



## **Felling Sure Start: Local Evaluation**

**First annual report: August 2004**

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## Section 1: Introduction and issues in focus

The early part of year one of the evaluation was concerned with gaining ethical approval for the evaluation from the Local Research Ethics Committee (LREC), meeting and getting to know Executive members, managers, staff and parents in Felling, undertaking an initial user satisfaction survey, and, in conjunction with the Evaluation Steering Group, identifying the key areas for this first year of evaluation and getting this work underway. In addition, it was agreed that the Felling evaluation should take every opportunity of connecting with the parallel evaluation in Sure Start Deckham because the neighbourhoods and issues were closely linked and joint meetings of the Executives were ongoing.

Much of this early work was reported in the year one interim report. A summary of findings and early recommendations from this report are as follows:

- A core of parents were remaining linked to the development of Sure Start Felling and new parents were being regularly recruited. Involving parents in service use and decision-making remained a key target with a general awareness that the needs of hard-to-reach parents were recognised but still in development.
- Staff were active in giving out information about Sure Start and were substantially supporting first contacts with parents. ‘Other parents’ and ‘friends’ were also a key source of information showing word of mouth to be the main method of first contact with Sure Start Felling.
- Parents tended to believe that Sure Start was either ‘for parents’ or ‘for children’. Very few believed it was for parents *and* children. Staff may need to be more active in promoting this message and in emphasising benefits for the community.
- Parents were responding positively to the regular opportunities to participate (e.g. courses/groups) and the occasional activities (e.g drop-ins and trips). Both types of activity were important in dispelling beliefs that Sure Start was for ‘bad parents’ or for ‘poor parents’.
- There was disappointment expressed that the new building had not been started.

Three issues would be examined in the ongoing evaluation:

**Nappy Days** - a weekly group for new parents and babies (currently, mainly attended by new mothers) offering family support, advice on children’s development and early learning opportunities. It encompasses all four of the Sure Start objectives:

**Improving Social and Emotional Development, Improving Health, Improving Children’s Ability to Learn and Strengthening Families and Community.** For

many mothers and children, it will be their first regular contact with a Sure Start activity. It is clearly a key activity within service provision.

**The Parents' Network** – a forum that meets on a regular, usually monthly, basis. It aims to extend parent and community participation in decision-making and service development in Sure Start Felling. As community involvement is one of the major underpinning principles of the Sure Start programme, this is another key area.

**An extensive user-satisfaction survey** – this is a compulsory part of the ongoing evaluation. It was agreed that the evaluation team would work with staff and parents to develop their survey skills in undertaking this role, together, in the community. This would be undertaken with staff and parents from Deckham Sure Start to sustain links across the two neighbourhoods although the surveys would each be undertaken in the separate wards.

## Section 2: Nappy Days

- **Collecting the evidence**

Evidence came from:

- documentary sources,
- four evaluator visits to the group for introductions, consent forms to be signed and observations,
- semi-structured, recorded and transcribed interviews with the staff,
- informal conversations with mothers during sessions and from one-to-one confidential interviews with four mothers (Appendix 1).

**NB:** All data from Sure Start evaluation are anonymous. Data are stored in a locked room in Northumbria University and are seen only by the immediate members of the Felling evaluation team.

- **Findings**

### *The format for Nappy Days*

The group is held in a good-sized room with tea/coffee making facilities in a separate kitchen at The Oxberry Room at Felling Library. The space allows a designated area for staff, mothers and babies to relax on large cushions, playmats and blankets, sitting together in a circle. The circle of adults provides a natural protective boundary for children but those crawling and 'new' toddlers can be safely monitored as they venture out of the circle. There is a separate table for mothers to drink tea and coffee. Sometimes children join them there and sometimes the staff and other parents entertain the children whilst mothers chat to one another or to staff. There are usually three members of staff in attendance, a Health Visitor, a Midwife and a Nursery Nurse so it is usually possible for one staff member to join parents at the table leaving two others to chat individually and informally in the group. Members of staff play with children also.

Once a month there is a sensory morning where the lights are dimmed and the resources have strong visual and tactile elements for mother, staff and children to experience together. Staff remarked that these are often quiet mornings and observations revealed a tranquil and absorbed scene throughout the morning with babies attracted to and staring at the lights and those that were mobile crawling over and investigating. The toys available at other times encourage exploration and problem-solving by the children both alone and with mothers and other adults. There is also a regular programme of visitors to the group, with talks on dental health observed and occasional activities for mothers and babies to do together, for example, craft activities. A baby weighing service is offered which is especially useful for mothers who are reluctant to attend a clinic and also convenient for all attending parents. The sessions often finished with a group sing song.

