

SURE START WEST SOMERSET

EVALUATION SUMMARY 2001-2005

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1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1. This report outlines the evaluation that has taken place since 2002 on behalf of the Sure Start West Somerset programme. This report provides an overview of the evaluation that has been carried out, and action that has been taken as a result. It is designed to be a reflection on the evaluation activity that has taken place throughout the course of the programme and how this has contributed to the ongoing development of the programme. For further detailed information regarding any of the studies mentioned in this report, please refer to the web address noted on the acknowledgements page of this document.
- 1.2. Sure Start local programmes aim to break the cycle of deprivation that may exist in particular areas, and to increase the uptake of a range of children and family services so that long term gains can be made for children living in low income families. Sure Start West Somerset is a round 4 programme and between March 2004 and February 2005, 602 children attended an activity or service run by the programme.
- 1.3. Children's Centres are an important asset in developing the work of Sure Start local programmes and provide a number of core services. Children's Centres are required to deliver a number of services as noted below:
 - 'Educare'/Early Education integrated with day care
 - Family support and parental outreach
 - Child and family health services
 - Links with schools and Children's Information Services
- 1.4. More recently a number of new outcomes have been published which will form the centrepiece of all Children's Services. These are part of the Every Child Matters (ECM) framework and are as follows:
 - Be Healthy
 - Staying Safe
 - Enjoy and Achieve
 - Make a Positive Contribution
 - Achieve Economic Wellbeing

2. EVALUATION STRATEGY

- 2.1 The evaluation for Sure Start West Somerset is carried out by the Community Evaluation Unit which is based within Taunton Deane Primary Care Trust. There are benefits to this approach. Sure Start West Somerset is able to benefit from a locally focused but independent evaluation approach. Evaluation for the programme began in 2002 once a programme manager had been appointed. The evaluation team for Sure Start West Somerset is shared across a number of Sure Start programmes ensuring that the programmes gain good value from the team.
- 2.2 Evaluation staff are full members of the Sure Start West Somerset team, taking part in team events and attending team meetings. However, as they are based in a separate organisation to Sure Start West Somerset and separately line managed, the programme is able to benefit from evaluators which are familiar with the local programme and area, yet able to offer an independent and unbiased opinion as evaluators.
- 2.3 The evaluation that has been carried out by the Community Evaluation Unit on behalf of Sure Start West Somerset has responded to need and used a mixture of different types of research methods. A summary of the evaluation work that has been carried out and how the evaluation has been used to shape the development of the programme is detailed in the next section.

3 EVALUATION FOR SURE START WEST SOMERSET (2002 TO 2005)

3.1 Evaluation strategies are often overcomplicated by using unnecessary or academic jargon. In all the Sure Start programmes that the team has worked with including Sure Start West Somerset, the evaluation strategy has steered away from labelling different types of evaluation in this way and instead chosen to be more explicit about the type of evaluation that is taking place and the reasons why it is being done. This has helped to make evaluation much more open and accessible to those working within the programme and to those who wish to use the findings of evaluation.

3.2 The evaluation team have been involved with Sure Start West Somerset from the early days of the programme and the programme has benefited from the continuity of staying with the same evaluation provider throughout the course of the programme.

Consultation for the Action Plan (2001)

3.3 Prior to the start of the programme and the involvement of the Community Evaluation Unit, the Children's Society carried out consultation with families in the Sure Start West Somerset area to find out what they thought was needed in the area for children and families. Meetings were held in a range of different places across West Somerset. A number of issues were frequently mentioned by those families who took place in the consultation (e.g. cost of services, information and support, transport) and the comments received by the Children's Society were used to help develop the action plan for the programme.

Community Questionnaire

3.4 One of the first pieces of evaluation that was carried out by the Community Evaluation Unit on behalf of the programme was a community questionnaire. A similar questionnaire had previously been undertaken in the Sure Start Bridgwater area and Sure Start West Somerset having seen the type of information a community questionnaire could produce, decided that it would be useful to carry out a similar questionnaire in order to establish baseline information for the programme.

3.5 The postal questionnaire was sent to 3478 West Somerset residents to gather relevant data from the local population. The questionnaire was sent to all households with Sure Start aged children, and to a random sample from the electoral register (1 in 3), in order to ensure that the wider community had the opportunity to feed in to the survey. In total, 1702 responses were received giving an overall response rate of 49%.

