

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This evaluation was commissioned by Sure Start New Town & Park (SSNT&P), one of eight Sure Start schemes in the London Borough of Newham, to find out how well they were doing in their aim to reach and involve parents, including “hard to reach” parents, in their newly emerging activities programme and in decision making.

When the evaluation took place, SSNT&P had been operating for just over a year under fairly difficult conditions with no central office base and their skeleton staff spread over three sites. In addition their main meeting place for parents was still under refurbishment. It is hardly surprising that their plans had got off to a slow start.

Under those circumstances it is something of a bonus to discover that almost half of local parents interviewed in a street survey had heard of Sure Start, although only half of those (about a quarter of those interviewed) had (knowingly) used its services. Altogether only 292 out of a possible 920 parents and 252 out of 1335 eligible children (less than 20%) were on the SSNT&P register as at January 2004.

Those parents who had attended activities from the SSNT&P programme rated them highly and were deeply appreciative of the “friendly” staff and the consistent provision of crèches. But these parents represented a core of only about 50 to 60 families out of a potential 920.

SSNT&P are clearly committed to involving parents in decision making about the services that affect them and demonstrate this by running a regular parents group which makes recommendations to the Partnership Board, as well as reserving as many as seven places for the parents on that Board, including the position of Chairperson. And they have successfully managed to engage a handful of enthusiastic parents in those committees, including a parent as Chairperson of the Board, but not enough has been done to provide the support and training necessary for more than token participation of parents in decisions about local need and service delivery.

Very little had been done specifically for hard to reach families and this is an area where the capacity, calibre and stability of the SSNT&P health team is crucial. When the evaluation was taking place this team was not fully staffed and one of the two crucial health visitors was on maternity leave.

The evaluation’s key findings and recommendations are to be found in Section 6 of this report.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are a number of people we would like to thank for their contribution in conducting this evaluation, including the SSNT&P staff, especially Raymond Wood (Programme Manager) and Zena Baker (Community Development Officer). Our thanks also to all those parents and service providers who agreed to be interviewed during street surveys, the focus group and face-to-face interviews.

A very special acknowledgement goes to those parents who gave their time and overcame their fears to be trained and then to conduct our street survey in fairly unpleasant weather during January and February. They were Nusratt Ashraf, Faiza Abu, Diane Camilleri, Golli Javadi, Kalpana Rauji, Jennifer Sheikh and Marilu Thimotheo.

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Winnie Ssanyu-Sseruma
April 2004

SECTION 1: ABOUT THE EVALUATION

1.1 Background

Sure Start is a cornerstone of the Government's drive to tackle child poverty and social exclusion. It aims to improve the health and well being of families and young children under 4, particularly those who are disadvantaged.

Sure Start New Town and Park (SSNT&P) is one of the 500 Sure Starts schemes that have been set up in deprived areas across the UK. The scheme started in October 2002 and a year later, following an open tender process, SSNT&P commissioned Partners in Evaluation to conduct an external evaluation of its activities.

Partners in Evaluation is a specialist evaluation agency with a national reputation. Its multi-ethnic staff team has a track record of conducting high quality external evaluations, training and developmental consultancy.

1.2 Aims of the evaluation

The overall aim of the evaluation was to assess the extent to which SSNT&P were reaching and involving parents in the programme.

The specific aims of the evaluation were to:

- assess levels of parental awareness about SSNT&P
- assess the extent of parental involvement
- evaluate the extent to which SSNT&P is contributing to the personal development of local parents
- determine how well SSNT&P are doing in reaching "hard to reach families"
- make recommendations for improving the work

1.3 Methodology

1.3.1 The evaluation commenced in November 2003 and data collection was completed between February and March 2004. Data was collected from 224 people, including a total of 215 local parents with children under 4, 5 Partnership Board members who were also external service providers and 4 members of the staff team.

- 1.3.2 An evaluation advisory group was set up to inform and monitor the progress of the evaluation and this met twice during the period
- 1.3.3 In order to interview local parents, we recruited and trained seven parent volunteers to carry out a street survey. A two-day training session aimed to build a team, develop the survey questions, practice listening skills, and instil the confidence required to approach complete strangers in the street. The volunteers were from different ethnic groups (1 white British, 2 African, 1 Brazilian, 1 Russian and 2 Asian). They were given a target of conducting between 20 and 30 interviews and received up to £75 in gift vouchers upon completion. 195 parents were interviewed during January 2004, using the interview schedule that they helped to construct. The volunteers went out as a group to specific locations, including the Stratford Shopping centre, under the supervision of a member of the evaluation team. Once they had gained confidence, they were able to interview people who lived in their immediate neighbourhood. The interviews began by asking people if they were parents or carers of children under 4 and living within the Sure Start New Town & Park area (identified by road name or on a laminated map). The findings are described in Section 3 of this report.
- 1.3.4 A further ten individual in-depth interviews were conducted with parents whose names were supplied by the SSNT&P team. Six of these were used for the case studies shown in section 4.2 of this report.
- 1.3.5 A focus group was conducted with the group of parents who had volunteered to be parent researchers. These were women who were currently using Sure Start services and were highly motivated, some of them attending the regular Parents Group. See section 4.3.
- 1.3.6 Semi-structured individual interviews were held with seven members of the Partnership Board, two of whom were parents, the other five being local voluntary or statutory service providers
- 1.3.7 Individual interviews were conducted with the Programme Manager, the Health Team Leader, the Community Development Officer and the Parent Involvement Worker.
- 1.3.8 Performance data supplied by SSNT&P, including monitoring returns to the Sure Start Unit were also examined.

SECTION 2: SURE START NEW TOWN & PARK (SSNT&P)

2.1 The Sure Start area

SSNT&P is one of the eight Sure Start schemes in the London Borough of Newham which has a large black and minority ethnic population: 32.5% Asian or Asian British, 21.6% Black or Black British, and 3.1% Chinese or other ethnic group (2001 Census ONS). It is home to half of the refugee population in East London – a significant proportion of which are children. The borough has a higher than average number of unemployed and economically inactive people: 52.3% as against an average of 39.4% in England and Wales. (2001 Census ONS)

SSNT&P covers a geographically awkward area in the north east of the London Borough of Newham. The majority of the catchment area encompasses the whole of Park ward and most of the New Town ward, with a few roads falling within the West Ham ward. The area is split by a busy main road, Forest Lane and consists of a mix of different types of housing with some low rise turn of the century terracing, mostly owner occupied or privately rented, plus a large amount of council owned housing stock including maisonettes and high rise blocks. In the last 20 years there has been a substantial amount of new build alongside existing housing which has brought new families to the area, some of whom live in temporary accommodation.

The area has 920 families with approximately 1335 children under four. (*Source: Newham PCT 2002*), which is considerably higher than the national average for Sure Start programmes of between 400 – 800 children (*Sure Start National Evaluation: Early experiences of Implementing Sure Start*). There is a high percentage of lone parents in the area, with a local survey of 203 parents finding almost a third were lone parents. (SSNT&P Community Consultation 2000)

2.2 Aims of SSNT&P

SSNT&P works towards achieving the four specific aims of National Sure Start. These are:

- Improving social and emotional development
- Improving health
- Improving the ability to learn
- Strengthening families and communities

Under each of these headings SSNT&P has national and local targets to achieve within their overall vision.

A particular aim of SSNT&P has been to involve local parents in determining their needs and being involved in decision making about policy and service delivery.

2.3 Development of SSNT&P in its first full year

SSNT&P was the seventh of the eight Sure Start schemes in Newham so it was able to build on the good practice, information and training that had already been established. Sure Start was introduced to the area with a fun day held in May 2002 at the Highway Kids Club in Romford Road. This attracted about 40 parents from the area.

