

# **Working as Partners: a thematic evaluation**

Acton Shapiro for Mexborough Sure Start

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## Chapter 1 - Introduction and Methods

### 1.1 Introduction

Partnership working is often seen as the most effective way of addressing complex issues in families and local communities. Sure Start guidance<sup>1</sup> emphasises the key role that partnerships have in directing and supporting the local programme's efforts to improve outcomes for children in their particular locality. Programmes are encouraged to evaluate and reflect on the structure and outputs of their partnerships, using findings to highlight areas of good practice and those areas that would benefit from improvement. A recent report from NESS<sup>2</sup> encourages more local programmes to evaluate their progress on partnership working, stating that "*effective partnerships remain a key delivery vehicle for Sure Start local programmes and it is necessary to reflect on how they function and what they achieve*".

As local programmes prepare to become key partners in the development of local Children's Centres, it is essential that the 'wheel is not reinvented' and that lessons learned about partnership working in the life of Sure Start are incorporated into the heart of service planning and delivery for children.

### 1.2 Methods

In the Mexborough local programme, it was agreed that a thematic evaluation would be carried out to assess progress and lessons learned on three key issues i.e.

- Partnership working: external and internal relationships
- Programme management and the functioning of the Board
- Parental involvement (other than as service users).

It was agreed that Sure Start staff, Board members, partner agencies and parents would all have valuable perspectives on one or more of these issues, and that samples of each should therefore be invited to contribute to the evaluation. The evaluation would be carried out by the external evaluators, Acton Shapiro.

In order to avoid 'consultation overload', and to make best use of time and resources, the evaluators proposed combining these aspects into one overall exercise incorporating a range of evaluation activities.

A combination of methods was selected including:

- Telephone interviews with members of the Board and other partner agencies or advisers
- Individual interviews with a sample of staff
- Individual telephone interviews with currently or formerly involved parents
- A questionnaire survey for parents.

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<sup>1</sup> Annex 6: *Sure Start: a guide to planning and delivering your programme* (Autumn 2001)

<sup>2</sup> Myers, P, Barnes, J and Brodie, I '*Partnership Working in Sure Start local programmes – synthesis of early findings from local programme evaluations*' (June 2004) NESS

- 1.2.1 **Board members**  
One-to-one telephone interviews were held with members of the Board and other partner agencies or advisers. The evaluator wrote to those selected explaining the purpose of the project and asking for their help, before making direct contact by phone to arrange a time for the interview. Ten interviews in total were carried out. These included representatives from Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council, Social Services, Doncaster West PCT, the Health Centre, Mexborough TARAs (Tenants and Residents Associations), Mexborough Community Partnership, Churches Together and a local primary school.
- 1.2.2 **Sure Start staff**  
Individual interviews were held with a sample of eight staff, including the Programme Manager and the co-ordinators of the four teams. Before the interviews, the evaluator wrote to those selected explaining the purpose of the project and confirming their appointments. The interviews were mainly carried out face to face, though two were carried out on the telephone for practical reasons.
- 1.2.3 **'Involved' parents**  
Six parents were selected, including some who were still actively involved, and others who had been involved but were no longer. Once Sure Start staff had been given permission by these parents to pass on their contact details, the evaluator wrote to them explaining the purpose of the project. The parents were then contacted by phone to arrange a convenient time for the phone interview. One parent declined to be involved for health reasons and two others could not be contacted. Individual telephone interviews were held with the three remaining parents. These included one who was still 'actively involved', one who was previously involved and one who had helped with interviewing staff.
- 1.2.4 **'Non-involved' parents**  
A questionnaire survey was devised for parents who regularly use activities but who have not to date been more formally involved. The questionnaires were sent to 100 parents identified by Sure Start staff as among the most regular users of services/activities. They were addressed and distributed by Sure Start staff to protect confidentiality. Most were distributed personally to the parents by staff, but those which could not be delivered personally were posted. All the parents were sent a free pen, though it was decided not to use other incentives, such as free prize draw entry. Responses were returned directly to Acton Shapiro in prepaid envelopes. 29 questionnaires were returned by the deadline and one parent telephoned the evaluators to give her views. This gave a response rate of 30%.

## Chapter 2 - Findings: Partnership Working

### 2.1 The Nature of Partnership Working

The interviews sought to identify:

- who are considered to be the 'partners' within the Sure Start programme
- what are seen as the key characteristics of partnership working i.e. what it should mean in practice
- what are seen as the potential benefits of partnership working, i.e. what 'added value' it can bring.

Most of the interviewees cited a wide range of agencies as their partners, with almost all including in their list of partners statutory and voluntary sector agencies, community organisations and parents. Some also cited the accountable body (Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council), lead agency (Doncaster West PCT) and specific departments, such as the Capital Builds Project Team.

Although some of the partners - such as Preschool Learning Alliance (PLA), dietetics and school nursing - have a contractual arrangement with Sure Start, many others do not. It was clear that, for most if not all the interviewees, 'partner' is used as a loose, conceptual term describing *any* organisation or individual in the Mexborough community which is felt to have shared goals, rather than to denote an agency or individual with whom there is a specific agreement to work in partnership.

There was considerable consensus amongst those interviewed as to what partnership working *is* (or should be). This can be summarised as four key characteristics:

- **A shared vision:** as one interviewee put it: "We are all here for the same reason i.e. to improve the community." Commitment to the shared vision is essential: "You need enthusiasm and passion for change to create new opportunities. We believe in what we are doing."
- **Trust and openness:** partners have to be willing to let go of some of their traditional roles and have confidence in others: "Bring your own skills and knowledge, but be prepared to listen to others and consider everything in the round." Several interviewees emphasised the importance of accepting that there will always be differences, and of acknowledging and addressing tensions openly through constructive criticism: "A willingness to hear the other person's view of a situation and consider it." It is also important for all partners to be "honest about what you can and can't do."
- **Close relationships:** several of those interviewed stressed that it is only possible to build such relationships with regular and consistent contact/engagement.
- **Communication and clarity:** this was mentioned by almost every interviewee. As one put it: "My role is to ensure constant communication. It's a balancing act to keep all the plates spinning." More broadly, a willingness to consult – and to act on the consultation – is crucial.

