

Wakefield District

**Sure Start Wakefield West
Family Café**

Evaluation Report

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Introduction

The Family Café was established at Sure Start Wakefield West in response to requests from parents in the User Satisfaction Survey (May 2004) and a follow up survey (September 2004)¹, relating to the Sunbeam (Children's) Centre.

Due to time constraints and the intention to attract new families to the Centre, the Café was timetabled for a Thursday afternoon, from 3.00-6.00 pm. The Café opened on 27 January 2005. The Café was initially established as a pilot for three months. This evaluation considers how well the Café met its original objectives and makes recommendations for future activity.

The evaluation was carried out by staff involved in running the Café, Sunbeam Centre staff and the project development, evaluation and monitoring officer. Feedback from parents and monitoring figures were also taken into account.

What did the Café aim to achieve?

Outcomes

- an increase in the number of children and families visiting the Centre
- the Sunbeam Centre is perceived as an accessible, welcoming place
- more children and families benefit from Sure Start Services

Objectives

- Meet PSA targets by
 - promote healthy eating
 - tie in with work, learning and volunteering targets
 - contribute to strengthening families and communities targets
- Get more people 'through the door'
- Meet a request to serve food in the Children's Centre

How would this be achieved?

By offering:

- Simple menu for children and adults from weaning onwards.
- Healthy food for the whole family.
- Comfortable surroundings for families to eat, where children would not be expected to sit still.
- Safe meeting place for people with children to meet and have a meal.
- Somewhere for children to play safely, read, look at books.
- A pathway to Sure Start services and activities.
- Using volunteers to help take orders, serve food.

¹ "What can we do?" Report

The Café was supervised by the healthy eating worker. A member of staff, given additional hours, did the cooking and food preparation and ran the Café with support from up to two volunteers. A rota of Sure Start staff was established to help cover the Café when support was needed from parents.

The Café also used the time of the Caretaker, Centre Assistant and other Centre staff in shopping, helping to prepare the kitchen and dining room and other duties necessary on the day.

How much did it cost?

Staff time alone when the Café was open was worth £45/hour. The low cost of a meal to families meant that income generated would be relatively small and the low use exacerbated this.

The Café income only just covered the cost of the food and did not cover utilities or the cook.

What happened at the Family Café?

This section shows how the Café met or did not meet original expectations.

Positives

- A healthy menu was developed and cooked for families.
- The menu was appropriate to all those who came, with a request to blend the main meal for a baby.
- There was only one complaint about a main dish.
- The Café was a comfortable place where children could play or read.
- The workers involved in running the café, food preparation and cooking enjoyed this part of the work.
- The shopping routine worked.
- The Café was adequately covered during staff leave.
- Staff could cope on busy days.
- The Café attracted families with young children and there were no problems with it being taken over by other than the target clientele

- The new dishwasher was effective.
- The Café was able to use a volunteer.

Negatives

- Attendance was low and fell to 2 or 3 families in April.
- Only 12 families used the Café, of which most were from the Lupset and all were regular attenders at other Sure Start activities.
- Publicity didn't work.
- Some families used it as a drop in and stayed for the duration.
- Children were not supervised by parents.
- Staff were left to supervise children and remind parents of their responsibilities, this in turn can lead to tensions between staff and parents as happened when rules were introduced around hot drinks during groups at the Centre.
- It was difficult finding toys and games that were suitable for the age range of children attending.
- The soft play equipment was a major distraction for children and was subsequently removed from the Centre.
- There was a lot of food wasted. This was partly avoided by freezing batches of the main meal where possible.
- Boxes for children had a low take up, with only four out of 40 being ordered over four weeks: this was not only a waste of food but also of staff time preparing the boxes.

What did staff do to improve the Café?

- Unused batches of the main meal were frozen so that they could be offered another day
- Ground rules were produced (Appendix)
- Toys were carefully selected and the book box was left out
- Soft play equipment was removed from the building

- The Café was closed off on quieter days to contain the children who were left to their own devices
- To ensure that the Café was used appropriately, parents were encouraged to leave once they had finished their meal, whilst maintaining the ethos of a family café.

Risks to the future of the Café

- The low take up and high running costs mean that the Café is not financially sustainable.
- Running the Café is labour intensive and calls on the time of a number of staff.
- Families might be easily put off coming to the Café if there is one meal they don't like (we think that the week when there was a complaint some families did not return).
- The healthy eating worker had concerns about registering the Café with environmental health as a food business because the kitchen is in use for other purposes during the week. From the environmental health point of view it would have to be dedicated to the Café for the day and would be subject to unannounced inspections at any time of the week. Staff felt they could not guarantee the state of the kitchen or use of the fridge all the time, even though we would comply on the day the Café is running.

Alternatives

- The timing of the Café could be changed to lunchtime to try to attract more families. However, the risks identified above would remain. Taking into account the concerns of the healthy eating worker, the environmental health issue would be difficult to overcome. A lunchtime café would still tie up a lot of staff time and also limit the use of the Centre on the day of the café.
- Sure Start Wakefield West could run events on a quarterly basis where food is sold, avoiding the need to register with environmental health as a food business but still meeting the request to provide food at the Centre. It was noticed that one of the busiest days at the Café coincided with the Dental Health Day when families stayed on to have a meal. Recent events involving food have included Pancake Day (on 8 February) when 10 families attended with only three of those families using the Café that month. Similar events in the past have been well attended.

Conclusions

The Café was opened some six months after a consultation about the Sunbeam Centre and a nearly a year after the User Satisfaction Survey. In Sure Start's experience families get frustrated with time lapses and, of course, some of those who requested the service might have started work, children started school, etc.

In its current form the Café is providing a good quality 'eating out' experience for the families who use it. However, it was felt that the low take up and failure to attract new families meant that the Café had not achieved its original aim. A few families did not use the Café appropriately.

The Café will not be sustainable in the longer term and there are some risks presented both to the Café and the integrity of the Programme by the standards of environmental health inspectors.

On a positive note, we have learned that we have the capacity to provide healthy food at the Sunbeam Centre in an organised way and the staff with the ability to produce healthy, good quality food.

Recommendations

1. To cease running the Café after the end of April (ie 28th), giving notice to the families who do use it.
2. To introduce and plan a series of events for the coming year where food will be sold, involving Five a Day, the Healthy Living Centre and on themes, for example international food.

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