A typical Sure Start structure was established:

- A Partnership Board with members representing parents, statutory, voluntary and community sectors, to be responsible for overall strategy and the balance of spending between programme areas; and sub groups:
- A parents' group to give parents a voice in the decision making
- A providers' forum to ensure effective communication with statutory and voluntary organisations not represented on the board

By January 2004 the development and health teams consisted of:

Development team

- Programme Manager and PA
- Community Development Officer
- Parent Involvement Worker

Health Team

- Health Team Leader
- Two Health Visitors (one on maternity leave)
- An SRN
- An associate nurse
- A midwife (one day a week)
- A clerical assistant

However, SSNT&P had a fairly difficult first year. As the evaluation began, the staff were still split between 3 temporary offices while waiting for their own premises in Atherton Road to be refurbished (now completed). The Major Road Tenants Association, which was to be used for parents' activities, was also under refurbishment and subject to delays. The Programme Manager was temporarily looking after another Newham Sure Start area and other full-time staff had not long been in post or had not yet been appointed. With all these difficulties things got off to a slow start.

2.4 Sure Start services in place by January 2004

SSNT&P aimed to provide a wide range of services and activities to engage parents who might not ordinarily become engaged in a more clinical service.

Month by month services were developed as the programme began to pick up momentum. By 2004 the following services were available:

- Health and education
 - Home visiting service
 - Breastfeeding support
 - Post-natal depression support
 - Chatterbox sessions for speech and language
 - Dietician drop In
 - Baby massage sessions

- Activities for children and parents
 - Music and movement (Kindermusic)
 - Story telling
 - Carer and toddler sessions

- Activities for parents
 - Aerobics
 - Photography course
 - Self defence for women

- Parent involvement
 - Parent Involvement drop in sessions
 - Parents meetings with crèche

2.5 Finding out what parents think

The level of parental awareness of Sure Start, together with their satisfaction with services, and involvement in decision making were assessed by the following methods:

- A street survey (see section 3)
- In depth interviews (see section 4)
- A focus group (see section 4.3)
- Interviews with the parents who chair the Parents Group and Partnership Board (see section 4.4)

SECTION 3 THE STREET SURVEY

3.1 Profile of the local parents interviewed

Of the 195 people interviewed, 158 (81%) were mothers and 33 (17%) were fathers

- 131 (68%) were married
- 20 (10%) were living with a partner
- 32 (17%) were unmarried
- 10 (5%) were separated, widowed or divorced

Figure 1: Marital status of the parents

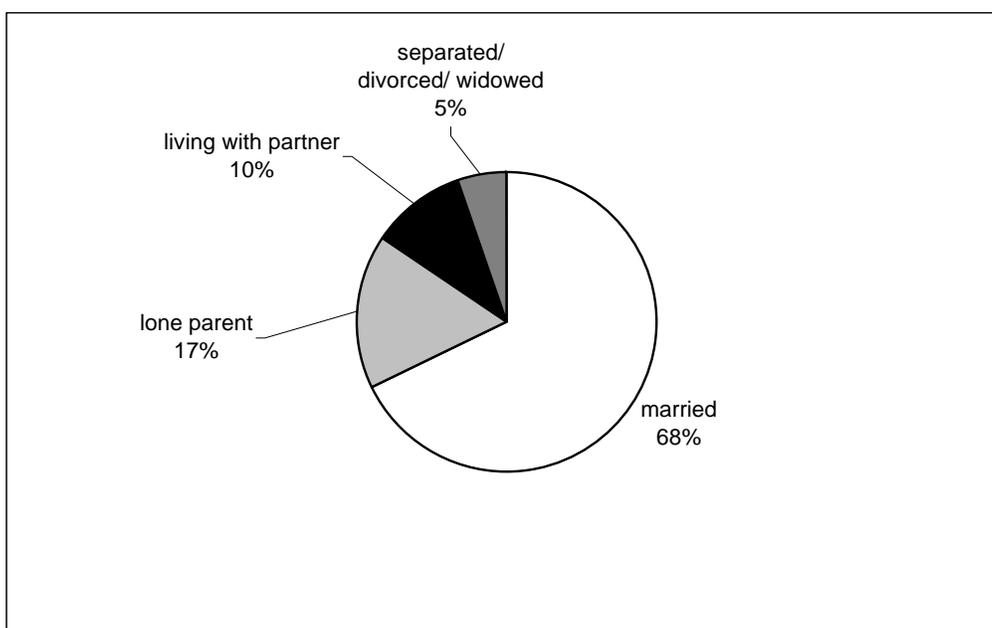
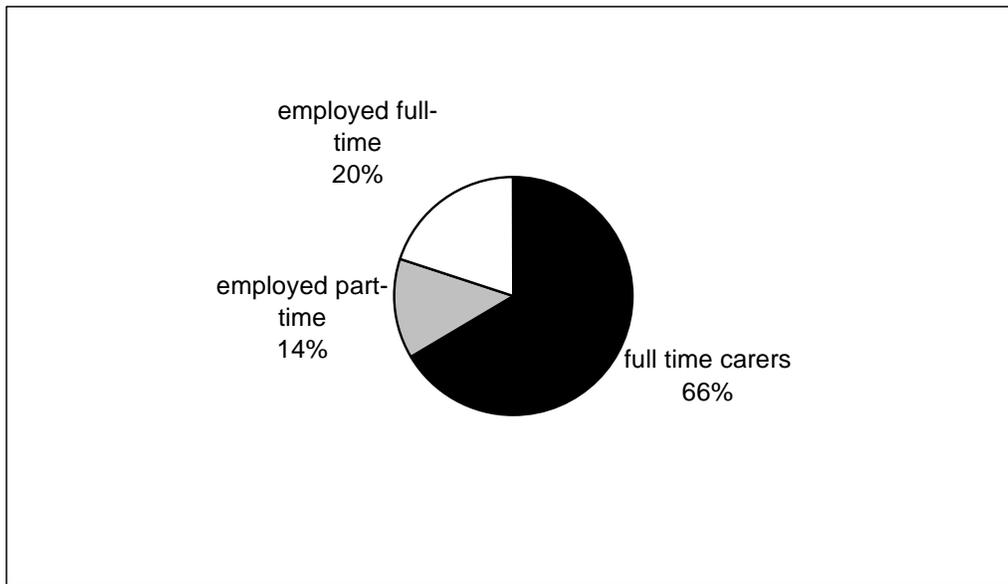


Figure 2 shows the employment status of the parents. Most of those interviewed were caring for their children on a full time basis but employed parents were likely to be under-represented in the sample because most of the interviewing was done during working hours.

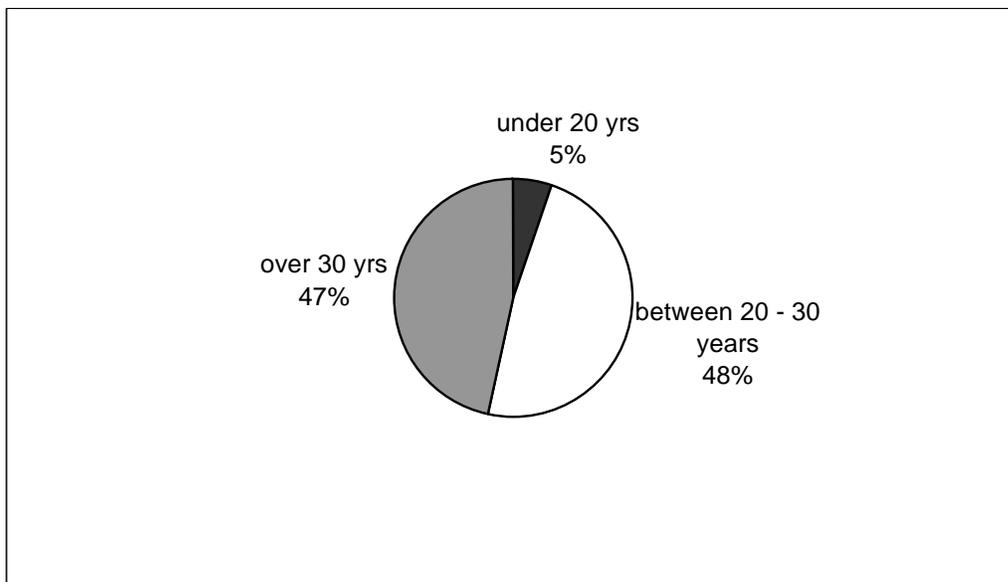
- 129 (66%) were full time carers and not employed outside the home
- 38 (20%) were in full time work
- 28 (14%) were employed part time

