Qualitative Research Methods in Sure Start Local Programme Evaluations
An Introduction

Patrick Myers
Jacqueline Barnes

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INTRODUCTION

This guidance focuses on the contribution that qualitative research methods can make to Sure Start local programme (SSLP) evaluations. It is designed to help local evaluations make the best use of qualitative research methods, complementing other evaluation and research that relies on monitoring and quantitative data by providing access to the experiences of those who are involved with the programme. It is one of a number of guidance documents that are available to inform the process and conduct of local programme evaluations[1]. As such it should be read in conjunction with other documents that focus on key issues such as ethics, using existing data to answer research questions and involving parents in evaluations.

A word of warning at the outset however. Qualitative research is NOT an easy option. If done properly it can be more time-consuming and labour intensive than quantitative research and it does often require more interpretation from the evaluator. However, it is a positive contribution to programme evaluation as it relies on personal contact with participants and emphasises the relevance of context and of subjective experiences.

The use of qualitative methods highlights the importance of ethical concerns - material revealed in unstructured interviews or groups may be emotionally charged. As a result the researcher must be prepared to deal with this kind of information, keeping boundaries while also respecting the interviewee's need for support. In some cases the researcher may need to suggest sources of support to respondents. Issues around ethics and confidentiality will be covered later in this guidance report.

[1] www.ness.bbk.ac.uk/guidance

WHAT IS QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?

Research methodologies are often broadly categorised into either qualitative or quantitative. However, an evaluation should not necessarily be planned as either quantitative OR qualitative but ideally will incorporate each type of approach, linking them in a rational way. Drawing on a wide spectrum of methodologies, which can then be integrated and disseminated, allows programme evaluation to address a range of questions.

Quantitative research often concerns itself with experimental settings, generally using methods to elicit information that can be transformed into numbers to allow for statistical analysis that will answer a question (e.g. did children attending this speech and language therapist make developmental gains?). Qualitative research on the other hand focuses on natural settings, seeking to understand human behaviour through the meaning people attach to things and experiences. Data from qualitative methods are usually in the form of words or images, material that is not easily reducible to numbers, yet goes to the heart of individuals' or groups' understanding of services and to the meaning attached to social phenomena (e.g. did the parents of children referred to the new Speech and Language therapist feel that family life had changed since the referral?).

Before using qualitative methods it is important to understand what they can and cannot achieve. The goal of research and evaluation is to answer questions that will expand your understanding of Sure Start. Good research, regardless of its orientation, should always involve a commitment to using rational procedures and arguments. Research and evaluation should therefore not only emphasise measurement, but also think about description and interpretation. Qualitative research methods provide the means by which this description and interpretation can be undertaken by accessing the opinions, experiences and meanings that feature in the lives of those who are the participants in Sure Start local programme services.

Specific features of qualitative research are:

- It attempts to capture information on perceptions "from the inside"; enabling the participants' views to be heard with minimal

bias from the researcher. In contrast, in structured interviews or questionnaires the choices have been based on previous research or particular theories. Qualitative methods therefore allow for new ideas to be introduced.

- Questions are open-ended, designed to draw out many responses rather than one response to predetermined choices (e.g. often, sometimes, never).
- There is a preference for unstructured data collection, which means using methods that capture what the person feels like saying rather than having preconceived ideas about what you might think would be said. Qualitative interviews are sometimes likely to start with a statement such as "tell me how you felt about being offered a place on the parenting support programme". They would not, for instance be asked, "how did you benefit from the programme" or "how much has your child's behaviour improved?" since these assume that they and their child will have benefited. The open-ended query allows them to say exactly what they feel.
- A range of information sources can be used – such as verbatim transcripts, observation schedules and field notes.
- There is particular concern for the 'micro' features of social life, the small details that may make all the difference to a service's success.
- Many interpretations are possible, the more the better. Qualitative researchers often share their materials with colleagues to see if different interpretations can be found.
- Qualitative analysis focuses on the words people use to describe their experiences, the way in which they express themselves and careful examination of transcribed speech is usually involved. Analyses look for the meaning and the reason why a particular viewpoint, behaviour or attitude is present. The use of language will be studied, the themes will be combined to discover, for example, that a parenting programme is not acceptable to women coming from one particular ethnic group because some of the material in the training videos shows parents drinking alcohol, which is not permitted in their religion.
- Finally the role of the researcher is crucial. An integral aspect of any qualitative inquiry is that it recognises the active role played by the researcher or evaluator. A key textbook (Banister et al., 1994)[2] defines qualitative research as "The interpretative study of a specific issue or problem in which the researcher is central to

[2] Bannister P et al. (1994) Qualitative Methods in Psychology OUP Buckingham

> the sense that is being made". This active role also extends to the analysis and interpretation of data. One does not just collect a series of quotations and list them in a report. There has to be a considerable amount of work attempting to place people's comments into a framework that enables questions to be answered more fully and comprehensively.

In summary, while quantitative evaluation strategies are enumerative, counting people with certain behaviours or levels of development, or counting the number of times certain events such as high quality parent child interaction occurs, qualitative methods are constructive, sometimes leading to new ideas and theories. Qualitative studies generate hypotheses while quantitative methods verify existing questions. Finally, qualitative methods acknowledge and in fact celebrate the subjective nature of inquiry while quantitative methods are designed to be as objective and replicable as possible.

Table 1. Some Typical Features of Research Approaches

Quantitative	Qualitative
• Counting, measuring, averages, percentages etc.	• In-depth study of phenomena not easily reduced to numbers
• Making comparisons, testing hypotheses	• Descriptive, often used to develop a hypothesis
• Systematic, structured pre-defined criteria	• Often avoids pre-conceived ideas
• Large sample, short time per person	• Small samples, long time per person

In the last ten years there has been a steady rise in the amount of qualitative research being undertaken. The position taken in this guidance is that both qualitative and quantitative methodologies are important in determining the processes and outcomes of Sure Start activities. It is not that one approach is superior to another but there are clearly questions that are more suited to one than the other; they simply provide different tools to use.

Some commentators have described qualitative research as adding another dimension to quantitative data, monitoring information for example. Qualitative enquiry may be able to add context to information about participation and reach. Regardless of the questions, qualitative methods provide a window through which stakeholders may be able to view the programmes' achievements, successes and impacts in quite naturalistic ways.

Qualitative methods such as unstructured interviews, focus groups, diaries and videotapes provide a less constrained method for evaluators and researchers to capture the feelings and perceptions of SSLP staff, parents and other stakeholders. This is important and should be seen as adding to the other, more quantitative information, which is collected in the evaluation. Efforts should be undertaken to blend them carefully across the evaluation cycle of data collection, data analysis and evaluation outputs. Patton[3] (2002) illustrates this point when he states that 'well crafted case studies can tell the stories behind the numbers, capture unintended impacts and ripple effects, and illuminate dimensions of desired outcomes that are difficult to quantify.

Stories from the field: Combining Methods

A questionnaire was employed to determine how many people used certain facilities in a SSLP neighbourhood. The questionnaire method was chosen because the evaluation was keen to be representative of the views of all local parents. The questionnaire results were analysed. From the analysis it was clear that, for some families, the most popular and important venue was a local family centre. In an attempt to find out reasons for this a focus group was organised. The information from the questionnaire about numbers attending, their characteristics such as age of child and family

[3] Patton MQ. (2002) Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods. Thousand Oaks. Sage

structure were enhanced by the addition of the focus group data, which gave the evaluators some insight into the reasons for the popularity of the venue. Reasons such as the presence of the facility for doing laundry and the opportunity for informal chats with local parents during this process, and staff who “dropped by” were given. This enabled the evaluators to understand more fully what the quantitative data was indicating and therefore providing a more complete picture of the role that the centre was playing in the lives of those who used it.

QUALITATIVE ENQUIRY

Questions to ask

There is a range of dimensions that qualitative research questions can focus on:

1. Experiences/behaviours
2. Opinions/values/attitudes
3. Feelings/emotion
4. Knowledge/facts
5. Sensory information
6. Background/demographic information
7. Impacts and outcomes

For SSLPs each one of the dimensions above can inform the type of questions that can be answerable using qualitative approaches. Detailed below (table 2) are some illustrations of how this can be achieved.

Table 2. Some questions that can be addressed using qualitative inquiry

Dimension	Project *These are just illustrative of ways of collecting information. Many alternatives exist*	Question
Experiences/behaviour/ attitudes	Needs Assessment Project	What is it like to bring up a child with a disability in this area? What is it that families with disabled children need or where are the gaps in services?
Opinions/values	Parents' Forum	Which parts of the programme do you feel are most valuable to you?
Feelings/Emotions	Self Esteem Project	Do you think attending this course has helped you in any way?