When a child becomes a confident toddler and leaves the group for a parent and toddler group or for Gym Babies, a certificate is awarded in a group celebration.

Mothers are told of the group during routine case-load related, Health Visitor visits to the home. The Nursery Nurses, Midwife and Health Visitor associated with Sure Start also make New Birth visits within six weeks of birth. Parents of older babies find out about Nappy Days by other methods also, by word of mouth, from friends - one saw a friend's car outside so came in to see what was happening. Another got an invitation through the post. A range of information strategies are used. The greatest distance a parent lived from the service was a 'ten to fifteen minute walk'. Several lived within five minutes pram-pushing distance. Attendance varied between 6-12 mothers and babies each week. The group was well-established with a large core of regular attendees and some occasional attendees. Staff evaluate the service through questionnaires to service users.

### *The strengths of Nappy Days*

#### **A welcoming atmosphere**

One mother remarked: 'Sometimes groups can feel like a clique but when you walk in here it's really friendly'. This was an issue remarked on by several mothers, both in one-to-one interviews and informal chats. It was also something staff were aware of from the beginning and had deliberately wanted to consider in as positive a way as possible. As one Nursery Nurse said: 'when they've been one week, they always seem to come back because it's a relaxed atmosphere. It's not so structured that you have to be here at ten o'clock. They can come at 11 and still feel welcome'. Another mother said: 'when I walk in I never felt as though everybody was looking at me and wondering why I was here'. It is clearly very important that no-one is seen as being there because they 'cannot cope'; this is not a reason that any respondent gave for coming to Nappy Days. They come to talk, to learn, to relax, to introduce their child to other children and while they all have one thing in common - a new baby - they are individuals with different needs and strengths and want this to be recognised by staff and other mothers. They may not stay if the group was not welcoming and their individuality was not recognised.

## **Confident babies**

All parents welcomed the opportunity for their baby to meet others in a social and interactive setting, 'to learn how to play with others'. One parent said she was glad because it 'gave him his own social life, not just trailing round with me'.

One mother said that her child had not liked Nappy Days in the early days but had become 'used to it' and 'likes to watch'. Nappy Days offered a progression for the babies as their confidence to explore developed and showed the mothers that their child could develop independence. When one mother had started part-time work, she had wanted the baby to continue coming so sometimes his dad had brought him and sometimes his grandma had brought him.

Sometimes the babies got on with playing, sometimes attention focused on them – a new tooth was celebrated, the first steps in walking or beginning to crawl; the important milestones could be recognised and celebrated. Some older children pursued a theme each week; observations revealed that they seemed to recall activity and investigation from previous weeks and wanted to extend their knowledge of or control over some of the play materials. Much praise was given for achievement by staff and parents and children were encouraged to be aware of other children, to relate positively to them and to share. Staff and parents reinforced learning by repeating children's noises and actions. The children watched adults chatting to one another; the whole scene was rich in language with much giving and receiving of toys between adults and children. Whilst mobile children might seek the reassurance of having mum around, they would also respond positively to staff if mum had gone for a drink or a chat elsewhere.

## **Adult learning in a relaxed setting**

Mothers identified a wide range of subjects that they had discussed individually with staff such as post natal depression ('I didn't want to raise it at first but felt better over time'), slow weight gain for the baby and that they had discussed in the groups – weaning, dental care, the impact of smoking, safety in the home, other Sure Start activities, sleepless nights, teething, price of nappies, later stages of child development. There was evidence from listening to parents' conversations, from talking to them informally and from the one-to-one interviews that in general, a lot of useful information was being internalised linked to the babies' health and to their own well-being. One interesting, spontaneous group discussion concerned how to manage the behaviour of friends and family who were smokers and felt it was reasonable to smoke near the baby 'I make people go outside to smoke'; the mothers talked openly about their own behaviour: 'I go into the yard'. Another group discussion, after the dental nurses' visit, was about safe drinks for the baby, for their other children and for themselves. The sugar content of fizzy drinks was a surprise to some. The Health Visitor remarked that the speakers were a good idea but it needed to be well-focussed with a chance for a lot of discussion afterwards.