Figure 2: Employment status of parents



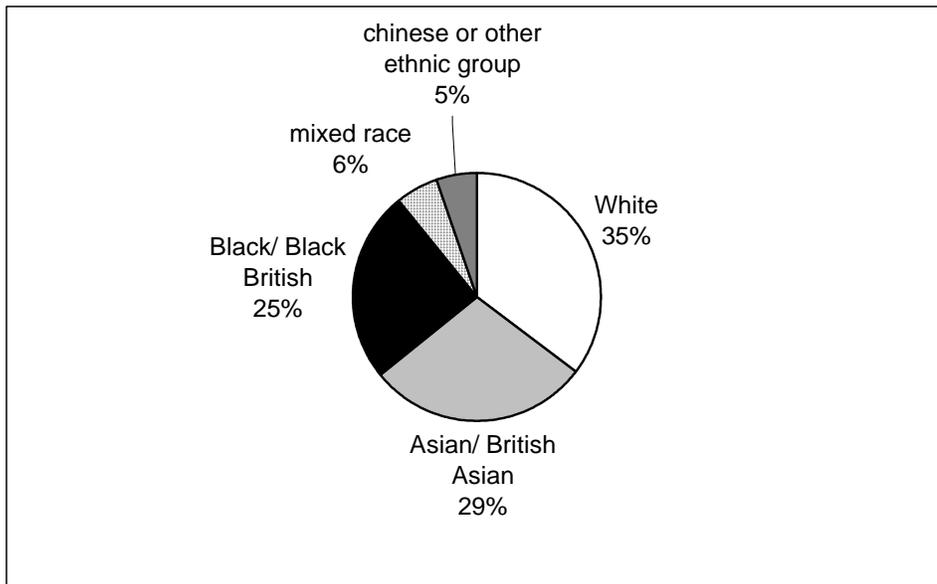
Most of the parents we interviewed (185 or 95%) were over 20 years of age – half of them between 20 and 30 and the other half over 30. Only 10 parents were under 20.

Figure 3: The ages of the parents



Parents described their race and ethnicity as shown in figure 4 below. The most widely spoken language at home was English (86 families), followed by Bengali, Urdu or Somali (56 families), reflecting the ethnic distribution shown below. The rest (53 families) spoke one of a further 21 languages at home including Spanish, French, Turkish, Albanian, Hungarian, Portuguese, Punjabi and Swahili.

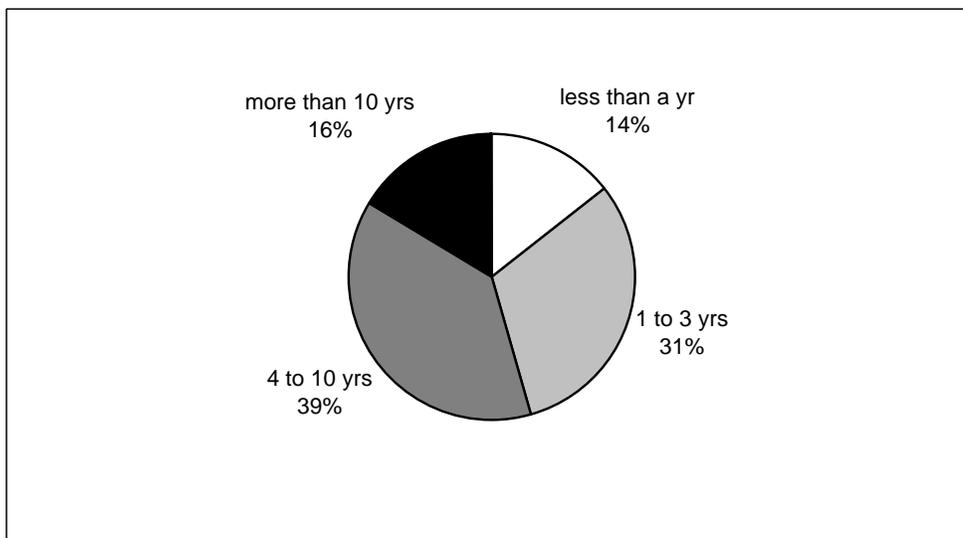
Figure 4: Ethnicity of parents interviewed



Parents were asked how long they had lived in the area and replied:

- 26 had been there less than a year (14%)
- 62 had lived there between 1 and 3 years (31%)
- 76 had lived there between 4 and 10 years (39%)
- 31 had lived there for over 10 years (16%)

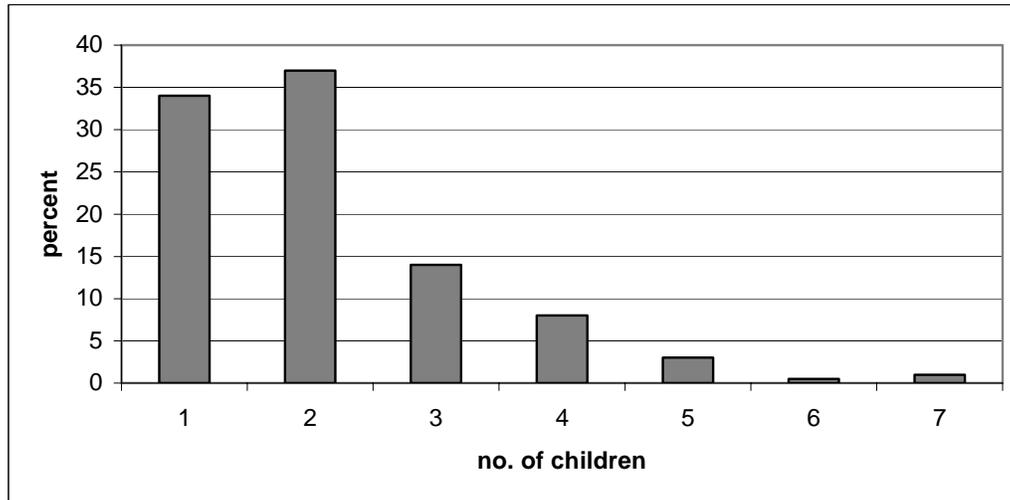
Figure 5: length of residence in the area



3.2 The children

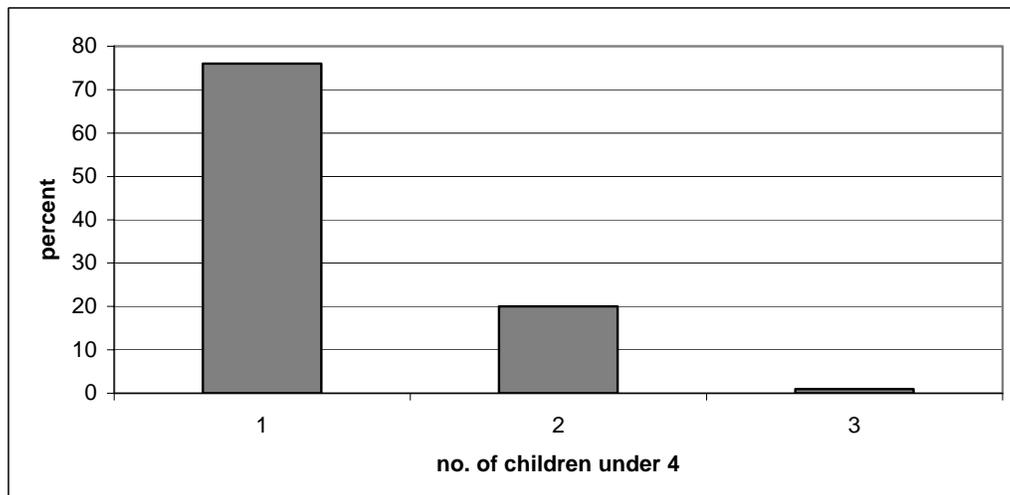
Most of the families (138 or 71%) consisted of either one or two children living at home, with 52 families having more than two children, including two families with seven children.