### Partnership Working – The Key Characteristics

- **A shared vision**
- **Trust and openness**
- **Close relationships**
- **Communication and clarity**

There was also very broad agreement as to the benefits of partnership working as compared to a more traditional, fragmented approach. The benefits cited by the interviewees are summarised below:

- **A better service for families:** a more 'joined-up' approach facilitates a more holistic, seamless service, so that: *"by working together you provide the best outcome for each family."* It was pointed out that: *"the recipients don't care who provides the service as long as it is understandable and meets their needs. They get confused with too many people. Sure Start puts the family and the child in the centre and focuses on their needs."* Families are less confused because they see agencies working together. Partnership working also minimises duplication of visits and intrusion into families and should improve signposting and access to support. Partners can access resources and information from other projects and therefore respond quickly and effectively to identified needs: *"Rather than being told 'we can't help you', the agencies are more proactive. If you know people individually, it's easier to pass people on to them."* *"Before Sure Start came in, if you had a problem, it was hard to get in touch with agencies. Now, we just ring Sure Start or a partner and the ball is rolling. It's better communication that has made this happen. We know who is who and what each agency is doing."*
- **Most effective use of resources:** discussing different perspectives *"avoids irritation, time wasting, unnecessary referrals."* Agencies can work strategically on shared goals and can use their resources - such as people, skills, money, materials and venues - more effectively. For example, one home visit can be used to *"kill several birds with one stone."* Partner agencies feel that, through working together: *"you achieve more – there are so many initiatives and projects but you need to look at the whole system, not just one part. It's like baking a cake with all the different ingredients."* As another interviewee put it: *"In partnership with Sure Start, the ripples go out further in the water."*
- **Easier access:** partners can do much to promote each others' strengths to clients and, by working well together, can reduce the stigma associated with certain services: *"If you establish a good partnership with one agency, you can help lots of families."* As one interviewee from a statutory service put it: *"Sure Start are closer to the community and we have a stigma, so we don't always hear the chit-chat that helps to make sense of it all. We need agencies that aren't so police-like to help us."* A health partner also said: *"Their approach can be more friendly, whereas we are 'professional' and have set targets."* However, it was pointed out that Sure Start would eventually have to accept that staff will have to consider joint visits to some families for their own protection, and that they may need to contribute to child protection conferences or even criminal justice proceedings [comment: this is already the case].

- **Preventative work:** it is generally acknowledged that Sure Start has brought into the area many extra resources, activities and courses, which otherwise might not have been seen as priorities for funding: *“It’s about strengthening the whole community. Outreach is really important, now Social Services has so many demands from child protection. It was a need that overwhelmed us when the pits closed and the drugs came.”* The provision of crèches has also provided useful back-up to partner agencies which have wanted to offer a service to parents or run an event.
- **Developing skills and knowledge:** through working together, partners gain a better understanding of each other’s work, targets and motivation. They also learn to be less precious about their own roles and skills: *“...recognising we can’t fix everything in our team – we need to call on other organisations’ expertise.”*
- **Acting as a safety net:** close inter-agency co-operation makes it less possible for families, and particularly those with child protection issues, to ‘fall through the net’: *“It protects more children because of good communication, closer monitoring.”* Another advantage of joint visits is that: *“they [the families] know we speak to each other and they can’t play us off against each other – it’s consistency and avoids duplication.”*
- **Identifying unmet need:** finally, partnership working can also show up more clearly the gaps in provision and therefore provide valuable evidence for the planning of future services.

#### The Benefits of Partnership Working

- **A better service for families**
- **Most effective use of resources**
- **Easier access**
- **Preventative work**
- **Developing skills and knowledge**
- **Acting as a safety net**
- **Identifying unmet need**

## 2.2 Relationships with External Partners

The interviews sought to identify:

- how effectively Sure Start had worked with its external partners
- actual examples of partnership working within the Sure Start programme which had felt successful
- any particular barriers or difficulties in partnership working
- evidence of how these have been addressed.

There was general recognition among those interviewed that building partnerships has not always been easy. As one interviewee put it: *"It takes time to build up mutual trust and respect. If you don't have that, you can't genuinely work together."* The barriers to effective partnership working were numerous (see below), although with some partnerships they were much easier to surmount than with others.

