within the School of Arts and Social Sciences at Northumbria University. CPP provides research, evaluation and training in relation to the management and organisation of public services. It has been specifically designed to provide a valuable resource for regional bodies, public sector agencies, partnerships and voluntary organisations in the North East region and elsewhere. CPP seeks to help policy-makers and managers to plan, develop and evaluate their response to the new ideas, initiatives and legislation that are creating fundamental changes to the way in which they operate. Overall, CPP aims to contribute to the process of public and voluntary sector renewal by promoting discussion, debate and dissemination of best practice, regionally, nationally and internationally.

Centre for Public Policy  
School of Arts and Social Sciences  
Northumbria University  
Newcastle upon Tyne  
NE1 8ST

Tel: +44 (0) 191 243 7433  
Fax: +44 (0) 191 243 7434  
Email: [az.centre-for-public-policy@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:az.centre-for-public-policy@northumbria.ac.uk)

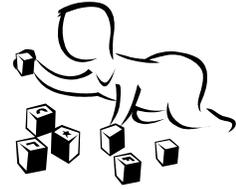
Website: [www.northumbria.ac.uk/cpp](http://www.northumbria.ac.uk/cpp)

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# INTRODUCTION



## Context

The SureStart programmes and the Children's Fund offer enormous opportunities to improve the life chances of disadvantaged children across the country. In North Tyneside positive contributions have already been made by the existing SureStart programme in Howdon. There are now three additional programmes - two further SureStart programmes in Killingworth and Shiremoor and Wallsend, and Children's fund work, which is ongoing.

North Tyneside Council in partnership with the Children's Fund and SureStart are seeking to evaluate the effectiveness of each of the three additional programmes over their lifetime. They are also concerned to combine the evaluation processes in order to facilitate synergy in the research process and to ensure economies of scale. Staff in the Centre for Public Policy (CPP) based within the University of Northumbria are conducting the evaluation, drawing on their previous experience of evaluating SureStart programmes and on their expertise in relation to health and social care, education and area-based regeneration. They are also building on their experience and skills in developing participatory approaches to research and evaluation. This allows them to work with the Partnerships, and with service providers, parents, children and young people to inform the policy and decision-making processes throughout the lifetime of the programmes.

The local evaluation of SureStart Wallsend began in April 2003 and is due to be completed in September 2005. The evaluation plan (shown as appendix A) was drawn up in consultation with the Programme Manager and approved by the Evaluation Steering Group.

## Aims

The aims of the evaluation are to look at the work of the SureStart programme in Wallsend and to facilitate and/or enhance a process of review, learning and improvement. At a partnership level the evaluation will assess the effectiveness, impact and operation of the work of the partnerships in relation to their key objectives and help them to work towards long-term sustainability of services. At a project level the evaluation will assess the impact of projects and individual services and their success in delivering intended benefits to children, young people and their families. The appraisal work undertaken will also seek to provide support to projects and individual services in relation to the development of their own self-evaluation including the use of participatory appraisal.

In other words, the evaluation aims to help the Programme assess how well it is doing, where it needs to make changes and provide a framework for continuing in-house review and reflection.

## **Structure**

The purpose of this report is to bring together findings from the local evaluation activity for SureStart Wallsend that has been conducted to date within the programme area. The document provides a progress report for the Partnership, and other local stakeholders, as well as the SureStart Regional Team and national evaluators.

The text seeks to give an overview of the evaluation work undertaken so far and the plans for the remainder of the study. It will describe the research undertaken into the progress on meeting targets and objectives of three aspects of the Programme's work. These are the SureStart Shop, the Programme's relationship with the local playgroups and the working processes of the Partnership Board. The report will go on to give a summary of the key evaluation findings to date and highlight successful approaches that could be applied more widely. Strengths and weaknesses of the Programme, as they are identified by the research, will be set out and policy recommendations for future development will be given.

# METHODS



## Introduction

This first interim report presents the analysis of findings from an evaluation, during 2003/04, of three projects or services within the SureStart Programme. These were the SureStart Shop, the relationship between the Programme and local playgroups and the decision-making processes of the Wallsend Partnership Group. Standard qualitative techniques were used to identify key themes, common factors and differences and these were presented within the framework provided by the interview and self-assessment questions.