Figure 6: number of children in each household



Most of the families (149) had only one child less than four years of age, some (38) had two children under four and two families had three children under four.

Figure 7: number of children under 4

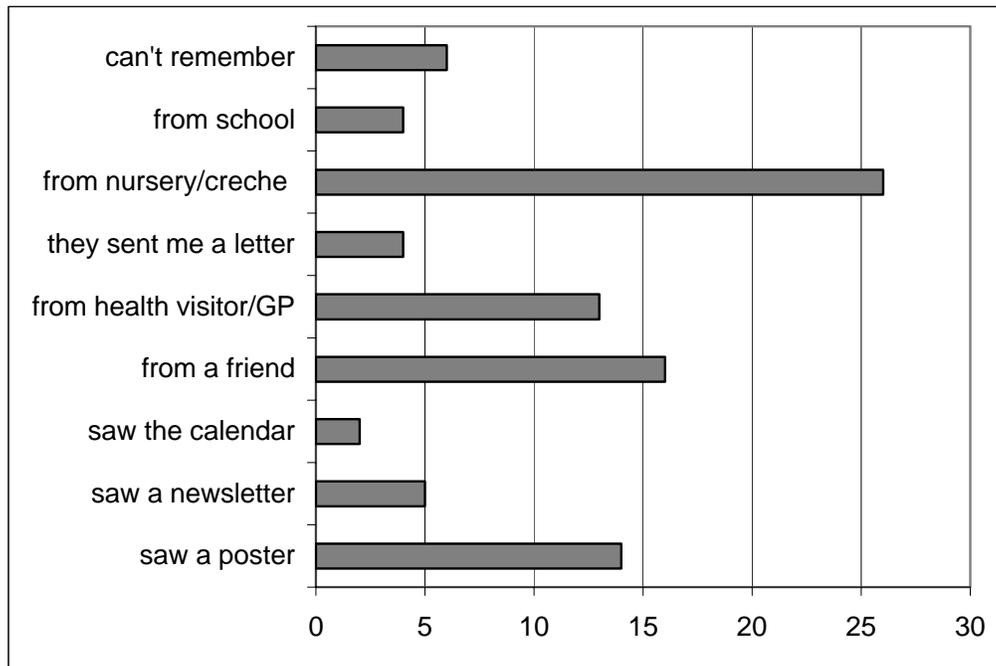


3.3 Perceptions of Sure Start

There was practically a 50/50 split between those parents who had heard of Sure Start and those who hadn't or weren't sure. Out the 190 parents who responded to this question 96 had heard of Sure Start, 86 definitely had not and 10 were unsure.

Of the 96 parents who had heard of Sure Start, most claimed that they had seen a poster or heard of it by word of mouth through the nursery, friends, or a health visitor. Only 9 people could recall having seen a letter or newsletter.

Figure 8: How did you first hear about Sure Start?



Only 28 of the 96 parents who had heard of Sure Start had actually used the services or participated in the activities. Those who didn't use Sure Start had various reasons; the main one being that they didn't have enough information. Some parents said that because they worked full-time it was difficult for them to participate. A few (6%) weren't aware that Sure Start services were free of charge. Others felt that they just needed a bit of encouragement. 17 parents said they simply weren't interested in what Sure Start had to offer. When asked what kinds of services they would be interested in, parents mentioned:

- outdoor and indoor facilities
- childcare and
- training / new skills

3.4 Using Sure Start services

Those who had used or were currently using Sure Start (28 parents) liked what was on offer, and rated most of the services highly. On a 3 star rating most services received 2 or 3 stars. The most frequently used services or activities were

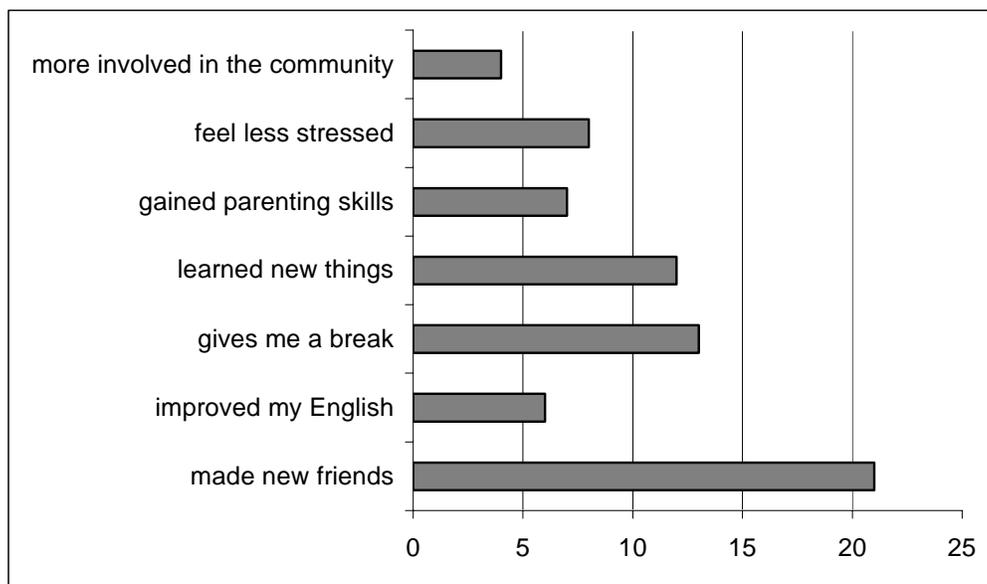
- self defence (8 parents)
- parents meetings (7 parents)
- story telling (4 parents)
- parent and child swimming (5 parents)
- trips (5 parents)

Most of the parents felt that participating in the activities had made a difference to them in one or more ways. The most commonly cited differences were social benefits i.e. making new friends, learning new things and having a break, as shown in the figure 9 below. (Parents were allowed to give more than one answer)

Only two parents said that there were not enough services to make any real difference to their lives.

Parents indicated that they would make even more use of the services if they were open during the afternoons, evenings or week-ends. Seven parents wanted services closer to their homes and nine wanted better crèche facilities. (Crèche facilities are provided at all SSNT&P functions).