- **Professional boundaries:** interviewees talked of 'empire building', 'territoriality' and 'preciousness'. One Sure Start staff member felt that some partners: *"see themselves as experts, us as amateurs."* Another said: *"Professionals all sit in their boxes and think only they can do the job."* An additional issue has been some resentment that a new organisation can sweep in and appear to be more innovative and effective than the traditional services: *"There's a view that we've done it before and it didn't work."*
- **Differences in culture, language and even dress code have not always been easy to accept** – though many now recognise that more relaxed behaviour and informal dress can make unengaged families feel more at ease. Such cultural differences have, occasionally, been exacerbated by differences in personality.
- **Initial lack of understanding of each other's roles:** for example, initially not all Sure Start staff understood that health visitors keep records on all families, so work was being duplicated. It was also suggested that, in the early days of the programme, some Sure Start staff might have had a rather idealised view of parents, which made it hard for them to look at child protection issues completely objectively.
- **Fear of being taken over:** one interviewee said that, initially: *"the smaller community groups felt threatened and swamped."* It was suggested that: *"some of the smaller groups may feel that Sure Start are there 'to show them how to do it' – so it's been hard to get up partnerships. The ultimate fear is that Sure Start will take it all over. People need to be reassured that they are there to help."* The programme's firm strategy of using its resources to strengthen, rather than replace, existing services has served to build such confidence in most cases.
- **Lack of staffing or other resources, as well as strict work schedules:** this can make statutory professionals reluctant to 'unearth' more problems and also less able to commit to attending meetings, or engage in joint working. Pressure of work on all parties means it is hard to fulfil commitments or see each other as often as planned. Relationships between partners can be strained by the fact that everyone is very busy – as one interviewee put it: *"Answerphones talk to answerphones."*
- **Pace of change:** some external partners have found it hard to keep up with the rapid growth in the Sure Start team and to maintain communication and relationships with them all. The growth of the Sure Start team, and the resulting move from the health centre to the Business Centre, although essential, did disrupt the original relationships.
- **Low morale:** envy of the new resources has, in some cases, made existing services feel demoralised. This has been exacerbated by the fact that some mainstream staff moved across to the programme, causing staffing problems for their own agency. External pressures and uncertainties, e.g. the transfer of Rockleigh staff from Social Services to the PCT, have also resulted in low morale. Some partners also suggested that the huge enthusiasm and desire to make a difference among Sure Start staff may have led to some inadvertent insensitivities.

- **Mistrust or misunderstanding about new ways of working:** *“There can be suspicion both ways. Maybe we haven’t made it clear what we’re about and others have misconceptions and expectations we can’t meet.”* Some partners, including parents themselves, thought Sure Start was only for the least privileged families and it has therefore taken a while for the programme to shake off its stigma. Others feel it is unfair that the programme focuses only on one geographical area, leaving poorer families in other parts of the area unserved.

#### The Barriers to Partnership Working

- Professional boundaries
- Differences in culture, language and even dress code, and personality clashes
- Initial lack of understanding of each other’s roles
- Fear of being taken over
- Lack of staffing or other resources, as well as strict work schedules
- Pace of change
- Low morale
- Mistrust or misunderstanding about new ways of working

In spite of these barriers, which are known to be common to many Sure Start programmes<sup>3</sup>, it is clear from the interviews that the Mexborough programme is perceived as having worked very hard to build and maintain good relationships. As a Fifth Wave programme, Mexborough has had the advantage of being able to build on the experience of other local ‘trailblazers’. The Manager was able to network widely and to build on the widespread enthusiasm for Sure Start in the community. A wide range of communication strategies has been adopted, including regular meetings, joint training, networking events and Away Days. Partners are encouraged to get involved in the appropriate Board Sub-Groups and Sure Start provides induction training for all new staff.

In cases where relationships have been less easy, it appears that the issue has been recognised and addressed with some determination. Specific link meetings or team-building sessions have been set up and checklists have been agreed to ensure that staff within agencies communicate with each other about involvement with individual families. The lead agency, Doncaster West PCT, has also played a valued role in mediating when necessary.

In spite of these efforts, a few interviewees felt that some of the partnerships have been very hard to establish. It was said that some professionals who should have embraced the full Sure Start philosophy have only used the programme to make referrals and have

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<sup>3</sup> Myers, P, Barnes, J and Brodie, I ‘Partnership working in local Sure Start programmes – syntheses of early findings from local programme evaluations’ (June 2004) NESS

been very resistant to changing their practice and trying out new ways of delivering services. One interviewee said: *“When we talk, we agree, but then things don’t happen so cohesively.”* These interviewees felt that genuine areas of disagreement have sometimes been ‘brushed under the carpet’ in the interests of maintaining relationships or avoiding confrontation.

Inevitably there have been examples of specific tensions – the three which were frequently referred to in the evaluation involved Sure Start’s relationships with the Community Partnership, Rockleigh Family Centre and the Health Centre. It is not appropriate in this report to describe in detail the substance of these tensions – suffice to say that there is evidence that all those involved have made real efforts to address the issues. Although it is recognised that relationships are improving gradually and steadily, several interviewees stressed that there is no room for complacency as people can easily *“slip back into their comfort zone.”* As one interviewee put it: *“I think it’s a continual difficult relationship and sensitive, too, but you have to keep working at it... we can’t take our bats home...”*

The evaluation also revealed many examples of positive partnership working and good relationships. A member of staff who has joined the team quite recently said: *“My experience is very positive so far – there are so many agencies in Mexborough and Doncaster. I feel very supported and encouraged – people recognise Sure Start and know what it means.”* Similarly, a representative of one of the partner agencies said: *“I think they have worked very well together. [There have been] very few blips – that’s been down to good management. And we all know each other well.”*

The approach has been very much to strengthen existing services, by building capacity and skills. Examples of positive partnership working are included in the box below:

#### **Examples of Positive Partnership Working in the Local Programme**

- **Books** - joint work between speech and language therapists, the Community Nursery Nurses and the library. The Community Nursery Nurses now carry out their 18-month developmental assessments in the library (these were previously done at the health centre) to help promote Bookstart Plus (a free book scheme for toddlers funded by Sure Start) and to encourage families to register at the library.
- **Recruitment** of staff through Service Level Agreements (SLAs). Joint job descriptions and interviews have involved a range of partners.
- **An employment outreach service**, run by JobCentre Plus, but promoted and supported by Sure Start, with the provision of crèches.
- **Work with Gingerbread** – they visit Sure Start’s groups to promote their own lone parents group, but also highlight Sure Start’s activities. Sure Start is helping with support, venues and recruitment, as well as promoting Gingerbread through their local contacts.
- **Aquanatal group** – Sure Start funded training for their own midwife and Health Co-ordinator, and the mainstream midwife, so they can share responsibility for the scheme and rotate shifts.

