Sure Start Thorntree and Brambles Farm Evaluation Report

Establishing Sure Start: Key Issues, Processes and Challenges

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Evaluation summary

This evaluation report documents the formative stages of Sure Start Thorntree and Brambles Farm over the period January-June 2002. Grounded in the views and experiences of a diverse research population (n=41), the report examines key issues, processes and challenges from local and professional perspectives. Prominent research themes include: strategic direction, partnership development, local views and involvement, and perceptions of quality. The main findings are set out below:

Professional views and experiences

- Professional stakeholders perceive Sure Start as a strategic approach based on new ideas about the nature of social problems, working practices, professional/community relationships and funding commitments.

- The Thorntree and Brambles Farm programme has a strategic focus on long-term outcomes and intermediate processes.

- The profile of the programme was initially raised but proved difficult to sustain without conspicuous capital development. Site developments have now begun and should help sharpen the profile of the programme in the community.

- The local knowledge base is being strategically maintained: i.e. by Newsletter, activity days, recruitment training. Project activity is also enhancing profile at a micro level.

- However, professional stakeholders feel there is still some uncertainty about Sure Start in the community. They feel there is a lack of expectation about it, notably in relation to sustainability. This lack of expectation reflects wider disaffection reinforced by perceptions of previous area-based initiatives. This constitutes a key barrier.

- The role of the programme manager is seen to be pivotal to programme development, and programme management is viewed positively throughout the professional partnership.

- Managerial style is seen to be shaped both by Sure Start principles and a particular approach to management. Strategically the role demands a broad knowledge base for effective partnership coordination.

- The involvement of the programme manager in the planning and development of additional Sure Start programmes was challenging for the Thorntree and Brambles Farm project.

- Some stakeholders suggested the issue was isolated and had been resolved, although the possibility is noted that it could reflect distinctive aspects of Sure Start management style.
• Key challenges concerning the structural nature of the programme manager role are addressed.

• Other emerging challenges are noted. Issues include the delegation of managerial work and its impact on other areas of professional work, the constraints of time and space, and challenges associated with role expectations.

• Professional views on the ongoing challenges of parental representation and involvement are documented.

**Partnership development**

• Partnership working is central to the vision of the Thorntree and Brambles Farm programme. Key points include the centrality of partnership, emphasis on new professional community relationships, flexibility of working practices and managerial style.

• Progress is being made in the development of partnerships both strategically and at a micro level.

• Challenges to partnership working at a strategic level include: increasing demands on agencies, the constraints of planning and bidding culture and time issues around the submission of plans.

• Time was also a significant concern at programme level, together with problems associated with perceptions of Sure Start from the perspectives of groups already working locally. Those perceptions are beginning to change as the programme develops.

• Community involvement is the founding principle of the programme and professional stakeholders considered the community to be their principal partner.

• Parents are represented at board level and involved in the interviewing and selection of prospective staff.

• Stakeholders perceived a series of benefits of involvement for both communities and professionals. They also emphasised the inclusive nature of their approach to community involvement, although a more democratic system of representation is envisaged as the programme develops. A core group of parents have already committed themselves to Sure Start.

• It was recognised that a key challenge for the programme is to ensure that it is perceived as both a Thorntree and Brambles Farm initiative. Boundary issues are apparent but do not yet appear to be a significant obstacle to development.

• Thorntree has a higher profile than Brambles Farm in terms of representation at Board level.
• Stakeholders feel it is important to develop partnerships with the local communities. Challenges include encouraging key people to share their experiences of Sure Start. It was also noted that those people need support themselves. Issues around local politics, ‘word of mouth’ culture, hard to reach groups and local expectations were also apparent.

Local views and experiences

• Parents displayed different levels of awareness about the programme, from a detailed knowledge of Sure Start aims to a more superficial awareness of activity and publicity.

• It was suggested that many local people are reluctant to commit themselves to Sure Start until it is made more visible.

• The parent group felt that local awareness could be enhanced; publicity material could be made more distinctive, possibly incorporating photographs and children’s artwork.

• The value of ‘word of mouth’ knowledge was considered crucial to the effective establishment of Sure Start in the community. Local friendships and personal trust were emphasised. The importance of relationships with professional people was also acknowledged.

• Parents identified key benefits of Sure Start investment on Thorntree and Brambles Farm. These include the impact of key services, confidence in Sure Start personnel, informal access to expertise, family support, personal development, extended social networks and wider local knowledge.

• Some parents felt that Sure Start was beginning to generate a stronger sense of community, although this view was expressed by people already committed to the programme.

• Parents want to see evidence of new development. High quality child care/playgroup facilities and safe play areas are priorities. Organised trips, physical activities for children and more open days were also wanted.

• Regular points of contact with the programme would be valuable. Parents suggested coffee mornings as a way to accomplish this.

• More contact between Thorntree and Brambles Farm parents was considered important, although peoples’ everyday routines and concerns may currently constitute a challenge.

• Key areas for further evaluation were identified throughout the chapter. These include: analysing informal and formal aspects of parent representation, mapping ways parents are effectively recruited to the programme, and studying everyday routes and routines with a view to integrating Sure Start into local life.
Understanding quality

- Quality is a much used term, yet difficult to define. Donabedian’s distinction between process, structure and outcome is useful for organising stakeholder views on quality.