Knowledge Facts	Home Safety Scheme	Can you tell me about some of the things that you know are safety hazards in the home?
Sensory Information	Photo Project	What are the features of this area that you feel need improving?
Background/ Demographics	Family Needs Profile	What type of help do parents who do not speak English get to access their GP?
Impact and Outputs	Return to Work Course	What do participants who have completed the return to work course see as the major impact of their attendance on the course?

From Table 2 it is possible to see that qualitative research questions can be applicable to many different types of evaluation. Questions about need reflect the formative type evaluations that are often used to inform programme development; questions about services figure well in process evaluation; whilst outcome evaluation can also benefit from qualitative methods to answer appropriate questions. The data that result from qualitative methods, when combined and cross-referenced with monitoring and quantitative data, contribute to a holistic approach to evaluation.

Stories from the field: Occupational Health Therapy

A review of the monitoring data for the Occupational Health Service provided by the programme suggested that very few families were benefiting from this service and therefore it appeared not to be cost effective. A piece of qualitative process evaluation was undertaken, conducting in-depth interviews with the beneficiaries of the service to assess what the Occupational Therapist was doing. This revealed that she/he was working very intensively with some particularly needy families over long periods of time.

Many changes to their family life were described and to their children's functioning within the family and community, showing the impact and benefit this work was having upon the children concerned and the family. Using data from a variety of sources, collected through different methods, it was possible to positively report on the process and impact of the service.

The following sections inform the process of collecting qualitative data, making particular reference to sampling and the most commonly used methods in SSLP evaluations.

MANAGING QUALITATIVE DATA

Qualitative research is descriptive and interpretive. The data collected are commonly in the form of words or images rather than numbers. The data can include interview or focus group transcripts, field notes, photographs, videotapes, and personal documents such as diaries and official documents such as minutes of appropriate meetings. In pursuit of a deep and rich understanding, qualitative analysis does not seek to reduce the information that often necessarily occurs in large data sets but to represent the data in its fullness as closely as possible to the way in which they were recorded and transcribed. Therefore the management of the data needs to take note of this potential richness, diversity and volume of data by representing the mass of content rather than reducing the data.

Ethics and Confidentiality

Prior to embarking upon any qualitative research it is very important to consider ethical implications. Qualitative methods by their nature often seek to elicit comprehensive views of particular phenomena and often allow participants time and space to reflect on sensitive areas of their lives. Padgett[4] states:

'*Many qualitative interviews elicit intense discussions of painful life events, such as divorce, death of a family member and domestic abuse. Sensitivity to research ethics dictates that we do not introduce these topics gratuitously: they should either be volunteered by the respondents or inquired about when they are the focus of the study' (p37).*

As well as being aware of the importance that evaluators need to place on the emotional well being of participants in qualitative research, particular attention must also be directed to the issues of informed consent and confidentiality. As qualitative interviews progress both the interviewer and the researcher cannot predict the details that are likely to unfold during the exchanges and the researcher must be prepared to ensure the continued willingness of the participant to continue, while coping with any troubling emotions that may emerge.

[4] Padgett DK (1998) Qualitative methods in social work. Sage. Thousand Oaks

Confidentiality and anonymity need to be considered at an early stage. SSLP evaluations are conducted in small, clearly defined communities and as such individuals may well be able to recognise specific individuals from quotations that evaluators include in their reports. Careful attention needs to be made to ensure that the product from qualitative research does not allow participants' identities to be revealed. For example if interviews have been conducted with a particular parent who could easily be identified by demographic, family history and also the nature of the discussion, rather than report the material as a case study, efforts must be made to analyse it in a different way – for example by incorporating information from several respondents in order to make 'hypothetical' people so that no one person will be identified.

Storage of this kind of material also needs careful planning. While anonymous transcripts of interviews of a series of focus groups may be held on a computer in full so that their content can be studied in depth, the identifying characteristics of the participants (including their real names even if only first names were used) must be held on a completely different system, or ideally only as paper records, in a locked file.

For more comprehensive guidance on ethical considerations for SSLP evaluations please refer to the NESS guidance "Conducting Ethical Research"[5]

[5] http://www.ness.bbk.ac.uk/guidance

WHO SHOULD BE INCLUDED IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?

Qualitative sampling strategies are often quite different from methods employed by quantitative researchers. Where the goal of quantitative evaluation is usually representativeness, ensuring that a sample is of sufficient size to detect statistically significant effects, qualitative research seeks out samples that are composed of key informants. This usually means working with small samples of people that are not necessarily random. They may be selected purposively on the basis that they are key informants. This means they are purposely selected because of the information they may have, and sometimes because they are not representative (such as the parent who avoids the mother and toddler group) to find out what is behind their difference from the majority.

There is no easy answer to the question of how many people you require in a sample. Sometimes the issue is about the practicability in terms of time and resource. Qualitative research is time intensive and therefore pragmatic decisions over sample size are necessary. Some issues to consider when determining sample size are:

- What is the purpose of the research?
- What is the question to be explored?
- What will be useful?
- What will have credibility?
- What really is possible to achieve in the time?

Whatever is decided in terms of sampling strategies and sample size it must be clearly articulated, particularly when it comes to writing up a report. Sampling should be about identifying those with the relevant information to respond to your research question. Qualities to look for in a participant or key informant to include in your sample are that they are knowledgeable about the topic in question.

Other features include:

- Being an expert by virtue of involvement in the research
- Have undergone or are undergoing an experience that is changing them

- Willing to talk
- Has time to talk

Sampling strategies
The sampling strategies adopted in qualitative research are those that seek out key informants, those with the knowledge and experience that will allow some description and interpretation to take place. The four main types of samples that can be utilised are described.

1. Purposeful Theoretical

Purposive sampling is a strategy that selects participants based on the study needs. To that end participants with certain knowledge or experience are sought out to contribute to the evaluation. It is a common sense approach in that if your study is reflecting upon why some parents do not engage with a SSLP then it is sensible to attempt to recruit those parents to ascertain the reasons.

It is important to note that purposive sampling is not just about ascertaining one particular view. If this strategy is to be successful then it must make certain that atypical experiences are collected as well as those that are deemed typical. For example finding out the reasons why a minority of people did not find a particular activity satisfactory should be as important an aspect of evaluation as it is to report that the majority did find it satisfying. Purposive sampling should be used to capture the entire range of experience from informed and knowledgeable participants.

2. Nominated Samples

Nominated samples are often used when researchers and evaluators need to contact people who are in similar circumstances or have some common identity. Nominated sampling is also known as ‘snowballing’. This is where contact is made with one key informant who then introduces you to another potential participant known through the common link (e.g. all have been depressed in the past few months). Thereafter, providing the introduced participant agrees to participate, they may be able to introduce another and so on. In many ways this is a very good method to use particularly if the evaluation may be investigating a sensitive subject. It also responds to the sentiment that recruitment to evaluation studies can be seen as intrusive and this way allows a

gentler means of participant recruitment.

Stories from the field: Teenage Mothers

Although data from the Teenage Pregnancy Unit indicated a high level of teenage mothers in the wards covered by the SSLP it was felt that the programme was not engaging adequately enough with them. Erratic attendance at some activities by some also indicated the programme was not reaching the numbers that the data indicated were in the programme area. The evaluator recruited one teenage mother to a study looking at the barriers to inclusion of teenage parents in Sure Start activities. Because few teenage parents were engaging with the programme it was necessary for the evaluator to ask the current participant to see if another of the young parents she knew would participate. Using this method 16 teenage parents, including one father, were recruited and the project was able to provide the SSLP with relevant information that led to a reshaping of services for this important section of the programme population.

3. Volunteer Samples

This type of sampling involves potential participants identifying themselves to the evaluator. The evaluator’s role essentially is to publicise the evaluation or research and allow people to volunteer to be involved. Many programmes have used this method to recruit focus group members by placing an announcement in the regular newsletter. Posters placed in early years settings have also been used to encourage people to engage with the evaluation. As with all sampling, these methods may lead to bias. People who are likely to volunteer may be distinctly different from those who don’t.

4. Total Population

Keeping in mind that data collection and analysis in qualitative research can be very time consuming this method is best used when numbers are relatively small or the evaluation is concerned with one particular setting. For instance all mothers who had been offered intensive videotape based work to help with parent-child interactions may be interviewed.