### Examples of Positive Partnership Working in the Local Programme

- **The Community Baby Clinic** – although this took a long time to get off the ground, it is helping to improve relationships and build bridges. Sure Start staff encourage parents to attend, provide safety equipment etc. and welcome new residents. They also help to keep a Sure Start notice board up to date to promote groups actively.
- **The schools PHSE programme** - although this is led by the school nurse, the midwife has an input in breast-feeding and baby care, the Developing Dads (formerly Dearne Valley Dads) are involved in delivering two sessions of 'A Game of Two Halves', and the mental health team has talked about self-esteem and emotional development.
- **Carousel (Neighbourhood Nursery)** - Sure Start has accessed their accommodation, shared some staffing and had a training input around planning the curriculum. Attendance has grown since the relationship with Sure Start. The programme also benefits from strong links, as there will not be full day care in the new building.
- **Dolcliffe Hall community group** - Sure Start has supported them financially to refurbish their kitchen, and can use the building 1 ½ days a week e.g. for Cook and Eat. The group will be able to boost their service provision e.g. pensioners' lunches, bingo, training: *"It's supporting, not taking over."*

Finally, a very specific example of partnership working is found in the Capital Build Project, which is now resulting in the new Children's Centre. Full and ongoing engagement has meant that the design has been regularly revisited by the sub-group: *"It was a blank piece of paper, so it was a long process."* However, those involved were very positive about the process: *"We've never been shut out and always made to feel welcome."*

### 2.3 Partnership Working and Relationships within the Teams

The interviews sought to identify:

- how effectively colleagues within the team had worked together to date within the Sure Start programme
- any actual examples of partnership working within the Sure Start team which had felt successful
- any particular barriers or difficulties in partnership working within the team
- evidence of how have these been addressed to improve partnership working.

Internal relationships within the team are generally regarded as very good, with several interviewees highlighting the excellent co-operation between the co-ordinators: *"It's a really supportive and happy team - a lot comes from management."* Several mentioned that the team structure has been perceived as very helpful, as has the move towards

smaller 'teams within teams' when appropriate, such as the Parent Development Workers. As one co-ordinator put it: *"I've seen people flourish and grow in confidence and work together more on joint projects and understand each other's expertise. I can back off now and set systems in place. I don't need to attend all sub-group meetings, as they can chair themselves."*

There is an impression that colleagues are generally very willing to 'muck in' to help each other e.g. with specific events, such as the opening of 'The Willows', health fairs and the networking lunch which was hosted by the Family Support Team, with back-up support from the other teams. Staff are willing to 'cover' for each other too if necessary, for example in running groups, and are supportive when colleagues have personal difficulties. Those interviewed had no trouble identifying examples of positive partnership working within and across teams, shared training (e.g. on child protection and domestic violence) and regular cross-team referrals.

One minor disadvantage identified was that staff have less direct contact with the Manager herself than was the case early on. While this was regretted, it was largely understood and accepted. However, one member of staff expressed real gratitude for the personal support she had been offered by the Manager when she had gone through a difficult time. She also stressed that the Manager responds very quickly to communications from staff e.g. to notes left in her in-tray.

Several of the staff interviewed chose to discuss the recent relocation of the Family Support Team to the Acorns. The move is felt to have been very instrumental in helping this team to consolidate and to develop its own strong identity. It has also improved access to the local community. On the other hand, it has caused some problems in terms of access to administrative support, networked computers etc. and, inevitably, has made this team a little more distant from the other teams who are based at the Business Centre. However there is said to be plenty of 'crossing of paths' and other incidental communication, and the team have stressed that colleagues are always welcome to drop in. They have also agreed that at least one of the team will call in to the Business Centre every day. It was pointed out that the situation will in any case change at the end of the year when the whole team is likely to move into the new Children's Centre.

With a quickly growing team, many of who have part-time or term-time contracts, and numerous projects taking off, communication is always likely to be an issue. The Health Team perhaps presents the greatest challenges, as most though not all members are on a Service Level Agreement (SLA), and therefore have to work to their own agency's systems as well as Sure Start's. The mainstream mandatory training, for example, takes time away from the work of the programme. In addition, team members have three-way accountability to the Programme Manager, their own team leader, and their own manager with their agency.

Team meetings have been very helpful in maintaining cohesion within the team. The monthly full team meeting always includes an 'updating' item for each staff member. Wednesdays are kept free for other meetings, and all staff have regular one-to-ones with their team leader. Quarterly Away Days and joint training have also helped to hold the teams together. The memo system also helps, though teething problems with emails have resulted in rather too many memos. Where there are communication problems, this is said to be the result of pressure and pace of work, rather than any lack of willingness to communicate: *"We are victims of our own success."*

In summary, communication will always be a challenge in a team such as this, but the programme has recognised and addressed the issues and is currently drawing up a communications strategy.

## Chapter 3 - Findings: Governance of the Programme

### 3.1 Management of the Programme

The interviews sought to identify how Sure Start Board has been managed and what lessons if any have been learned along the way.

Most of those interviewed were very complementary about the way in which the programme had been managed. The Programme Manager was variously described as fair, professional, dynamic and resilient in coping with difficulties. Attention was drawn to her skills in balancing competing agendas, identifying resources, budgeting, chairing meetings and representing Sure Start's interests. Her commitment to staff development and supervision was also highlighted. Several people referred to the value of the experience she had brought with her from her previous role in another Sure Start programme. Both parents and colleagues appreciated her ability to relate to all levels and make them feel at ease.