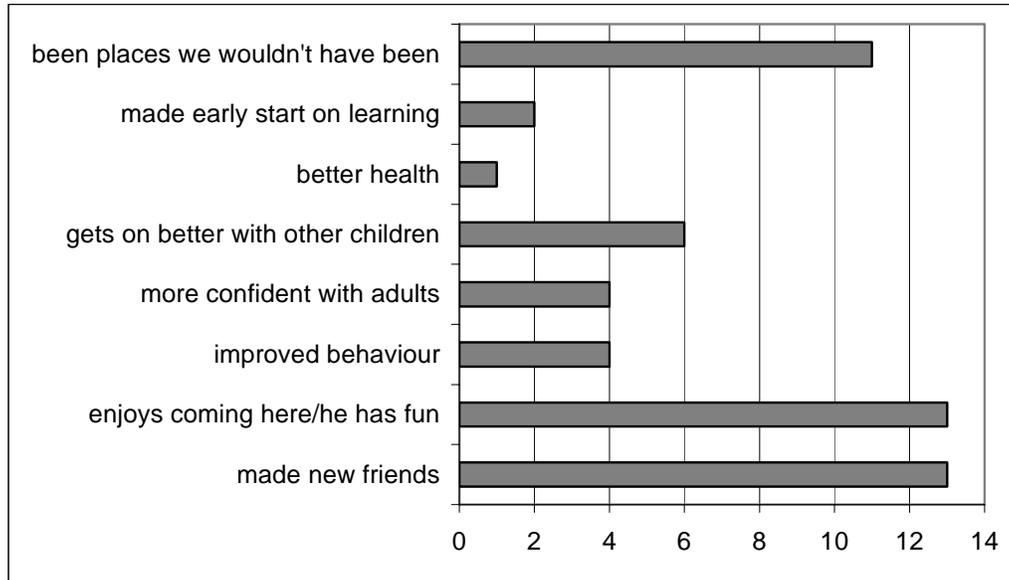
Figure 9: Do you think that Sure Start services have made a difference to you?



All the parents (28) felt that the services had also made a difference to their children's lives. They were able to give more than one answer and the main

differences mentioned were that their children had made new friends (13) had enjoyed themselves (13) and had been on trips to places they wouldn't have gone to otherwise (11).

Figure 10: What differences has Sure Start made in your child's life?



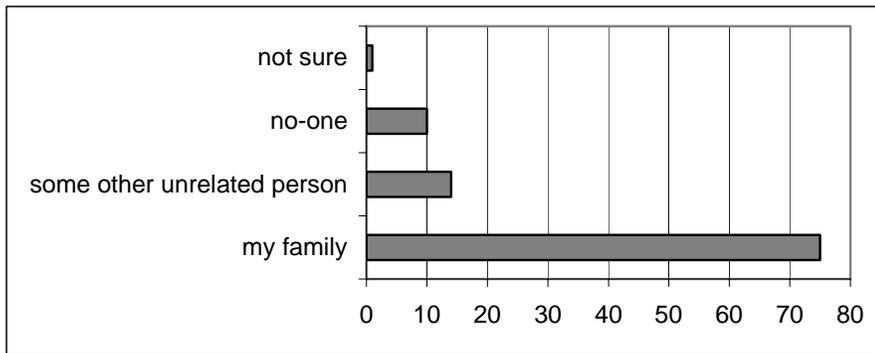
In terms of overall satisfaction the majority of the parents said that they 'definitely would' or 'would' recommend Sure Start to friends with children under 4. Only one parent said that 'maybe' they would.

3.5 Where do parents go for support?

All the 195 parents who were interviewed were asked where they would go if they needed someone to talk to:

- 146 (75%) said they would use their family
- 26 (14%) said they would use a source other than their family
- 19 (10%) said that they had no-one to turn to
- 4 (1%) said they weren't sure

Figure 11: Where would you go if you needed to talk?



When asked where they would go if they were worried about their child's general health, 148 parents (76%) reported they would go to their GP and 37 (19%) indicated they would go to a health visitor. A few mentioned accident and emergency or NHS Direct.

When asked where they would go if they had a concern for their child's learning and development, as before, GPs and health visitors were most often mentioned.

SECTION 4 IN DEPTH INTERVIEWS

We interviewed a number of parents in more depth. That is:

- Individual interviews with 10 parents selected randomly from the SSNT&P register
- Case studies of 6 of those parents
- A focus group interview with 8 parents who had volunteered to help with the street survey
- Individual interviews with two parents who had positions of responsibility on SSNT&P committees.

We also interviewed a number of professional people:

- Five members of the Partnership Board who were also local voluntary sector service providers
- Four members of SSNT&P staff

4.1 Parents on the SSNT&P register

10 parents, selected at random from the SSNT&P register were individually interviewed in more depth. There were nine mothers and one father with 15 children between them, 12 of whom were under four years of age. They all lived in the SSNT&P area:

- 4 for less than 2 years
- 4 between 2 and 10 years
- 2 for over 10 years

They spoke the following languages at home:

- English (6)
- French (1) but mother speaks perfect English
- Bengali (1)
- Pilipino (1)
- Portuguese (1)

Their marital status was:

- 4 were married
- 4 were single parents
- 2 lived with a partner

Seven parents were full-time carers in the home, two worked full-time, one was about to return to work full-time.

- 3 parents had no help with their children
- 4 had help from relatives (one of them a working parent)

- 1 used an au pair (working parent)
- 1 used a private nursery (working parent)

Half the parents (5) thought that local provision in the area was poor, two thought it was OK, one said it was good and three didn't know. The main complaints were about the lack of information and nowhere to leave children for a few hours to give the parent a break.

All the parents had heard of Sure Start but this was not surprising since their names were selected at random from SSNT&P's register. They all received information through the post and most knew what Sure Start was all about. Three parents didn't know and one parent thought she knew that it was a service for lone parents.

Once again, we are reminded of the importance of the "word of mouth" information because most parents had heard about Sure Start by word of mouth, through the nursery or from friends. They had heard of Sure Start in the following ways:

- 3 from friends
- 3 from nursery
- 2 from a leaflet sent through the post
- 1 from the aftercare team
- 1 received a phone call from the SSNT&P Team

Six of the ten parents had used Sure Start services and rated them as good:

- 3 had been on the trips
- 1 had been to the "kindermusic" sessions
- 1 had been to self defence classes
- 1 had used the drop in crèche
- one had used the speech therapy service

When asked what else Sure Start should provide, five parents said they would like to have a place to leave their child for a few hours to "relieve stress" or allow them to "visit the hospital" or "go shopping". One parent suggested a "central building where it is clear that Sure Start is housed and people can then know where to find them".

Three parents had attended one or more of the SSNT&P parents meetings but one of those was no longer involved. Those that weren't involved either "weren't interested" (2) or were "too busy". (5)

4.2 Case Studies

(The following names are not the interviewee's real names).

JENNY

Jenny has been in the area for just over six months, with her daughter Imogen (Mo) who is two and a half. Mo's father does not live with them but visits quite often.

Jenny is a full time mother but hopes to go to college sometime in the future. *"I've always wanted to but could never afford it"*. Her family lives nearby and offers the occasional babysitting but Jenny would like to have more time for herself: *"It would be so nice to have a place where I can drop her off for a few hours. Sometimes I get stressed and just lose it with her (Mo) for no real reason"*

Jenny is looking forward to Mo starting at pre-school within a few months: *"I will be paying a discounted fee because I am on benefit"*. Jenny hopes that this interaction with other children will help Mo with her speech: *"I was worried at one time but I think it is already improving"*.

Jenny got to know about Sure Start from information she received *"just once"* through the post, but she didn't really understand what it was all about and hasn't been to any of the activities.

"I haven't been here long and I don't really know what there is available. I'd like to get involved at some point but not right now".

HADIJJAH

Hadijjah who comes originally from Bangladesh, lives in the Park section of the Sure Start New Town and Park area. She moved to the area to look after her mother who is disabled and lives in her mothers flat with her husband, her two children, a brother, a sister-in-law and a 5 month-old niece. Hadijjah would like a place of her own near by.

Hadijjah receives regular information from SSNTP and has been on some of the trips with her 3 year old daughter (now 4 years old). Hadijjah says that she hasn't been able to benefit from any other activities because she is always busy at home taking care of her mother and children, although her relatives help out sometimes. *"I am very busy at home. My mother needs a lot of help."*

But Hadijjah says she would like to get more involved with Sure Start especially if she could get help with tutoring in English.