Stories from the field: Observation of Child Interactions

A programme wanted to assess the changes in children as a result of their participation in a total communication project conducted by speech and language and crèche workers in one particular setting. This was a before and after study conducted using an observation schedule that recorded things such as interaction between children and staff, shared and co-operative play etc. The total population of the crèche were observed prior to the intervention and after it had been completed. The observation schedules were compared and a change had taken place. The programme recognised that other variables may also have influenced the changes such as maturation factors and natural history factors; however, it remains a good example of total population sampling and efforts to use qualitative methods to examine impact and outcomes.

This approach is therefore only suitable for evaluation questions that seek to assess an overview of one particular area. It can be used to examine one particular family, consent and ethics permitting, or one particular programme activity. For example as a result of attending a volunteering course what do all those who completed the course feel it has added to their competencies?

A word of caution. Some participants may not be particularly able to express their views, or wish to articulate how they feel. This can be overcome by undertaking a secondary sample of those who for example were interviewed, eliminating data that does provide adequate information for analysis.

As with all sampling strategies, be they qualitative or quantitative, evaluators need to ask, do the methods used to select the sample facilitate understanding? The reason for using qualitative methods is to discover from people what they are experiencing and how they interpret that experience and in SSLP what are the results of such experiences. Sampling strategies therefore need to continually keep the rationale for the qualitative approach in mind.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS

A range of methods can be used for qualitative research and guidance on how to use each is given. The most common strategy is to conduct interviews.

1. Interviews

SSLP evaluations have often reported the use of interviews to obtain the views of the beneficiaries, staff and of the programme activities. Good interview techniques involve active listening skills, which incorporate the means to convey interest and our desire to listen through body language and posture. Interviews are social encounters and as such we need to recognise some of the elements that will make them successful social encounters.

Rapport building and creating the environment conducive to good information exchange requires interviewers to act in ways that can be described as maximum attending behaviour. One approach called SOLER summarises some of the best features of maximum attending behaviour:

S	Sit Squarely. This means that you should face the interviewee usually face on.
O	Open Posture. The interviewer needs to adopt an open posture, with arms unfolded.
L	Lean Forward. This conveys interest in what is being said and at the same time confirms that as an interviewer you are expectant.
E	Eye Contact. Frequent but not fixed.
R	Relatively relaxed. Try to be as relaxed as possible. Tension is easily detected through posture and stance.

The principles of SOLER reflect many of the techniques used in situations where active listening and communication are paramount. Research and evaluation have many lessons to learn from such techniques in order that participants are comfortable in their discussions about SSLPs

Good interpersonal skills are important to the interview process. These are skills that can make a difference in the data that is

generated from an interview. It is important therefore that efforts are made to build rapport with participants. Active listening techniques can be usefully employed in the interview setting. Some of these are:

- Look and act interested;
- Listen to content not delivery;
- Hold your fire;
- Listen to ideas;
- Be flexible, be patient: put the talker at ease;
- Work at listening;
- Remove distraction;
- Stop talking sometimes;
- Exercise your mind, ask questions;
- Keep your mind open;
- Capitalise on the fact that thought is faster than speech.

There is a range of interview approaches that can be adopted in qualitative studies. These include

- Informal & Conversational
- Interview Guide Approach (Semi-Structured)
- Standardised Open Ended Interviews

Informal & Conversational Approach

This approach to interviewing has no predetermined or specified topics identified in advance. The interview proceeds with questions being generated from the immediate comments made by the participant. This means that questions are asked in the natural course of things and can be described as conversations with a purpose. This approach allows the participant to talk about what is relevant rather than the responses being directed by predetermined areas of importance and interest developed by the researcher. This is achieved by ensuring that the interview has the features and conventions of a conversation and not an interrogation. The approach offers the maximum flexibility. However, the interviewer should maintain the stance of naïve curiosity, using probes where appropriate to maximise the opportunity for relevant and useful data to be shared.

Stories from the field Post Natal Depression

One evaluator used the conversational approach to examine the experience of mothers with postnatal depression. The interview commenced with just one question:

Please tell me what it is like to have postnatal depression?

Thereafter, a 1.5-hour interview covered a wide range of issues relating to the participants' experience of postnatal depression. Several interviews were conducted and a thematic analysis of the interview data revealed some common experiences.

One theme centred on the role of partners in the interviewees' experience and a decision was made to set up a group exclusively for those partners who need some support as well.

Interview Guide Approach (semi-structured)

Compared to the conversational approach the interview guide approach uses semi-structured questions to cover topics that are often specified in advance. The approach can use questions that can be sequenced to facilitate a logical flow or the structure can be that of an aide memoir of the areas that you need to cover during the interview. This is a broadly defined agenda that usually arises from the evaluation question. As such it helps the interviewer to remember the points that must be covered and the need for the use of probes and particular ways of asking certain questions. The benefit of this approach is that it can often increase the comprehensiveness of the data that is generated by the interview and can keep the emerging dialogue linked to an area of interest. This approach is more useful when not necessarily exploring in depth personal experience, which may use a conversational approach. Often when exploring emotional and personal topics pre determined ideas of what should be discussed might not be helpful. Letting people tell you what they want ensures relevant and pertinent information to the participants is covered. For an example of a semi structured interview guide that has been produced by a SSLP please see appendix 1.

Standardised open-ended interview

Like questionnaires, the exact wording of questions and the sequence in which they are asked is predetermined in this approach. However unlike most questionnaires the questions are worded in completely open-ended format. For example: What was your reason for deciding to come to this smoking cessation group rather than the one at the surgery? All the interviewees answer the same question in the same order and this therefore offers some degree of structure and standardisation. Benefits from this approach are that the interviewer effects that come from asking questions in slightly different ways or in a different order can be minimised. Interviews are very time efficient and the approach makes for easier data analysis. However the drawbacks include constraints that may impede the collection of deep and rich qualitative data. As with semi-structured interviews the result may be, not always, that pertinent issues to the participant may not be explored as fully as they could be. Because of this, the approach is often used in conjunction with others. For example standardised open-ended interviews can be used to understand some of the benefits that have resulted from participating from a service and then semi-structured interviews can be used to explore how these factors may have come about.

Stories from the field: Developing Questions

Using standardised questions to ascertain the range of benefits that were associated with being involved in a SSLP members reported common experiences. These included greater levels of confidence, better social networks, and opportunities to learn. These experiences or themes were further explored using an interview guide to attempt to record from the perspective of those members the routes by which these benefits have come into being.

The Interview Structure

Regardless of the interview approach adopted the structure of the interview generally should follow the same pattern.

Beginning

This is a moment in the interview process when rapport can be established. It is also the opportunity to restate the likely length of the interview, confirm issues of confidentiality and check permission for recording. The first question should be broad and directed at making the participant feel at ease. Often it is useful to ask the participant to describe a situation or something that has happened to them that is pertinent to the research topic. For example if a focus group was to explore perceptions of health visiting services in the Sure Start programme area you could start by asking about the environment in their local surgery when they attend baby clinics etc.

The body of the interview

The body of the interview focuses on the main area of research interest. If the semi structured approach is being used a logical path is pursued in order to access the participants' views, experiences or opinions. Some researchers advocate the use of 'funnelling questions' working towards sensitive or difficult questions by exploring broader areas of interest first. This enables the participant to get used to the situation before having to answer more difficult, sensitive or personal questions. It is crucial that the right questions are asked to get the information that you need and much attention should have been directed to this when considering any interview guide that may be used. Most of all, remember that the role of the interviewer is to listen so it is necessary not to talk too much. There are some important practical interviewing skills that may be useful at this juncture in the interview process. Mason (1996)[6] suggests the need for interviewers to be attentive to the following during the interview:

- Listening, really listening, in ways we have previously discussed in this guidance as active listening
- Remembering what people have said and indeed what has already been asked and discussed
- Observing, picking up the verbal non-verbal cues

In addition other commentators stress the importance of probing and summarising:

[6] Mason J. (1996). Qualitative Researching. Sage. London

- Probing: This is a very important interview skill. Often some people can assume that evaluators may have more knowledge of the evaluation topic than they do. Therefore it becomes important to listen to those items of interest that may need to be further explored in this dialogue.

- Summarising: This useful technique can be used to validate the interviewer's understanding of the information conveyed. By summarising what has previously been said the participant can either validate, or not, the interpretation or description that results from the information.