- Many professionals referred to quality in holistic terms, reflecting the programme’s strategic, integrated vision.

- On a micro level, inter-professional and professional/client relationships emerged as important quality criteria. Key themes include: trust, respect and the appreciation of other viewpoints.

- Professional conduct and courtesy were important to parents.

- Notions of ‘consistency’ and ‘standard’ influenced local and professional judgements of Sure Start and underpinned the development of partnerships.

- Parents valued the immediacy of the BLAST project, and this immediacy has been important to the programme during the formative period.

- BLAST embodies the Sure Start emphasis on collaboration, although parents perceived it more in terms of the direct application of expertise.

- Resource and capital development are prominent structural concerns; the structural element of quality is not viewed as favourably as process quality.

- Cost-effectiveness is identified as a key structural issue.

- Quality as outcome emphasised the requirement for Sure Start to demonstrate quantifiable social change. However, respondents also considered outcome in terms of the qualitative experience of parents/clients, and the team’s experience of programme development.

- Overall, the study of quality is a useful tool for analysing different stakeholder perspectives and, if employed strategically over time, could be valuable for illuminating patterns of change.
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1. Introduction

Sure Start Thorntree and Brambles Farm is a ‘third wave’ Sure Start programme located within the ward of Thorntree in Middlesbrough. Engaging the communities of Thorntree and Brambles Farm, which comprise the ward and give the project its name, the programme aims to improve the health, social, emotional and learning opportunities for pre-school children and their parents. This holistic approach to enhancing life experience particularly aims to ensure children are ready to achieve when they start school.

Programme evaluation at local level is a fundamental principle of the Sure Start evaluation strategy. Local Sure Start programmes are required to monitor progress towards prescribed objectives, targets and benchmarks. They are also expected to routinely monitor and review working practices with a view to improving such key concerns as cultural sensitivity, partnership working and local participation. A commitment to evaluation is built into the Sure Start Thorntree and Brambles Farm development plan, and the programme is working towards the synthesis of process, output and outcome review as detailed in the requirements for local evaluation (Sure Start Unit, 2000). This approach defines evaluation as an ongoing process of investigation and feedback that will inform and enhance programme development. A summary of key principles and early evaluative themes is contained on the National Evaluation of Sure Start website: www.ness.bbk.ac.uk.

This report reflects those priorities and is the outcome of a series of discussions, initiated in November 2001, between members of the Sure Start Thorntree and Brambles Farm management team and the School of Social Sciences & Law and the School of Health and Social Care, University of Teesside. The meetings resulted in the refinement of the main evaluation aims and objectives. They also led to the development of an evaluation strategy which articulates those aims and objectives.

1.1 Evaluation aims and objectives

The aims of this evaluation are:

- To improve the understanding of the aims and processes of work carried out by partners and project staff in order to improve planning, implementation and delivery
- To produce a forward strategy for the Sure Start programme informed by systematic evaluation of work to date.

These aims correspond with requirements for Sure Start programmes to review working practices and developments in the implementation of Sure Start principles, and the effects these have on service provision. They also confirm local level evaluation as a significant source of support for programme development.
The capacity for local evaluation to inform programme work also underpins the principal objectives of the study. These include assisting in the monitoring of decision making processes, identifying problems in communication, collaboration and implementation, and supporting other data collection and evaluation work. The evaluation will also feed into the national evaluation of Sure Start.

1.2 Evaluation strategy and timetable

Guidelines for the local evaluation of Sure Start emphasise the importance of understanding the views and experiences of diverse programme stakeholders, on major issues and processes (Sure Start Unit, 2000). Sure Start Thorntree and Brambles Farm is in the formative stages of programme development. Team members are still being recruited and the construction of formal and informal networks is ongoing. It was felt that an in-depth analysis of key Sure Start processes, sensitive to diverse and potentially competing perspectives, would be particularly valuable at this stage.

The evaluation comprises four main themes:

- A study of professional views and experiences
- An examination of partnership perspectives at different levels of the programme
- A study of local knowledge, participation and attitudes
- An investigation into quality: key issues, meanings and approaches.

1.2.1 Interim evaluation report

An interim evaluation report was completed in March 2002. This paper concentrates on two of the above themes and discusses initial findings around the key areas of professionalism and partnership (Jackson 2002). The current report extends analysis of those themes, examining and contextualising earlier findings in the light of additional data. It also extends the scope of the evaluation as a whole, bringing local views into focus and mapping a range of perspectives on issues related to service quality.

1.3 Layout of the report

This report sets out the background, methodology and key findings of the evaluation.

Chapter 2 situates the Sure Start programme in wider context. Chapter 3 describes the study’s methodology and the research methods employed in the collection of data. Chapters 4-7 report the main findings of the research around the themes of ‘professionalism’, ‘partnership’, ‘local views’ and ‘quality’. Key issues raised by the study and potentially fruitful areas for further study are also discussed.
2. **Context**

Sure Start is a national programme of action designed to improve the health and well-being of young children and families, so that children are ready to thrive when they start school. It represents ‘a cornerstone of the Government’s drive to tackle child poverty and social exclusion’ (Department for Education and Skills, 2001: 3), and reflects commitments beyond material provision as a means to address exclusion. Emphasis is directed towards the involvement and empowerment of communities and the modernisation of service provision and delivery.

