THE INVOLVEMENT OF PARENTS AND CARERS IN SURE START LOCAL EVALUATIONS

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CONTENTS

The involvement of parents and carers in Sure Start local evaluations

1   Introduction

The key principles of Sure Start services are to:

- Co-ordinate, streamline and add value to existing services;
- Involve parents, grandparents and other carers;
- Avoid stigma by ensuring that all local families are able to use Sure Start services;
- Ensure lasting support by linking to services for older children;
- Be culturally appropriate and sensitive to particular needs;
- Promote the participation of all local families in the design and working of the programme.

One important way to involve parents, grandparents and other carers is to develop ways that they can be involved in local evaluation activity. This is likely to link in with other Sure Start principles in that evaluation activity may be more culturally appropriate and sensitive if local parents are involved. Involvement in evaluation, and its dissemination will also promote the participation of local families in the design, re-shaping and on-going development of the local programme, as the evaluation findings are used to improve services.

This guidance aims to address the issue of how programmes can effectively enable parents, carers and other family members to participate in local evaluation. In doing so it draws on examples from work already being undertaken in Sure Start local programme evaluations. It begins by considering the reasons for involving parents and carers in local Sure Start evaluations and the different models of participation that are available. The guidance then goes on to explore the ethical and practical issues that need to be worked through. Practical advice is also offered in relation to these issues. Finally a list of additional resources is given.

It is important to remember, however, that the involvement of parents, carers and other family members in evaluation is unlikely to be successful, or at the least will be much more difficult to introduce, if this style of working closely with local parents is not already integral to your Sure Start programme. Findings from a survey of programmes in Rounds 1 and 2 undertaken by the National Evaluation of Sure Start (Early Experiences of Implementing Sure Start, NESS. Available on the Sure Start website www.surestart.gov.uk and the NESS website www.ness.bbk.ac.uk) have shown that there is some variation in the nature and amount of involvement of parents in programmes.

2   Why involve parents and carers in Sure Start local evaluation?

Sure Start local programmes need to evaluate so they can:

- Understand how well their services are performing;
- Keep track of progress in meeting the objectives and targets; and

- Make changes to their programme as a result of evaluation findings.

In order to achieve these objectives, Sure Start local evaluations need to be robust and methodologically convincing. Existing guidance on evaluation highlights the need to appoint individuals with appropriate research skills to take responsibility for evaluation, including skill at enabling parents to participate meaningfully in the evaluation activity. If the local programme and parents are to benefit from the evaluation, then parental involvement should take place as part of the overall evaluation strategy. Nevertheless, as this guidance shows, parental involvement in evaluation can mean many different things at different times. It means much more than inviting some parents to attend an initial planning session, or asking them to hear about results. Their involvement is important throughout the whole evaluation process.

The involvement of service users in research and evaluation has developed enormously in recent years. It is now widely recognised that we cannot understand how well services work unless we ask those who use them. It is acknowledged that change will not take place in Sure Start communities unless families have the opportunity to identify not only the needs which exist within their communities, but also the possible solutions. In order to do this, families need to be able to participate in key decision-making processes, which involves a shift in the traditional balance of power between those providing and those receiving services.

Additionally, users themselves have increasingly undertaken research. This is not only morally and ethically desirable, but the quality of our understanding of services is improved through knowledge that is generated in this way. There are also practical benefits, discussed in greater detail below.

The involvement of parents and carers in local evaluation clearly chimes with Sure Start principles. There are, however, some more specific reasons why their involvement benefits evaluations:

- Parents and carers can help to ensure that the issues and outcomes which are important to them and therefore to the success of Sure Start are identified and prioritised within evaluations. The Parents' Forum may be the ideal starting point when thinking about evaluation questions, or ways to focus evaluation activity.

- Parents will have specific skills and knowledge, which can help improve the overall quality of the evaluation. For instance they may have more extensive knowledge of cultures within the community, and of languages spoken than the Sure Start staff.

- Involvement in evaluation can provide opportunities for parents and other family members to acquire new skills and build on existing skills. This will contribute to the employability of community members and should help to address targets of Sure Start such as reducing the number of young children in workless households.

- A robust evaluation will need to include information about the families who do not use services. Parents can help local programmes to make contact with other parents for the purposes of evaluation, including hard-to-reach groups. Local

community parents will be an important source of information about those groups, who may be less well known to established service providers. They may also be able to gain the confidence of families whose status is vulnerable, such as asylum seekers.

- Parents can help disseminate the results of evaluation and can work to ensure that changes are implemented. If an evaluation shows that a particular service (e.g. drop-in crèche) is not being used, local parents can alert other community members to its presence and encourage them to attend.

- Parental involvement can help the local evaluation to be more efficient in terms of time and resources, for example by conducting community-based surveys. It is not usually possible to employ a large number of researchers for a short time, but parents living locally who can be employed for a few hours a week may be ideal to conduct a user satisfaction survey.