One mother said that one of the main benefits for her was 'a chance to talk to other mums and have a cup of tea'. This mother also said that Nappy Days had 'got me out of the house, I was very lonely. It gave me a reason to leave home in the beginning'. She felt that one of the greatest supports it had offered was 'finding out that there were others out there and having access to a Health Visitor'. She had been able to talk

to staff about the time her baby had spent in hospital and about her own, post-natal depression. Her only criticism was that she 'could have done with it sooner, it should be better advertised'. Another mother said: 'This has been a life-line to me'.

As the Health Visitor pointed out: 'The work we are doing here is at the earliest stages of intervention'. Whilst not all mothers had need for special support, she felt the group allowed a development on from her regular visits to new mothers that were part of her case load across the wider community. The home visits were necessarily pre-occupied with 'form-filling' and she knew that sometimes the message about what was available would need to come several times and from a range of sources, for some parents. She could prompt again at her four month visit.

The contacts that mothers were making at Nappy Days were extending beyond the group. One mother who knew no-one before she came was now meeting other mothers socially and at other Sure Start groups. The Nursery Nurse said 'they learn they can give advice and receive it . . . I know one mum was having difficulties with her little girl but she went to someone else for a coffee and a chat and she says that's helped her'.

### **Multi-disciplinary working.**

The mothers recognised the contributions that each of the staff team made. The Midwife role was linked to their recent pregnancy and delivery – significant, recent events in their lives which needed to be re-visited and learnt from and in some cases, negative experiences had to be come to terms with. The Health Visitor supported in relation to child development. The Nursery Nurses talked to parents about their child's development and all three staff came to recognise and discuss the week by week development of the children as well as talking to mothers about aspects of their lives at home with the children and their return to work in some cases. One Nursery Nurse remarked on how her own professional knowledge had developed from working alongside other professionals; she was now more aware of many family support issues whereas previously her knowledge had been limited to care of the children. The staff remarked on how the absence of one team member might be felt: 'it's a shame the Health Visitor wasn't here today because I could have brought her into the conversation'.

The Health Visitor was keen to develop the service by having other Health Visitors involved, perhaps on a rolling six month basis to give all of them experience of the benefits of groups for parents and young children: 'A mainstream doesn't have the luxury of the time to set up a group, you don't have money for premises. To me this would be a nice way of linking across to mainstream'. Issues of mainstreaming are considered further in the next section.

### *The challenges for Nappy Days*

#### **Maintaining and developing the service and the staff teams**

Having a Health Visitor, a Midwife and a Nursery Nurse makes for a complementary team able to respond to parent's queries and concerns informally and spontaneously, to nurture good relationships between parents and professionals and across parents and to interact with children to support their learning and development. There are,

however, clearly some costs associated with maintaining a relatively high professional to parent ratio. The Nappy Days staff have regular discussions with the service co-ordinator in relation to maintaining and developing the service including costs, staffing levels and continuity of staffing. The Nappy Days staff appreciate that this is done through consultation rather than direction.

The staff recognise the need to be constantly alert to potential exclusion of new mothers from the group as long-attending parents become established and cohesive. They recognise the need to be constantly active in attracting new parents but there is also an issue of group size – too large a group might also be difficult for sustaining relationships and for encouraging frank and open discussion.

Fathers are not yet well-represented in the group. Their presence may affect the dynamic of the group in either positive or negative ways, as perceived by the attending mothers. However, if the service is designed for all new parents, then this aspect may need further consideration to secure equality of opportunity.

### **Mainstreaming the service**

A key part of Sure Start activity is to develop innovative approaches in community settings. Ultimately, Sure Start money will be withdrawn and, currently, the intention is that innovative activities become mainstreamed through service development. This clearly has implications beyond the Sure Start team and into the wider Local Authority structures and the continuation of the Nappy Days format would need consideration in this wider context. The Health Visitor at Nappy Days has been looking to involve other Health Visitors in the service. This Health Visitor, however, is now employed elsewhere. As a new Health Visitor is employed, this person will need to be carefully briefed on and integrated into the Nappy Days format and the team. This person may not, initially, have the same sense of ownership of the group idea in the way the previous Health Visitor did. However, this person may also bring new ideas that the established team may need to be prepared to consider. There will need to be a continuation of activity around the principle of mainstreaming this service. In addition, until a new Health Visitor is appointed, consideration will need to be given to maintaining the high quality of the current provision at Nappy Days.