This chapter contextualises these developments. Key aspects of Sure Start’s emergence as a national programme of action are discussed, together with an appreciation of its core principles and objectives. The profile of Sure Start in Middlesbrough is then considered, enabling the Sure Start Thorntree and Brambles Farm project to be placed in local context.

2.1 **Origins**

The origins of Sure Start lie in a Government review of services for young children, announced in October 1997. It examined issues related to social exclusion risks in early childhood and their consequences for later life, and reviewed evidence on the effectiveness of existing policies, resources and interventions (Glass 1999).

The review found multiple disadvantage for young children to be a growing problem. It also found variance across localities in the quality of services for children and their families, considered services to be particularly dislocated for the under fours. It concluded that a holistic, community-based approach was a necessary requirement for policy to impact upon social exclusion, and further identified the need for it to be evidence-based.

Consultations following the review led to the central financing of the programme, beginning in the 1999-2000 financial year. They also led to the establishment of an inter-departmental steering group across seven Government departments, the forming of the Sure Start Unit, and the facility for ongoing consultation through the ‘Friends of Sure Start’.

2.2 **Development**

Three influential strands of thought underpin the strategic development of the Sure Start initiative. The first looks back to the Educational Priority Areas Programme (EPA), developed in Britain in the late 1960s. Local EPA projects, set up in areas of disadvantage, aimed to raise educational standards and involve young children and families more fully in education. The programme included a pre-school focus and an evaluation requirement.

The second focuses on more recent work in the US on investment in pre-school intervention. The effects of intensive pre-school programmes of support, particularly those organised around structured play, were found to be tangible, long term and consistent with existing research on the effects of interventions directed at disadvantaged families with pre-school children.
The third strand of thinking centres on the disabling effects of poverty on children growing up in areas of disadvantage and the dynamics of processes of social exclusion. This approach highlights the multiple and mutually reinforcing nature of exclusion processes, and argues that their reversal is dependent not simply on resource provision but on new ways of thinking and working and new relationships between government, organisations and communities (Sure Start Evaluation Development Project, 1999).

2.3 The Sure Start initiative

The aims of the Government’s approach to social exclusion are threefold: prevention, reintegration and the delivery of basic minimum standards to all. These broad commitments link Sure Start with a range of other government initiatives, such as Health and Education Action Zones and New Deal for Young People. However, Sure Start is particularly associated with programmes of prevention and is already cited as evidence of success in this field (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001).

The initiative focuses on neighbourhoods where a high proportion of children live in households with incomes less than half the national average. It requires those communities, together with all groups, organisations and sectors involved in services for families and pre-school children, to work in partnership to meet a series of long term objectives and specific targets.

2.3.1 Long term objectives

The long term objectives are:

- Improving social and emotional development
- Improving health
- Improving the ability to learn
- Strengthening families and communities.

Each objective is accompanied by a number of more specific national targets. One set, contained within the Public Service Agreement (PSA), is specifically designed to improve children’s well-being and development. A further set, referred to as Service Delivery Agreement (SDA) targets, is associated with programme implementation. In total there are 4 PSA targets and 12 SDA targets that local programmes are expected to work towards. The formulation of additional local goals is also encouraged to meet locally identified needs.
2.3.2 Core services and key principles

It is a central tenet of Sure Start that local perceptions of need and forms of involvement will lead to programme differentiation. Variety is allowed and encouraged, and heterogeneity of form is anticipated (Sure Start Evaluation Development Project, 1999). However, local Sure Start programmes must include a number of core services:

- Outreach and home visiting
- Support for families and parents
- Support for good quality play, learning and child care experiences for children
- Primary and community health care, including advice about family health and child health and development
- Support for children and parents with special needs, including help getting access to specialised services.

Programmes must also adhere to a set of key principles throughout their development. They are required to:

- Co-ordinate, streamline and add value to existing services in the Sure Start area
- Involve parents, grandparents and other carers in ways that build on their existing strengths
- Avoid stigma by ensuring that all families are able to use Sure Start services
- Ensure lasting support by linking Sure Start to services for older children
- Be culturally appropriate and sensitive to particular needs
- Promote the participation of all local families in the design and working of the programme.
  (Department for Education and Skills, 2001: 6-7)

These key principles are intended to ensure a shared value based and a consistency of approach in the delivery of Sure Start services. In particular, they are designed to ensure that local programmes add value to existing services, provide new services and facilities, communicate clearly to parents about service availability, and train workers and volunteers to deliver Sure Start in ways sensitive to local need. It is also anticipated that they will enable local programmes to meet the challenge of improving joint working between service providers, thereby making them more effective and accessible. (See Chapter 5 for extended analysis of partnership issues and experiences).
2.4 Sure Start in Middlesbrough

The first 60 Sure Start programmes were classified as ‘trailblazers’ and one of those, Sure Start Abingdon and Breckon Hill, is based in Middlesbrough.

Sure Start is currently implementing a ‘fifth wave’ of programmes and two further local programmes – Pallister Park, Berwick Hills and Park End, and Grove Hill, Beechwood and Easterside – are being developed in this phase. To date more than 260 programmes are planned or in operation and it is envisaged that 500 local programmes will be established by 2004 (Department for Education and Skills, 2001).