(Adapted from Consumers in NHS Research Support Unit, 2000)

However, there are also some potential difficulties associated with the involvement of parents in Sure Start local evaluations. These include the following issues:

- The work may take more time. A participatory approach by definition demands that time is spent talking to and working with parents, and with others for whom evaluation is a new idea. If this is to be an integral part of a local evaluation, it is essential that realistic consideration be given to planning this into the evaluation schedule.

- Involvement of parents can be tokenistic. As the involvement of service users in evaluation acquires a higher profile in policy development, there is a danger that lip service is paid to the idea but that service users are given little real power in decision-making about the evaluation. Examples of ways in which such tokenism can operate include consultations, which do not affect how the evaluation takes place, or reliance on an existing group of parents who are already highly involved in the programme.

- When non-professionals are involved with collecting information the research can be perceived as 'unscientific'. If the 'expert' researcher does not carry out all aspects of the evaluation and shares decisions with service users about what questions to ask, how to get answers, and how to present the answers to the community, the results may be criticised for possible bias.

- Addressing the issues raised by parents can generate conflict over different values in the research process – for example, in terms of what constitute appropriate methods for evaluation.

- If parents are volunteers rather than employees the research can be difficult to manage – this is partly linked to the issue about time listed above. Participatory approaches mean more people will be involved, more views need to be taken into account, and there is always the danger that this creates difficulties in getting the work done.

- Involvement of local residents can result in bias – this could relate to any aspect of the research process. The key issue is the fact that parents will know the local community and it could be argued that some parents may try to influence aspects of the evaluation in order to strengthen a particular lobby. Less dramatically, there are issues around, for example, data collection. If parents are interviewing other parents whom they know well, the respondents may feel less inclined to disclose information that is important to the evaluation, or they may tell fellow-parents what they think is an acceptable answer.

3.   What is meant by 'participation' in local evaluation?

Participatory approaches to evaluation are well established and there are a number of theories and methodologies available. The language used in the literature is not always consistent, and some overlap may be identified between types of method such as 'action research' (described in greater detail below), 'emancipatory/empowerment evaluation' and 'participatory appraisal'. The distinctive nature of participatory approaches may, however, be identified from their different perspectives on the following aspects of the research process.

The politics of research

Although we like to think of research as being a neutral or objective process, it is also a political one. Decisions about the issues that are researched, the methods that are used and the people who undertake research are influenced by wider social inequalities, including gender and race. Research is largely considered to be an area of work requiring specialist expertise, often based in a specialist institution such as a university. Participative research challenges this assumption. While specialist knowledge and skills are required to undertake research and evaluation, this does not mean that such knowledge should not be shared. By enabling those who use services to take part in the research process, it is argued that different perspectives can be generated on the issue being researched.

The purpose of research

Linked to the view that research is a political process is the question of how research information will be used. It is generally agreed that social research has been much better at influencing policy than day-to-day practice. Often those working in services have little access to research information or knowledge about how it should be applied, let alone those who actually use the services. Research that is participative seeks to identify where change is needed and encourages reflection on how far that is happening.

Research design

Evaluation that is participative requires a different perspective on the research process. Such an approach may have an impact on any or all of the following:

- How planning and decision-making takes place;
- The choice of methods;

- Who undertakes the fieldwork;
- How the data are analysed; and
- How information from the evaluation is disseminated.

The learning and empowerment that takes place through the research process is considered to be as important as the research findings. However, it may require thoughtful presentation to groups used to more traditional research methods.

Dissemination

Research has traditionally been viewed as a process that is directed by the researcher. The participants wait until data collection and analysis is completed before being given access to findings. In contrast, participative research involves an ongoing 'conversation' between all those concerned with the research and the process those involved with managing change in the organisation.

It would be a mistake, however, to suggest that there are no differences in philosophy and methodology amongst different types of participatory approach, and it is important to explore these further if you intend to incorporate participatory thinking into your evaluation. The texts and websites listed at the end of this guidance can help you to do this. Action research is outlined here as the ideas associated with this are often referred to in relation to evaluations being undertaken by Sure Start programmes.

Action research

Action research aims to use the process of research to better understand problems and needs within organisations and in turn to initiate change. The participation of the people involved with that organisation is considered key to achieving this. Action research is traditionally associated with the participation of staff in the development and improvement of an organisation, but the term is increasingly applied to research and evaluation involving service users such as parents.

A specialist researcher may act as facilitator to the research process, while staff and parents play an active role in identifying areas where change is needed. Action research is therefore intended to be a collaborative venture, which seeks to use the expertise of both researcher and participants in the research design. Such democracy or interdependence can, of course, generate other problems. For example, decision-making about the research can be significantly more time-consuming, and if there are key people committed to the research who then leave then the research project may suffer.

The cyclical nature of action research is often highlighted. This involves:
- Planning a change;
- Acting and observing what happens following the change;
- Reflecting on the consequences of this; and
- Planning further action and repeating the cycle.