Ending the interview

Often it is useful to use some form of summarising to bring the interview to an end. It will avoid an abrupt end by allowing some general discussion to take place. It is important to ask the participant how the interview went and were there any issues raised that may need further discussion or clarification. Thank them for their time and input. It is important to try to create on overall summary that captures the salient points of the interview. You will have periodically done this to ensure understanding but it is a useful way to conclude an interview.

Recording Interviews

Wherever possible, try to record the interviews using a good quality audio recorder. Note taking is the alternative but will never be as comprehensive as the verbatim transcript that results from a recorded interview. Note taking also distracts from maximising attending behaviour and ensuring that the interviewer is actively listening. There are, however, issues to consider around confidentiality when recording interviews. However, most people are happy to be recorded, provided that once the tapes have been transcribed they are destroyed or returned to the participant and that they have been asked for their permission first.

Things to remember when recording interviews:

- Always check the volume levels;

- Always use new tapes;
- Check that you have inserted the tape;
- Check the power is on;
- Check that the microphone is working;
- Check that the machine has recorded the interview.

Interviews, be they structured, semi structured or conversational are a common and useful method to elicit qualitative data from participants in the evaluation. However there are some things that should be considered prior to utilising this method. Table 3 details some of the advantages and disadvantages of interviews.

Table 3 Advantages and Disadvantages of Interviews.

Advantages	Disadvantages
Semi structured approaches enable information relevant to the research question to be answered	Good interviewing skills are required, and staff may be more costly as a result
Ability to target specific audiences and key informants	Expertise in developing the framework for interview is needed
Allows freedom to explore general views and perception in detail	Sometimes there is difficulty in arranging time and dates
Conversational approaches can yield rich and personal experiences	Location is important as there is a need to minimise distraction
Can be a very useful method in dealing with sensitive topics such as PND	

Adapted from Practice Guidelines for Consultation (2002)

2. Focus Groups

A focus group is a group discussion that is guided by a skilful facilitator in order to generate a rich understanding of participants' experiences, beliefs, opinions, and attitudes and sometimes needs. As the name implies, focus groups are usually focused on a particular topic, activity or service. And those invited to participate usually have something in common. However even though people are brought together because they share certain characteristics (e.g. people who have used the home support service) or live in the same geographic area (e.g. people from the SSLP area) they will

rarely have identical attitudes and opinions. Focus groups provide the opportunity to bring together a variety of perspectives about the issue being investigated as well as adding rich contextual data.

Focus groups have become a common feature of modern life, featuring highly in consumer testing, political policy development and consultations. However focus groups when used for the purpose of research and evaluation are not simply about getting a few people together to get a little feedback. They should be used in such a way that allows for detailed analysis of the discussion to take place. Therefore they will need to planned, with due consideration to sampling, the research question and the rationale for using this approach.

Evaluators should use focus groups for example when they wish to:

- Explore behaviours and attitudes which may have some bearing on outcomes
- Investigate questions relating to the how and why of the outcomes
- Obtain in depth knowledge by listening and learning as participants share and compare their experiences and feelings about the topic
- Identify issues that the programme may need to address around the area under discussion
- Learn specific information about a group (e.g. staff)
- Access different views of the same experience

- As with all qualitative methods, focus groups in evaluation should not be seen as an easy and inexpensive option. They are resource intensive as they generate a large amount of material to be transcribed and analysed, and also require the commitment of considerable amounts of time for participants and researchers.

Planning a Focus Group

It is important that at the planning stage attention is directed to the number, size, time and location of focus groups.

Number: The number of focus groups will be based on the research objectives, the number of key informants that are accessible and of

course the resources that are available. It is also worthwhile thinking overall that there may be subgroups in the sample whose views may need to be incorporated into the evaluation. For example if you are considering access to SSLP services it may be as important to try and ascertain the views of those who do and those who do not access services. A decision about the homogeneity of the sample may impact on the need to run different focus groups to capture the diversity of experience.

Size: Most commentators agree that the optimum size of focus groups should be between 6-8 participants. The group size will have a profound impact on the dynamics of the group affecting the amount of ideas exchanged and the atmosphere within the group.

Focus groups that are too large, over eight for example, restrict the amount of speaking time for participants and this can result in participants back tracking to get their views across. The aim is to allow all participants to partake in the discussion. Large groups impede this process. A larger group is also more difficult for a facilitator to manage and the danger of people starting their own mini discussions in the group becomes a real possibility. Equally, there may also be a greater likelihood that a number of participants will remain silent. Indeed some participants may feel intimidated in large groups and the facilitator would have to work extremely hard to encourage quieter members to contribute in such circumstances. Essentially large groups result in a lower quality and volume of data and should be avoided.

Alternatively, smaller groups are less likely to lead to wider discussions and it becomes more likely that a dominant voice is able to monopolise the discussion. If the aim of a focus group is maximise representativeness within the limitations discussed above smaller groups will not assist in this ambition. It is therefore recommended that you stick to 6-8 participants to maximise the effectiveness of focus groups.

Time: The characteristics of the participants should determine both the time and location of the focus group. In SSLPs, attention will need to be paid to the childcare requirements of those involved in focus groups so daytime groups with a crèche will be the best option. However if the evaluation question is to explore experiences of Sure Start activities by those who are at work then it is necessary to undertake the groups in the evening. Focus groups generally last

between 1 and 2 hours. Because of the time commitment it is important that childcare where appropriate is provided as well as the covering of out of pocket expenses. Some programmes may wish to consider further payments for the participant's time and commitment.

Location: SSLPs are fortunate in that the ethos of involvement has already done much to address any notion of space being associated with authority and power. Community ownership of SSLP facilities means that they will make a useful venue to conducting a focus group. If this is not possible efforts should be made to use neutral accommodation. The room should of course be comfortable, free from distractions and conducive to audio recording. Large rooms do not make for high quality recording environments and should be avoided.

Important skills are required of focus group facilitators and many of the qualities discussed for interviewing are transferable to this role. Focus groups can be demanding and not all researchers will have the necessary skills to undertake such work. Foremost, good listening skills are vital, as is the need for a good short-term memory. Good interpersonal skills will be necessary to facilitate and direct the discussion as will some general understanding of the topic being discussed. As with semi structured interviews it will be necessary to develop a guide that will ensure all areas are covered and that the discussion remains focused and directed.

The Structure of a Focus Group

Beginning

It is normal practice to offer participants refreshments at the start of the focus group. This enables people to be introduced to each other and allows some informal communication between participants prior to the focus group. This is also the time when the moderator can make some decisions about seating people in the group. Quiet individuals should be seated opposite the facilitator in order that the maximum use of non-verbal behaviours can be made to involve them in the discussion. Equally those who the facilitator feels may dominate the discussion should be seated next to the facilitator. Here it is easier to use body language to assist in the task of moderating the group. For example you can use your arm presented in front of the person whilst at the same time asking for

other peoples' opinion. It also at this point, that the ground rules of the focus group need to be established. The participants collectively can decide the ground rules they would like to operate in respect of the group and the information that it produces. However these should include:

- Issues about tape recording the group;
- Confidentiality;
- Respect for differing views;
- No raised voices;
- Anonymity;
- First name terms;
- Facilitator's role;
- How long the focus group will last.

The Body of the Focus Group

As with interviews it is important to start with a primer or warm up question. This allows participants to speak right from the outset and therefore is an important strategy for developing rapport. These can be broad questions relating to experiences and attitudes. In this early stage the facilitator should attempt to encourage the group processes that will lead to effective and active discussion. It is often tempting to tag focus groups on to an existing group such as the parent's forum. However it should be remembered that focus groups have a unique purpose - they therefore need to be constructed on the basis of good sampling practices and take note of the reasons why individuals attend. The facilitator's task is to encourage discussion between participants in the group so that participants can:

- Ask each other about experiences;
- React to each others' statements;
- Use others' statements as prompts;
- Discuss potentially different views.

The evaluator has the task of utilising the dynamics that become evident in the group to provoke a focused conversation of the topic. This is often generated through the type of questions asked, the use of prompts and cues and the encouragement of all to participate. When this is achieved rich data on experiences and perspectives can result, generating details that cannot be obtained using different

methods. These are often general questions that stimulate debate. The role of the facilitator is to move to more in-depth investigation by developing the discussion that results from the questions. The facilitator needs to remain flexible, making good use of the probes that are available and continually linking current information to that gained at other parts of the discussion.

Ending the focus group

The most useful way to wrap up a focus group is to summarise the content of the discussion that took place. Where there were differences of opinion expressed it is important that respect has been shown to those differences by including them in the summary.