Sure Start Thorntree and Brambles Farm is a ‘third wave’ project. Community consultation began in October 2000 and the programme came into being in April 2001. Full details of the programme’s vision, profile and development to date can be found in Sure Start Thorntree and Brambles Farm (2001, 2001a, 2001b).
3. Evaluation methodology and research methods

Sure Start evaluation combines a national focus on implementation, impact, context and cost-effectiveness with a local focus on activity, process and progress. These different approaches to evaluation seek answers to different sets of questions within the overall framework of strategic Sure Start evaluation. This chapter highlights the principal questions asked in this evaluative study and discusses the methodologies and research methods employed.

3.1 Key issues

As noted earlier (1.2), a key set of questions of interest to Sure Start Thorntree and Brambles Farm relate to its status as a developing community initiative. A need was identified for an evaluation that would facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the formative stages of the programme. This would necessarily embrace professional, partner and client views and enable all stakeholders to reflect upon their aspirations and early experiences.

Previous evaluation concentrated on professional and partner perspectives (Jackson 2002). This study expands discussion on those perspectives in the light of additional data. It also brings local views into focus, together with a range of perceptions of issues related to service quality. In all cases the evaluation is guided by the requirements for local evaluation (Sure Start Unit, 2002). Key issues addressed in this study include:

- Strategic direction and vision
- Profile and expectation
- Programme management
- Partnership issues
- Community involvement
- others

3.2 Methodology

The key issues indicate the scope of the evaluation. They also point to some of the inherent difficulties in evaluating social programmes such as Sure Start. These programmes are typically designed as complex partnership initiatives comprising multiple interventions, working with different groups and towards ambitious targets.

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1 This chapter is based upon, and includes, material written by Paul Crawshaw.
Programme implementation is often dependent upon partnerships between public, private and voluntary agencies as well as communities themselves. Connell et al (1995) suggest that such initiatives present challenges for evaluators because they typically possess the following characteristics:

- They are highly complex learning enterprises with multiple strands of activity operating at many different levels
- Objectives are defined and strategies chosen to achieve goals that often change over time
- Many activities and intended outcomes are difficult to measure
- Units of action (communities) are complex open systems and it is virtually impossible to control all the variables that may influence the conduct and outcome of the evaluation.

3.2.1 Theories of Change

A method developed by the Aspen Institute in the US has gone some way towards tackling these issues. The Institute has developed the Theory of Change model over several years of evaluation what they call ‘complex community initiatives’; holistic social programmes aimed at working with communities. Such programmes are comparable to Sure Start and have in some cases provided inspiration for both its philosophy and approaches (see the US Head Start programme). There are a number of advantages to using this model:

- It is a participative model engaging stakeholders from the outset and involving them in the process of self evaluation; this compliments the philosophy of Sure Start with stakeholders being integral to the activities and the programme
- Evaluation is integrated into practice and provides a basis for informed planning and development
- Process and outcomes are accommodated from the perspectives of the main stakeholders
- It encourages participants to be clear and agree about long term outcomes and the milestones required to achieve them
- A process of ongoing evaluation and review is promoted
- It is results responsive in identifying what works and what does not work; subsequent targets can then be modified accordingly
- It is possible to use a range of research methods within the overall framework which can be devised as appropriate to the development of the programme and resources.
The Theories of Change model provides an overarching model for evaluation. It is used extensively in the evaluation of complex community initiatives both in the US and the UK, where it currently informs the national evaluations of Sure Start, New Deal for Communities and Health Action Zones, together with Barnardo’s anti-poverty strategy. It is, therefore, a valuable and appropriate methodology for the evaluation of Sure Start Thorntree and Brambles Farm, enabling stakeholders to express their understandings of the programme and their roles within it from the outset.

Within this methodology qualitative methods of interviewing and observation are prominent forms of data collection. These methods enable the researcher to explore respondents’ individual understandings and meanings attached to experiences. In the field of evaluation research they are particularly associated with the work of Guba and Lincoln (1989) and their understanding of Fourth Generation Evaluation.

3.2.2 Fourth Generation Evaluation

Fourth Generation Evaluation gives primacy to the claims, concerns and issues of stakeholders. It argues that these should be the main focus of any evaluation and that stakeholder input should ultimately guide the process. This model is implicitly based on a ‘constructionist paradigm’ which contends that evaluation is not a matter of accessing a reality beyond individuals’ constructions and understandings. Rather, it involves collecting accounts of individuals’ own constructions of reality and social contexts. This casts evaluation as a responsive and interactive process.

This has also been called a ‘democratic approach to evaluation’ (Caulley – in Laughlin and Broadbent, 1996: 434). Agendas are negotiated by all stakeholders rather than set by funders, with key concerns emerging through ongoing consultation. It is a perspective that challenges the traditional ‘managerialist’ assumption that one unified, objectively measured, outcome will be appropriate to all stakeholders involved in the evaluation.

Guba and Lincoln’s (1989) ideas have significant potential for evaluation complex community initiatives such as Sure Start. They compliment wider Theories of Change methodology and are compatible with Sure Start philosophy. Indeed, Sure Start is dependent for success upon effective interaction amongst stakeholder groups and constant feedback to central management, and this process requires evaluation to improve the potential of the programme.