4   Participatory approaches and the process of local evaluation

The NESS "Getting started with a local evaluation" guidance document (http://www.ness.bbk.ac.uk/documents/GuidanceReports/GettingStartedWithLocalEvaluation.pdf) emphasises that the nature and focus of local evaluation will change as your Sure Start programme develops. Similarly, what is meant by involving parents and carers in Sure Start evaluations will vary between and within programmes, depending on the focus of the evaluation at that point in time.

Although participatory research is a well-established approach to evaluation, it is still unfamiliar to many people, both staff and parents. It is not, therefore, an approach that can be imposed, but needs to develop through dialogue with parents and staff. Critically, this will include discussion at an early stage about what is meant by evaluation, the purpose of local Sure Start evaluation and what the participation of parents and other family members might involve. It is important to remember that evaluation will be an ongoing activity within your programme, and that the skills of parents and other adults will develop and accumulate. Feedback from local Sure Start programmes and from other research emphasises that developing a participatory approach to evaluation is a *learning* process that requires an ongoing commitment to the principle of participation.

The evaluation at Sure Start Southwark, Aylesbury Plus is a good example of the way in which parental participation in evaluation can be developed.

EXAMPLE: Sure Start Southwark, Aylesbury Plus

- Following the establishment of an evaluation sub-group, monitoring and evaluation of all services was built into the programme.

- Parents have been involved throughout in the planning and management of the programme and associated activities.

- The results of evaluation have fed in to the development of the programme, for example the development of a new Delivery Plan.

- The next stage of the evaluation focuses on the health visiting service, and ten parents are to be trained as evaluators and will work alongside staff and management.

The participation of service users in planning and development is often presented in terms of a stairway or continuum. Increased participation is associated with growing empowerment and increasing ownership of the research and its findings. A modified version of this model can also be applied to parental participation in local evaluation. This way of thinking about participation acknowledges the fact that, while a relatively small number of parents may wish to be actively engaged in such activities as data

collection and analysis, many more may be interested in knowing what kind of evaluation is taking place and the effects this has on the programme.

Ways in which parents might be involved in local evaluation include:

Stair 1   Receiving information about evaluation activities;
Stair 2   Involvement in planning the evaluation and identifying aspects of the Sure Start programme that might benefit from further evaluation;
Stair 3   Involvement as research participants, for example as interviewees or members of focus groups;
Stair 4   Participation in data collection and analysis;
Stair 5   Participation in dissemination of the evaluation findings and discussion of the implications for service provision.

It may of course be the case that parents and carers are involved in all aspects of the evaluation process, as in the example from Sure Start Gloucester below.

EXAMPLE: Sure Start Gloucester, Barton Tredworth & White City

- This programme has adopted a community development and capacity building approach to evaluation, viewing evaluation as a learning process that empowers individuals and groups of parents. Those delivering services, local people and users of the services develop evaluation themes and questions and undertake much of the information gathering.

- Participants benefit from the training involved and the intention throughout is that evaluation should directly inform programme and project management development.

The next three subsections of the guidance will focus on three of these 'stairs': involving parents and carers in planning evaluation, in data collection and analysis, and involving parents and carers in dissemination and future planning.

A. Involving parents and carers in planning local evaluation (Stair 2)

If the involvement of parents in your local evaluation is to be meaningful then it is important that it is considered at the planning stage of your evaluation. Specifically:

- The involvement of parents should be part of your evaluation strategy. It will be helpful to think through and write down the principles on which your strategy is based – the example below from Sure Start Corby, Pen Green is useful in illustrating how a commitment to parental participation can be translated into a statement about what this will mean in practice.

- Parents may also be involved in your planning/evaluation group and the development of your evaluation strategy. If they are to do this then it will be necessary to inform them about the evaluation, what it means and why it is

important. It may be useful to present examples from other Sure Start local evaluations or other pieces of work that have taken place in your programme.

- Involving parents should be considered if it is decided that selecting an external evaluator is the best option. It will be important to ensure that evaluators have a commitment to working in partnership with parents and that they have the appropriate skills to work with and involve parents. It may therefore be helpful to involve parents in the selection process. The advantages and disadvantages of having an internal/external evaluator are discussed in detail in the NESS 'Getting started with a local evaluation' guidance.

EXAMPLE: Sure Start Corby, Pen Green – principles of evaluation

National and local evaluation should:

- Be done with participants not done to them;
- Be ethically conducted in an open and honest manner with the consent of all participants;
- Be collaborative and inclusive;
- Be empowering, developmental and illuminative for all participants;
- Protect the participants from risk of any harm or threat to their personal or professional activity;
- Respect the confidentiality and anonymity of participants at all times unless agreed otherwise by all parties;
- Respect the professional and personal well-being of the individuals involved in any data gathering and reporting process; and
- Feed back any resulting evidence to participants in the research process.