Recording the focus group

Wherever possible, focus groups should be recorded either using tape/audio or in some circumstances video. Taping and transcribing the discussion allows for good quality data analysis. It also allows other evaluators in your team to have access to the raw data, provided that consent has been obtained for this. Video taping focus group discussion also enables researchers to take note of the body language and facial expressions of participants, adding another layer of analysis. However, although many researchers favour it, sometimes participants may see recording, particularly video recording, as intrusive. This then will have an impact on the free expression of thoughts and feelings about the areas under discussion.

Some evaluators have worked in groups of two, one facilitating the focus group while the other takes notes. This can work very well as long as the recorder simply records and does not draw any conclusions while listening. The recorder should then type up notes as soon as possible after the focus group concludes. Once this is done both the facilitator and the person who has recorded the content of the discussion can together begin to analyse the data for themes etc.

Table 4. The advantages and disadvantages of focus groups

Advantages	Disadvantages
Group interaction produces new ideas that are of interest	Can be costly if they are held in locations other than SSLP facilities
Good for exploring issues that may need further research within the programme	Confidentiality may be compromised if ground rules are not adhered to
Participants can be recruited by specific criteria	Mixed groups may not work well
Content emerges through the group discussion	Groups are unique so data will not be directly comparable
Participants' views can be endorsed by others	Gender, culture, ethnicity of facilitator can influence group performance
With probes the facilitator can seek clarification of certain issues	
Facilitator can take note of non verbal signals and explore how particular participants feel	
Good facilitation can ensure that all participants participate, drawing in those who are quiet	
Able to include people who cannot read and write in research	
Able to obtain views from people who do not speak English if the facilitator has appropriate language skills	

3. Observation

Many commentators note that once a researcher enters an area of study things are likely to change. Thus the disadvantage of observational methods is that behaviours being observed may change simply because they are being scrutinised and noted. Researchers need to be aware of this and attempt to minimise the impact they may have on what is being recorded.

However observation is a particularly useful evaluation method

when wishing to include data that involves the actions and experiences of young children. This method has utility across a range of settings and activities within the programme. According to Patton [7] (1990) there are variations in observational methods. Evaluators' use of observation can range from full participation to a type of onlooker observation, watching and observing what is going on without really being a part of the setting under investigation. Equally the degree to which participants have knowledge of an evaluators' presence in a particular setting ranges from the covert (hidden) to the overt (open). For the purposes of this guidance discussions will be limited to overt observation, where all participants are aware and are fully able to give consent for inclusion in the evaluation, rather than the more ethically challenging route of covert, hidden observation.

Observation provides a mechanism to systematically watch people, events and settings to discover something about behaviours and interactions in real world settings. As such observational methods should be used to answer very specific questions. Observers must have a clear idea of what the evaluation is looking for. They must also attempt to leave behind preconceived ideas about what they think they may see.

Stories from the field
A programme had decided that one of the main outcomes of a horticultural project was to encourage and develop social interaction between children participating in the activity. A before and after type methodology was adopted to observe changes in shared and cooperative activity between children that was not play worker initiated. Using observations the evaluation was able to demonstrate that child initiated shared and co-operative activities increased during the course of the horticultural project.

Qualitative observations generally rely upon high quality narrative field notes, which can take the form of a diary. This is where observations are recorded according to the observer's interpretation of what is taking place in the environment under study. This method can yield rich data and it is also possible to use a hand held recorder to record the observation rather than committing it to paper at that time. Field notes, if they are to be useful, need to be as

[7] Patton, MQ, (1990) Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods. Sage. Newbury Park.

comprehensive as possible.

Evaluations that have included observations have usually focused on an activity or a particular setting. It is worthwhile to include staff in the setting to assist in the development of any observation schedule and study. Play workers have high quality skills in observation and assessment and provide evaluators with an informed resource to ensure that observations and are focused on important and meaningful experiences that allow some conclusions to be made about the impact of the area under study.

4. Documentary Analysis

Clarke [8] (1999) suggests that process evaluation provides a description of the programme, exploring changes and providing the context with which to interpret outcome measures. Process evaluation of this type can provide information on how certain services came into being, their rationale and the anticipated outputs and outcomes. One way of assessing how the programme has developed and moved towards delivering services is to undertake analysis of various documents such as meeting minutes, reports, memorandums, newsletters, and forms.

Examination of a range of documentary material is an important feature of a programme's attempt to understand and share some of the processes that they have gone through. For example, documentary analysis of partnership board minutes will provide insight into any difficulties that have been experienced in the rolling out of the programme. It may be that the analysis can be focused on one particular area such as the capital programme. Using documentation to elicit the process will lead to a very rich and descriptive account of how the programme dealt with certain issues.

Other sources that can be subjected to documentary analysis can include:

- Newspaper articles: These can be used to assess the impact that the programme is having in the local area. For instance one programme uses volume of newspaper articles to assess

[8] Clarke A. (1999). Evaluation Research. Sage London

the output of the programme's information strategy. Another initiative undertook a longitudinal study of newspaper articles to examine if the negative reporting associated with the programme area moved to a more positive and friendly approach to reporting as the programme developed.

- Policy and Procedures documents: These materials are often an indication that the programme is implementing services in a professional way and are indicative of quality efforts associated with service delivery. The fact that many organisations such as Ofsted rely on such documentation indicates how useful they can be for internal evaluation.

- Timetables and Activity schedules: These provide indications about the productivity of the programme. When coupled with monitoring data they demonstrate how the programme is reaching their population and also provide information as to the range of activities and for which age group.

As well as undertaking analysis of the formal documents of the programme other documentary methods are available to evaluators. The use of **diaries** to record experiences and behaviours is used in many settings.

Stories from the field

Parents in a Sure Start local programme were encouraged to keep a weekly food diary, recording what they and their children consumed. This formed the basis for a formative evaluation to examine the required content of a course being organised by the programme dietician. The dietician was also able to provide feedback to the families on the nutritional content of their diet and provided them with alternative suggestions that were healthier.

In one programme an occupational therapist kept a diary to document the intensive work that had been undertaken with children who exhibited real need. This was an important contribution to the assessment of the service, since simply examining the monitoring data would not have given a true assessment of the work being

carried out (this was an intensive service being delivered to those who needed it most, hence client numbers were small). The diary also provided information that could be explored further by giving the evaluator insight into the nature of what the practitioner was doing.

The use of diaries can also contribute to the development of an evaluative and reflective culture in programmes. Encouraging practitioners and staff to commit an assessment of their activity to paper can facilitate an understanding of the how the activity relates to outcomes. Diaries then become part of the reflective repertoire of programme staff, and they can then also be used to collate and share much of the good practice that occurs in programmes yet does not seem always to get documented.

Diaries often place quite heavy demands on people who are to complete the diary. Therefore evaluators need always to consider if this is the best approach to data collection for the evaluation question posed. The benefit of diaries is that individuals are able to select the material they wish to include, free from interviewer influences. An ethical imperative is that when asking individuals to participate and complete material such as this the data is then utilised. Before commencing on an evaluation that requires the use of diaries it is worth considering the rationale for their use and the need for this type of data.

Stories from the field
One programme encouraged practitioners to maintain a reflective diary of a weeks work. These were then reproduced as a collection of staff reflections about working in Sure Start local programmes. This provides particular useful contextual data that when combined with other data sources such as parent's satisfaction and monitoring data and ensures a wide perspective is incorporated into the evaluation.

5. Visual Methods

Visual images in an evaluation report contribute to a reader gaining access to the world of the programme, giving the reader real insight and access to the outputs and outcomes of the project.

Visual methods include:

- Still Photography;
- Video Footage;
- Drawings and Maps.

Photography

Photography has many uses within a programme's evaluation and is a useful additional tool when used alongside other data. Photography can be used as form of observation where the evaluator can record activities, settings and events to support other data collection methods as shown in the examples below:

Stories from the field

One programme used photographs to capture the child's experience of Sure Start activities. Parents with newborn babies were recruited to the evaluation and were provided with a disposable camera every month. They were asked to photograph their child at Sure Start activities (where other children were photographed consent was gained). Once the photographs were processed a copy was provided to the parent as a record they could keep. The programme then had a photographic record of the child's experience of Sure Start, detailing the services that were available at different stages of a child's life. The programme was then able, where appropriate, to relate some outcome data to the activities that were recorded by photograph, which again gives readers of evaluation access to the real world settings in which programmes operate.