3.3 Interviewing

The above discussion demonstrates commitment to a form of evaluation sensitive to stakeholder experiences and understandings. With this approach in mind in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews were undertaken to enable participants to share opinions, understandings and information in a non-pressed and confidential environment.
In-depth, semi-structured interviewing allows people to present their accounts on their own terms, whilst still providing the researcher with a structure for comparability (May, 1997). Throughout the study 30 individual interviews and 2 paired interviews – representing the perspectives of Board members, parents, project staff, consultant support and other partners – were conducted in this way. Interview schedules are included in the Appendices to this report.

A series of further meetings with parents also yielded important forms of data. These meetings, which were held at local school nurseries, were of a more informal nature and 7 parents contributed to the research in this way. Total research population (n=41).

With the exception of the above meetings, which were documented in note form, all interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using the conventions of qualitative analysis. This involved coding the data into categories and themes which emerged from within the data itself (Strauss, 1998). This allowed it to be indexed under topics and headings from which systematic comparative analysis of all material could be conducted.

The following chapters discuss that material under the general headings of:

- Professional views and experiences
- Partnership development
- Local views and experiences
- Understanding quality
4. Professional views and experiences

This chapter reports on professional views and experiences of the Sure Start Thorntree and Brambles Farm programme and draws on interview data with partnership, team and consultant personnel. Data are discussed under a series of headings that articulate professional perspectives and correspond to local evaluation requirements. Data are also employed to capture elements of development and change in the formative period.

The opening section examines the programme’s strategic approach to enhancing life experience and tackling exclusion on Thorntree and Brambles Farm. Key beliefs and priorities are discussed together with perceptions of long and short-term change. Issues relating to early programme development are assessed, with particular emphasis on profile, visibility and local expectation. Management style is then brought into focus and some important characteristics and processes are considered. The final section looks at emerging issues that capture key challenges for project staff and offer insights into the challenging nature of professional experience.

4.1 Strategic direction

Professional accounts emphasise the duality of Sure Start processes; their ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ nature. Knowledge of ‘top-down’ philosophy, objectives and targets is evident throughout the programme but equal weight is given to issues that are harder to conceptualise and measure. This is represented in the programme’s philosophy statement.

4.1.1 A new approach

A number of beliefs underpin the professional vision of the programme. All respondents spoke of the extensive social problems experienced by members of the Thorntree and Brambles Farm communities. Key issues include health, environmental, educational and economic problems and the enduring cycles of inequality and exclusion, all of which contribute to Thorntree’s status on the Index of Material Deprivation.

The partnership was under no illusions about the task at the outset – ‘I was concerned, really I suppose, at the scale of the task that we were taking on’. However, balancing that concern is an understanding of Sure Start as a new strategic approach in the field of community regeneration and development. Characteristics include:

- Sure Start emphasises the inter-connected nature as well as the extent of social problems.

  *It’s a new way of trying to make a difference to not one issue but a set of complex circumstances … It’s really about working in deprived areas to address a number of interweaving issues, but in different ways to the ways we’ve always done it before.*
• Sure Start involves a commitment to new ways of working towards the management and resolution of problems.

_The only way to change things round to the benefit of children and parents and families is to work more collaboratively, and not be too precious._

Experiences of collaboration and partnership working are examined in detail in **Chapter 5**. The point is raised here because of its significance to the programme’s interpretation of Sure Start principles.

• The long-term nature of the national Sure Start plan and the proposed long-term funding strategy are key sources of professional optimism.

_I’m more enthusiastic about the Sure Start programme because it’s a longer programme – over ten years – and I hope it would have more of an impact._

• Sure Start encourages the establishment of new relationships between professionals and lay people. These relationships value the complexity and diversity of individuals and communities.

_The thing that makes it distinct is that we’ve involved local people. We haven’t got a group of professionals who’ve sat around and said: ‘Right! What have we got to do to involve somebody?’ – or ‘What do these people need?’ They are actually telling us what they need; we are beginning to listen. We’re beginning to understand, hopefully, some of the sensitivities and complexities of what’s really going on._

• At the centre of these relationships is a respect for individual lives and a sensitivity to local feeling and self-image.

_I think when a community has been given a label, whatever it is, it’s quite a sensitive issue really, the whole issue of being part of a multiple index of deprivation, and I think that must hurt. If I was living here I think I’d feel that, so that’s quite a challenge in that as a team we need to justify why we’re here in those terms but give respect to each person in the same way that I would want respect._

**4.1.2 Future visions**

Perceptions of performance and future achievement combine specific knowledge of programme objectives and targets with a broader, qualitative professional vision. This reflects the partnership’s strategic focus both on long-term desired outcomes and the intermediate steps involved in effecting positive change (Sure Start Thorntree and Brambles Farm, 2001, 2001a).

Long-term desired outcomes include:

• Better educational experience

• Healthier individuals and communities
Higher local expectations

Increased social skills

Reconfigured, ‘best practice’ service delivery

Professional response to locally defined need

Self supporting, parent-led communities

Self-confident children

Ultimately, the long-term vision of Sure Start is to ‘enable parents and the community to do without Sure Start being there’.