Board members in particular were extremely satisfied with how the programme has been managed, and many commented on the personal qualities which the Manager has brought to the programme:

*"She is one of the most professional people I have come across. She can handle a meeting and gets the balance to deal with people at any level. She has a nice quality, is easy to talk to and is very welcoming. [She is] very professional and also very down to earth."*

*"She is a really fantastic manager – I'm a great fan... She is very adaptable to changing circumstances. She's on top of the job – she has a very likeable character and is totally professional too. She can talk to senior managers on an equal footing but also to parents. She doesn't talk down to them – it's a difficult balancing act."*

*"She is very conscientious and very aware of people's needs."*

*"She is a very confident manager and very articulate and enthusiastic...always consistent and always gives 100%."*

*"I feel she is really on top of the job and has a real interest in the work she is doing. It seems that she foresees difficulties that might arise and anticipates them."*

One minority voice felt that decisions were sometimes made too quickly, without adequate thought or discussion. There was also a minority view that the Manager does not always fight Sure Start's corner sufficiently, or challenge partner agencies when that seems necessary - for the sake of keeping relationships on an even keel. Another criticism was that overspending within the programme should have been predicted, as all expenditure has to be authorised through a project template.

The Manager herself feels that, with hindsight, the programme should have moved more slowly, focusing more on strategy and less on action – this view was echoed by one or two of the interviewees. She feels it is now time to refocus and take stock to ensure that what is being delivered is sustainable. With hindsight, again, some of the smaller services should not have been commissioned, as they were not sustainable.

Although most comments on the management of the programme related to the Programme Manager, several interviewees went out of their way to complement the

Administrative Officer as well. She is seen as providing very good back-up to the programme: *“Clair is also brilliant – they work very well together. Her professionalism shines through”*. Others spoke more generally about the overall calibre and commitment of the staff:

*“Many staff will bend over backwards for you – they see you as a person, not just a Mum.”*

*“There are a lot of good staff, including the admin. staff – they seem very efficient and pleasant.”*

The move into a number of distinct teams with their own managers was generally seen as a very positive and effective way of bringing more structure into the organisation and of delegating some of the management responsibility. The team leaders seem well respected and well able to accept the considerable responsibility which the Manager gives them. For their part, they feel that their voice is listened to and that they can challenge decisions if necessary.

### 3.2 Functioning of the Board

The interviews sought to identify how the Sure Start Board has functioned, and what lessons, if any, have been learned along the way.

The interviewees gave the impression of a Board which functions calmly, efficiently and democratically. Agendas are always sent out in advance, and those who have not been able to attend a meeting are kept informed of what has happened. The Board has always been well attended and has had the consistent commitment of a number of senior people – though several interviewees regretted the lack of senior representation from the LEA.

Unsurprisingly, the Board has had to address one or two hard issues along the way, but the general feeling is that these have been dealt with fairly and effectively, and that the Board has matured with time under its excellent chairing and management. The Board has kept up with a fast-moving agenda and has adapted well. It is well embedded in the community.

*“The Chair knows what he is doing and is able to challenge if necessary – [there is] healthy debate – but I see no power struggle.”*

*“[There has been] reasonably consistent representation and all members seem to have the right positive attitude.”*

*“It has been very equitable and open – everything has been taken to the Board for a decision”.*

One interviewee was a little more critical of the Board's effectiveness: *“[The Manager] guides the Board a lot and it doesn't work well without her. I have never seen her being challenged. Not all members attend and they need to be a bit more dynamic.”*

It is never easy for multi-agency Boards to meet the different needs of senior managers, parents, front-line staff and community representatives. One member of the Board said: *“I don't always understand what is happening – there are so many acronyms – but the professional people use this every day. I think some of the other community reps. also feel the same. Maybe someone has pointed this out, as the minutes recently have spelt out the real names for acronyms. That has been helpful.”* Board members are perceived to have worked hard to encourage the involvement of parents and to ensure

they can have a real influence. One of the parents confirmed: *“The Board works well. There is a variety of people. There’s always someone who can have an input. You can talk to everyone, even if they are high up. They are good at making decisions.”*

## Chapter 4 - Findings: Parental Involvement

A report produced by an external consultancy in March 2004<sup>4</sup> highlighted the barriers to engagement for parents in the Mexborough Sure Start area. These included three main categories:

- Practical barriers (such as lack of information, dissatisfaction with activities offered, difficulties with access/resources, and lack of finances or transport)
- Psychological barriers (such as fear of the unknown, stigma associated with the programme, and lack of motivation)
- Cultural barriers to male engagement.

This chapter complements that report by focusing on the barriers *to formal* involvement in the programme as opposed to informal engagement as a service user in the wider range of activities.

### 4.1 The Impact of Involvement to Date

The interviews sought to identify how effectively parents have been involved formally in the programme (e.g. on the Board, Parents' Forum, interviewing staff or as volunteers) and what lessons if any have been learned.

One or two parents have been very actively involved for a long time, both on the Board and its Sub-groups, and in many other ways, such as interviewing new staff and the Parents Forum. These parents are perceived as having grown a lot in confidence and it is generally felt that they have been able to take a full part in the decision-making processes. They are well able to participate and have consequently become very articulate and influential. A couple of other parents have also been very consistent, if less influential, though in one case it is felt that the influence has not always been positive. There is a concern among some, that, if only a few parents are involved, their views will carry a disproportionate weight even if they are not always representative of the views of parents more widely.

Real efforts have been made to involve parents in team meetings, but these have also sometimes seemed tokenistic. However, this has also had its downside: *"You often tend to get a small core who do everything. This can be exclusive – it is really difficult. You need to involve at many different levels."* The original expectation of formal involvement from more than a handful parents was perhaps unrealistic. As one member of staff put it: *"Sometimes we think of things and then consult afterwards. We need to get better at involving people right from the start."*

The Parents Forum, which suffered from poor attendance when it was held monthly, has now been adapted to a programme of quarterly formal meetings, interspersed by less formal themed visits by the Parent Development Workers to established playgroups or Rockleigh Family Centre. Feedback gathered in this way is fed back into the Forum for further discussion. This model appears to be much more successful, attendance has been much higher and contributions more positive.