The above illustration demonstrates what photographs can add to other data collection methods.

Stories from the field

One programme used this data collection technique in a formative evaluation and provided a mechanism where parents were able to raise their concerns about the playground facilities in the area and actually visually record the playgrounds to support and validate their concerns. This was included in a report that was submitted to the local authority to seek joint funding for an improvement scheme to certain play areas in the locality.

The applicability of visual methods is particularly relevant when wishing to incorporate children's perspectives into programme evaluation. For example the Mosaic Approach [9] advocates the use of visual methods to incorporate the views of children. The mosaic approach suggests the use of cameras to record children's perceptions of areas and settings. In addition, Penny Lancaster[10], in her work listening to children, combines dialogue with image so as to explore the world as seen from the children's perspective. Cameras do not take pictures; people and children do, so it is vital to explore the content of the picture and the reason for the child's decision to include that image. In order to facilitate this and capture the immediacy it may be worthwhile using Polaroid cameras. This eliminates any memory issues when the child attempts to recall the motivation for capturing a particular image.

Some programmes have used pre taken photographs to ascertain children's preferences for activities and areas. Others have used visual methods to demonstrate some of the features of the SSLP geographical area.

Stories from the field

A Sure Start programme undertook a photographic evaluation project examining what it was like to be living in bed and breakfast accommodation when you have young children. The photographic record examined things like facilities and safety and provided a unique insight into the experiences of families in these circumstances. The approach afforded the opportunity for a participatory ethos to be adopted with participants contributing to the visual images and the narrative that accompanied the pictures.

[9] Moss P, Clarke A.(2001) Listening to young children. The Mosaic Approach. NCB London
[10] Lancaster P. (2004) Listening to Children OUP Milton Keynes

Videos

Video is another ideal method for capturing the perspective of the child.

Stories from the field

Trips and visits are a feature of many Sure Start programmes. One programme, conscious that evaluation of trips and events can lead to evaluation fatigue on the part of parents, decided to make use of video to record feedback from trips. A short video would be taken of the location or activities visited and on the return the video camera was handed over to parents to record short summaries of what they felt about the day and what they felt they had gained from it. This added to the evaluation, again making it more than just textual, for those who were interested in the programmes outputs and outcomes.

Videos can be useful in projects where observation is important. For example speech and language projects may be interested in a series of outcomes that are associated with improved communication skills between parents and children and use of video offers a reliable recoding of how these may have changed. Videoing at the beginning of an intervention and again after a period of time will provide data that can be illustrative of changes that occur.

However, it is important to make sure that all who may be recorded provides consent. In settings such as playgroups it may mean that unless all parents give permission it is not viable to use video recording. If it is possible, settings where children interact are often good sources of information concerning the quality of environments and children's interactions within them.

Video and DVD can also provide a mechanism where evaluation results can be accessed. Some programmes have used this medium to convey the results of a themed process evaluation, such as what the capital programme has achieved and the resulting outputs associated with the buildings.

Drawings and Maps

Drawings are another area that has been used to access the perceptions of children. This activity can take place within a learning or play situation and as a method that plays to the strengths of children. For example, children aged 3-4 have been asked to draw the food they like to eat on paper plates giving some insight into the diet they may experience. One project asked children to draw how they felt about their speech and language therapist or play worker. Another programme asked children to draw a map of their play group setting asking them to colour those areas where they liked to play in one colour and those areas they did not like as much in another.

There is much debate about the validity and reliability of children's drawings in research and evaluation. The position in this guidance is simple. The main beneficiaries of Sure Start services are children, improving their life chances and outcomes. As such, methods should be incorporated into evaluation that allow children to participate in the process and make sure that their perceptions are shared along with all the others. Drawings and maps facilitate that process.

Stories from the field

One project sought to assess the impact that healthy lunches were having upon children's perceptions of food. They provided a range of paper plates to be used as drawing materials for children to draw their meal likes and dislikes. This in turn informed some activity towards working with children to encourage changes in preferences where appropriate but also offered a view into the progress that the crèche and nursery team were having in developing children's appreciation of health and nutritious food.

Insert photo of child taking photo

Visual images often need to be combined with other methods to create a more comprehensive overview of programme activity and outcomes. They can represent a first hand experience of the programme's outputs and creatively add to other outcome data

sources.

6. Combining qualitative methods

Often one method alone will not provide the overall evaluation output that the programme may require. For example it may be necessary to supplement children's views with that of parents and practitioners. The Mosaic approach[11] provides an overview of how this may be achieved by suggesting that a multitude of data sources are required to achieve a holistic view of a particular topic area. This approach incorporates views and opinions by a range of participants to develop a credible description of what is happening and how people experience.

Stories from the field

A programme was encouraging parents to stay and play with their children. The evaluation of the service included observations over a period of time to see the effectiveness of the service in developing parents' ability and desire to spend time playing with their children. The observations demonstrated that over time parents were playing with their children in ways that were not evident previously. The evaluator then conducted a number of semi-structured interviews to ascertain how the parents felt about the changes that the observation had identified. Parents reported increases in confidence, increased time at home spent on play activities and a better understanding of play as learning.

From the above it is clear that combining the methods provided additional data relating to what had been achieved as a result of the activity. Observation alone would not have been able to ascertain the changes that occurred outside the observed environment. Combining methods also allows a participatory model of evaluation, ensuring that the voice of those who use the service is captured and that they feel inclusive to the development of evidence of the programme.

[11] Moss et al The Mosaic Approach

ANALYSIS OF QUALITATIVE DATA

The result of any research endeavour is a collection of information. In qualitative terms that could mean taped interview or focus group output, field notes, systematic observation schedules and images of various descriptions. The information has to be transposed into a form that provides access to the world or experience that is the focus of a particular research question.

It is important to note that the development of credible findings requires evaluators to both retain (in anonymous format) and make available where necessary the evidence that has been used to inform evaluation findings such as transcripts of tape-recorded interviews. This is important since all evaluation and research, whether qualitative or quantitative, involves rigorous and systematic empirical enquiry that is data based. –

This section focuses on pragmatic ways of managing and interpreting the qualitative data collected in the course of programme evaluations. To that end we will focus in general terms on the thematic analysis of text derived from audiotaping, field notes, diaries etc and approaches to the analysis of image-based data.

We have chosen to outline the following four approaches:

- Thematic analysis of transcribed speech;
- Analysis of documentary data;
- Analysis of observational data;
- Analysis of visual data.

1. Thematic Analysis of Transcribed Data.

The volume of data generated by qualitative approaches requires a systematic approach to analysis and description. To this end wherever possible the raw data should be derived from verbatim transcripts of recorded data. Full transcription is the most desirable method, however it involves a very hefty time commitment by the evaluator or transcribers. Essentially for every one-hour of recorded audiotape 5-8 hours should be set aside to transcribe. Focus group transcription has an added layer of complication in that the

transcribers need to be able to detect and record who is speaking when. Also good practice suggests that transcription should be undertaken as soon after the interview or focus group as this allows the evaluator to be able to recall passages that may be unclear on the audiotape. When transcribing it is worthwhile leaving quite a large margin on either side of the page so that annotations can be made as the transcript is being read.

The data can then be subjected to a thematic analysis, which is a systematic and structured approach to categorising what the respondents have said and how it fits in with the research question, which formed the rationale for the use of qualitative methods.

There are two basic approaches to thematic analysis:

- The first approach is called **inductive**. This simply means that the researcher approaches the data with no pre-conceived ideas about what the themes in the data might be.
- The second approach is called **theory led** - this is where some themes are thought of before the analysis. In this case the initial analysis will involve finding data that fits with those predetermined themes (e.g. guilt of mothers with young infants who go out to work, feelings of anxiety about the childminder becoming more important than themselves). Other unexpected themes may also emerge during the analysis that can be added later. This is useful when qualitative methods are used to validate other findings. For example a programme may wish to confirm reasons why a particular service is so popular. It may for example be an issue of need so the analysis may look towards themes defined around the concept of need and unmet need.

The key to good quality qualitative outputs is organisation. By its very nature qualitative data can be cumbersome and plentiful. It is therefore important to adopt a staged or procedural approach to the handling and analysis of the data, based on drawing out themes.

According to Hayes (2000)[12] themes are recurrent ideas or topics that can be detected in the material being analysed. This can

[12] Hayes N (2000) Introducing Qualitative Analysis in N Hayes Doing Psychological Research. OUP. Buckingham

require multiple readings of the transcript. From each transcript significant statements and phrases are extracted, meanings are formulated from these statements and phrases and finally organised into clusters of themes.