In addition, the Sure Start Midwife is currently working with the community midwife and the local clinic to develop a ‘new style’ of group-based ante-natal clinic: ‘we do it together . . . some come regularly, some drop in but I can feed back to the community midwife’. This is a further example of innovative practice beginning to emerge, one with the potential to be mainstreamed and with real potential for meeting the needs of expectant mothers who might not be comfortable in accessing traditional provision. It could be argued that this is a crucial time for attracting these hard-to-reach mothers-to-be in that once confidence is built, for them, in available services, they may be more likely to continue their involvement in other kinds of services, for example, attending Nappy Days and other groups.

## Reaching the hard-to-reach

There is a view that some hard-to-reach parents-to-be are beginning to be accessed through the different style of ante-natal clinic mentioned above: 'I think they are coming because of the way it is set up. The traditional system of sitting in a waiting room is not for them . . . we have a bit of a group environment where we have a chat and go over things . . . over time they might get more comfortable with the idea of groups'. As this is the step 'before' Nappy Days, it would seem worthwhile developing this aspect and perhaps including this in the next phase of evaluation. This initiative is also addressing the mainstreaming of Sure Start services by developing innovative links between Sure Start staff and Health Authority staff.

One parent suggested that leaflets advertising Sure Start might be available in maternity wards, perhaps given automatically to every new mother or that information could be given when informed of the need for parents to register the new birth. The benefits of Sure Start could be made clear, indicating what it provides for children, for parents, for the community. This parent expressed concern that a suggestion of a card from The Parents' Network to every new parent had not yet, to her knowledge, been acted upon.

It might also be considered that fathers remain a hard-to-reach group in relation to Nappy Days.

### *The weekly cost of Nappy Days:*

| <b>Item</b>                 | <b>Cost</b>    |
|-----------------------------|----------------|
| <i>Staff</i>                |                |
| Nursery Nurse: 3 hours      | £24.18         |
| Midwife : 3 hours           | £46.80         |
| Health Visitor: 3 hours     | £48.00         |
| <i>Refreshments</i>         | £2.50          |
| <i>Administrative costs</i> | Nil            |
| <i>Transport</i>            | Nil            |
| <i>Room hire</i>            | £20            |
| <b>TOTAL COSTS PER WEEK</b> | <b>£141.48</b> |

For six children and their parent attending a Nappy Days session, this is a cost of approximately £23 per family.

For 12 children and their parent, this is a cost of, approximately, £12, per family.

In addition, a sum of £71.50 has been spent, so far, on promoting Nappy Days within the Felling community.

## **Nappy Days: Summary**

1. Nappy Days appears to be reaching all the targets it has set for itself in relation to Sure Start objectives. It has clear aims and the service is focussed on achieving these aims for the birth -10 month age range.
2. It offers a welcoming and supportive service to between 6-12 new mothers per week, has a core of regular attendees and encourages social relationships to develop between them away from the group. It is reaching mothers who have experienced or are experiencing post-natal depression. Continuing to attract new mothers remains a clear target. Attracting more fathers may also need further consideration.
3. It sustains an innovative and effective model of multi-disciplinary working across a team that include a Midwife, a Nursery Nurse and a Health Visitor. The informal working practices of this team and their individual strengths and professional knowledge are welcomed by parents. The appointment of a new Health Visitor may influence the dynamic.
4. Innovative ideas for mainstreaming the service are emerging from the staff team in consultation with senior managers. These have implications for workloads beyond the immediate Sure Start team and to be effective will require discussions beyond Sure Start Executive and into the wider Local Authority structure.
5. The staff team are addressing the issue of hard-to-reach mothers and see particular opportunities by forging links at the ante-natal stage with an innovative, more informal setting for mothers-to-be. Whilst this is a longer term strategy, long-term thinking of this kind can only be beneficial to the sustainability and mainstreaming of the service.