EXAMPLE: Sure Start Southwark, East Peckham

Developing User Satisfaction Questionnaire

- The parents' forum decided what to include in the questionnaire and wrote the questionnaire
- Members of the Parents' Forum and other parents will administer the questionnaire

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Parents may be involved in generating ideas for more detailed evaluation. The Parents' Forum in East Peckham were involved with thinking about evaluation questions and then designing the questionnaire. Questions about what to focus on in your evaluation may include identifying Sure Start services or aspects of the programme that would benefit from more in-depth study – for example, a service that

is working especially well or one that has lost momentum. Within particular services, parents may have ideas about the design of a specific project. If evaluation has already taken place, then it is important to ask parents for feedback about this.

In order to enable parents to be involved in this way, you will need to provide a range of appropriate opportunities. If you are setting up an evaluation group, programme staff with responsibility for evaluation and/or external evaluators may attend parents' groups or particular activities to talk about evaluation and what this means and give parents the opportunity to express an interest in participating. Practical arrangements, for example ensuring childcare is available and considering if and how parents are to be paid, must be considered (see Section 5 below). As evaluation progresses, the involvement of more parents will largely depend on the effective dissemination of information about the evaluation and how it is informing changes within the programme. There may be visual displays of information about the evaluation of specific services; programme newsletters will also be an important means of communication.

B. Involving parents and carers in data collection and analysis (Stair 4)

Forthcoming NESS guidance will address the different methods that may be employed in local evaluation. In order to investigate different aspects of services, you are likely to be gathering both quantitative and qualitative data. Methods may include surveys, semi-structured questionnaires, interviews of different kinds, focus groups, observations and the use of visual 'mapping' methods – for example, pictures of places in the community or maps as a medium for research participants to express opinions about aspects of life in their communities - and other media such as film and video. The NESS website has examples of methods that have been used in local evaluations http://www.ness.bbk.ac.uk/evaluations.asp.

There is scope for parents to be included in a variety of different ways. They may be involved in planning and designing research tools – e.g. after a topic has been identified, there may be a group discussion/word-storm which the evaluator then develops into a questionnaire etc. If the evaluation concerns a specific service, then the process of doing this may be helpful in interpreting the findings from the evaluation.

A group of parents might look at and comment on a questionnaire that the evaluator has developed, or be involved in the piloting of research instruments. This can be very useful in terms of identifying ways in which the design of research tools can be improved and obtaining a better understanding of how research participants may respond to the questions being asked.

Parents may also be involved in administering questionnaires, undertaking interviews, organising focus groups or any other methods that you may be using. Advantages of this include the following:

- Parents and carers may be best-equipped to meet the objectives of the evaluation;
- Parents will acquire new skills or build on existing skills;

- Response rates may be improved, for example if the sample is being developed by a 'snowball' method, i.e. where research participants identify others whom they know and fit the criteria or might be interested in taking part in the research;
- Parents' local knowledge may be useful in identifying the best places and times to approach respondents; and
- Parents may have particular empathy with respondents, which may be helpful in establishing good rapport during interviews.

EXAMPLE: Sure Start Camden, Euston

- The evaluation undertaken by a university partner involved training 17 local parents to interview other families.

- The parents knocked on doors to find families to interview.

- Since these parent interviewers spoke 10 different languages between them, this enabled many families who couldn't speak English to be included.

- The parent interviewers took an active role when the results were presented to the community.

EXAMPLE: Sure Start West Bromwich, Smethwick-Sandwell

Following the decision to involve parents in administering a questionnaire:

- Positions of community researchers were advertised in Sure Start newsletters, schools, local newspapers and shops. All applicants were invited for interviews with the researcher and the programme's community worker.

- Positions were offered on the condition that the community researchers completed a paid training programme. Six community researchers eventually undertook training. This included team building exercises, questionnaire development and analysis, child protection issues and health and safety.

- Interviewers went out in pairs and questionnaires were completed in batches of ten. They were provided with mobile phones and emergency numbers.

- The researchers were paid £8 per interview.

- This research resulted in 100 interviews taking place, compared to the initial target of 60-70. The overall cost of the exercise was approximately one quarter of the bids which had previously been offered by outside agencies to carry out the whole process.

> *EXAMPLE: Sure Start Lincolnshire, Nunsthorpe and Bradley Park*
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> - Local parents were involved throughout the process of local evaluation. Two introductory sessions took place as a means to get parents involved.
>
> - Two groups were then set up, with one group focusing on participatory appraisal – consultation exercises conducted in a range of community venues and involving a variety of methods, including the use of diagrams and maps – and the other group undertaking a survey using a questionnaire methodology.

However, some thought will need to be given about who parents are approaching and the effect this may have on the respondents' answers. Some parents may also be reluctant to discuss certain issues – for example their contact with some professionals – with other parents. NESS guidance on conducting user satisfaction surveys (http://www.ness.bbk.ac.uk/documents/GuidanceReports/GuidanceUserSatisfactionSurveys.pdf) also points out that where parents are well-known within a Sure Start area the potential for bias in this type of research may be increased, in the sense that – as noted above – other parents may be less prepared to answer questions or feel that they should answer in a particular way.

