SURE START SUNDERLAND
NORTH WEST

THE VIEWS OF CURRENT USERS ON WHAT SURE START NORTH WEST MEANS TO THEM
AND THEIR EXPERIENCES SO FAR

LOCAL EVALUATION REPORT
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I. BACKGROUND TO THE EVALUATION

1. Aim of the Evaluation:

To assess how well Sure Start is responding to what parents and the local community in the North West area want for children under four and their families.

2. Method

The evaluation steering group, comprising the local evaluation team and the four programme managers involved, decided that interviews would be undertaken with Sure Start parents’ groups, non-Sure Start community groups and other local forums as considered appropriate by the local programme. This was to gain a ‘snapshot’ of views of what Sure Start meant to them and what their experiences had been so far.

An interview schedule was devised by the local evaluators and the programme managers. It was decided this would be carried out by staff within the programme as this would help to introduce the idea of evaluation to both staff and parent/carers.

Seven interviews were carried out with individual parents and there were twelve group interviews. A total of eighty-nine parents/carers, including childminders/toddler group leaders were consulted. Their anonymous responses were forwarded to the University evaluation team for analysis.

II. INTRODUCTION TO SURE START AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The overall aim for Sure Start local programmes is:

‘To work with parents-to-be, parents and children to promote the physical, intellectual and social development of babies and young children – particularly those who are disadvantaged – so that they can flourish at home and when they get to school, and thereby break the cycle of disadvantage for the current generation of young children’.

There are four main objectives:

Objective one: Improving social and emotional development

*In particular by supporting the development of good relationships between parents and children, enabling early identification of difficulties, helping families to function effectively and promoting social and emotional well-being.*
Objective two: Improving Health
*In particular, by supporting parents in caring for their children to promote healthy development before and after birth.*

Objective three: Improving children’s ability to learn
*In particular, by encouraging high quality environments and childcare that promote early learning, provide stimulating and enjoyable play, improve language skills and ensure early identification and support of children with special needs.*

Objective four: Strengthening families and communities
*In particular, by involving families in building the community’s capacity to sustain the programme and thereby create pathways out of poverty.*

III. MAIN FINDINGS

1. What Sure Start is about for people in the North West area

These current users saw Sure Start North West as being for both parents/carers and their children and for the community.

For parents they see Sure Start as a way to “meet new people and make new friends, encourage new learning skills, involvement in the community, active involvement in children’s activities.” It provides support for families with young children and people in the area and improves lives. Easier access is provided to services in the area including Health Visitors, Nursery Nurses, and complementary therapies. It is about providing support and advice on returning to work, benefits, training, and running training sessions such as family nurturing and first aid with the availability of crèche facilities. It is also about providing support for single parents, helping them cope with the stresses and strains of being a parent.

For children they see it as “helping children get a better start in life” and this can be achieved through providing more nursery places, providing access to toys e.g. via the toy library, soft play sessions and improving play and learn experiences by “providing children from an early age with experiences of quality play e.g. through toddler groups."

For families they see it as “helping families with children under 4 to get a better start in life” and “offering advice, support and assistance where families have little or limited resources.” The support includes “bringing young families together e.g. interaction through play between child and parent”, going on trips, and “through toddler groups and messy play sessions showing parents the value of play.” It is about ensuring toddler groups are run to a high standard, providing quality play, ensuring insurance is in place, and also encouraging parents to use their local library and to read to their child. Several groups stated that they saw Sure Start as helping and working with families where there may have been abuse and sufferers of domestic violence, helping families through difficult times e.g. bereavement, divorce or
support when a child is ill and also reducing the number of teenage pregnancies. Sure Start is offering “hands on help”. It offers access to a safety matters scheme ensuring child safety. Improving health was mentioned and this included weaning parties, advice and encouragement on healthy eating and general health education.

For the community they see it as “bringing the community together and offering different services”, encouraging social gatherings, and “helping the community to get their life back on track workwise and developing new skills and courses.”

These areas of importance to parents/carers/toddler group leaders can also be seen to relate to the Sure Start objectives of improving social and emotional development, improving health, improving children’s ability to learn and strengthening families and communities.