Stages of Thematic Analysis (Hayes 2000) for inductive led analysis

1. Prepare data for analysis - transcribe interviews or notes
2. Read through each interview, noting items of interest
3. Sort items of interest into general themes
4. Examine each of these general themes and attempt an initial definition
5. Take each theme separately and re-examine each transcript carefully for relevant material for that theme
6. Using all the material relating to each theme, construct each themes final form, name and define the theme and collate supporting data
7. Select the relevant illustrative data for the reporting of that theme

For theory led analysis
1. Identify the theoretical themes being applied to the analysis
2. Identify specific predictions about what the data is likely to contain

Then proceed to stage 5 as listed above.

The management of the data is crucial if a systematic approach to data analysis is to be achieved. There needs to be a clear logical audit trail that can support the development of themes that has occurred. Themes can act as conclusions and as such their credibility rests on clear evidence of how they emerged.

Smith (1995)[13] offers another way of dealing with transcript data, which has great utility when looking at a single case as well as larger groups of participants.

[13] Smith JA (1995) Semi Structured interviewing and qualitative analysis. In JA Smith, R Harre & L Van Langengrove. Rethinking Methods in Psychology. Sage London

1. Read the manuscript a number of times, using the margin on one side to note down anything that strikes you as interesting or significant about what the respondent is saying. Some of these comments may be attempts at summarising, some may be associations/ connections that come to mind, and others may be your preliminary interpretations.
2. Use the other margin to document emerging theme titles, which is using keywords to capture the essential quality of what you are finding in the text.
3. On a separate sheet, list the emerging themes, and look for connections between them…. some of them may cluster together and some may be regarded as master or super ordinate concepts.
4. Produce a master list of themes, ordered coherently. Thus the process outlined above may have identified five major themes, which seem to capture most strongly the respondents' concerns about this particular topic or issue.
5. Add an identifier of instances. Under each master theme you should indicate where in the transcript instances of it can be found. This can be achieved by giving keywords from particular extracts plus the page number of the transcript.

Smith places much emphasis upon the role of interpretation in data analysis. To that end the researcher is central to the sense made from transcripts of interview data. It should be recognised however that there is an underlying tension in the analysis of qualitative data. In order to ensure that the voice, views and experiences of participants are truly represented efforts have to be made to ensure the researcher's frame of reference does not obscure what is conveyed.

In order to overcome this tension some researchers advocate taking the analysis back to participants to see if they recognise the description and conclusions that have resulted from the analytical process. The participatory approach embodied in SSLPs may make this an appealing way to ensure that participants' involvement is not undermined by the analysis undertaken.

2. Analysis of Documentary Data

Filed notes that may have been collected in the course of examining various documents are amenable to the type of thematic analysis detailed above. For example, minutes from partnership board meetings can be exposed to a true thematic analysis whereby themes around content and conduct in meetings can be developed and analysed.

Another approach is to examine the content of various documents. A real benefit of this approach is that although the data collection and analysis occur at one point in time, the accrued documents may cover a considerable length of time. This then can have some longitudinal value and it may be possible for example to detect changes that occur over time. Content analysis at its most rudimentary categorises the content of a document under a range of headings informed by the researcher and the research question.

Stories from the field

Parents are seen as integral to the functioning of a Sure Start local programme. An evaluation of a partnership board indicated that members were committed to developing parental capacity to be involved in the decision-making processes of the programme. A content analysis of two years worth of partnership board minutes was undertaken to ascertain the level of parental involvement that occurred at board meetings. The researcher was particularly interested in parent-initiated ideas for service delivery and improvement. Data was extracted and when analysed revealed very low levels of parent initiation but high levels of tacit approval of other people's ideas. This led to a discussion about whether parents were truly involved in the decision-making process or whether the representation at this level was tokenistic.

The above example indicates that the analysis is driven by the question. If, for example, the documents were being examined for cases where partners were delivering multi agency solutions to what was previously seen as a single-agency service, the documents would be scrutinised for examples or otherwise of the area of interest. These are examples of theory led analysis where content is sought to substantiate or disprove a particular question.

According to Bauer[14] (2000) coding and therefore classifying material is a constructive task that brings together the theory and the research material. At its simplest the actual coding can be achieved on the necessary documents if margins are available to do that otherwise a coding grid could be created to manage the data and assist in interpretation. A coding grid is a simple matrix by which various elements of the documentary analysis can be recorded. For example if one area of interest were minutes of board meetings to ascertain if parents were actively involved in decision making a coding grid such as that illustrated below could be used.

	Meeting1	Meeting 2	Meeting 3	Meeting 4	Meeting 5
Parent directed agenda items					
Parental proposed items					
Parental seconded items					
Indication of parental inclusion in debate					
Indication of parental objections					

The above could then be used to assess frequency of parental involvement as reported with a content analysis of board minutes made available to the evaluator.

Steps in Content Analysis

The following is one way of identifying themes within the documents under scrutiny (adapted from Bauer 2000):

1. Texts should be chosen based on the evaluation question or topic
2. Decide if the approach is to be deductive (you have decided what you are going to look for) or inductive (the coding develops from the reading of the document)
3. If you know what you want to look at construct some coding categories with which you will examine the documents such as the illustration above
4. Pilot and revise the coding categories to see if they work when reading the documents

[14] Bauer M (2000) Classical Content Analysis in Bauer M Gaskell G (2000) Qualitative Researching with Text Image and Sound Sage London.

5. Code all materials in the sample
6. Set up a data file to incorporate the codes
7. Write a codebook including (a) the rationale of the coding categories (b) the frequency distributions of the categories or codes (c) an assessment of what the categories or codes indicate in the form of a description.

Content analysis represents a useful way of attempting to understand what texts convey about various processes and impacts. As such analysis offers an additional insight into how SSLP operate and the mechanisms that may facilitate, or otherwise, good working practices.

3. Analysis of Observational Data

This guidance has detailed one method of observational recording techniques. The other possible method is a more structured approach that relies upon observation schedules. Both forms of data require a degree of analysis and interpretation on the part of the researcher resulting in a description of what has been observed.

As with all methods the research question drives the focus of the observation. For example, if the research question was related to nursery worker's child interactions then it would be necessary to focus the observation on the details of those involved and what activities were undertaken. Spradley (1980)[15] suggests there are nine dimensions by which observational data used to describe can be collected:

1.	Space	layout, physical setting, rooms, outdoor space etc
2.	Actors	details of the people involved
3.	Activities	the activities undertaken by the actors
4.	Objects	Physical elements, toys, books, art material
5.	Acts	What people are doing
6.	Events	Particular occasions- e.g. board meetings
7.	Time	The sequence of the events
8.	Goals	What goals were evident and were they accomplished?
9.	Feelings	Emotions in particular contexts

[15] Spradley JP (1980) Participant Observation. Holt Reinhart & Winston New York

Observations may focus on one or all of the dimensions listed above. However, the task of the researcher is to reflect upon what has been observed and to develop a credible account of what has been seen and recorded. Thus the analysis will be undertaken to give a description, a narrative account detailing the context, activity and outcome.

Structured observation relies upon a coding scheme that contains the predetermined categories that the observer is interested in. It may be that the observation is looking for instances of co-operative play in an early years setting. The analysis will then generally examine the frequency and type of co-operative play exhibited by the group of children who are participating in the study.

Stories from the field

One of the purposes of the Stay and Play sessions was to encourage the development of shared play between parents and their children. Observations at some pre school groups had found that parents, instead of playing with their children, still remained separate from them, chatting and talking whilst their children played alone or with other children. Whilst not wishing to undermine the benefits of social networking the programme did wish to encourage joint play experiences between parents and children and encourage the notion of play as learning. The stay and play was introduced and progressive observations revealed that parents were, with support, playing with their children in an interactive way. Thus this qualitative method was able to inform on the outcomes of the play and stay sessions. As a result other play and stay sessions were developed throughout the programme area.

4. Analysis of Visual Data

This guidance has placed some level of importance in using multiple methods to provide readers of evaluation with an insight into the programme and the impact the programme is having on its beneficiaries. It has been said that a picture paints a thousand words and as such visual data represents a perfect opportunity to complement other methods of evaluation. Pictures to support observation for example will allow the reader of an evaluation output

to visualise the setting where the observation took place.