## Section 3: The Parents' Network

### Introduction

The Parents' Network at Sure Start Felling currently meets monthly on a Friday afternoon. The group developed from information-giving meetings announcing the Sure Start programme in the Felling area of Gateshead Metropolitan Borough in late 2001. The group has, until recently, met in the upstairs room at Stoneygate Community Centre but with increasing attendances, was relocated to the Brandling Community Centre which offers crèche facilities. Parental involvement in decision-making is a crucial aspect of Sure Start programmes intended to ensure community representation in decision-making and to develop parents' skills as decision-makers in group settings within a Local Authority structure. Between 9 and 15 members have attended seven meetings from September 2003 until June 2004.

The main Sure Start objective which underpins The Parents' Network is:  
**Strengthening Families and Communities.**

- **Collecting the evidence**

The dataset consists of:

- Documentary evidence including Minutes, a letter from a parent (made available with their permission) and an email (made available with permission).
- Evaluators' notes from attending three meetings of The Parents' Network,
- Informal discussions with parents and Sure Start staff at the meetings
- Questionnaires to 25 Parent Network members (Appendix 2). Twelve were returned, representing a return of just fewer than 50% (a good return).
- Seven telephone or face to face interviews (as selected by parent) with volunteer Network members (Appendix 3). These were transcribed.

Questionnaires and interview questions were developed with the Parent Network members. The dataset has led to emerging themes presented below under *the strengths of* and *challenges for* The Parents' Network.

- **Findings**

### *The strengths of the Parents' Network*

#### **An established group of confident parent/carers**

The Parents' Network has 25 parent/carer members although not all are regular attendees. It is regularly attended by a Community Support Worker and a Parent Support Worker. Many of the attendees have been members since the Parent Network began. A small number of new parents have since joined. Almost without exception, the reason individuals joined was because they wanted a voice in community decision-making: '... it was a ready-made way I could influence and be part of the community', and, 'I wanted to have my say'. They also joined because they had their own child's interests at heart: 'so things would be better for my little girl'; 'I was hoping to help in some way, I think Sure Start is a very good idea for children'. Members were making others aware of Sure Start: 'I was able to make the Management Committee at the Community Centre aware of Sure Start'. It was clear that crèche facilities were an essential part of regular attendance and no concerns were raised about crèche provision.

Some enjoyed the meetings because it was a chance to meet other parents, socially with lunch beforehand: 'I have made new friends' and then in the meeting itself: 'I get the chance to give my opinion as a parent with like-minded people'. Some parents had found out about other Sure Start activities by attending the meetings. A small number of respondents talked about their understanding of the bigger picture of childcare developments regionally and nationally and some indicated that they were beginning to understand that constraints operated that impacted on decision-making: '... we have to be aware that laws and budgets can affect the outcome of requests we make'. Some parents had gained experience of meetings in other activities; for the majority, this was their first experience of operating in a meeting structure and influencing local authority decision-making through their views and comments. The group is aware of the need for 'new faces' and this aspect is under discussion. There was an awareness of some responsibility in encouraging other parents/carers to change their view of Sure Start: 'A lot of people think that Sure Start is to do with Social Services and they won't come to it, but it's not'.

#### **Regular contributions to decision-making**

Most respondents felt that they had been able to contribute to decision-making in the development of Sure Start Felling. Several were aware that discussions and recommendations were taken forward to the Executive Group and they felt that they received feedback on why decisions were made. It was established members, rather than new members, that had greatest awareness. Several interviewees were also parent representatives on the Executive and they were able to acknowledge and confirm the decision-making process at the Parent Network meetings: 'We are able to relay information to and from the Executive Group to the parents via the Parents' Group. The method tends to work quite well'.

The Parents' Network members are regularly informed of the numbers of new babies born in the Sure Start area. There was a general sense that issues could be raised by

parents and that parents felt comfortable in doing this. Many parents did feel that they had influenced the range and types of courses and groups that were being offered and the timings of courses and groups; they felt their local knowledge and personal insights were accepted. The main area identified related to the new building and many parents felt there had been extensive consultation on many aspects of this. Several mentioned their influence on the location of the building: 'One of the proposed sites was at the bottom end of Felling and it was a bit out of the way, people would be less likely to go to the building. The chosen site is more central. People have to walk past it to get to the centre of Felling. We can't guarantee that people will use the building but they are more likely to use the building if it was more accessible.'

Another key area for discussion at Parents' Network was the greater involvement of fathers/male carers in the Sure Start programme overall. A male member of the Parents' Network has started two groups and encouraged others to spread the word and get the men coming along with their children. The launch of one group had been attended by the Deputy Mayor. They hoped to be able to develop a community garden at the back of the new building.