"I would also like to find a place to where my other child (6 years) could get some tutoring and help with her homework". (Sure Start only provides for children up to four years of age)

KATE

Kate lives with her partner and their 18 month-old daughter, Irene, near West Ham Park, her home for about six years. She is a full time mother and expecting another child soon.

Kate heard about Sure Start New Town and Park from a friend. But she says she hasn't been to any of the activities: *"I'd like to go to the Kindermusic sessions but they haven't happened yet"*. (They had). She takes her daughter to a toddlers group at Bryant Stretch every Monday and Wednesday mornings and to the Heritage group on Thursdays.

The expected birth is creating some anxiety because after the first Kate had postnatal depression. *"I need more support. My partner leaves for work each day at 6 am and two evenings a week he is doing a course. That means I will be with two children all day long until 7 pm on three days and until 10 pm on two days."*

Kate's parents live nearby but are only able to help for up to two hours at a time. Once the baby arrives she feels she needs some professional support, at home, but she doesn't think Sure Start can help. Her other problem is the size of her flat. *"The flat we are living in now is incredibly small and with a new baby it is going to feel even smaller."*

Kate was asked how she felt about the local services or activities for parents and children under 4. She said: *"The services are poor and not easy to find. I think that parents need more support in pointing them in the direction of trying to get what they need. It is just too much when you are pregnant and struggling to find the support yourself."*

Kate would like to join Sure Start activities but at the moment her focus is on preparing for the arrival of her new baby. *"I'd like to be more involved and I think I have lots of ideas to contribute."*

MARIA

Maria comes from Brazil and speaks Portuguese as her first language. She and her husband, a teacher, have lived on the boundary of the Sure Start New Town and Park area for about 11 years. They have two children, one five and the other two years old

Maria is a full time mother and has little or no extra support but she is a great believer in healthy exercise and uses the gym at the Atherton Leisure Centre and also does kick aerobics and yoga, leaving her two year old in the Centre crèche. She'd like to do more but can't find suitable childcare: *"I would like a chance to be able to take driving lessons and do other things for myself. I wish there was a place I could leave my children for a few hours."*

Maria's concerns are mainly about her five year old. *"He was pre-mature and I have always worried about his growing especially as he is not good at eating. When he was born we didn't get a lot of support and we had to fight for it. Now we regularly see a paediatrician and psychologist."*

She feels that the standards and availability of children's services in the area is poor. *"This is a really deprived area. There are hardly any sports facilities or activities for children. Sport is a natural drug for the body. Children have to start young or they are in danger of going astray."*

Maria hadn't used of Sure Start services but she had been to a few of the parents meetings and found them: *"Quite useful and informative."*

ROBERTO

Roberto, his wife and their 10 month old baby have lived in the Sure Start New Town and Park area for only six months. They come from the Philippines and were recruited to work in the UK as nurses. They work alternate shifts at the local hospital so that there is at least one parent looking after the child for most of the time, although the relatives they are living with help out occasionally.

Roberto and his wife have very hectic schedules: *"When we are not working we are just too tired to do anything else. They have no worries about their baby daughter at the moment: "Being trained nurses, we would be able to recognise problems if there are any. But we can also go to the GP who is quite nearby. He is very good; we can just call in and get an appointment very easily."*

However they are aware that as their daughter gets older she will need to socialise with other children and eventually go to school. They know that they will need to start looking around to see what is available.

Roberto and his wife have received a few calls to notify them about different things that Sure Start has to offer. . But they are only free at the weekends and nothing they have seen suits them at the present time. They were not aware that as parents they could get involved with Sure Start but they didn't feel they were ready to get involved. Their energies were simply devoted to settling into a new place and new jobs.

"We just need the energy and time to look around."

BRIDGET

Bridget is self- employed single mother of two who has lived in the Sure Start New Town and Park area for six years. She employs a live in au pair to look after her daughters Mary (six years) and Penny (2 years) while she is at work.

"I don't work specific hours. I have an au pair so that when I need to work at short notice, I have the support and do not need to worry about scrambling for childcare."

Bridget learned about Sure Start from the Ronald Openshaw Nursery Education centre. *"I was very involved with SSNTP in the beginning but now I don't know what I am doing from one day to the next."* However, Bridget uses a variety of services in the area. She is a member of the Atherton Leisure Centre and also enjoys taking her children to the Discovery centre in Stratford. In addition, she goes to both the Stratford and Forest Gate libraries for the Sure Start story telling sessions sponsored and enjoys the self-defence classes.

Bridget does not have any major worries about her children's health or development. When asked about how she feels about children's services and activities for children under 4, she responds: *"They are okay, I guess. But when my 6 year old was younger, many services were not available. When I was a first time mother I would have loved a place to leave my young one for a few hours and have sometime to myself."*

Bridget feels that she copes well but could have used some support when she was trying to find schools for her children. *"There are not enough places to find out the right schools to take children. It was a very stressful decision for me. I could have used some help with that."*

4.3 Focus group

We conducted a group interview with the eight parents who were trained to do the street survey. These were therefore women who knew about Sure Start and were highly motivated.

All of them had heard of Sure Start by word of mouth; from friends, the nursery, the health visitor or social services: *“Although no-one told me that it was only up to four years of age.”*

They had mixed feelings about the facilities and services in the area: *“The Forest Gate end is terrible but round here (Community Road) it’s very good”*. They all felt that parents needed much more information about the whole range of services and the most desired facility was after school clubs.

The Sure Start activities were thought to be good: *“There is generally something for children on four days of the week.”* They were most appreciative of the Sure Start crèches: *“They give us time for ourselves and it’s good to meet other parents and find out about things from each other”*.

However some parents mentioned that if the facilities were nicer and brighter they might attract more parents. One of the meeting places used by SSNT&P (Dormer Close) was described as *“dismal” “hard to find”* and *“freezing”* with a caretaker who *“is not very welcoming”* although it was agreed that the Sure Start room had been made *“as nice as it could be”*. They were more understanding about the half refurbished state of the Major Road Tenants Association although they felt it was off-putting. Someone pointed out that hardly anyone knows where the new SSNT&P office is. Finally a parent summarised the general view rather pithily: *“Excellent people, crap facilities.”*

Some of the mothers had been to the SSNT&P parents meetings. These parents were grateful for the crèche facilities and felt that their views were listened to but were wary of getting more involved on committees. One of the parents told of her experience on the Partnership Board:

“I attend because Helen (the Parent Involvement Worker) says they need more parents at these meetings. So I just turn up and listen. But my English is not that good and they talk like officials (laughter all round). I don’t always understand what they are on about.”

4.4 Parents on the SSNT&P committees

Two parents spoke to us about their experience of being involved with Sure Start committees, one as Chair of the Partnership Board and the other as Chair of the Parents’ Group and the Sure Start Capital Panel. Both were single parents and not working at the present although both wanted to work again when their children were a little older. They were interviewed separately.

Neither of these parents had received training for their roles and responsibilities as committee chairpersons and support was said to be fairly minimal.

"I suppose they thought that I already had some knowledge of how these things work"

It took a fairly assertive and self-confident parent to insist on the back up she required.

"I was very nervous. The last parent who was chair didn't know what they were talking about – there was no training and no explanation of what was going on. All she would do is read down the agenda and keep time – she didn't even know the other people on the Board. I was determined that this wouldn't happen to me and I've told them they must have pre-meeting to brief me and keep me in touch with things by e-mail".

Both parents were aware that they represented only a small core of parents in the area:

"We just go by the views of the parents who turn up to the meeting. What we all want is childcare and some accurate information about what is available."

"We can't speak for all parents but all those on the SSNT&P register get copies of the minutes and an invitation to join the next meeting."

