SUPPORT TO LOCAL SURE START PROGRAMME EVALUATIONS

Introduction

Each local Sure Start programme is expected to conduct its own local evaluation. While the National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) looks at the medium and longer-term impacts for the Sure Start programmes as a whole, the local evaluations need to evaluate what they are doing in order to understand how well their services are performing and to keep track of progress in meeting the objectives and targets for Sure Start. They have been asked to concentrate on

1. The process of delivering services
2. How well the Sure Start principles have been implemented.
3. The effects these are having on progress in service provision.

The aims of the Support Module are to facilitate local evaluations in achieving these objectives and to act as a conduit for information between local evaluations and NESS as a whole.

Providing a Range of Guidance, Information and Support

The overall structure of the support programme consists of 4 components:

1. Support delivered by a team based at Birkbeck College, with staff also based at the University of York, Lancaster University and Keele University.
2. The NESS Website providing a venue for sharing information about local evaluation methods and findings, information about the National Evaluation, and a discussion forum.
3. Regional and sub-regional workshops organised by NESS staff and including presentations by NESS support officers, other NESS staff, Sure Start Local Programmes and external evaluation experts to provide information and exchange between the National and Local evaluations.
4. Collection of information about local evaluations, their questions, methods and findings, and synthesis by the NESS team.

1. Regional Support Officers

NESS has a Support Officer dedicated to each Government Office Region, and two National Coordinators. The regional support staff provide support to the local programmes which are located within the boundaries of each of the Government Office Regions. They provide the full range of support functions and are responsible for approximately 80 programmes each.
The role of the regional support units includes:

- Making contact with local evaluators, programme managers and where appropriate Strategic Sure Start Managers, to forge relationships that create opportunities for information sharing.
- Advise local programmes on issues around methodology and the management of the evaluation process.
- Disseminating examples of good practice in evaluation and monitoring activity. This will enable good practices to be shared between programmes at an earlier rather than later stage.
- Organising regional workshops of Sure Start evaluators to address issues such as research methods, instrumentation, costing of services and action research.
- Maintaining links with regional structures of other Area Based Initiatives.
- Co-ordinating the in depth evaluations by NESS which will be conducted in collaboration with local evaluators.

2. Website

The website is a key channel for communication between NESS and the local evaluators. The website offers useful information and guidance as well as a mechanism for sharing evaluation reports and findings. The website also hosts the evaluators discussion group providing opportunities for local evaluators and programme staff to communicate and collaborate on issues to do with evaluation.

The website has a number of components:

- Information – This section provides information about the national evaluation. Each of the five modules will be described – including staff contacts, description of methods, publications, local and regional events etc.

- Searchable database of local evaluations – Included here are instruments/methods which local evaluators are willing to share with others.

- Guidance - This section of the web-site provides information on methodological issues such as commissioning evaluations, appropriate design, access to information, ethical, legal, and data analysis issues, dissemination, cost effectiveness etc. Links exist and are updated with existing technical assistance resources, both locally and internationally.

- Links to various other relevant websites can be found on the NESS website

- Online discussion groups so that evaluators can discuss problems, methods and good practice with each other

- Reports and publications of NESS and local evaluations.

The website is a continually developing area of the National Evaluation of Sure Start. The intention is to continually ensure that the content reflects programmes needs and as such is subject to periodic review.
3 Workshops

Regional and sub-regional workshops are organised in each region. The aims of these meetings are:

- To train programme managers and local evaluators, both in conjunction with NESS written guidance documents (e.g. conducting cost effectiveness) and responding to stated needs (e.g. conducting action research).
- To bring programme staff and evaluators together so that ideas, methods and local evaluation results can be shared.
- To provide a venue for question and answer sessions with the NESS staff on a range of topics that programme managers bring to the meetings.
- To highlight the support that is available so that programmes make full use of all the resources.
- To inform programmes about the other NESS modules, their methods and their findings.

A range of workshops has been provided regionally or to smaller groups of local programme staff and their evaluators. These have included:

- Getting Started
- Cost Effectiveness
- Involving Parents
- Ethics
- User Satisfaction Methodology

Included in the workshops have been presentations from other modules of the National Evaluation and findings that are of interest to attendees. Workshops for evaluators have also been undertaken where the opportunity to share good practice and network with colleagues has been appreciated. The workshop programme often relates to the guidance documents that are compiled by the Support Module Team from time to time. Regional support officers inform programmes of planned workshops on a regular basis.

4. Synthesis of evaluation findings.

The Support to Local Programmes module is establishing a repository of Annual Evaluation Reports and Local Evaluation findings. The key findings from these evaluation outputs are collated into a range of synthesis reports covering topics such as the evaluation of partnership working or reaching ‘hard to reach’ families. Annual evaluation reports are synthesised to examine similarities and differences in local evaluation results across England, linking them where relevant with the results of the national evaluation. This provides an overview of experiences of Sure Start local programmes in relation to specific issues.