More recently, The Parents Network had asked if a residential weekend could be organised to support them in the development of required knowledge and skills. It was agreed that this was possible if the course met Sure Start criteria and as one parent remarked: 'The Community Support Worker is working with parents to help them develop plans for the weekend. It's obvious that parents are looking forward to this weekend'. The parents are also fund-raising themselves to offset some of the costs of the week-end.

Overwhelmingly, the feeling was that parent/carer views were taken seriously and that when views were expressed at meetings, they were listened to by other parents and by the staff in attendance at the meeting.

### **Parents managing meetings**

At a Parents' Network meeting in May 2004, a decision was taken that parents/carers would replace staff in Chairing and Minuting the Parents' Network meeting. This was seen as a welcome step by parents; however, they were also aware that a certain level of confidence was required for the job and that the confidence came from having related knowledge and skills as this parent noted: 'Parents will take over more of the running of the meetings. It gives them skills if they are trying to seek work. It gets the parents more involved and is a confidence booster'. Many Parent Network members felt that, as a result of these decisions, the meetings had become more open and that they could be even more forthcoming about what they would like to see happen.

## *The challenges for the Parents' Network*

### **Maintaining structure in meetings; establishing clear lines of communication; extending decision-making.**

There seem to be very few members of The Parents Network who have had experience of Chairing and Minuting meetings. These are highly skilled activities and the members of The Parents' Network recognise this and are keen to do the jobs well to the benefit of children, families and the wider community. Minutes of meetings become public documents and as parents take on their new responsibilities, it may be an appropriate time for the Network members to formally consider the impact and use of Minutes within a Local Authority structure. Drawing up agendas, leaving sufficient time for all items to be covered, ensuring less confident/new members find voice in meetings are, amongst other skills, needed by the Chair to ensure successful meetings.

Recently some concerns were expressed by some members of The Parents' Network, that communications between parents/carers and the staff base might be improved. In response, the Sure Start co-ordinator and an administrator attended a meeting, alongside the usual staff attendees, to listen to the concerns and identify a way forward in the development of administrative structures. It was agreed that Minutes are a crucial item of communication and that Parent Network members need to receive these as soon as possible after the meeting. Some further consideration may also need to be given about how agendas are drawn up for meetings. This is a crucial time for the Parents' Network. As parents take greater responsibility for the work of the Network, like all committees within a Local Authority structure, they will continue to need appropriate support both administratively and for personal development.

Sure Start aims to promote active community involvement in decision-making processes and The Parents Network has progressed towards the achievement of this objective, but there is still, inevitably, some distance to travel in the development of new modes of participation in decision-making. There are some tensions to overcome as this parent illustrates: 'The views that the parents have are not necessarily the views that the professionals hold and it is about being able to put forward our own views, what we think is important for our children and our community'. Parents and professionals are learning to work together for the good of children, families and community

### **Developing links with the wider Local Authority structure.**

The Parent's Network is a committee of the Local Authority, but a new kind of committee, charged with a specific task of developing services for children and families in communities where there is substantial economic disadvantage. A key aim is to improve the economic circumstances of community members by supporting them in accessing training and jobs. (Sure Start only operates in the 10% most economically disadvantaged wards in the country). The committee members are not elected; they volunteer and give their time unpaid to the service of the Network and of Sure Start. They are not likely to have had experience of service development. However, they have much to offer by way of local knowledge and a deep understanding of local needs. Each member will bring with them a view of the Local

Authority and the more familiar they become with Parent Network activity, the more likely they are to develop that view, either positively or negatively or perhaps a combination of both.

There were comments from a small number of parents to suggest that they felt parental involvement in decision-making at The Parent Network meetings was tokenistic. One parent felt that the extensive delay on the building of the new nursery was an indication that the Local Authority was not taking the initiative seriously. This parent felt that the 'chain of command' was not clear and that this had prevented more rapid action being taken: 'what I want to know is if the building is behind schedule, who do we go to? Who is actually driving it? Who is up there listening to the site manager and driving them? It just means we tell the programme co-ordinator, who tells the Partnership, who tells the Executive Group that it's behind . . .'. Another parent expressed it a little differently: 'The high-ups make the decisions that they want and they are not always what the people in Felling want'.

