



**‘WHAT WORKS IN INVOLVING PARENTS IN SURE START’?**  
**A Research Project for local Sure Start Parents**

**‘What Works In Involving Parents In Decision Making in Sure Start’**

OCTOBER 2003  
Communities Count

## **“What Works In Involving Parents in Decision Making In Sure Start”**

- **2- year research project being carried out by Communities Count. Jan 2003 - Jan 2005**
- **5 local programmes involved:**
  - **Nunsthorpe & Bradley Park -  
(Round 1)**
  - **Scunthorpe Old Town - (Round 3)**
  - **East Marsh - (Round 4)**
  - **West Marsh & Yarborough -  
(Round 5)**
  - **Northern Cleethorpes - (Round 5)**

## **PHASE ONE**

### **'Parental Involvement on Management Boards and Parent Groups'**

- **Six month time scale (April 2003-  
October 2003**
- **3 programmes involved**
  - **Nunsthorpe & Bradley Park**
  - **Scunthorpe Old Town**
  - **East Marsh**

## METHODS

- **Steering Group**
- **Interviews-Parents involved in the Parents Group & members of the Management Board**
- **Documentary Evidence**
- **Observations of Meetings**
  
- **Training for parents involved in the Steering Group**
- **Introduction to Basic Social Research Skills- provided by the University of Hull.**
- **One-day course included introducing interviewer skills, ethics, research design and questionnaire construction**
- **Parents receive a Certificate Of Attendance from the University of Hull. (Department of Applied and Comparative Social Sciences).**

## COMMUNITY SURVEY

- 15 per cent of eligible Sure Start population
- To find out how much those 'hard to reach' groups know about Sure Start
- Aim to include some of those NOT registered with the programme in the sample.

### HOW?

- Target trips/events
- Local schools
- Local shops
- Local Community centres/cafes

## East Marsh Findings

### THE PARENTS GROUP

The parents group meets regularly and has an average attendance of between 8 and 12 parents who attend regularly.

The evaluation of the parents group looked at the following issues:

- What do parents think the role of the group is?
- What is it like being involved in the group
- What would put people off coming to the group
- What could be done to improve meetings?
- Do parents think the parents group is taken seriously?
- Do parents feel that the Parents group can influence the decision-making?

All but one parent had a clear idea about the role of the parents group. Parents felt that the role of the group covered the following areas:

- Making decisions about the programme
- Getting parents views across
- To help make improvements in the programme
- To let staff know what parents want
- To come up with ideas
- To help run Sure Start

Reasons for getting involved in the parent group varied,

- 'Wanted to know what was going on in the programme'
- 'Don't know'
- 'Something to do really'

The majority of parents felt that the group is taken seriously within the programme and the parents do have a chance to

have a say what goes on the agenda and to have their say during the meetings.

### GETTING PARENTS TO MEETINGS

Apart from the two parents involved in setting up the group in the early days, all the parents heard about the group through other parents.

Parents were asked how the meetings might be improved and what they thought might put people off coming along to the meetings. Some of the views given included:

- Meetings getting 'loud'
- Not being listened to
- Parents views not being acted on

Some parents thought the group itself might be off-putting to new people who do not know them:

" We all sit there, we look and stare – and we do!

More Personal issues that might put parents off were

- Being shy
- Not knowing anyone in the group
- Not knowing what to expect in the meeting
- Not knowing what is expected from them at the meeting (having to speak!)

Some suggestions given for,

What might help?

included,

- Parent Buddy
- More privacy
- Food/cakes/biscuits
- Seeing changes that parents ask for take place

Has the Parents Group made a difference to services in general and the programme overall?

Answers varied from a definite 'yes' to 'don't know'. However, some examples of the group making a difference to services were given, for example:

" Yes. I have heard things brought up in the group that have happened. For example, another health visitor, we wanted one and we got one.

Other ways in which the group have influenced the programme include involvement in various working sub-groups such as the Capital Group and the Implementation Group, getting involved in staff recruitment and having an input into how services are delivered.

We will talk about the recommendations for the Parents group at the end.



## Management Board

East Marsh has had 50 per cent parental representation on the management board since the first meeting.

The main things we wanted to find out were:

- What parents and professionals think their role on the board is.
- Do parents think the board is where the main decisions about the programme get made?
- Do parents believe they influence the decision-making at Board level?
- What is it like to sit with professionals on the board?
- What could be done to improve parental involvement on the Board?

## WHAT DID WE FIND OUT?

All the parents reported that their first experience on the Board was 'nerve-racking' and 'daunting'. Most of the parents had never been involved in anything like this before and found sitting in a room "with professionals in suits with badges on" intimidating. However, with experience things do improve. Parents were asked, 'What's it like now' and some of the responses were:

- "Relaxed, friendly atmosphere."
- "Piece of cake!"
- "Good now. I understand all the things now."

All the parents interviewed said that the time, venue and available childcare made meetings convenient.