As with any research project, quality control will be an issue. A solution is to conduct follow-up check with a random sample of the households interviewed, asking some of the same questions and also asking how they felt about the whole survey process. This was found to be a successful strategy for the Euston survey. It is also useful to have a link person with some research expertise to oversee quality control and be a point of contact for queries from the interviewers. If a local university partner or a research organisation is working with you, they will be the most obvious people for this role.

Once the data have been collected, parents can also be involved in analysis. Initially this may involve a group discussion about the experience of undertaking the research and the data collection process. Once interviews have been transcribed or quantitative data entered onto a computer and analysed using a programme such as the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS www.spss.com), then it would also be useful to invite parents to discuss these findings and what they mean.

If parents who have been involved in data collection have, or are seeking to acquire IT skills, then they may also be involved in the data entry process, but it will be very important to ensure that anyone who carries out work on such tasks has a good understanding of the principles and procedures concerning confidentiality and anonymity. For instance, knowing about the kinds of services a particular family may have suggested in a needs assessment survey (e.g. drug and alcohol counselling) can make it awkward when the parent responsible for entering the data meets the family in the community. It will be important to get a staff member to separate out the identifying information from the responses (which will need to be done as soon as

possible) so that the data being entered contain no identifiers at all. Another parent might enter the names and addresses in a separate database so that follow-up interviews can be conducted.
(http://www.ness.bbk.ac.uk/documents/GuidanceReports/ConductingEthicalResearch.pdf).

EXAMPLE: *Sure Start Camden, Euston*

- To preserve anonymity the questionnaires were pre-numbered.

- Separate sheets for personal information were also pre-numbered and after completion they were sealed by the respondent in an envelope at the time of the interview. Thus the parent conducting the interview did not have access to the information.

C. Involving parents and carers in writing-up and dissemination (Stair 5)

Dissemination is a key element in the process of enabling parents and carers to participate in local evaluation. They may be involved both in receiving information and in communicating it to others. This stage in the research process will also be important if you are trying to recruit more parents to be involved in another stage of the evaluation.

- The writing-up and dissemination of evaluation findings will depend on the kind of evaluation that has taken place and the kind of data that have been collected. It will also depend on the audience in question. If parents are participating in the dissemination of information, discussion about how to proceed will be useful. It is likely that different kinds of dissemination materials will be required – for example, one-sheet summaries, posters, longer written reports or verbal presentations by individuals or groups. Questions such as 'What kind of information do you find helpful?' or 'What do people in our programme think about this evaluation?' could provide useful topics for discussion in parents' forum.

- Parents could be involved in the design and writing of materials and this can prove a very effective way of ensuring that messages are being communicated in an effective way. It can also provide a good opportunity to train community members in desktop publishing skills, which can then be useful in other contexts. If someone else is responsible for this, then parents should be asked to advise on drafts.

- Parents will have views on how they would like information presented to them – in terms of length, amount of information, and format. Programmes are sometimes concerned about 'information overload' – it may be best to communicate findings about your evaluation in your regular newsletter.

- Some parents may wish to become involved in presenting information to others within the programme or to other organisations in the community. You will need to think about how they can be trained and supported in doing this. Initially it may be helpful to involve parents in group presentations, or in doing things jointly with an evaluator

5   Employing parents and carers as evaluators

Involvement in some aspects of evaluation may be voluntary. However, if your programme intends to employ parents to carry out parts of the evaluation, thought needs to be given to the following questions:

- How will parents be recruited? There may be equal opportunities requirements that you need to conform with, depending on your lead agency.
- If/how will parents be paid?
- What resources will be needed to provide support for parents who are helping undertake the evaluation?

How will parents be recruited?

The way in which parents are recruited will in part depend on what you are asking them to do and what skills will be necessary. You need to be honest and realistic about this. Parents will need to know:

- What they will be asked to do;
- Whether the work is to be undertaken on a voluntary basis or if it will be paid;
- Whether payment will be in cash or in some other form such as vouchers for services or for a local store;
- Whether there will be provision for child care;
- How much time the work will take;
- Whether training and support will be available.

EXAMPLE: Sure Start Corby, Pen Green

Sure Start Pen Green employed parents as interviewers for a needs-assessment project. It was felt that this was the best way to engage with the local community. A group of parents was therefore recruited to interview families with children under one year of age. A panel was set up to narrow down the group of parents who had applied. Parents were selected on the basis that:

- They had to be 'known to the centre' as workers, volunteers or parents using the centre
- They had to be literate and articulate
- They needed to be police cleared
- They needed to be friendly and approachable

The parents who were selected were then trained and actively involved in discussion about how the interviews should take place.

The question of payment

If parents are helping to carry out data collection for the evaluation, this will usually involve a substantial amount of their time and you will need to decide how they are to be paid. Clearly involving parents in evaluation work should not be exploitative. The issue of payment is one that programmes have usually encountered in relation to other activities where parents are involved, and the same considerations apply.

Being officially employed and receiving payment can be an important step for someone who wants to return to work after a break. It will enable them to add to their c.v. and will provide the source of an employment reference. However, if families are receiving benefits, entering employment can mean they are worse off financially, and it is important that parents receive information about this so that they can make an informed choice about starting work.