One parent expressed the view that it is the Sure Start activities to which parents/carers had substantially contributed their own time in development were to be truly mainstreamed (a stated objective of Sure Start), then: 'What I would be looking for a lead agency to provide (is) someone who can stand up and inspire the workers to change'. This comment would have implications in relation to senior posts across the Authorities rather than to one individual.

The government agenda has charged Local Authorities to engage with radically new practices in implementing a Sure Start agenda; these practices cut across health, education and social services; new visions may emerge only slowly. An ongoing question for consideration within and beyond the Sure Start programme would be how such visions can be taken forward within a changing Local Authority structure alongside the broadening of information sharing about the constraints upon Local Authorities as well as their responsibilities.

### **Creating and sustaining an integrated community**

One of Sure Starts key objectives is to strengthen communities. Whilst one initiative cannot achieve such a huge goal, it can perhaps make a substantial contribution, in the right circumstances and of course, there are other, related initiatives with which it can link, as is considered a little later in this section.

There were some conflicting views offered in the evaluation about the Felling community and it is worth considering them here as a basis for looking forward.

Some concerns were expressed about the suitability of Stoneygate as a current 'centre of operations'. Some parents living outside the area felt it had an unacceptable reputation: 'There are problems with vandalism at Stoneygate Community Centre; people have thrown bricks through the window. I had thought about putting my child in the crèche there but I don't want to now'. One worker spoke of trying to encourage parents to attend a meeting and although 23, when telephoned, had said they would be coming, only 8 subsequently arrived. She expressed concern about low take-up on some activities although parents still complained that 'there's nothing for the kids to do'; a parent supported this view in her interview using almost the same phrase: 'they

say there's nothing for kids to do but they won't come along'. It had recently come to the worker's attention that a higher than average amount of crime in the Felling area was drug-related; she expressed concern that Community Policing was being withdrawn.

The Minutes of a Parent Network meeting had detailed some of these issues and discussions had considered whether wardens, a CCTV camera and a bigger fence might deter vandals. However a letter (released anonymously to the evaluators, with the parent's permission) articulated considerable concerns that Minutes were being used to make public what in her/his view might be unsubstantiated claims: 'I have never felt my children were at risk (in Stoneygate Nursery) . . . please consider whether a Felling parent reading these Minutes would want to put their child in a Sure Start nursery'. The Minutes had also made some claims about staff practices in the Stoneygate Nursery and again, the letter refuted these as inaccurate, suggesting a very different and very positive experience of both the nursery and the staff, from the letter writers' perspective. This raises an issue of a difference between individual perspectives on opinion and truth and the extent to which public documents might promote opinion as truth on some occasions.

Sure Start staff have a remit for birth to four years, yet parents look to them as someone who might provide for older children particularly during school holidays and before and after school. Sure Start also has a role in supporting a return to training and employment for parents but its remit does not extend to provide care and support for children over the age of four years in order to facilitate this return to work. These services are provided elsewhere within the Local Authority. Sure Start Felling, wherever possible, attempts to extend its events during the school holidays so that children up to the age of 10 years can be included.

As the Sure Start initiative moves towards Children's Centres, their remit for care and education will extend from birth to five years. Children's Centres also have a remit for family support, including a return to training and employment. It will be important to avoid replication of services just as it will be important to avoid omission of services as the move to Children's Centres progress.

*The monthly costs of the Parents' Network:*

| <b>Item</b>                   | <b>Cost</b>    |
|-------------------------------|----------------|
| <i>Staff costs</i>            |                |
| Two staff for four hours each | £149.68        |
| <i>Venue</i>                  | £24            |
| <i>Refreshments</i>           | £90            |
| <i>Crèche</i>                 | £100           |
| <i>Taxis (variable)</i>       | £15            |
| <i>Administration</i>         | £15            |
| <i>Post and publicity*</i>    | £15            |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                  | <b>£408.68</b> |

\* this publicity extends beyond but does include information about The Parents' Network.