3.6 The report was able to raise a number of pertinent issues for the area. One of the recommendations of the report was for the programme to give

consideration about how to keep services affordable for local parents but in addition sustainable over time. One finding of the survey was the number of parents without access to a car during the day. A number of parents have since been offered driving lessons through the Sure Start programme allowing them to become mobile with their children during the day.

- 3.7 The information collected by this survey was invaluable and was used and referred to many times to plan and guide the programme in a range of different areas.

Evaluation of the Activity Pilot Project (2002)

- 3.8 The Water Confidence and Swimming Project was set up during 2002 as a pilot project. The evaluation team were asked to carry out a small scale evaluation in order to inform decision making regarding whether the project should continue past the pilot stage. Telephone interviews were carried out with 8 families who were currently using the project. The evaluation was able to look at a small number of impacts for those attending the project and suggest areas which parents would like to see changed. The project was able in most cases to respond to the changes that parents wanted to see.

CLOWNS and Information Study (2003)

- 3.9 There were two pieces of work that the programme needed to evaluate during 2003. The first was the CLOWNS toy library and there was a need to establish how the service might be best developed to ensure that it was in line with local need and to consider any possible barriers to using the service.
- 3.10 In addition, the programme wanted to review and evaluate the way in which they communicated with Sure Start families throughout the area. It was seen to be important to evaluate the effectiveness of the Sure Start newsletter as this was taking up a fair amount of staff time and resources. The evaluation aimed to see whether the newsletter was meeting the expectations of parents.
- 3.11 After some discussion about the best methods to use for these two evaluation studies, it was decided that we would need to be gaining information from the same groups of people each time (parents with Sure Start aged children). We felt that it would be unreasonable to expect parents to take part in two consultation activities. It was decided that we would design and send out a single questionnaire which would cover both topics. A postal questionnaire was sent to all 538 households within the Sure Start West Somerset area with a child aged under 4 years.
- 3.12 In total, we had 212 respondents to the questionnaire. This provided a response rate of 41.6%. Two separate reports were produced for Sure Start West Somerset, one containing results relating to the CLOWNS toy library and another containing results relating to the Information Study.

- 3.13 The evaluation was able to demonstrate that although the newsletter had been considered an expensive method for communication prior to the start of the evaluation, that this was one of the top ways in which parents wanted to find out information. Parents wanted to continue to receive the newsletter on a monthly basis and were fairly happy with the layout. The cost of the newsletter (allowing for production and distribution) was 59p per family. This makes the newsletter a very cost effective way of sending information directly to relevant families compared to other forms of advertising.
- 3.14 As a result of the evaluation, a small working group was set up to revamp the newsletter and consider the possibility of increasing its impact by moving to a colour newsletter. As part of the revamp the addition of adverts to contribute towards the costs of the newsletter were discussed. This process is now complete and the newsletter remains a key mechanism through which Sure Start West Somerset can make contact with parents about news and events.
- 3.15 The toy library results showed that it is used on an 'as and when' basis. Those parents using the service were very positive about the toy library and the range of toys was rated highly. One issue which parents raised about the toy library was the lack of space at the central base in Minehead. However, the majority of families (84.4%/179) who responded did not use the toy library simply because they were not aware of the service.
- 3.16 The process of carrying out the questionnaire about the toy library service has in itself raised awareness as well as provided an opportunity for the parents to request more information about the toy library service by returning the questionnaire. 60.9% (109) of the non-members requested further information about the service and this information was been passed onto CLOWNS to follow up with families.

Press Relations Study (2003)

- 3.17 Sure Start West Somerset has since its launch received some adverse publicity resulting to their plans to build on four sites across West Somerset. A consultant was employed to positively raise the profile of the programme between April 2003 and August 2003.
- 3.18 The aim of the evaluation was to document media coverage before and after the press relations work. Content analysis of all newspaper articles collected by Sure Start West Somerset relating to their local programme took place (160 articles/letters). Discussions also took place with various members of the staff team involved in press relations and communication issues.
- 3.19 104 cuttings were analysed prior to the start of the consultant work. Some months showed no press cuttings at all. 40 of the 41 negative articles were focused upon the Williton build.
- 3.20 A total of 56 cuttings were analysed between April 2003 and August 2003 to establish whether the press relations work was able to have an impact on the

work of the programme. Sure Start West Somerset had featured in the press every month since the start of the press relations work in April 2003.