The parents found the Partnership Board daunting with its use of public service jargon and assumed knowledge of local authority structures and policies.

"It is very much a clique of voluntary and statutory partner sectors - the parents are somewhere else. The language is inaccessible – people are expected to understand the structure of the local statutory services, to know the constitution and rules if votes are tied."

And there was a feeling that their presence on the Board was something of an empty gesture, especially in the context of the re-structuring of Sure Start in Newham:

"We haven't had enough information and are unable to make an informed decision. Parents ask me what is going on and I have to say that I don't know. It doesn't matter because it will happen anyway. We are being railroaded into it."

There was genuine appreciation for the services and opportunities provided by Sure Start, the friendliness of the staff and the new friends that had been made. But questions were raised about the impact of Sure Start on all but a "small core" of parents and, more significantly on their children:

“We do some fun things but sometimes I think (pointing to her child) what’s in it for him?”

“What would make a difference is more outreach work but the staff are far too stretched although I don’t really know what they are doing.”

One of the parents felt strongly that more information should be made available to parents; not just about the services available but also about procedures and processes so that parents get to understand the system.

4 5 The professional viewpoints

The PiE team interviewed five Partnership Board members who were also local voluntary sector service providers, working with families including children under four years of age. Only one of those who were interviewed attends the Partnership Board regularly. One other attends “when I can get away”. A further person can’t attend when the meetings are held in the mornings, which is usually the case. Two people attend spasmodically because they sit on other Sure Start Boards in Newham. Their views were sought on how well SSNT&P were reaching, supporting, involving and empowering parents.

Four of the five people interviewed mentioned that things had been slow to get going but acknowledged that SSNT&P was a very new service and would take time to become established. Meanwhile there was a strong feeling that SSNT&P was reaching only a minority of parents

“They set up things for parents and they are always the same parents – like Heineken, they should be reaching the parts that other services fail to reach, not duplicating things for the same people.”

Three of the service providers said that “hard to reach” families’ are not so much hard to reach as hard to engage. For example each of these service providers were working, in some capacity, with the travellers in Clays Lane and had found a reluctance to get involved beyond having their immediate needs met.

“They enjoy going on outings and trips but that’s about all”

One interviewee felt that the only effective way of reaching “hard to reach” families is through outreach and home visiting and that SSNT&P should be doing more of this through their health team:

“These are families that need a lot of support and you have to go to them. Unfortunately the health team has had teething problems and is not very strong. SSNT&P just isn’t geared up – what would they do with these families once they found them?”

Despite being on the Partnership Board none of the interviewees were able to say very much about SSNT&P’s strategic plans and they had little idea of the

range of activities that were currently on offer by SSNT&P or what services had been commissioned.

"Its very easy to get lost with the allocation of funds - £10,000 here, £25,000 there, £50,000 somewhere else – once you sit down and add it up you wonder what it's all about – you can't see the wood for the trees."

"Sometimes I feel that the Sure Start programmes are just throwing money around in an aimless fashion" (Referring to all Sure Start programmes in Newham)

There was a common view that child care was the service most in demand by parents.

"The one thing they all want is dependable child care to release parents to train or work but unless it's good quality childcare the children lose out."

There were some concerns that the parents who sat on the Partnership Board were not particularly representative of parents in the area and not effective at determining local need.

"They seem to be confident and pro-active but sometimes it seems like they are furnishing their own needs – there needs to be wider consultation."

"Parents want influence on the Board and that's OK as long as they are effective. Usually they are intimidated but a couple of people are coming through – they have to be wary of recruiting just the middle class vote."

"The parents group is supposed to have the local knowledge but I don't know how effective they are."

SECTION 5 HOW ARE SSNT&P DOING?

5.1 Levels of parental awareness

In January 2004, 15 months after SSNT&P was established, just under half (47%) of parents involved in our street survey had heard of Sure Start and 252 children were registered with SSNT&P which, if the Newham PCT figures are correct (see section 2.1) represents less than 20% of the total number of eligible children in the area.

SSNT&P's publicity strategy has consisted of:

- A leaflet drop to every household in the catchment area
- Registration of all parents visited by the Health Team
- Sending leaflets and information to other services in the area
- A one day Health Promotion in Stratford Shopping Centre.

We have no way of knowing just how effective each of these methods has been because there has been no monitoring. But the evidence from this survey as well as that of a community consultation carried out for SSNT&P in 2000 plus has shown that word of mouth is the most effective method of communicating to parents. SSNT&P should therefore rely heavily on professionals working with families and with the parents themselves to spread the word and get its messages across.

The front line in all this is the Health Team, which is supposed to register all of the parents visited. Unfortunately, with one health visitor short, this hasn't gone quite as planned because the interim staff brought in from other boroughs weren't familiar with the Sure Start requirement to register clients. There may also be some resistance to the requirement among health visitors who are used to a culture of unconditional health care provision. The Health Team leader pointed out that some parents are wary of being registered, partly because of cultural issues:

"They don't always want it. They tell us that they can't sign anything until their husbands get home and then, of course, they don't do anything."

Existing monitoring systems are focussed on required National Sure Start data i.e. on numbers of parents rather than on outcomes. But registration doesn't guarantee awareness and although a leaflet is sent to all newly registered parents this may not be sufficient to engage their interest, especially if the language spoken in the home is not English. SSNT&P should devote considerable energy and resources to engaging parents at this point, perhaps by using parent volunteers to visit them.

Although it makes sense to send leaflets out to households and to a wide range of public facilities and services, it is equally important to monitor their use and effectiveness. In the few local organisations visited by the PiE team only one was doing a good job of publicising Sure Start. In the others there

was, at worst, no visible information about Sure Start or, at best, just one curled up notice on a board.

A number of interviewees suggested that a permanent or regular stall in the Shopping Centre would reach many more parents and provide a place where they can pick up information, meet the staff and be registered as they do their shopping. But publicity is only one part of the equation; parents will show interest only insofar as they value what is on offer from Sure Start. They might know about Sure Start but, as our case studies show, there are all sorts of reasons for not getting involved.

5.2 The extent of parental involvement in the SSNT&P programme

SSNT&P's monitoring data does not provide figures for the numbers of children and/or parents who have benefited from Sure Start services and activities, only for the number of attendances at activity sessions. These show that there are currently 120 parent attendances at the activities on offer but since many parents attend more than one activity the figure masks a smaller group of parents who take part – some interviewees estimated that a core group of about 50 to 60 families were involved in one or more activities.

It is difficult to pinpoint the reasons why parents don't participate in activities – given that they know about them in the first place. The street survey and the in depth interviews and case studies give some rather vague indications:

- Insufficient information
- The inaccessibility of SSNT&P itself – few people knew where the office was or how to get in touch.
- The timing of activities – many parents, especially those who are employed, suggested that they would attend activities if they were available at weekends or in the evening
- The activities may not be what people want - most parents seem to want childcare and a recurring theme was the need for drop in facilities where they can leave their children for a few hours.
- A few parents mentioned that *“they needed a bit of encouragement”* from which it might be assumed that some people are shy and might find phoning a stranger for information (as required on the SSNT&P activity leaflet) and/or turning up on their own at an activity, a painful prospect.
- Some parents had complained about the venues used (see section 4.3) but refurbishment of the new parents centre will be completed in the late spring of 2004 although its location is not ideal for parents in the Park area.

It is difficult to assess the reliability of reasons given for non-participation. Are they the real reasons or are they the sort of excuses we are all inclined to make when the truth is that we can't be bothered or are simply not interested?

It should also be remembered that there may be some disparity between what parents want and what may contribute to their children's health and well being. For example, a drop in facility might be great for parents but need not necessarily contribute to a child's health, education and well being.