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<sup>4</sup> *'Barriers to Engagement; Mexborough Sure Start'* (March 2004) Arc Research and Consultancy Ltd

The Parent Development Workers have extended this new strategy of aiming for less formal engagement, for example by 'going to where the parents' are, rather than expecting them to come to meetings. The new Comments and Complaints system has also generated informal feedback. The comments have been very good for staff morale and have resulted in quick changes to the programme, with the management team preparing an action point for each comment.

In spite of the issues described here, the majority of those interviewed felt that the programme had made real efforts to engage with parents and had demonstrated a willingness to adapt its strategy when necessary. There is consensus that this work must be carried forward, and broadened out, into the new Children's Centre.

#### 4.2 Supporting and Valuing Parental Involvement

The interviews with the parents sought to identify what support parents had been offered and whether they would have liked any other support, what had been the pros and cons for them of being involved and whether they felt that their involvement had been recognised and valued.

Parents involved in helping the programme are usually offered a crèche place, or the costs of a nursery session, if they have children. However, this is not always the case. An additional complication is that, although the parent may need the crèche, the child does not always want to go in it.

Although it is clear that parents can find formal involvement very daunting, it does not seem that they have been given any specific training relating to their role on the Board. As one parent explained: *"I didn't know what to expect and felt 'dropped in the deep end'. They gave me lots of papers with figures. I felt "what am I really doing here? A lot is still a bit like that, to be honest, especially the figure work."* In some cases, however, more informal support has been given: one parent, for example, had had an informal chat with the Programme Manager about Equal Opportunities, when she was part of an interviewing panel for a member of staff. Parents who are Board members have also been involved in an Away Day.

Parents who have been involved have really appreciated the vouchers and treats they have received, for example at Christmas. However, there is some irritation that they have not always been able to access Sure Start activities to benefit their own families – mainly because many activities are targeted specifically at the 'hard-to-reach' families. As one parent put it: *"If there's something free, everyone else takes it, e.g. trips. They come for nothing and they get everything – [whereas] those that put everything in, get nothing."*

Feeling valued does not necessarily depend on material reward; the attitude of staff towards parents can be just as important. One parent who had been involved on an interview panel commented that: *"I introduced myself as 'just a parent' but Jane picked up on this and said I was not just a parent."* The parents generally were very complimentary about the support provided by the Programme Manager, stressing that, even when they had expressed some dissatisfaction, she had always taken them seriously and had sought to address the issue raised. One parent said: *"Once I nearly left the Board. I went to talk to Jane and she was brilliant. It felt too much hassle, but I talked to her and went back on."*

### 4.3 Motivation for Involvement

The interviews with parents sought to identify what they felt to be the pros and cons of being involved.

The main motivation for parents becoming involved in a more formal way seems to be their desire to access good information about what is happening so that their own families can benefit from it. However, it is also clear that they derive a lot of enjoyment from the process of involvement itself and are keen to 'give back' in this way to their community. One parent said she enjoyed making new contacts and also felt her involvement would eventually be a real bonus for her C.V. There is also a strong commitment to ensuring that parents like themselves should influence the programme and a fear that, without their input, this would be left to the 'professionals'.

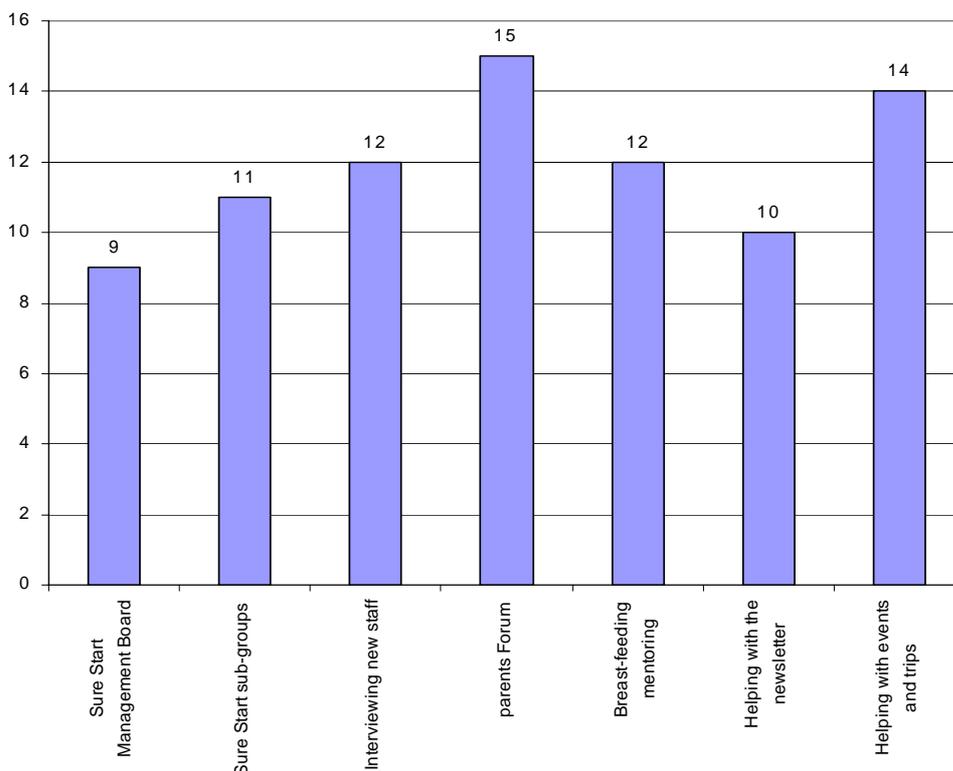
On the other hand, one parent said that she did not feel she could mention her involvement with Sure Start to the people at her playgroup: *"They would see me as an enemy, as a traitor"*. She also felt that the motivation of staff in involving parents was sometimes more for show than anything else: *"Sometimes you feel they want you so they can tick the box. Other times, you don't get asked... Sometimes you feel Sure Start are really after the 'hard to reach' parents. If they are short of people, they come to you, so they can tick the box."*

All three of those interviewed said they would recommend involvement to other parents.