### ***Ethical issues:***

All interviewees, focus group and workshop participants were made aware of the purpose of the studies, how the information collected would be used, and given assurances that their anonymity would be maintained. In addition, the evaluator asked participants working for partner organisations to the SureStart Programme to ensure that it was permissible within their contracts of employment to take part in evaluation of this nature.

## Evaluation of SureStart Shop

While waiting for its main base to be developed at the Buddle site SureStart Wallsend leased a shop, with offices above, on Wallsend High Street from December 2002 to March 2004. It was thought that this would enable the programme to raise awareness of SureStart and of the planned new building. The concept behind the decision was that if SureStart was given an immediate, visible base in the area, then SureStart services could be established quickly and therefore contribute even sooner to the national target 'ensure parenting support and information are available for all parents in SureStart areas.' SureStart's lease on the shop was due to end in March 2004, however it has now been extended to early summer 2004, due to delays in the construction of the Programme's main base. The evaluator was asked primarily to find out more about the ways in which local people and primary health staff use and view the shop. Another goal was to collect users' ideas on the shop's future role and use the findings to inform other organisations, who may have an interest in taking responsibility for the shop when the lease ends.

### ***What the research involved:***

The evaluation took place between July and September 2003, with the majority of the fieldwork occurring in September. The key elements of the study included collecting background information on the shop and focusing on the views of local people. With the latter in mind, the principal tool chosen for the research was Participatory Appraisal (PA), a well-recognised family of techniques, which places an emphasis on visual methods of communication. In the case of the shop, a map and sheets of flip chart paper were placed on the walls of the shop, and the administration and reception staff encouraged and assisted local people to give their views. Twenty-six local people made comments in this way. In addition, other information about the use of the shop was gathered by making observation visits to the premises where appropriate, and running two focus groups with five Midwives and 11 Health Visitors working in the programme

area. The aim of the focus groups was to identify their current use of the shop and their thoughts on its future potential. Both of these activities were completed in September 2003. A face-to-face semi-structured interview was also conducted with the Assistant Director of Nursing to find out her views on possible future uses of the shop.

## **Evaluation of the relationship between the Programme and local playgroups**

When Wallsend SureStart was being developed, it was acknowledged that, unlike its sister programme in Howdon, it would not need to provide playgroup provision as there were already four established playgroups operating in the programme area. Therefore in May 2002 the programme began to explore opportunities for mutually beneficial joint work and met with the playgroups and representatives from the Pre-school Learning Alliance to establish the level of playgroup use by the community and how SureStart could help.

### ***What the research involved:***

A study was undertaken in November 2003, to explore how that relationship has developed and to highlight key issues, which need to be addressed. The research questions focused on issues such as: who the playgroups seek support from if they have concerns about a child or its family: whether the playgroups make referrals to or via the programme: what informal links exist: whether SureStart has benefited the playgroups and visa-versa. Information was also sought on how the relationship between the playgroups and the SureStart programme could develop during the next three years. The study involved in-depth face-to-face interviews with each of the four playgroup leaders, with the SureStart Programme Manager and Assistant Programme Manager. These were supplemented by short telephone interviews with the SureStart Community Development Worker, Speech and Language Therapist and the Pre-school Development Worker. Minutes from meetings held in the development phase between representatives of the playgroups and the programme were also analysed.

## **Evaluation of the SureStart Wallsend Partnership Group**

Here the study focused on the question of how well the partnership was working as a decision taking body and sought to concentrate on process and procedure issues. The evaluation sought to test whether the partnership had developed robust systems and processes, which could add value to local service delivery. This included assessing the commitment and attendance of appropriate people from partnership agencies at meetings and the Partnership's decision taking, recording and communication procedures.

### ***What the research involved***

The study was undertaken in partnership between the local evaluator and members of the Policy, Performance and Communications Unit from North Tyneside Council, who were undertaking an evaluation of the SureStart Howdon Partnership at the same time. The work built on recent guidance for Community Safety partnership evaluations issued by the Home Office. Here, best practice standards for any type of partnership were identified. The method chosen to study the Wallsend SureStart Partnership was a self-assessment procedure using electronic "Ask the Audience" voting technology. A facilitated workshop for Partnership members was organised with the aim of helping members to identify important issues by looking at their own voting results.