SSNT&P strategy for services and activities should be developed by focussing on the outcomes or results it wants to achieve for children under four rather than on quick wins to generate numbers or to fulfil the needs or wants of a minority. As one interviewee put it:

“Although these activities are a result of consultation with parents we don't have clear reasons for doing this mix rather than another. We need to be clearer about how they meet needs.”

5.3 The extent of parent involvement in the management of SSNT&P

SSNT&P is committed to involving parents in decision-making and to empowering them to affect policy and service delivery so that it suits their needs. Its Parent Involvement Strategy involves several approaches to encourage parent participation in the programme, the main features of which are:

- Information – a parent pack of community information translated into the main community languages
- Training – a comprehensive programme that includes minute writing, understanding budgets, writing grant proposals.
- Childcare – to be available at all meetings
- Networking – exposing parents to other boards, conferences, professional insights into the mechanisms and functions of other forums in the area.

Childcare is the one approach that has been implemented consistently. Although the parents have been exposed to talks by local authority and voluntary sector professionals there has been no comprehensive training programme, so far, to equip them for a management and decision-making role and no systematic programme to enable them to gain an insight into the workings of the local authority policy process. As for the information pack, this has been a source of some frustration for both parents and SSNT&P staff. It seems that this is being developed on a borough wide basis and is *“still in the pipeline”*. The parents we spoke to had no idea what it would contain, not having been consulted or having seen a synopsis of its contents.

SSNT&P holds parents meetings (always with a crèche) once a month. As many as 25 parents attended one of the early meetings but they now attract a

steady core of about eight parents. This is the group that makes recommendations to the Partnership Board about the needs of families in the area but there appears to have been no surveys to test local opinion between the Community Consultation Survey in 2000 and our own recent street survey (2004).

Parents from this group are recruited to the Partnership Board; there are as many as seven places reserved for parents but only two or three attend regularly. It was clear from our interviews with parents that the culture of the Board, with its assumed knowledge of local structures, its use of professional jargon and its political dimensions, is, for them, an alien environment. (See section 4.4)

SSNT&P are committed to having a parent as chairperson of the Partnership Board and see this as a clear expression of their aim to empower parents and give them a voice. But this could be an empty and tokenistic gesture unless parents are also properly briefed, supported and trained for the role. This hasn't happened to date although the new parent chair has, we understand, started to receive proper briefings prior to each Partnership Board meeting. This may not be sufficient and SSNT&P should consider external coaching for the parent fulfilling this crucial role.

It has to be said that parents are bound to become cynical about involvement if they feel that the really important decisions are being made without their involvement. Such was the feeling about the restructuring of Sure Start in Newham, with parents making comments such as: *"We are being railroaded in to it"* *"It doesn't matter because it will happen anyway."* *"They say it's up to us but we know that it isn't."* It might be better for Sure Start to be more explicit about which issues are for parents to decide and which are not.

SSNT&P has made a good start by its commitment to the principle of parental involvement but has not backed it up with intensive support and training. Nor have it done enough to "de-jargonise" meetings or to provide a simple glossary of terms and supporting structural diagrams.

5.4 Reaching hard to reach families

All Sure Start programmes are obliged to ensure that "hard to reach" families are able to access their services. The barriers to access have been identified as:

- The mobility of the population
- Lack of knowledge of services
- Lack of capacity to deliver services in an area of high need
- Communication and language difficulties
- Practical difficulties – finance, travel, venues that are not buggy/pushchair friendly, parental priorities, times of service
- Concern about confidentiality
- Gender/sexuality issues

- Negative experiences

SSNT&P has been concentrating its efforts on reaching all families but has made a start with “hard to reach” families by funding two days of an outreach worker based with the local Home Start organisation and by forging links with other organisations working with identified groups e.g. RAMP (the Newham Asylum Seekers Team) and Cairde na nGael (which works with travellers and refugees). However, there has been little, if any, systematic monitoring of outcomes so it is not possible to assess what has been achieved. (It follows that where Sure Start works through other agencies, that work will not be “branded” as Sure Start work but this should not matter if Sure Start aims are being achieved).

Strangely, given the barriers to access that have been identified (see above), little has been done yet to provide information in other languages and, even more worryingly, the new SSNT&P offices in Atherton Road are only accessible via an intercom and two steep flights of stairs.

Those interviewees who were already working with hard to reach families suggested that SSNT&P should regard the hard to reach as more hard to engage and to plan services and activities accordingly. They suggested that there should be more outreach work with SSNT&P going to the families rather than expecting them to come to Sure Start. *“How do you get to them? The only way is by door knocking.”*

Since the “door knocking” arm of SSNT&P is the Health Team, it suggests that this team is crucial to the success of a “hard to reach” strategy. The aim must surely be to build trust by providing a predictable and valued service. A number of parents alluded to the unpredictability of this service in the past and that they *“never saw the same person twice.”* This is something that Sure Start should aim to correct through the capacity, calibre and stability of the Health Team.

6 KEY FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 The extent of parental awareness

- Our street survey indicates that 47% (nearly half) of parents with children up to four years of age in the New Town and Park area have heard of Sure Start.
- SSNT&P has a publicity strategy but it is not monitored to find out what works and how it might be improved. Word of mouth appears to be the most effective way of communicating with parents.

Recommendations
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. SSNT&P should rely heavily on professionals working with families and with the parents themselves to communicate with other families.2. Considerable energy should be devoted to engaging parents as soon as they are registered, perhaps by using parent volunteers to visit them.3. Although it makes sense to send leaflets out to a wide range of public facilities and services, it is equally important to give clear guidance as to how they might be used and to monitor both use and effectiveness.4. A permanent or regular SSNT&P presence in the Stratford Shopping Centre would reach many more parents and provide a place where they can pick up information, meet the staff and register as they do their shopping.

6.2 Parental involvement in activities

- 292 out of a possible 920 parents and 252 out of a possible 1335 children are currently registered with SSNT&P. (As at January 2004).
- Monitoring data only captures the number of attendances at SSNT&P activities but it is estimated that a core group of about 50 - 60 parents are involved.
- Interviewees who had attended activities rated them highly. Those that haven't attended gave a range of reasons for not doing so (see section 6.2) none of which may be particularly helpful.

Recommendations

5. SSNT&P strategy for services and activities should be developed by focussing on the outcomes or results it wants to achieve for children under four rather than on quick wins to generate numbers or to fulfil the needs or wants of a minority.

6.3 Personal development of parents

- SSNT&P has successfully engaged a handful of parents in decision making and has recruited a parent to chair the Partnership Board.
- Not enough has been done, so far, to provide the support and training necessary for more than token participation in decision making but SSNT&P are about to offer an externally commissioned training course for parents.
- There is some concern as to how far a small group of parents can be representative in the sense that they can speak for other parents in the area.
- With the restructuring of Sure Start in Newham, there is some cynicism among parents about whether they really are “in the driving seat” of decision making.

Recommendations

6. To monitor the attendance of parents at the externally commissioned training and its impact on their understanding and capacity.
7. To de-jargonise meetings as much as possible and, at the very least, to provide a simple glossary of the main terms and initials used.
8. To provide simple diagrams of relevant local authority structures and the way they interlink.
9. To use parents more effectively to communicate with other parents and to determine their needs
10. To be more realistic and explicit about the opportunities and boundaries of decision making by local parents, in the Sure Start programme.

6.4 Reaching hard to reach families

- Very little had been done specifically for hard to reach families and the outcomes of work commissioned through other organisations is not being adequately monitored.
- There is little or no information in languages other than English and the SSNT&P offices are far from accessible.

Recommendations
<p>11. Hard to reach families should be seen as hard to engage and outreach work should be a major part of a “hard to reach” strategy, the Health Team being in the front line to provide a consistent, predictable and valued service to families. In this the capacity calibre and stability of the Health team is crucial.</p>