In the shorter term, professional stakeholders suggested the following as indicators of programme development:

- Increased knowledge of Sure Start and active local participation
- Development of a community voice
- Enhanced parent networking and assertiveness
- Setting up Sure Start structures: groups, play areas
- Broadening of the partnership
- Changing work processes
- Emphasis on service accessibility

One person summed up the key elements and indicators of intermediate change.

Increasing involvement of parents and children, and increasing range of services that they feel can, that meet their needs, or their children’s needs. A willingness to look at things that are of concern to parents, not just things that professionals think they ought to be concerned about.

This section has mapped key aspects of the programme’s strategic vision. The next section discusses some early experiences of communicating and establishing that vision.

### 4.2 Developing Sure Start on Thorntree and Brambles Farm

Following a period of community consultation the Thorntree and Brambles Farm programme began in April 2001. The profile of the programme was initially raised by a number of events: family activity days, visits to local schools, day trips. These generated significant local interest.
We had a plethora of local activities that were very well supported. The people did come and engaged very positively.

However, those levels have been difficult to sustain as the programme has entered new phases of development.

It probably is at its most difficult phase at the moment. I think, you know, there’s all the bally-hoo and the publicity that goes with all this … And then there’s a quiet period where you’re trying to establish the team and the process and the recruitment – where there is the danger that residents kind of think: ‘Oh God, you know, they ask me what I wanted, and where is it?’

4.2.1 Profile and visibility

Most respondents concur with the view that the programme is currently at a difficult phase in terms of its profile within the community. Part of this is believed to be a common experience of community initiatives in the formative stages of development. The launching of initiatives raises local interest which then has to be managed while less visible aspects of the project are established. This requires keeping local people informed.

I guess it’s finding a level of publicity that you’ve got to have, just to maintain the knowledge base. Because you can’t be doing something every week.

One way that the programme has sought to maintain the knowledge base is through the publication of the Leaps & Bounds newsletter. Three editions have been produced to date, with the most recent circulated in June 2002.

Other approaches include the ongoing enrolment of new parents on the recruitment training programme, the delivery of information conducted around theme-based activity days and the subsequent building up of the programme’s database. Communication networks are also being established around the delivery of professional services and through inter-agency collaboration, familiarisation with local groups, ‘drop-in’ facilities and individual contacts.

4.2.2 Profile and capital development

Sure Start Thorntree and Brambles Farm is managing issues common to many community projects in their early stages. It is also managing issues of a more specific nature, notably those concerning capital development.

New Sure Start centres and play areas have been planned for some time for a number of sites on Thorntree and Brambles Farm. Early interviews in this study stressed the importance of material evidence and suggested that without it local people were uncertain about the programme.

I think there’s a bit of confusion about what’s actually happening, because a profile’s been raised, and people know that it’s coming. But I don’t think people are quite sure about what stage it is at.
Subsequent interviews suggest that Sure Start continues to be constrained by the lack of a physical presence.

*From my perspective in school here I’m waiting for the building and as soon as that building’s up and running I think they’ll be a massive impact, but not at the moment because there isn’t anything for them to see.*

This lack of physical presence was also felt to restrict the programme’s capability to become an integral part of people’s routines. (For a community-based view on this issue, see 6.3).

*I think what [the delay in capital build] means as well is that it’s very hard to do regular things that have a weekly point of contact.*

However, capital development has recently been approved by the Sure Start Unit and some site development has now begun. Work on the new Play Area is particularly visible and this, together with other developments, should help the programme to sharpen its profile and dissipate the confusion experienced by some community members.

### 4.2.3 Profile and other influences

Despite its undoubted practical and symbolic importance the role of capital development should not be overstated. As one person observed, Sure Start is: *‘not about masking by changing a physical environment, it is actually about looking and understanding … and investing in people’.* The full range of Sure Start activity is driven by these principles, much of it enhancing the profile of the programme at a micro level. Examples include the increasing range of community-based, outreach work throughout Thorntree and Brambles Farm, the establishing of regular ‘drop-in’ facilities at local schools and the BLAST project.

The latter has made a particularly effective contribution to raising the profile of Sure Start in the formative period and is discussed in more detail in Chapter 7.

It should also be noted that not all people are ‘confused’ by the Sure Start development process on Thorntree and Brambles Farm. Some parents have participated enthusiastically in the programme from the outset, others have been recruited as it has become more established, and all combine to form a group fully committed to its aims and vision. (See also 5.4).

*We have had a number of parents who have given quite unstintingly of their time, and that is wonderful.*

*The big thing that I’ve felt about it is that the parent group are so committed and so enthusiastic.*

On the other hand, it is recognised that there are other groups of people who are not only less involved with Sure Start but also less inclined to participate. This led professional stakeholders away from earlier notions of confusion, towards more fundamental concerns with expectations.
4.2.4 Expectations

One person said: ‘I think it is different with some parents that it is with others, it’s more important for some parents than it is for others’. This acknowledges that parents are not an homogeneous group and that the programme means different things to different people. As noted above, it has come to mean a lot for a core group of parents who devote their time and energy to it.

However, there are other groups – even when the programme overcomes issues of profile and visibility – that may be less receptive to the aims, ideas and services of Sure Start. The struggle to broaden involvement beyond a small group of community members, and engage the community as a whole, is very common in community-based project work (Dixon, 1989). One of the principal factors underpinning this struggle in Thorntree and Brambles Farm is an apparent lack of expectation and aspiration.