To ensure that the workshop session voted on and discussed all the relevant issues, a focus group plus several semi-structured interviews were carried out during January 2004 with a range of partnership members from the statutory and voluntary sectors. The findings led to the development of the statements used at the workshop. Fifteen members of the Partnership attended the self-assessment workshop on 23 February 2004. These included: 8 service provider members of the Partnership, including two from the voluntary sector: 5 community members (4 parents and one other): the Programme Manager and the Assistant Programme Manager. There were no attendees from the Health or Education sectors.

Those present were given an electronic voting handset, and asked to give their assessment of how the Executive compared to a number of “best practice” statements. Each of the 22 standards was presented and voted upon, without any discussion of the results. Once voting was complete, the facilitator led the participants through a discussion designed to bring out the reasons for positive or negative scores. Comments were recorded on a flipchart and words or short phrases that summarised “problem” issues were recorded on cards. This produced a prioritised issues list. A brief discussion was held with participants to check whether the results reflected their discussions. No changes were thought necessary and the workshop ended.

# FINDINGS



## Evaluation of the SureStart Shop

### *Findings*

The research undertaken found that the shop plays a key role in providing support, advice and information to local people. Users are keen that this role continues, enabling the shop's future managers to benefit from its central location, transport links and reputation for friendliness and support. Several crucial elements have played a part in the shop's success. These are the staff, particularly the provision of a permanently staffed reception, the opening hours and the informality of the atmosphere. Combined with its location these elements have enabled the shop to act as a vital gateway to services and have undoubtedly enhanced public awareness of the SureStart programme.

However, the building is small and funding will need to be sought in order to meet the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act coming into force during 2004. In addition, if the building's successful use is to evolve and grow, there may be a need to create more private spaces suitable for clinical or counselling work.

The lease for the shop will soon draw to a close. Other potential partners are being sought because neither SureStart nor the Primary Care Trust will have the resources to staff the building without other partners; although each could continue to run some groups and provide information services from the shop. The Programme Manager is in discussion with organisations including Age Concern and Connexions. She is seeking funding from the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund to pay for the adaptations, which need to be made to the building. A mix of users could develop a number of synergies, creating, for example, new opportunities for cross-generational work. However care must be taken to ensure any future uses are complementary, inclusive and responsive to local needs.

### *Recommendations*

The research shows that users are keen that the provision of advice and support from the shop should continue. The key aspects that were valued were its central location, transport links and reputation for friendliness and effective help and support. Combined with its location these elements have enabled the shop to act as a vital gateway to services and undoubtedly enhanced public awareness of the SureStart programme. However, what is not so easy to demonstrate is how this achievement links with the overall aims and measurable outcomes for SureStart and its statutory, partner organisations. In other words, the success of the project has been evaluated by finding out the views and opinions of its users, but there is now a need to demonstrate both closer links with the overall aims of SureStart, and sustainable benefits for children and their parents in terms of health or education. Currently the shop is due to close in June 2004. Because of the substantial financial investment into the premises by SureStart Wallsend, it is hoped that some expressions of interest in its on-going use as an amenity for the community, will bear fruit. The Local Authority's Valuation Team is looking into the matter.

## **The Evaluation of the Relationship between the Programme and Existing Local Playgroups**

### ***Findings***

As the programme area already contained four playgroups, a decision was made not to develop any new groups, but to find the most effective ways for the Programme to work with the existing groups. One key finding that emerged is that the four Wallsend playgroups all exist within very different financial, managerial and environmental circumstances. Of the four in question, one is eager to emphasise its independence and self-reliance, another is happy to support SureStart as long as the programme does not ask it to change the way it operates, and two appear to need more support, however one of these is particularly wary about the implications of working more closely with SureStart. Although from the outset the programme chose not to compete but rather to support the playgroups, there was an expectation that the groups would provide family contacts and data in return. However, the playgroups do not appear to share this view and while happy to receive support and promote the programme, they continue to be wary of helping the programme engage with the families they work with.

Another reason that the programme was eager to support the playgroups was to help them improve the quality of their provision. However, the groups appear overwhelmed by requests and suggestions on training from a range of organisations. Indeed they often feel they have neither the time nor the funding to allow staff to undertake more training. The research showed that many people thought that there was duplication between SureStart and EYDCP and better co-ordination is required.