2. What users hope Sure Start will achieve for children under 4 and their families in the North West area.

Respondents’ vision for what they hoped Sure Start would achieve related to:

- Better facilities in the community and to feel part of being a community, e.g.
  - To have crèches, toddler groups and playgroups; safe and stimulating places to play such as Stay & Play, groups for younger children
  - To give all families access to different amenities they may otherwise not have access to
  - Low cost childcare (e.g. Neighbourhood Nurseries)
  - Training facilities provided on the doorstep with crèche facilities

- Building social networks, improving communication and providing support
  - Children starting nursery having experienced contact with other children, and to give children good social skills
  - Improving social skills and values, making better adults
  - Being part of the community
  - An improved social life for adults
  - “Families being closer and able to communicate without screaming at one another”
  - Helping families to provide a more secure home environment for their children to grow up in

- Assisting parents and children with health and safety matters
  - Advising parents on how to feed their children from an early age to help prevent child obesity
  - Advice to help reduce teenage pregnancies
  - Advice on safety matters
  - General health advice and quicker access to health care
• Improving children’s learning
  Early education and better prospects for children
  Children gaining better experiences from toddler groups due to good planning and structure
  More nursery facilities in the area that will improve children’s education e.g. the opening of St John Bosco School and Sunflowers Neighbourhood Nursery
  Well staffed nurseries where staff are not overworked
  To increase the numbers attending toddler groups
  Encouraging parents to participate with children and encourage more young parents to use groups
  Learning experiences that will encourage new skills, sharing, and improve speech and language development
  Availability of information about children’s activities and services

• Learning opportunities for parents and helping to reduce unemployment
  Helping single parents back into work
  Training facilities provided on the doorstep with crèche facilities
  “Helping families back into work and increasing their income to provide a more stable future for their child”
  Assistance with benefit advice, employment support and finding work
  To offer general support and information

3. Knowledge and experiences of Sure Start services

Parents and carers in the North West area are aware that Sure Start is based in The Cabin at Hylton Castle and is ‘accessible to all’. This has enabled new friendships to be formed by parents and their children. More families know about Sure Start and it has allowed parents to share experiences especially when many are new mums. They feel that Sure Start offers ‘great support’, provides information and offers volunteering opportunities. Their knowledge and experiences of what has happened so far include:-

• Services and activities for children such as Neighbourhood Nurseries (Sunflowers); toddler groups; messy play sessions; structured play; Stay and Play; Talk Talk bags and outings e.g. to see Thomas the Tank Engine Show.

• Awareness of staff (Toddler Power Worker, Early Years Librarian, Community Development Worker, Employment Counsellor, Health Visitors and Nursery Nurses) and the services they provide in homes and groups covering a wide variety of areas. These include smoking cessation; weaning parties; Move & Groove; Rockin’ Robins; Toddler Splash; Toy Library; Reading Reward Scheme and Safety Matters Scheme.

• Support for parents such as the availability of ‘Family Friends’, and also regarding training provision and providing courses as a pathway to employment (crèche workers course, food hygiene, computer, driving), and to assist with parenting (family nurturing, crafty creations). Parents have commented that making new friends has helped them to join in new activities e.g. joining computer classes with a friend.
- Assistance with funding applications to assist groups e.g. art and craft material at toddler groups.
- Encouragement to involve fathers in the programme (Fathers’ Group).
- Holiday activities (Messy Play) and events in the locality including
  - Dads’ event at the Stadium of Light
  - Christmas parties
  - Health Scented sessions providing massage and Reiki at Toddler Groups
  - Pamper sessions at the Stadium of Light and Castle View
  - National Fun Day organised by the Community Development Worker
  - Soft Play sessions at Downhill
There were two individuals who commented that they did not really know what Sure Start provided as neither had received any information despite having children.

4. Benefits to Users

Positive elements identified so far related to:

- facilities and availability of staff
  Parents have found it beneficial to be able to access staff from all teams (e.g. health team – Health Co-ordinator and Family Therapist), many of whom visit groups in the area to promote their service. Parents also commented that some groups are smaller and therefore more personal.

- building social networks
  Sessions/activities/events have benefited both parents and children in making new friends and increasing social networks. One parent commented “[it has] helped me mix in with fellow parents and has provided play opportunities for my children.” Parents find the groups enjoyable and it allows them time to have a ‘chat and laugh together’ as well as allowing babies to interact.

- children’s learning and experience
  Assistance with funding has enabled trips to take place (farm in summer), and new equipment and toys have been purchased for groups. Children have benefited from the range of toys available in the toy library and visits from the Toddler Power Worker to various groups, plus visits from the Safety Worker. There are more fun games for the children (singing), more play and learn opportunities and increased interaction between children of similar ages. One parent commented on how her son’s speech had developed since attending a group, and other parents commented on improved social skills.