I think the biggest problem is with the parents, is a lot about their expectations. Their expectations of their future, their children’s future, what they can achieve, you know, what they can get out of a situation. Their expectations are very low about an awful lot of things. That, to me, feels to be the biggest thing that holds them back. They don’t expect anything, so don’t try, and you know, just leave it at that.

Now there is a problem in Middlesbrough, there is a major problem, which is peoples’ aspirations of what is possible. It’s like a Middlesbrough disease.

This general lack of aspiration and subsequent reluctance to engage with local service providers is a finding common to many community-based studies (Foley and Martin, 2000). The ‘Middlesbrough disease’ is a feature of all disaffected communities and it highlights one of the main barriers faced by the programme.

4.2.5 Expectations and previous initiatives

Respondents spoke of a general lack of expectation as a key indicator of local deprivation. They also related it in various ways to previous history of community-based initiatives on the Thorntree and Brambles Farm estates. For example, it was noted that some of those initiatives had engaged successfully with the communities. However, they were subject to limited funding and their work was unsustainable in the longer term. Local perceptions of area-based, community work as fleeting and temporary were thus believed to contribute to an overall lack of expectation about it, actively working against participation.

I think sometimes, perhaps, people aren’t coming forward or agreeing to do things because they think it’s not going to happen anyway, what’s the point? … They’re deliberately avoiding us because they don’t want to be let down.

Another perspective suggested that previous community based work had been strong on capital investment and valuable for organised community groups, but less effective in other ways.
It concentrated on the physical environment, improved buildings. What it did as well, it gave like organised residents groups a mechanism for them to send people forward. What it didn’t do, it didn’t do genuine ‘new developing community development stuff’ … it didn’t enable many new groups to establish.

As noted earlier (4.1.1) the programme’s philosophy and vision generates considerable professional optimism. Nonetheless, the partnership is aware that many people in the community remain to be convinced about sustainability and long-term commitment, and that others may either be uninformed about Sure Start or question its capacity to be meaningful for them at this stage.

4.3 Managing Sure Start

Professional accounts of the formative stages of Sure Start on Thorntree and Brambles Farm invariably refer to the role played by the programme manager. This section examines views on management style in the development of Sure Start processes and maps out some characteristics and implications.

4.3.1 Management structures

The Final Plan (Sure Start Thorntree and Brambles Farm, 2001) documents the structural arrangements for the management of the programme. These arrangements ensure programme line management through the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership. They also confirm the composition of the Board including the representation and review of parents at Board level in accordance with risk assessment requirements (Sure Start Unit, 2002).

Line management structures within the programme itself are established around core work themes and are coordinated by the programme manager. Team and Board meetings are conducted on a weekly and monthly basis respectively and the Partnership meets formally as a full partnership four times a year.

4.3.2 Management style

Professional interpretations of programme management are twofold:

- Management style is shaped by Sure Start principles
- Management style is related to a particular approach to management.

For some people the management of the Thorntree and Brambles Farm programme is inseparable from the Sure Start principles guiding it. Sure Start’s new approach (4.1.1), particularly the emphasis on new collaborative ways of working, makes particular demands on the programme manager role and shapes the way it is seen by others.

The distinctive thing is that the programme manager is coordinating the whole lot … Because what generally has happened, from my experience, is that you have your community initiatives, and each organisation feeds into a community but they still hold responsibility and
managerial accountability for that individual … Whereas Sure Start has addressed it differently; because the programme manager has overall organisational responsibility for all those individuals.

This view emphasises the strategic importance of the role at a macro level. Sure Start programme managers are considered to have more power and responsibility than managers of previous community initiatives. This makes particular demands on the role, particularly the need to build a broad knowledge base for the effective coordination of diverse agencies and partners.

*I think the person who comes into post … needs to have a real strong vision about partnerships. And has to be creative with how they develop the partnerships.*

There is widespread professional admiration for the way this has been accomplished in the Thorntree and Brambles Farm project.

This perspective initially makes links between management style and Sure Start processes and concludes by bringing individual characteristics into focus. Other people, however, use personal characteristics as a starting point and see the management of the Thorntree and Brambles Farm programme in terms of personal qualities, allied to a general ethic of work and people management.

*What you’ve got … is a real sense of commitment. I mean, the one thing that will make this work or fail, is whether communities will accept the people who are working with them … [the manager’s] got all the skills to deal with people on different levels, without ever being patronising.*

This view displays managerial leadership at a micro level; co-working as much as coordinating. It has a different focus but again shows the pivotal nature of the programme manager role. It also shows the regard others have for the way the programme is led and managed.

Programme management is viewed positively throughout the partnership. There are also challenges, however.

### 4.3.3 Challenges and management style

Additional Sure Start programmes have recently been approved in Middlesbrough (see 2.4). The programme manager has been heavily involved in the planning and development of those initiatives, and this presented the Thorntree and Brambles Farm project with a series of challenges.

*Because Middlesbrough’s been so successful in getting additional Sure Start programmes … the manager that was appointed at Thorntree has had to take on some developmental work for those two project … I think that’s, maybe, been slightly detrimental to the Thorntree project.*
The key concern for Sure Start Thorntree and Brambles Farm was the timing of this additional work, which coincided with the arrival of newly recruited staff.