An important first step is to ensure parents receive benefit checks in order to find out how much they can legally earn without their benefits being adversely affected (as well as the obvious advantage of finding out if they are not receiving benefits to which they are officially entitled). If possible, employment can be paced according to each parent's circumstances, although if many parents are only conducting a few interviews each week it will probably be necessary to train a larger number. Many programmes have also tried to find ways of supporting parents by methods other than cash payments, or by encouraging their participation by providing child care, meals, and travel expenses.

Skills and Accreditation

Programmes have also found that parents sometimes see the skills obtained through taking part in the evaluation sufficient reward, in conjunction with the opportunity to meet other parents and extend their social networks. This is an issue on which opinions may change and will need to be regularly reviewed. There is a range of views represented through the country and each Sure Start management group is likely to want to develop their own policy about payment to parents or assistance with gaining qualifications, or both.

The skills acquired through participation in local evaluation may form the basis for accreditation of some kind, relating to the research skills that parents and carers develop. This can allow the parent to work towards a qualification such as an NVQ in participatory appraisal. Sure Start Enfield, Edmonton has established accreditation through the National Open College Network (http://www.nocn.org.uk). A certificate in Community Volunteering has been launched by the Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN, www.asdan.co.uk).

However, feedback from programmes suggests this organising accreditation can be a lengthy process, depending on the facilities available at local colleges. It is important, therefore, either to plan negotiations for accreditation at an early stage in your evaluation strategy, or to leave parent involvement until a subsequent stage of the evaluation. It will also, of course, be important to consult with parents themselves to find out if this is the kind of outcome they want from taking part in the evaluation.

> *EXAMPLE: Sure Start North Tyneside, Howden*
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> - Parents and carers were involved from the start of the local evaluation. The external evaluator initially visited the 'Parents and Carers Group' to explain about the evaluation, and received an enthusiastic response.
>
> - Parents were keen to undertake some research on their own, but needed training. The Training Co-ordinator within the programme found a company that produced a research-based course accredited by a national body. A tutor is now in place and 12 parents have signed up for the course.

6   Training

It is clear that the involvement of parents in evaluation can take many different forms and that the degree of involvement will vary. Parents may be trained initially as interviewers. As your evaluation develops some parents may choose to play a more active role in evaluation, for example in some aspects of data collection and analysis. However, it is not empowering to ask people to participate in activities for which they do not have appropriate skills. If you are going to involve parents in such roles, then training and support will need to be provided on an ongoing basis. Training will require time and resources, and this will have to be built into your evaluation strategy and considered in the recruitment of an evaluator – for example, a proportion of their time will need to be allocated to this.

You may wish to initiate discussion through your parents' forum and consider setting up a training day for parents and staff regarding evaluation. There are a number of organisations that offer training, and several Sure Start programmes have taken advantages of such opportunities (see Appendix for a list of possible contacts. Please let us know if your programme has identified additional organisations). A local university or an independent trainer may also be able to provide training. In identifying a trainer, you need to ensure that they have appropriate experience in working with non-professionals. You may wish to consult with other programmes who have used the trainer and/or with your NESS regional support officer.

Training and research ethics

It is especially important that parents who are involved in undertaking evaluation, especially data collection and analysis, understand the importance of research ethics. Specifically:

- Parents should understand the principle of informed consent and that participants in the evaluation can withdraw from the research at any time;

- Parents involved in data collection and analysis should be aware of the procedures you have to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of participants;

- Clear rules should be established about who has access to data and the need to ensure that research data are not discussed outside the research team (and even then should not be attributed to named individuals); and

- Parents should know and have contact details for the person they should go to if they have any concerns arising from any work they are undertaking as part of the evaluation;

- Research ethics will be an important element in any training that is provided for parents who are participating in local evaluation.

Further information on these issues can be obtained from the NESS Guidance 'Conducting Ethical Research'.
(http://www.ness.bbk.ac.uk/documents/GuidanceReports/ConductingEthicalResearch.pdf).

EXAMPLE: Sure Start Barking and Dagenham, Marks Gate

Alongside the development of the programme's evaluation strategy, training has been provided for a group of parents and carers interested in taking part. The evaluation training has been provided by the in-house evaluator and has covered the following issues:

- The aims of local evaluation and how these relate to the aims of the programme.

- Training on research ethics, including confidentiality, anonymity and care of data.

- Consideration of the proposed methodology, which includes the use of video, and training for parents and staff on using video equipment.

- Training on presentation skills – a group of parents will shortly be presenting at a national conference.

Languages

In many areas it will be necessary not only to train parents as interviewers but also to train local parents interpreters, or to find parents who speak more than one language. In particular it is important when training volunteer interpreters to explain the importance of retaining the meaning of interview questions. It is usually best during training and preparation of the research materials to find at least two people skilled in each language so that one can translate into their language and the second translate back into English. In this way alterations in the meaning of questions can be discussed. Local parents who have expertise in different languages can also play an important role in helping to prepare short summaries describing the research. These

one page outlines of the research can be shown to householders who do not speak English and a follow-up visit arranged with a suitable interpreter.

