



NESS

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Partnership Working in Sure Start Local Programmes Early findings from local programme evaluations

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Introduction

The National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) is actively engaged in bringing together all evaluation reports and summaries that are produced by Sure Start Local Programmes. This report synthesises findings from local programme evaluations addressing partnership working in Sure Start Local Programmes. The report is based upon early findings from those programmes that have started the task of evaluating the nature and effectiveness of their partnerships.

Background

Sure Start is an initiative that depends on close and effective working arrangements between a range of stakeholders. Sure Start guidance on the governance of Sure Start Local Programmes at a local level emphasises that a partnership approach is essential to the achievement of national targets and local objectives and milestones. Partnerships are expected to have a key role in directing and supporting the Sure Start Local Programmes in their efforts to improve outcomes for children in their particular localities. This has been further emphasised in research by the NESS team, which has shown that the effective working of the partnership is critical to the process of setting up and developing a Sure Start Local Programme.

However, it is also widely recognised that partnership working is challenging and requires commitment both by those developing Sure Start at a strategic level and those working directly with children and families. It is against this backdrop that programmes are encouraged to evaluate and reflect on the structure and outputs of the partnership, using findings to highlight areas of good practice and those areas that would benefit from improvements.

Staff and parents felt that one of the biggest influences Sure Start had on partnership working was improved communication. Staff felt they had a better idea of what agencies were doing and that agencies were consulting each other.
Local Programme Evaluation Report 2003

What has this synthesis found?

- High levels of commitment to partnership are typical
- The experience of being a member of the partnership board was usually reported positively
- Parents are vital to the success of partnerships
- Parents felt a new equality as part of the partnership
- Sure Start's emphasis on multi agency working has facilitated more effective work with families
- Parental Involvement is not an end in itself but should be seen as a process that needs continual input
- Attendance by members of statutory agencies at meetings could be improved
- Some reports highlight the adverse impact that organisational cultures can have on effective partnership working.

Methodology

Sure Start Local Programmes are at different stages in their evaluation journey. As such this summary reflects the findings of 27 relevant evaluation outputs that have examined in one way or another the nature and effectiveness of their partnerships. The authors acknowledge that this report is based upon a relatively small number of evaluations and as such cannot be seen as a definitive exposition of how partnerships are working in Sure Start Local Programmes. NESS looks forward to adding to these findings so that a more representative and robust appraisal of partnership can be provided, forming a basis with which assumptions about outputs and outcomes can be more reliably be made. Thematic analysis of these reports was the key analytical tool to investigate what programmes had said about partnership. Even with the limited number of evaluations undertaken in this area, it is encouraging to see that partnerships are coming together to maximise the opportunity that Sure Start funding has provided and genuinely strive to initiate and maintain better services for children and families.

Local Evaluation Findings

In the evaluation reports studied the decision to focus on partnership as a significant topic was usually identified early in the history of the programme. There was a sense of taking stock with the majority of programmes undertaking the evaluation just after the setting up phase had been completed. Partner agencies had made commitments, for example regarding resources, and evaluation was important to see how these commitments were being put into practice as the programme developed. The reports highlighted four areas of common interest with regard to partnerships:

- What constitutes successful partnership working
- The working of the partnership board
- Partnership with parents
- Team working

On successful partnership working:

Sure Start is working well—it's going in the right direction'

(Board Member)

The board is quite reactive, things are getting sorted' (Board Member)

Successful Partnership Working

Encouragingly, many of the local evaluations reported a high level of commitment to the ethos of working in partnership and to Sure Start principles and values. Several evaluations asked participants of their study about their knowledge of and views about Sure Start as an initiative. Views were generally positive and included an appreciation of the following:

- The fact that Sure Start recognised the inter-connected nature and extent of social problems
- The existence of a long-term funding strategy
- The encouragement given by Sure Start for the establishment of new relationships between professionals, parents and other members of the community
- A continued focus on issues from the perspective of families
- Flexibility in the way that services were delivered

A common evaluation method used was interviews. When asked what would help facilitate good partnership working interviewees, who included parents and board members from statutory and voluntary sectors stated:

- Good communication between all members of the partnership, their organisations and the community
- Openness and transparency
- Receptiveness to other ideas
- Tolerance of different perspectives
- Strong management, specifically the leadership exercised by the programme manager
- Clear objectives for the partnership board which translates into effective management of the programme
- Wide representation on the board from the community, providers of services and statutory agencies
- Accessibility for parents and carers to be involved in the decision making process of the programme
- Knowledge of other professional roles



The Partnership Board

Many positive comments were made regarding the experience of partnership board membership by those interviewed. Where parental engagement is good, parents felt that they were listened to and had been able to contribute to the development of the programme in a meaningful way. One report recorded comments from staff who felt that the existence of a partnership board, which included parents, helped keep the programme focused on the needs of the local community.

'The board is quite reactive, things are getting sorted...if you feel that there is a problem you can bring it up and people are going to listen and do something so the board is working really well' (Voluntary sector representative)

A number of barriers were identified to parental participation in the partnership board. The most common problems concerned the use of jargon and the absence of training to enable parents to take part in such meetings. Occasionally practical barriers to participation, such as the timing of meetings and the lack of childcare facilities were also noted. It was evident from the reports that some of the programmes were experiencing difficulties as a result of the number of people technically listed and/ or attending board meetings. For example, in some evaluations concern was expressed at the lack of attendance of senior officials from partner agencies. This was traced to the early strategies used by programmes to engage other agencies, namely by seeking to involve those at assistant director level. It was also argued that this problem could relate to the lack of clarity on the content of partnership meetings, and their failure to focus on issues that would attract the interest of managers at this level.