Parents were then asked if they thought the main decisions about the programme get made at the Board. The majority believed they did. Here is a selection of the answers given:

- "Yes. Definitely"
- "I think so, that's the impression I get. If not they go to the Government Unit"

All the parents felt they had a great deal to offer to the programme by being on the board. Most said that as they lived in the area they knew what the needs and wants of the community were and could bring forward the views of the local community.

Parents also felt they had learnt a great deal about Sure Start by being on the Board, and also on a more personal level:

WHEN ASKED, what have you learnt from being on the board? Some of the answers were

- "I can do decision-making"
- "I have more confidence"
- "...to respect people better...not to be frightened by professionals".

Overall the research suggested that in East Marsh Sure Start the Parents Group and parent membership on the Management Board do offer an opportunity for parents to have their say and influence decision- making.

Parents report they feel they are listened to, supported and that their views are taken seriously.

We then asked:

### WHAT MIGHT STOP PARENTS GETTING INVOLVED IN THE MANAGEMENT BOARD?

- Never having been to meetings before.
- Not knowing what to expect.
- Not knowing what a Management Board is there for.
- Not knowing what role they will be expected to take on the Board.

### The Conclusion

- Parents do believe their views are taken seriously on the Board – and could give examples of where their input had influenced decisions within the programme.
- Experience of being a Board member makes parents more willing to challenge the views of professionals.

Although practical things, such as childcare can put people off joining the Board, there are other, more personal issues; such as being shy and lacking confidence.

## **THE RECOMMENDATIONS**

The recommendations set out in the final report are based on the findings from three programmes - and within the report each individual programme has specific recommendations. The research covered 3 programmes, all of which were at different stages of development and evolved in different contexts, as such, some recommendations were specific to each programme. The following is a summary from the individual list of recommendations for the East Marsh Sure Start.

- Standardise the Parent Group name across the programmes.
- Light refreshments – cakes/tea/biscuits
- Welcome pack for Parent Group members containing clear information about the role of the group and the importance of parents getting involved.
- Establish a set of 'ground rules' or 'Terms of Reference' that includes:
  - The right for everyone to have their say without interruption.
  - Clear guidelines about the involvement of staff in meetings.

- Clear guidelines on voting rights
- Training – committee skills, group work etc. for parents who want it.
- Introduce satellite Parent Groups at strategic points in the community (e.g. Local schools) to maximise the involvement of parents who do not use the building.
- Parent Buddy system.
- Annual re-launch of the Parent Group – publicised with lunch and crèche included.
- ‘Out of Hours’ Parent Group. Evenings/weekend meetings every couple of months for parents in the area that may work and find daytime meetings difficult to attend. This may encourage more male carers to attend.
- Introduce a coordinator role between the Management Board and the Parent group. This will ensure a smooth flow of communication between Parent Group and Management Board.
- Staff to take copies of Parent Group Minutes to all activities and drop-in’s.
- A quarterly progress report up-date at an open meeting.

## Management Board Recommendations- What might help?

### Joining The Board

- **Standardise the election/eligibility criteria for parent members across the Board.**
- **Build confidence of parents by involving them in sub-groups that report to the Management Board first.**
- **Trail period for interested parents to observe meetings without obligation to join**
- **Shadowing. – Going along with a parent member as an observer.**
- **Jargon-Buster.**
- **Training.**
- **Publicity information available, e.g. – ‘Getting Involved’ – a leaflet highlighting what groups are available for parents to become involved in decision making- times/dates etc...**
- **Work towards informal atmosphere in meetings – refreshments etc...**

### Parental Involvement on the Board

- **Provide welcome pack that fully details what the role of the Board is – to include:**
  - **Clear guidelines of the role parents are expected to play on the Board.**

- Clear guidelines on the Terms of Reference/Constitution of the Board – how decisions get made, voting rights etc...
- Clear guidelines on issues around confidentiality, Conflict of Interest etc...
- 'Reward System' for parents.
- Pre-meetings with all parents/ Manager
- Post meeting with parents.

### What East Marsh Are Doing With The Findings

The programme manager took the final report for East Marsh to both the parents group and the Management Board. Both groups decided which recommendations they thought would be useful.

Here is a summary of the main points. Some of the recommendations from the report have been added to the parental involvement strategy for more long-term development.

- We want to keep our own identity and have our own name for the Parents Group.
- Biscuits and cakes was discussed and agreed.
- Staff members have been asked to sort out having a go at fruit and cakes.
- Leaflet about the Parents Group to be reviewed and handed out at schools and the Sure Start building.

- Parents to have a trial run at making their own ground rules.
- Training for meetings. – Management Board already has introduced having observers to see what it is like.
- Parent Buddy system to already working.
- Parental Involvement staff to work at setting up new parents groups and getting more parents to meetings.
- No to annual re-launch.
- Parents to try and have a Saturday morning meeting in the New Year.
- Parents do not want to lose own identity.
- Parents would like a notice board to see what's going on from day to day. – This is now in place.
- Refreshments for Management Board.
- Leaflet for parents to find out what's going on with the Management Board.

Most of these recommendations should be carried out in the New Year.