However visual evaluation projects sometimes seek to use the medium as a distinctive research tool to record aspects of an environment, activity or behaviour. Images can be produced by the researchers themselves or by encouraging a more participatory approach, getting people to take pictures or videos themselves. Indeed some programmes have incorporated some photographic training with the opportunity to collect evaluative data. So the end product may be images that have been produced by the evaluator or participants.

Photographs taken by the researcher can be used as a photo interview approach. This approach uses photographs as prompts to stimulate discussions about certain services or aspects of the programme. Using images of what the capital has achieved could for example be used to prompt discussions about how the capital funding in the programme has facilitated change in services available to parents.

Photographs taken by participants can be used to complement data that has been captured from other evaluation methods. Viewing other peoples' images can be subject to a content analysis such as that described above where a coding schedule could be constructed to record for example the frequency with which a particular area was being photographed by children when asked which is their favourite part of the nursery.

Additionally photographs can be used to produce visual narrative accounts that stand on their own as evaluation outputs in their own right.

Stories from the field

One programme provided new parents with disposable cameras on a monthly basis to record their child's contact with the SSLP. Parents were asked to take a photograph each time they were involved in a Sure Start activity. The cameras when used, were handed back to the evaluators for developing, the parents received a copy of the photographs for their own records and the evaluators were able to build a photographic portfolio of a child's contact with Sure Start across the age range. At regular intervals the evaluators used the photographs to elicit responses from the parents about

the quality and content of activity and were able to incorporate the results into evaluation outputs.

When using photographs to act as prompts to discussion the typical analytical process would be thematic analysis, as described above. It is important to recognise that data comes in many forms, including visual. The need for systematic, credible and robust methods of analysis applies to all forms of data when being employed to convey programme processes and performance.

Stories from the field

Children were provided with Polaroid cameras to take pictures of the playgroup setting they liked or disliked. It was only by talking and listening to them that the evaluator was able to determine if the area photographed was a like or a dislike. For example one might interpret a picture of a wet and windy outdoor scene taken through the window as being somewhere the child would not like to be. Yet the child in discussion really enjoyed the splashing in the puddle and categorised the photograph as somewhere he would like to be. This process of photo elicitation is informative across a whole range of applications. In this example it demonstrates the problematic nature of viewing the world as adults to represent a child's experience.

There is an extensive literature about the theoretical use of visual methods in qualitative research. The purpose of this guidance is to provide an introduction to research methods that have applicability to SSLPs and offer some pragmatic options when thinking about how to evaluate qualitatively. For those with an interest in visual methods the following two texts may prove useful in exploring the theoretical underpinnings of visual research methods.

- Emmison M & Smith P (2000) Researching the Visual. Sage London;
- Bauer MW & Gaskell G (eds) (2000) Qualitative Researching with Text Image and Sound. Sage London.

MAKING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH COUNT

This guidance has attempted to offer a pragmatic approach and advocate that researchers and evaluators incorporate multiple methods of determining the outcomes of programme activity. Information is required across the whole domain of programme activity. Evaluation needs to use the foundational monitoring information that informs others of the productivity, reach and activity uptake within the programme. Process evaluation, understanding the way things occur, supports the development of evidence about impact and outcomes. Qualitative research can get closer to the individual's perspective and experience than other methods. Capturing as much reality as possible from the programme participants' viewpoint adds valuable and important information about the progress the programme is making across any number of criteria.

Qualitative research, when undertaken in a systematic, credible and robust way, affords programmes the opportunity to add rich and descriptive data to their evaluations. Qualitative outputs can contribute to the development of evidence about what works and what does not in SSLPs. Qualitative methods also sit well with the overall ethos of Sure Start in that they are focused holistically, value experience and seek to explain by incorporating social and environmental context. Qualitative methods often seek to explain the meaning behind the other measurements that occur.

Qualitative methods can also contribute to the evidence base, particularly when the quality of the research output is assured. This guidance commenced with a warning that qualitative research is not an easy option because just as in quantitative research effort needs to be placed into a systematic approach to question generation, data collection and analysis. Qualitative research is not simply collecting a series of quotes and then adding them to reinforce an evaluation finding. The nature of qualitative research demands that careful attention is placed upon utilising what the data has revealed. This allows the resultant descriptions, themes, and pictures - whatever the output - to contribute to a credible evaluation process of informing others of what the programme is doing and what it is achieving.

Table 1 summarises some ways in which you are able to assess the quality and utility of your qualitative research. Lincoln and Guba (1985)[16] provide a classification that focuses on credibility, transferability of the findings, dependability of the analysis and confirmability, which is concerned with information about how the researcher concludes what they have.

Credibility	Is this a credible representation based upon others' knowledge of the area of investigation?
Transferability	Is it sensible to be able to transfer the inferences to another set of individuals in another similar situation? If asking a similar group of parents that same questions could we perhaps expect a similar response?
Dependability	How sure is this data representing the meaning ascribed to it?
Confirmability	Has the researcher made explicit and auditable the ways in which the description and interpretation has been undertaken?

The above is just one set of criteria that people might apply in assessing the content and conclusions of qualitative outputs. Evaluators need to ensure that the meaning that they attribute to their questioning and analysis in the end has the power to inform and contribute to the evidence and knowledge base of what works, and how in early years services.

Evaluation is about assessing the value of the programme through a credible synthesis of evaluation findings. Qualitative methods either independently or when combined with quantitative data are a valuable tool in many aspects of local programme evaluation.

[16] Lincoln YS & Guba EG (1985). Naturalistic Enquiry. Sage. Beverly Hills

Appendix 1 Example Interview Guide from an evaluation of Partnership Working from a Sure Start Local Programme?

1. Please can you tell me your job title and explain a bit about what you do?

2. Do you understand your role in the partnership and can you explain what this is?

3. Do you understand other people's roles within the partnership, and can you explain a little about these?

4. What do you think makes a partnership effective?

5. How effective in those terms do you think this partnership is?

6. Do you know and can you explain what outcomes this programme is working towards?

7. Do you know and can you explain the wider policy context for Sure Start?

8. When you are working for the partnership, how do you balance your own priorities and the partnerships priorities?

9. Does everyone speak up at the partnership meetings? If not why is that?

10. Does everyone contribute to decisions making in the p[partnership. . If not what do you think hinders it?

11. Are the statutory sector agencies involved at the most useful level? If not why not?

12. Are the voluntary and community sectors involved? If not why not?

13. Are parents and carers fully involved? If not why not.

Are children and young people fully involved? If not why not?

14. Can you think of ways to improve Sure Starts links with other agencies in the area?

15. Are all partners willing to learn?

16. Are all partners willing to accept and consider a challenge to there opinion?

17. Do all partners share responsibility equally when problems arise. If not what happens?

18. Is there anything you would like to say about the partnership that has not been covered?

Appendix 2. NESS Support for Local Evaluation Team

National Evaluation of Sure Start
Institute for the Study of Children, Families and Social Issues
Birkbeck College, University of London,
7 Bedford Square,
London. WC1 3RA
Tel: 020 7079 0823 Fax: 020 7323 4738

Professor Jacqueline Barnes, Director - Support for Local Programmes
Tel: 020 7079 0837
Mobile: 07855 308311
Email: jacqueline.barnes@bbk.ac.uk

Patrick Myers, National Co-ordinator (South) and Regional Support (South West)
Tel: 020 7079 0849
Mobile: 07813 887039
Email: p.myers@bbk.ac.uk

Jane Stuart, National Co-ordinator (North) and Regional Support (North West)
Tel: 01539 620882
Mobile: 07855 309187
Email: j.stuart@bbk.ac.uk

Clare Dixon, Regional Officer - North West
Tel: 01524 593565
Mobile: 0781 3887042
Email: c.dixon4@lancaster.ac.uk

Sarah Ellison, Regional Officer - Yorkshire & Humberside
Tel: 01904 433499
Mobile: 07813 886941)
Email: se11@york.ac.uk

Louise Harrington, Regional Officer - London
Tel: 020 7079 0848
Mobile: 07814 935382
Email: l.harrington@bbk.ac.uk

Paula Latham, Regional Officer - West Midlands and South West
Mobile: 07813 887039
Email: p.latham@keele.ac.uk

Nigel Lloyd, Regional Officer - East of England and South East
Tel: 020 7079 0847
Mobile: 07989 540482
Email: n.lloyd@bbk.ac.uk

Anthony Rafferty, Regional Officer - East Midlands
Mobile: 0797 3358846
Email: a.rafferty@bbk.ac.uk

Trish Van der Velde, Regional Officer - North East
Mobile: 07811 360117
Email: p.van-der-velde@bbk.ac.uk