EXAMPLE: Sure Start Hounslow, Hounslow West/Beavers Estate

- The programme held four full days on evaluation for parents to enable them to take central roles in the local evaluation. A number of the parents did not speak English as a first language, and so it was essential to the programme manager that the trainers were used to working with parents whose English may be minimal.

- Beforehand it was agreed the training would involve translators and therefore any presentations or discussion would need simple jargon-free language so the translators could easily translate the information to non-English speaking parents.

- An external organisation has been appointed to train parents.

Time will be needed to plan your training programme for parents who are involved in evaluation activities. These principles apply to any training, but are particularly important if the participants have a range of backgrounds, and variability in employment experiences.

Checklist for arranging evaluation training:

- Talk to other Sure Start programmes who have used the same trainer or training package – if you are not sure who to contact, check the NESS website www.ness.bbk.ac.uk or talk to your regional support officer.

- Identify clear objectives for the day.

- Ensure that the training is fun and accessible.

- Think about what could be developed as a result of the day – this could be the starting point for the establishment of an evaluation-planning group involving parents.

- Issues such as language and terminology will need to be considered – words like evaluation may not be meaningful.

- Training should be inclusive – ensure that all parents and carers are able to take part, including parents from different minority ethnic groups and parents with literacy problems.

You will also need to think about what topics the training should cover. Again this will depend on the stage of your programme's evaluation. Possibilities include:

- What evaluation means for Sure Start and why it is important;
- The use of different research methods;
- The ethics of evaluation;
- Data analysis;
- Report writing;
- Dissemination of research findings; and
- Identification of local issues that parents feel would benefit from more in-depth examination.

Plans for training and support should include the following:

- Identify the precise nature of the tasks parents are being asked to carry out from the outset.

- Consider the safety of parents undertaking evaluation. If 'cold calls' are being made to families, you will need to ensure that someone knows when visits are being made. It is sensible to organise door knocking in small groups. If parents are undertaking individual interviews, arrangements may need to be made for mobile phones to be available and a system of phoning in to confirm the completion of interviews.

- If parents employed it may be necessary to complete police checks. Adults who are alone with children require police checks. Most household interviews are conducted with parents and other carers, thus it should not necessary to conduct checks for this kind of work, but policies may be more stringent in local partnerships and this will need to be discussed. Police checks are expensive and take several weeks to be processed. The decision will depend on the activities that local parents are involved in and your local policy but, if visits are made to homes, this issue should be raised.

- Organise opportunities for parents to be debriefed about their research experiences. This may need to be done both individually and with a group. As well as providing support, talking over the research process can provide interesting insights that may be useful as background information.

7   Conclusion and resources

Parental involvement in evaluation is a logical outcome of Sure Start's commitment to developing partnership with parents. As part of the Sure Start local programme it is important that parents play an active role in reflecting on the development of services and using evaluation for the improvement of services. Programmes that have involved parents in their evaluation activities confirm the value of this approach, while emphasising the hard work and commitment required to make it possible. Parents, the programme and the evaluation will, however, only benefit from parental involvement in evaluation if this is associated with careful planning and ongoing attention to training and support.

Books and articles

David, M. (2002) 'Problems of participation: the limits of action research', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 5, 1, 11-17.

Fetterman, D., Kaftarian, S. and Abraham, W. (Eds.) (1996) *Empowerment Evaluation*. California: Sage.

Hart, E. and Bond, M. (1995) *Action Research for Health and Social Care*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Hawtin, M., Hughes, G. and Percy-Smith, J. (1995) *Community Profiling: Auditing Social Needs*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Macauley, A., Commanda, C., Freeman, W., Gibson, N., McCabe, M., Robbins, C. and Twohig, P. (1999) 'Participatory research maximises community and lay involvement', *BMJ*, 319, 774-778 (September)

Percy-Smith, J. (ed) (1996) *Needs Assessments in Public Policy*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Reason, P. (ed) (1999) *Participation in Human Enquiry*. London: Sage.

Stringer, E. (1999) *Action Research*. London: Sage.

Useful Websites

http://www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/

http://www.cudenver.edu/~mryder/itc/act res.html

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/books.html

http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arhome.html

http://www/uea.ac.ukcare/carn

Training organisations

ARVAC
 2d Aberdeen Studios
22 Highbury Grove
London N5 2EA
Tel: 020 7704 2315

Consumers in NHS Research
The Help for Health Trust
Highcroft
Ronsey Road

Winchester
Hampshire SO22 5PH
Tel: 01982 872242
Fax: 01962 849079
Email conres@hfht.org

Development Focus UK (for Participatory Appraisal)
Vicky Johnson
23 York Avenue
Hove
Brighton
BN3 1PJ
01273 700707

The Neighbourhood Initiatives Foundation
The Poplars
Lightmoor
Telford TF4 3QN
Tel: 0870 770 0339
Fax: 01592-591771
Email training@nif.co.uk
Website www.nif.co.uk

Accreditation

Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN)
www.asdan.co.uk

The Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network grew out of the Youth Award Scheme development during the 1980s and was formally established as a charity in 1991. ASDAN is an approved awarding body offering a number of programmes and qualifications to develop life skills, from Key Stage 3 through to adult life, from preparatory to Entry Level through to Key Skills at level 4.