## Parents' Network: Summary

1. A majority of parents/carers have been attending meetings for a long period. This gives them the confidence and knowledge necessary for participation in decision-making and there is clear evidence that they believe their views are heard and that they are well-supported by the attending staff. A substantial number of parents/carers will, however, leave the Network when their child is four years old. Without new recruits, this could leave the Network with a small, relatively inexperienced membership. There is also an issue of how the skilled and knowledgeable parents/carers can continue to contribute to Sure Start in Felling.
2. New members need time to develop their understanding of the aims and objectives of the Network, their role within it and how the Network links, via the Partnership and the Executive Group into the wider Local Authority structure. This understanding might be aided with an induction opportunity and, if possible, by allowing them to attend an Executive Group meeting as an observer.
3. It may be helpful to new Parent Network members and in consolidating the development of practice in the Parents' Network if an introductory leaflet were prepared, setting out the purposes of the Parents Network, the responsibilities and rights of Network members and the formal links between the Parents' Network and other decision-making bodies within the Local Authority structure. The leaflet could make it clear that membership is open to all parents/carers and provide a contact number for those who wished to know more about The Parents' Network.
4. Ongoing training opportunities will clearly be helpful; a small number of parents have already taken advantage of these. Parents begin by wanting to contribute to the development of their community. To be effective in this, they also need to understand something of Local Authority structures and practices and to develop knowledge of Sure Start as a national initiative within a government agenda.
5. The new building is an important feature of the work of the Parents' Network. Many of them see it as a crucial part of spreading positive views of Sure Start to others in the area, of serving families' and community needs and of connecting what some see as a traditionally fragmented community in Felling.
6. The members of the Parents' Network are contributing through this group, and as individuals, in developing activities and services that meet community needs. A strong strand of innovation is evident in these contributions and they welcome the support of staff in undertaking this work.
7. Inevitably, as community members become active in community development, through a committee structure, they come into contact with the structures of governance at Local Authority level. When parents believe they can see what

is needed to improve their community, and when they believe money has been designated to support them in this, there can be frustrations for them if Local Authority structures seem unable to deliver some solutions as quickly as parents might have hoped. This is likely to be happening in Sure Start programmes across the country.

8. The Sure Start remit limits staff to working with the birth – four age range. Communities are more diverse and community involvement in decision-making inevitably raises issues relating to older children and wider family needs. The development to Children’s Centres may allow the Sure Start programme to make more explicit links with related ongoing initiatives in the Felling area and within the Local Authority to the greater benefit of local children, families and community.

#### **Section 4: The User Satisfaction Survey (USS)**

The USS is a requirement from national Sure Start and should be undertaken within a programme near the start and towards the end of the initial evaluation period for comparison purposes. Within the Felling Sure Start it was agreed, with the Parents’ Network and the Evaluation Steering Group, that the USS would be undertaken by parents and staff, working together in teams. The USS should be undertaken with all members of the Community including Sure Start service users and non-service users.

Northumbria University staff agreed, as part of their evaluation role, to offer training and review sessions to volunteer parents and staff from Felling and Deckham, together. Two training sessions were held at Deckham Community Centre. Five Felling parents attended along with three staff. Five staff from Northumbria University attended.

The first session focussed on a review and development of a draft questionnaire (final questionnaire attached in Appendix 4). The second session considered likely venues and permissions required to undertake surveys in these venues. (Northumbria University staff formally notified Gateshead Authority of the intended survey.) This second session also considered survey skills and strategies.

A review meeting is planned for early September to consider the number of surveys completed and future action. This aspect of the evaluation will be reported in the next interim report.

**Section 5: future developments in evaluation-some brief, initial thoughts.**

1. The User Satisfaction Survey will need to be completed and analysed.
2. It has been suggested that the ante-natal group developed by the Sure Start Midwife may become a focus. There is a view that it is beginning to attract hard-to-reach members of the local community. Its practices and impact might offer some insights in relation to mainstreaming.
3. In relation to return to work, several parents have been identified (all mothers) who believe that their involvement in Sure Start has assisted their return to work. Case Studies of these parents might be helpful in extending this good practice.
4. Other than the relatively brief focus on children's development undertaken in relation to Nappy Days, there has been no extensive focus on how Sure Start activities are supporting parents in actively engaging in their own child's intellectual and language development; this may be an area of interest.
5. The evaluation so far has focussed mainly on the views of parents and service users. The perspectives of staff, managers and representatives of the Local Authority have been incorporated in a more limited way.
6. A meeting has been arranged of the Evaluation Steering Group for early September 2004 to discuss these issues. The Executive Group, on receipt of this report may also wish to express a view on the future direction of the evaluation. There may be some aspect to be identified that might support the move towards Children's Centres.

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