- parenting
  Parents commented on how they enjoyed going to different places with their children such as the Wildfowl Park and the Thomas the Tank Engine show. Sure Start has also introduced new opportunities for parents with
babies such as ‘Baby Massage’. Parents commented that there were more opportunities for socialisation with parents who have similar aged children and are therefore able to share experiences.

- **personal development**
  Parents in 2 groups felt that they had benefited from the employment advice given by the Employment Counsellor. Some had either secured employment, gained training places or had been helped with advice on benefit entitlement.

- **information**
  “All of the information received has been excellent. The leaflets and regular visits from the members of the Sure Start team has ensured the group has been kept up to date with all that is going on in the local area.”

These comments show some evidence that the work undertaken is moving towards the vision of parents/carers for the Programme, e.g. with regard to facilities in the community, building social networks, children’s learning and learning opportunities for parents.

### 5. Areas for Improvement

Whilst some respondents indicated that their experience had been entirely positive, there were some comments about areas for improvement. These related to:

- **Information**
  Both individuals and groups commented on the lack of information and general advertising of events. Sometimes publicity for activities was received only a few days prior to an event, which did not give enough notice. This was echoed by childminders who required parental consent before children in their care could participate in some activities. One parent group noted that information is often received either the day before or after events have taken place. As the group runs only once a week, more notice needs to be given. One parent commented that activities were not advertised in the places she attended and another commented that she did not receive anything through the door and therefore had to go to the clinic and ask the health team.

- **Availability**
  Several groups commented that there was a lack of availability of places on trips and often it was the same parents who accessed places. There were also age restrictions on trips and activities, which meant parents either had to find and pay for childcare for older children in order to allow their younger ones to participate, or alternatively the younger children would miss out. Activities in school holidays were an example highlighted by parents.
  One parent also commented that groups were stopped in school holidays and another parent felt there were not enough groups for younger babies.
6. Suggestions for the Future

These have been categorised into some of the key areas for Sure Start local programmes:

- **Support for families and parents**
  - ‘more information to reach families through the door’ especially for those who work and cannot attend groups and therefore miss out
  - Advertising on radio/press to provide information regarding activities in the local area e.g. play schemes, holiday activities
  - More support for parents in work
  - More courses and training places e.g. driving
  - Increased interaction with other workers in groups and more group activities
  - More arts and crafts; therapies; pamper days and theme days

- **Support for good quality play, learning and childcare opportunities for children:**
  - Increased number of places within the neighbourhood nurseries at affordable prices
  - More messy play sessions, Rockin'Robins, craft activities
  - More childcare provision in the Hylton Castle area (crèches rather than childminders)
  - Secure play areas

- **Availability and Accessibility**
  - More holiday activities
  - Inclusion of children/siblings over 4 years of age in activities (especially during holidays) or provision of activities for older children in the same building
  - Availability of activities in all local areas
  - Availability of funding to allow groups to organise trips (this is available for some groups)
  - Free trips and access to different places
  - Information to be sent out 2 weeks prior to event to allow more people to access activities
IV. SUMMARY AND KEY FINDINGS

Interviews were carried out by Sure Start staff with 89 parents/carers, including childminders/toddler group leaders in group and individual settings. The purpose was to gain a snapshot view of what Sure Start meant to them and their experiences so far.

Key Findings

- Parents/carers/toddler group leaders recognise Sure Start as being for parents/carers, their children and the community
- They recognise Sure Start as providing emotional and social support; health care/advice; early learning for children and providing training, education and benefit advice for adults
- Their vision of what Sure Start would achieve related to better facilities in the community and being part of that community; building social networks and providing support for adults and children (improving social skills, more contact with other children); improved communication; assisting parents and children with health and safety matters; improving children’s learning and providing training for parents and helping to reduce unemployment.
- Sure Start was seen as ‘accessible to all’ offering provision for children (early learning opportunities) and adults (parenting and personal development e.g. training, advice)
- Respondents’ comments show evidence that the work undertaken so far relates to some aspects of their vision for the programme
- There were some areas for improvement e.g. lack of, or late provision of, information/publicity on events/activities in the area; lack of availability of places on trips; age restrictions for children
- Suggestions for the future related to support for families and parents (e.g. more activities/ courses, support for working parents); good quality play and learn opportunities for children (nursery places, crèche provision, activities, secure play areas); availability of more holiday activities, trips, and funding; provision of activities for older children to promote inclusion; better publicity and information.