### ***Recommendations***

All of the playgroups would benefit from the provision of a regularly updated contact list for SureStart personnel plus other key sources of advice and information. In other words, SureStart needs to be more consistent and systematic in the frequency and content of its contact with the playgroups. A way must also be found to address playgroups' concerns about raising sensitive issues with parents. What is needed is clearer communication and understanding of each other's needs and expectations between the Programme and the playgroups. In other words, although the groups are not able to meet each other, they would benefit from having the opportunity to share ideas, activities and resources.

## **The Evaluation of the SureStart Wallsend Partnership**

### ***Findings***

Stakeholders identified many strengths in connection with the Wallsend Partnership. These included the skills and experience of the Programme Manager, the stable membership of the Partnership, who appear to share a common focus and determination, and the strategic networks of Partnership Members. In addition, those parents who attend activities report that they feel comfortable and able to participate. This has been demonstrated by the use of the shop and the involvement of partners in the milestone planning process.

However the findings also highlighted several weaknesses that the Partnership needs to address. First, some parents report difficulty in influencing Partnership decision-making. Second, the awareness of local people regarding the Partnership appears low, particularly those moving into the area. Third, there seems little ownership or commitment from some of the organisations

represented on the Wallsend Partnership. Some of the evidence for the latter statement lies in the low attendance from representatives from statutory organisations at meetings and the failure of some community-based health workers to provide the accurate monitoring data required by the Programme. It is feared that without, manifest support from partner organisations and members of the community, SureStart Wallsend may have difficulty in ensuring that the improvements it has brought about are maintained when the taper is applied.

### ***Recommendations***

The Partnership must strengthen the ability of parents to influence decision-making. This could be done by, for example, introducing pre-meetings for parents, clarifying which issues are to be discussed, and what decisions may have to be made. In addition, the Partnership and Programme should encourage and sustain the involvement of a broader number of parents in partnership meetings. There are a number of ways that this could be achieved, for example, by moving items of particular interest for parents higher up the meeting agenda, by providing training for newly involved parents, and by commending parents who have been involved even though their own children will not benefit.

The Chair and Programme Manager should discuss the poor attendance of some agencies with senior Council officers and with the Health representatives on the Board to agree a way forward to tackle this issue. Work should begin aimed at developing a tighter meeting structure which ensures service provider representatives arrive at partnership meetings on time and that discussions within the meetings are more focused so the meeting runs to time. Relevant Partnership members should ensure that the taper issue is raised in their own organisations' budgeting and service planning processes. Although this is a medium term issue for the Wallsend Partnership, work should begin now to raise partners' awareness of the impact SureStart will have on the delivery of all services. It is important to ensure partners use their networks and reporting arrangements to bring this issue to the attention of those in charge of preparing medium term budget plans.

The Partnership should clarify its own processes by more clearly and formally defining partners' roles and responsibilities. A step in the right direction would be to review the Partnership's terms of reference and ensure partners are familiar with them and abide by them. The development of an induction process for partners could be one way to achieve such an objective. In addition, partners' awareness needs to be raised on how they can each contribute to such topics as agenda setting and the Programme's approach to performance management.

# DISCUSSION



The evidence collected suggests that there is a great deal to be commended in the energy, industry and commitment demonstrated by key stakeholders in the SureStart programme. As a result there is good potential for there to be well-supported and accessible services and flexible working arrangements across the Programme area. However there are some issues for the Partnership to consider in terms of improving its service provision.

With regard to the use of a shop to promote awareness of and access to local programmes, the central location was welcomed by local people and users. However, the confusion surrounding where responsibility lies for sustaining services in the longer term needs to be addressed.

With regard to the relationship between SureStart Wallsend and the local playgroups, the study undertaken suggests that they are culturally very different from the SureStart Programme. This contributes to their on-going suspicions of the programme and the data requests that are made. A contributing factor to the problem is that limited capacity is a major issue for all of the playgroups. They all work to the required 'staff to children' ratios, but this allocation only allows them to cover their day-to-day work plus a few additional requirements, such as the running of extra childcare services or attendance at mandatory training. There is considerable pressure on staffing and it is clear that personnel from the playgroups do not have time to attend SureStart events and meetings.