### 4.4 Reasons for 'Non-Involvement'

Most of the 'non-involved' parents who responded to the postal survey were aware of at least one way that parents could get involved in planning and running Sure Start (19 questionnaires recorded at least one response in this section). Awareness of the Parents Forum was highest (a half knew about this), followed by helping with events and trips, breastfeeding mentoring and interviewing new staff.

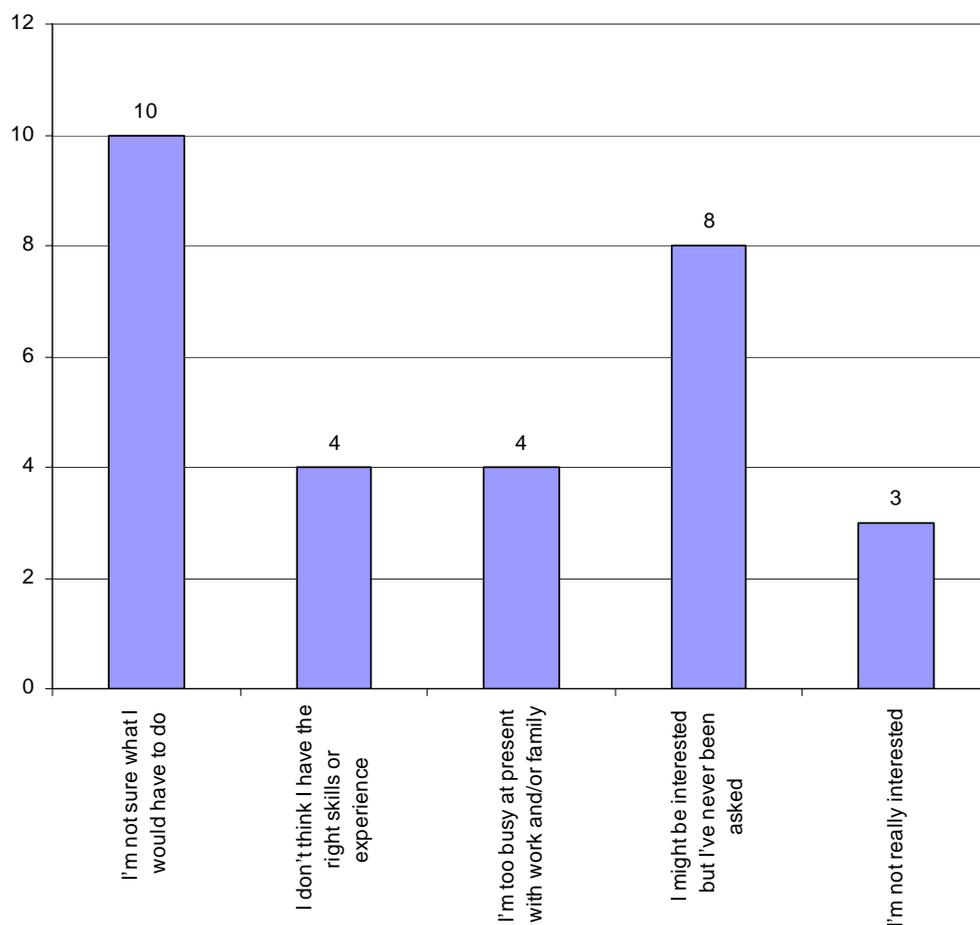
**Figure 1** Ways of getting involved of which parents were aware



The sources of this information varied, including notice boards, the newsletter, articles in local newspapers, word-of-mouth, leaflets, open days, and contact with Sure Start staff while attending activities. The responses made it clear that some of the sample actually were – or had been – actively involved, for example on the Board, or as a breastfeeding support worker.

21 out of the 30 respondents gave reasons why they had *not* become actively involved in Sure Start. The most common reason – cited by ten parents – was that they were not sure what they would have to do. Eight indicated that they might be interested, but had never been asked.

**Figure 2 Reasons parents gave for not becoming involved**



Comments relating to this question indicated a range of other reasons why parents had not become more actively involved:

*“They've never done anything for me.”*

*“[I'm] too busy with my children.”*

*“I did not know that I could get involved in these things.”*

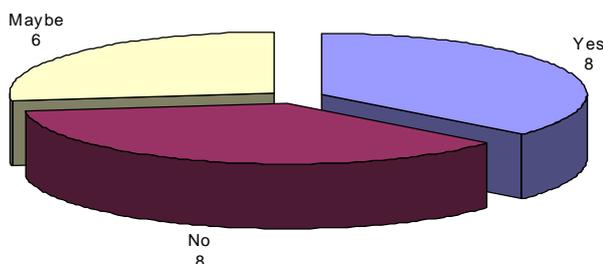
*"I'm working full time at the moment and I also do fundraising for [my] pre-school."*

*"People associate Sure Start with underprivileged families."*

*"Because I haven't got any children myself who are under 5 years. I do childmind and look after under 5s though. [I] sometimes feel that childminders are frowned upon for using some of the services."*

Most of the respondents felt that there was – or might be - something that Sure Start could do which might encourage them to get involved in planning and running Sure Start.

**Figure 3** Is there something Sure Start could do to encourage you to become involved?



14 respondents made specific suggestions as to what might be done. Most focused on more information on the opportunities available, through mailings, open days, leaflets or in the newsletter. Two stressed that the newsletter should be more regular, and also sent out before it became out of date. One said she would be interested in helping with the newsletter if given the appropriate training. One parent called for childcare for those involved (comment: this is in fact usually available).