- 3.21 The evaluation showed that although some change was possible in press relations over a relatively short period of time, the overall negativity surrounding the programme was likely to continue until issues related to the builds were resolved.

Parental Satisfaction Boards (2003)

- 3.22 As part of the Sure Start Unit targets, programmes were expected to measure parent satisfaction with services in their area. This target was introduced after the community questionnaire for the area had been carried out. The team felt it inappropriate to carry out a questionnaire or survey to provide information for this one performance indicator and therefore we needed to find a novel way of collecting this information. In an urban area, it might be possible to gain the views of a cross-section of families simply by carrying out an on-street survey. However, as a result of its rural nature this seemed unlikely to work in the Sure Start West Somerset area.

- 3.23 The evaluation team decided to use some visual display boards on which people with young children could use dot voting to indicate firstly, whether they had made use of any of the Sure Start services and secondly, to report on their levels of satisfaction with these services. These boards were very successful and were put up in nurseries and doctors surgeries throughout the area. The boards were displayed for a number of weeks after which the evaluation team collected the boards and collated the results for the programme.

- 3.24 The vast majority of families taking part in the survey reported that they were satisfied (78.7% 85/108) with the quality of Sure Start services offered. 24.1% (26/108) reported being fairly satisfied, whilst 5.5% (6/108) were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. The information collected was fed back to the Sure Start programme who were then able to use this as one of their performance indicators in line with Sure Start Unit requirements.

Play Area Evaluation (2003/4)

- 3.25 Improving local play areas was seen by parents as important in the original consultation prior to the start of the programme. In response to local need, Sure Start West Somerset funded staff from the Children's Society to work alongside parents to make improvements to local play areas. An evaluation was carried out to look at the impact and outcomes of this work. Interviews and a questionnaire were used to gain feedback on the process.

- 3.26 The evaluation found that in some cases it was felt that the level of support offered by the Children's Society was not altogether necessary as some people felt they would have reached the same outcome (installing the play equipment) without their support. However, the evaluation only included groups who successfully installed new equipment and it may have been that

the support of the Children's Society was more valuable in areas that experienced greater difficulties.

- 3.27 The families using the play areas are generally aware that the new equipment has been funded by the Sure Start programme. This is a very positive outcome as people are able to see that the programme is having an impact on their area. Everyone involved in the play area improvements mentioned that they had personally gained from the experience. However, several people commented that the process of involvement was time consuming.
- 3.28 The experiences drawn out from the evaluation process have been able to inform the programme about outcomes and add to the programmes knowledge about involving parents in projects.

Dulverton Questionnaire (2004)

- 3.29 A study was carried out in the Sure Start West Somerset area during 2004. The aim of the study was to support the development of childcare services and family support facilities in the West Somerset area. A postal questionnaire was sent to 80 households within the Sure Start area with children aged under 4 years.
- 3.30 The response rate to the survey was 53.9%. The survey provided a range of information for the programme. For example, 18 respondents reported that they would be interested in a centre at Dulverton where they could meet up with other families. There was also demand for advice on keeping children healthy (17), child development (16), advice about employment and benefits (16), and information about training opportunities (15).
- 3.31 With regard to childcare places, there was demand for 33 sessions a day for parents in Dulverton and the surrounding area. The information collected from parents was used in the planning for new childcare services within the Dulverton area.

Evaluation Workshops (2004)

- 3.32 Part of the role of the evaluation team is to support and enable staff within the programme to evaluate and evidence the impact of their work as reflective practitioners. Sure Start programmes are very wide ranging programmes and it simply wouldn't be feasible for the evaluation team to be able to evidence all the work that is taking place within the programme without the support of staff.
- 3.33 It is the responsibility of each staff member within the programme, to evidence the work that they do as part of the service level agreements under which they or their organisation work. To support staff with this process, three evaluation workshops have been run during 2004 to introduce evaluation and ways that staff can evidence the work that they do. Two half day workshops were run by the Community Evaluation team and a third

workshop was run jointly with a member of the National Evaluation of Sure Start team.

3.34 There is still scope for staff to increase the amount of evidencing work that they do. However, a number of staff are, as a result of the workshops, working alongside the evaluation team to look at ways of evidencing the work that they do.