A related issue of capacity also arises in the fact that all of the playgroups are heavily dependent on income generation via fees. This makes them vulnerable to demographic variations and to changes in government policies. Although SureStart is willing to help the groups broaden their funding base, the groups do not appear to feel they have the capacity, or in some cases motivation, to identify and develop funding bids. However, while two of the groups are satisfied with the current level of communication with the programme, two would prefer more regular, ideally face-to-face, contact from a member of the programme team – this could also be more effective in terms of raising Playgroup Leaders' awareness of SureStart services.

The Programme needs to be more consistent in contacting the playgroups regularly and should help them to work together to identify ways to share ideas, activities and resources. Such work could also focus on the development of a clearer understanding of the needs and expectations of each playgroup and of SureStart. There also needs to be a joint approach taken to concerns, which affect all the playgroups, for example, raising sensitive child protection issues with parents. To help in this process, greater co-ordination is required between the Programme and Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership.

With regard to the processes and systems of the SureStart Wallsend Partnership, the ability of the Programme and the Partnership to engage a broad range of representatives and develop a sense of team and common direction is good. Also, SureStart principles and practice are having a positive influence on the lead body and other partner organisations.

However some weaknesses are apparent. In the main these involve parent participation and the monitoring processes. There is a need to provide training for parents in the structures and processes of the SureStart area. This training could include sessions designed to build skills in contributing to meetings and to decision-making.

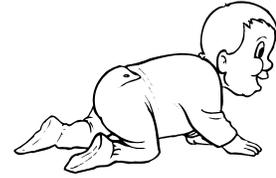
As with all SureStart Programmes, the Wallsend Partnership has a number of key objectives to meet. The targets appear well defined, which implies that measuring progress should be relatively straightforward. For example, the percentage of women smoking during pregnancy is to be measured and the overall aim is to achieve a 2% reduction in women smoking during pregnancy. However much of the information required is collected by a wide range of professionals from different backgrounds and therefore successful evaluation depends on the full participation of everyone involved.

Clearer guidelines on collecting data for monitoring are needed, including more work done to disseminate the reasons why monitoring is necessary. In addition, practical information about methods for collecting, recording and interpreting and using data may help to promote confidence and a sense of ownership in the process of data collection, including:

- Why monitoring is a requirement for the programme area
- When information is needed
- How it can be collected, recorded and interpreted
- How the information is used in terms of a local management tool

Initiating debate about the reliability of data and the monitoring requirements of other agencies (such as health) may help to improve validity, methods of collection and information sharing between agencies.

# OVERALL RECOMMENDATIONS



- Currently the shop is due to close in June 2004, but service users are keen that the provision of advice and support from the shop should continue. Because of the substantial financial investment into the premises by SureStart Wallsend, it is hoped that some expressions of interest in its on-going use as an amenity for the community, will bear fruit.
- There should be greater co-ordination between the Programme and Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership.
- The Programme needs to be more consistent in its contact with local playgroups. What is needed is clearer communication and understanding between the programme and the playgroups of each other's needs and expectations,
- The Programme and the local playgroups should work together to identify ways to share ideas, activities and resources and develop a clearer understanding of such issues as raising sensitive matters with parents.
- All of the playgroups would benefit from the provision of a regularly updated contact list for SureStart personnel plus other key sources of advice and information.
- The Partnership must strengthen the ability of parents to influence decision-making. This could be done by, for example, introducing pre-meetings for parents and clarifying which issues are to be discussed, and what decisions may have to be made.
- The Partnership and Programme should encourage and sustain the involvement of a broader number of parents in partnership meetings. There are a number of ways that this could be achieved, for example, by moving items of particular interest for parents higher up the meeting agenda, by providing training for newly involved parents, and by commending parents who have been involved even though their own children will not benefit.
- The Chair and Programme Manager should discuss the poor attendance of some agencies with senior Council officers and with the Health representatives on the Board to agree a way forward to tackle this issue.
- Work should begin aimed at developing a tighter meeting structure which ensures service provider representatives arrive at partnership meetings on time and that discussions within the meetings are more focused so the meeting runs to time.
- Relevant Partnership members should ensure that the taper issue is raised in their own organisations' budgeting and service planning processes.
- The Partnership should clarify its own processes by more clearly and formally defining partners' roles and responsibilities. A step in the right direction would be to review the Partnership's terms of reference and ensure partners are familiar with them and abide by them. The development of an induction process for partners could be one way to achieve such an objective. In addition, partners' awareness needs to be raised on how they can each contribute to such topics as agenda setting and the Programme's approach to performance management.