However, eight out of the 30 parents felt there was nothing that could be done that would encourage them.

One parent contacted us by telephone and had a long conversation about her views on Sure Start staff. Although she had had good experiences of some services and had been impressed by several individual staff, the parent also complained about various inefficiencies e.g. failure to get her a timetable of activities when she had twice requested it, as well as a perceived lack of interest in her offers of practical help. She concluded by stating: *"I am the sort of person who would have got involved if I'd been given a better impression"*.

The interviews with staff and Board members also generated some suggestions as to how 'non-involved' parents could be motivated, although it is fair to say that most were sceptical and felt that many routes had already been tried. There was general recognition that many parents simply do not want to be involved: *"You can't fault Sure Start. They do try very hard. It's just the parents – it's that kind of area. If they can get a service, they want it, but they don't want to put in anything to make a difference."* However, there was also recognition that parents can feel genuine fear of being involved

and feel they have not got the necessary skills or experience: *"It's frightening at first, with high-up people. When you first start, you haven't a clue what's going on. There's lots of jargon."* They also confirmed that the stigma associated with Sure Start can be off-putting.

There was some suggestion that staff tend to go back to the 'usual suspects' rather than trying harder to involve different parents. This meant that the latter risked 'burn out'. It was suggested that the planned volunteer programme would help to encourage greater involvement from a broader spread of parents. The new Centre would also include an on-site crèche, which would facilitate the logistics of involving parents. Finally, a system of 'buddying' less confident parents with those who had had some experience was proposed.

## Chapter 5 - Conclusions, Lessons Learned and Recommendations

### 5.1 Conclusions

There is real consensus across the programme about the benefits of partnership working, and this is complemented by an abundance of positive examples of joint working with both internal colleagues and external partners. Having said this, it is clear that the real challenges of putting theory into practice should not be underestimated. Nevertheless, it seems that many, if not most, of the challenges described in this report have already been recognised and that thoughtful and sustained efforts have been, and still are being, made to resolve them. The programme Board, staff and Manager and its partners are to be congratulated for their determination to overcome barriers and to deal with issues which must on occasion feel very personal and very threatening. It is evident that the impact of the programme to date owes much to the calibre, skills and commitment of the Board members, the Programme Manager, the co-ordinators and the staff teams – as well as the willingness of partner agencies to try out new and innovative ways of working.

### 5.2 Lessons Learned

Given the pace of change and the many challenges which Sure Start has posed to more traditional ways of working, it is not surprising that many lessons have been learned in the course of developments to date. These are summarised below:

#### 5.2.1 Partnership working

- Communication is essential: it takes time to build up mutual trust, and partners should never become complacent.
- Understanding of each other's roles is very important and should be addressed in initial induction training, and possibly by further shadowing or buddying arrangements.
- Understanding of the purpose and philosophy of the programme is also crucial and requires a lot of effort and proactive publicity.
- Partnership working does appear to improve the effectiveness of each partner agency and the outcomes for families themselves.
- Consultation with community organisations takes time and can make progress slow: however it is essential in gaining the support and trust of local people.

#### 5.2.2 Programme management

- The team structure adopted within this programme has proved very effective.
- Having more than one base for staff has both pros and cons; these need to be carefully weighed against each other.
- Confident and bold leadership is essential in a programme of this kind, and permeates through the programme.
- Enthusiasm for fast change needs to be tempered by care to ensure services initiated are sustainable in the longer term.

### 5.2.3 Parental involvement

- Parents and community representatives would value support and/or training to enable them to fully understand, and contribute to, the workings of the formal groups.
- It may not be realistic to expect many parents to be formally involved in the programme – other strategies will need to be adopted to elicit feedback and ideas from parents in a less formal way.
- Parents who are formally involved appreciate practical help such as childcare, and value the vouchers or gifts they are given in recognition. They also value being allowed to take part in regular activities and outings.
- More parents might be willing to be involved if a) they had more information about what opportunities there are, b) they understood what would be required of them and c) they were asked directly.

## 5.3 Recommendations

In the light of the findings set out in the previous chapters, our recommendations are as follows:

- **More publicity** should be given to the various ways in which parents can become formally involved in Sure Start, and, in due course, the Children's Centre. This could take the form of a 'question and answer' booklet and should include details of; the types of involvement possible; skills and experience needed (if any); skills and experience to be gained; mutual expectations; childcare arrangements; other 'rewards' etc. The programme could capitalise on forthcoming events, for example, the opening of the Children's Centre, to publicise new opportunities to individuals.
- **The training/support needs of parents** interested in becoming involved should be agreed and addressed as early as possible. 'Buddying' of parents at formal meetings has already been introduced and is likely to be very helpful to some parents.
- **Those parents making frequent use of services/activities** should be approached directly and *individually* to discuss ways in which they could be more formally involved.
- **The Parent Development Workers should continue their strategy** of seeking input in a very informal, one-to-one way which can be fed into more formal mechanisms, such as the Parents' Forum and the standard agenda item at management meetings.
- **Inductions of new staff**, both within the Sure Start team and in the partner agencies, should explain the roles and practices of the key professional partners.

Finally, it is crucial that lessons learned during the course of the programme, and summarised above, should be passed on to those tasked with the development of the new Children's Centre. The lessons relating to partnership working will also be of wider relevance to the whole 'Change for Children' agenda. It is inevitable that those involved in the development of Extended Schools, Children's Trusts and the new Children's Services will face very similar challenges as they bring together staff from different agencies and professional groups into new integrated, co-located teams, and seek to shift their focus to more joined-up and preventative work. Local Sure Start programmes

are well placed to suggest ways forward and to share the lessons they have learnt in the course of their own development.