3.35 **Evaluation of the Water Confidence and Swimming Project (2004)**

An evaluation of the swimming project has recently been completed in order to establish what outcomes this project has for the programme. The report will help to inform the programme decisions about the contribution that this project can make towards Sure Start and Children's Centre targets

Speech and Language Screen (2004)

3.36 Health Visitors within the Sure Start West Somerset area are currently helping the evaluation team to collect data relating to speech and language needs within the local area. This speech and language screen is being carried out in both the Sure Start Taunton and Sure Start West Somerset areas. All Health Visitors administer a questionnaire with parental consent at the 7-9 month check. Each Health Visitor is undertaking a recognised speech and language screen of each child on their caseload. These results are used to determine whether a referral to the Sure Start Speech and Language therapist is required.

3.37 Data from all screens are sent to the evaluation team for collation and analysis. The data collection started in August 2004 and in Sure Start West Somerset will continue for 6 months. Interim findings from the study will be available and fed back to the programme in spring 2005. The study will assess whether there is sufficient demand for a similar service to be provided as part of mainstream speech and language provision.

Barnardos Evaluation (2004)

3.38 The evaluation team are currently working alongside the Barnardos team to carry out an evaluation of their Family Support Worker service. Two focus groups and a number of telephone interviews have been carried out with parents using the service, and case study information has been collected so that we can establish the impact and outcomes for this service. It is hoped that the report once completed will provide information that can help the Sure Start programme and Barnardos consider how their work might fit with the Children's Centres within Sure Start West Somerset.

Impact of the Health Team (2004)

- 3.39 The health team are currently working on documenting some of the impact and outcomes of the work that they carry out which is funded by Sure Start West Somerset. The team are using a range of methods to consider the impact of their work and as with the evaluation being carried out for Barnardos, once this work is complete will provide information that can help to establish how this work might fit with the Children's Centres within Sure Start West Somerset.

What has enabled evaluation to work well?

- 3.40 A number of factors have enabled the evaluation to work well within the programme. The following areas have been important in allowing evaluation to become an integral part of planning and development within the programme.

- *Support from Programme Managers*
The Programme Management have been keen to use evaluation to help to develop and shape the programme. This has ensured that evaluation has been central in helping to define what the programme should look like, and how it should develop, as well as providing a way to demonstrate the outcomes and impact of the programme.
- *Local approach*
The evaluation team are based in Somerset and therefore have a good insight into the work of the programme. This enables evaluation to be relevant, timely and well informed.
- *Evaluation as team members*
As team members of Sure Start West Somerset, it is hoped that the purpose of evaluation is better understood by the staff team, than if the evaluation team were operating at a distance. Being team members helps in building rapport and trust especially when sensitive issues need to be raised or discussed with regard to evaluation undertaken.
- *Evaluation Feedback*
The evaluation team keep in close contact about the progress of evaluation projects with the Programme Manager. In addition, evaluation findings are fed back and discussed with the Partnership Committee. This ensures that the evaluation work that is carried out can inform key decision making within the programme. It also provides an opportunity for staff to ask questions about the evaluation and results which should increase the likelihood that the findings are used by the programme.

3.41 However, a number of factors have limited the impact that evaluation can have for the programme. These are as follows:

- The reluctance of some staff to collect information for evaluation and monitoring.
- The lack of ownership by some staff of the responsibility to evidence their work despite this being a requirement of the service level agreements.
- The challenge of establishing and measuring change over short periods of time.
- A rapid drive for a change in the focus of evaluation from descriptive and process evaluation to an outcome focused approach from Sure Start Unit and NESS.
- Changing priorities for the Sure Start programme, leading to the need for a reactive and changing approach from evaluation often to tight deadlines.

4 CONCLUSION

- 4.1 This report shows the range of evaluation that has been carried out within the Sure Start West Somerset programme since 2002. Sure Start West Somerset has over the past few years been able to use evaluation to inform the planning and development of its work. The evaluation is now at a stage where it is working towards providing evidence about the impact and outcomes of its work given the move towards the Children's Centre model for the Sure Start local programmes.

- 4.2 Sure Start local programmes face a challenging twelve months ahead as the programmes change and adapt to move towards the Children's Centres model of working. The evaluation looks forward to supporting and moving with the programme over the next year to support them through this process.