'I sometimes think that attendance could be a little better, but I will say that the voluntary sector and the parents are always present' (Programme Manager)

'I know that (board members) have got important jobs, you know, and they've got full diaries but when they've got months ahead notice that there are going to be meetings on those dates and they still don't turn up, it's not on really' (Parent)

Partnership with Parents

This is an area in which findings are mixed. Most evaluations had interviewed parents to ascertain their views. Other interviewees also made reference to how they contribute to the partnership. The programme's experience of involving parents was frequently linked to the process of setting up Sure Start in the community, and the extent to which early expectations were met and enthusiasm for the Sure Start programme maintained. In some programmes, these early experiences had been difficult and continued to have implications for perceptions of, and relationships within, the partnership. All reports recognised that parental participation was an essential element in the partnership, and even where it was felt that programmes had been successful in this dimension of their work, it was recognised that ongoing effort was needed to sustain this. Ensuring that many parents had the opportunity to be involved in order to maximise representation was an issue raised in some reports.

Evaluations uncovered varying degrees of satisfaction in the extent to which progress had been made in enabling parents and carers to have a voice in the partnership and indeed within the programme more widely.

'The last meeting I attended and all the through the conversation it was them, them, them. I said "Hold on, I am a parent, I am sitting as one of them take that on board as well"' (Parent)

However, when the process worked well, parents felt a new sense of equality in terms of influence and decision making within the programme.

Opportunities

'You could walk in the room a stranger and listen, and you wouldn't be able to pick out who was a parent and who was the voluntary sector and who was the council. Apart from the suits you wouldn't be able to pick them out' (parent)

Barriers

'I can't stand people who talk in initials all the time. By the time I have worked out what it is I've lost the drift of the conversation, so it was decided early on that we wouldn't use jargon, that we didn't need to and I think that really helped' (Parent)

'As yet they (partnership meetings) have always been on a Tuesday which is impossible for me'

Team Working

A wide range of staff from a variety of backgrounds will typically be involved in the delivery of Sure Start services. Key staff can include Speech and Language workers, Health Visitors, Midwives, Community Development Workers and Early Years teachers, among others. It was clear from the evaluations that there was considerable diversity in terms of contractual arrangements for the employment of staff, and the way in which a 'skill mix' operated within programmes. Overall, however, joint working at ground level was viewed as more successful than at strategic level.

'Awareness of the Sure Start ethos needs to be raised within partner organisations, i.e. beyond the management board members. The cultures of the employing organisations tend to dominate and the flexibility of Sure Start funding isn't taken advantage of' (Board Member)

The benefits of multi-disciplinary working were reiterated in many of the studies. Throughout the reports there was evidence of an understanding of the need to compromise, and respect for the way in which colleagues from other agencies had worked on behalf of Sure Start. Sure Start funding is able to facilitate new ways of working but in some reports was the feeling that it was hard to challenge some of the historical ways of working. Staff felt they had learnt from working with members of other disciplines. Examples were also given of the way in which the involvement of staff from different backgrounds had enabled more effective working with families, for example in terms of identifying needs that would otherwise not have been recognised. In one report the benefits of a team approach to working was identified as the most positive aspect of work for the respondents to a staff questionnaire.

'I do enjoy meeting the other members of the team...I really do like the involvement of parents involved in this.... the real big thing is feeling so positive about many of the excellent services that have been possible' (SSLP Worker)

Evaluation Options

Here are some suggestions of ways that SSLP's could investigate partnership and multi disciplinary working. Further information can be obtained through your NESS Regional Support Officer.

- Make use of some of the tools available for assessing partnerships (see full report)
- Produce a map of your partnership looking at the connections with other agencies and how the programme fits together with existing services
- Partnerships need active participation from all if they are to work. It may be useful to conduct an attendance audit.
- Interviews remain a useful method for accessing views concerning partnerships in Sure Start Local Programmes. Many of the evaluations in this report included some form of interviewing to uncover how people felt about partnership working.
- Some programmes have used a questionnaire due to time constraints and the difficulty of getting to interview everybody. You could construct a questionnaire to look member's opinions of how effective the partnership is. Programmes could also ask members to suggest any changes that might make the partnership improve.
- Sometimes it is worthwhile looking at how the multidisciplinary team is functioning. This is another aspect of the partnership that could be evaluated. Programmes could look at the mechanism by which a range of services are offered after a first contact and how particular families' needs are being met by the different parts of the Sure Start Local Programme Team. This could be achieved either by an audit of existing data or a particular case study related to one family's experience of accessing multiple services. This then could be incorporated in a full evaluation report.
- Evaluators can look at the functioning of the partnership board by making use of the minutes that are produced. It is possible to report on the decision making process, the inclusivity of meetings etc by this type of document analysis.

To access the full report please go to www.ness.bbk.ac.uk. If you have any questions or comments about this work please contact Patrick Myers at NESS. Telephone 020 7079 0849 . p.myers@bbk.ac.uk

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