ASDAN awards qualifications within the National Qualifications Framework, regulated by **QCA**, **ACCAC** and **CEA**. They include the Certificate in Life Skills and the Certificate in Community Volunteering.

National Open College Network www.nocn.org.uk

The National Open College Network (NOCN) is one of the largest recognised qualifications awarding bodies in the United Kingdom and is subject to regulation by QCA (in England), ACCAC (in Wales) and CCEA (in Northern Ireland). Representing and quality-assuring the work of its licensed Open College Networks (OCNs), the network offers national qualifications and a local, flexible and responsive accreditation service that has national strength and nationally recognised value and quality.

Open College Networks (OCNs) were established to provide a mechanism for formally recognising the achievements of adult learners on courses that did not lead to a traditional qualification. In particular OCNs sought to provide access to recognition for learners for whom other qualifications were either unsuitable or inaccessible.

Appendix

Programmes that have involved parents in evaluation: contact details

Sure Start Barking and Dagenham, Marks Gate
Jane Caine (programme manager) 0208 270 6093
Anna Houston (evaluator) annamhouston@hotmail.com

Sure Start Bromley, Penge
Barbara O'Reilly (programme manager) barbara.oreilly@bromley.gov.uk
0208 313 4194
John Gazeley (evaluator)

Sure Start Camden, Euston
Laurence Pouiliot (programme manager) Laurence.pouliot@camden.gov.uk
Dr Valerie Wigfall, Thomas Coram Research Unit, (evaluator)
0207 612 6815 v.wigfall@tcru.ioe.ac.uk

Sure Start Corby, Pen Green
Bernadette Caffrey (programme manager) bcaffrey@northamptonshire.gov.uk
 01536-463950
Dr Margy Whalley (evaluator) mwhalley@northants.gov.uk

Sure Start Enfield, Edmonton
Laxmi Jamadgani (programme manager) laxmi.jamdagni@enfield.gov.uk
0208 350 5573
Lindsay Hill (evaluator)

Sure Start Gloucester, Barton Tredworth & White City
Melanie Dopson (programme manager and evaluation contact)
 mdopson@gloscc.gov.uk 01452-550059

Sure Start Havering, Hilldene & Gooshays Vicky Johnson
David Woodhull 01708 379262 (programme manager)
Anna Houston (evaluator) annamhouston@hotmail.com

Sure Start Hounslow, Hounslow West/Beavers Estate
Sharon Walsh (programme manager) surestarthounslow@hotmail.com
0208 570 8156

Sure Start Ipswich, South-East Ipswich
Sandra Shears (programme manager) sandra.shears@ipswich-pcg.nhs.uk
01473 322050
Dr Julia Clarke (evaluator) J.L.Clarke@open.ac.uk

Sure Start Leicester, Beaumont Leys
Ann Marshall (programme manager) surestartbl@lrh-tr.nhs.uk 0116-235213
David Potter (evaluator) dpotter@dmu.ac.uk

Sure Start Lincolnshire, Nunsthorpe and Bradley Park
Paul Gathercole (programme manager) paul.gathercole@nelincs.gov.uk
01472 326603
Louise Garnett (evaluator) louise.garnett@shumber-ha.trent.nhs.uk

Sure Start North Tyneside, Howden
Julie McVeigh (assistant programme manager) julie.mcveigh@northtyneside.gov.uk
Janette.brown@northtyneside.gov.uk 0191 200 1333
Noreen Mulhern (evaluator) noreen.mulhern@northtyneside.gov.uk

Sure Start Norwich, Thorpe Hamlet
Liz Chapman (programme manager) lchapman@surestartthropeh.co.uk
01603 767940
Pippa Belderson (evaluator) p.belderson@uea.ac.uk

Sure Start Scunthorpe, North Lincolnshire
Margaret Hornsby (programme manager) margaret.hornsby@northlincs.gov.uk
01724-296590

Sure Start Southwark, Aylesbury Plus
Kate Miranda (programme manager) 0207 771 3967
kate.Miranda@chsltr.sthames.nhs.uk
Aileen McWey (Assistant director in charge of evaluation)
aileen.mcwey@chsltr.sthames.nhs.uk

Sure Start Southwark, East Peckham
Nita Rogers (programme manager) nita.rogers@southwarkpct.nhs.uk
0207 635 7428

Sure Start Tower Hamlets, Weavers
Jo Fisher (programme manager) jo.fisher@thpct.nhs.uk
0207 3772117
Mibi Ishmael (evaluation)

Sure Start West Bromwich, Smethwick-Sandwell
Bhvana Solanki (programme manager) Surestartsmethwick@hotmail.com
0121 555 6756