On one level the issue can be considered in isolation, an event unique to the programme and one characterised by coincidence and timing. Certainly, it has now been resolved. Initial planning and development of the new Sure Start projects is complete and programme managers have been appointed to them.

On another level, however, the challenge can be thought more complex, and some people expressed this view.

- As in the previous section, personal characteristics were used as a means to access management and explain the additional workload. The programme manager was described as ‘competent’, and it was felt that ‘people who are more competent get more put on them’.

- A key challenge for the partnership is to be aware of this:

  *I think there’s a responsibility for Board members to watch out for our team, staff, and make sure that they are not being over-stretched. Because they can be left.*

However, as noted above (4.3.2), Sure Start itself adopts a particular style of management in which managers are encouraged to assume high levels of individual responsibility and autonomy. This is part of the distinctive nature of the programme and suggests that managers become accustomed to these demands. Consequently, it also suggests the possibility that challenges, such as the one above, may not be isolated events but part of the fabric of Sure Start programme management.

The context of Sure Start, both locally and nationally, continues to be one of change and development. New regional support structures have been established in the light of the increasing decentralisation of responsibilities. Those structures suggest a strengthening of programme management support networks and consolidate the view that the events described above reflect an earlier set of circumstances. Nonetheless, there are other challenges that have emerged during the project’s formative stage.

### 4.3.4 Other emerging challenges

- Although regional networks provide new levels of support, programme managers are involved in the co-ordination of growing levels of activity, organisational involvement and information flows. The role is the focal point across a range of issues: community engagement, staff training, capital development, data protection, publicity, evaluation and so on. There is an immediate challenge, then, to shape the managerial role whilst simultaneously learning about its requirements and demands.
One of the things that any manager has to do very quickly is to begin to shift that information and say ‘what do I need for my programme or what do we need for our area’ … there’s a potential for a Sure Start style of management to eat into everybody’s time. So I think what we have to do is learn to manage it and we’ll all manage it in different ways.

Clearly there is scope within the programme manager’s role for different people to manage in different ways. However, there are also key requirements common to all interpretations. For example, risk assessment criteria around governance and partnership working set out process benchmarks and required standards for the documenting of decision making processes and the delegation of authority (Sure Start Unit, 2002). In the early stages of the evaluation, team members spoke positively about the ‘open’ nature of the Thorntree and Brambles Farm programme and its emphasis on communication and support. They suggested that these qualities facilitated an open forum for professional discussion and decision making.

All decisions are brought to a team meeting, are discussed, and then we decide and act upon them.

Team members continue to view discussion in this way. However, as Sure Start has progressed on Thorntree and Brambles Farm, a series of challenges have emerged particularly around the delegation of managerial work.

- Most people spoke of the amount of time they had to devote to managerial issues. They felt that it drew them away from work with people and this could be a source of frustration.

  I think that’s one of the frustrating bits because I’ve been doing all the setting up on management type issues and I’m much more of a practical person.

- Others identified challenges associated with time constraints and, given the increased emphasis on written work, constraints related to office space.

  How am I integrating [management] into my work? … there isn’t a lot of time to integrate. You’re learning it on the hoof.

  This is not to do with how I’m managed or how we manage our time. It’s actually to do with the physical environment.

- And all, in different ways, spoke of discrepancies between the reality of their role and their prior expectations of it.

  There had been a Sure Start in Middlesbrough already so I thought loads of the stuff, very naively, would have been set up. I’m doing things that I assumed would have either been set up because there was a precedent, or I assumed it would have been set up in the planning stages.
Challenges associated with role expectations were not confined to managerial team members. For example, other team members spoke of having to construct Sure Start documents for the purposes of recording their work, before they could begin to contact and visit people. One person summed up many of the processes alluded to above: ‘I would say that some of the challenges are, trying to do your job when the system is not fully in place’.

Alongside challenges related to managerialism, working practices and expectations, respondents identified other concerns. These bring relationships with parents into focus.

- One issue that represents an ongoing challenge for the programme concerns parental representation at Board level. Local representation is fundamental to the programme and the foundations have been laid in the formative period. It is recognised, however, that a more democratic process and system is needed to move beyond the current approach to local representation. Further discussion on this issue is contained in Chapters 5 and 6.

- Another challenge, and one that was described as a ‘lesson learnt’, highlights the need to continually maintain close contact with members of the community. This is particularly important during periods when activity days and information sessions are not being conducted or staff are involved in courses or visits to other organisations or groups. Team members now routinely involve parents in those visits following a period when: ‘it felt like we lost a bit of contact. We brought that back but it’s a lesson for us’.

### 4.4 Summary

- Professional stakeholders perceive Sure Start as a strategic approach based on new ideas about the nature of social problems, working practices, professional/community relationships and funding commitments.

- The Thorntree and Brambles Farm programme has a strategic focus on long-term outcomes and intermediate processes.

- The profile of the programme was initially raised but proved difficult to sustain without conspicuous capital development. Site developments have now begun and should help sharpen the profile of the programme in the community.

- The local knowledge base is being strategically maintained: i.e. by Newsletter, activity days, recruitment training. Project activity is also enhancing profile at a micro level.

- However, professional stakeholders feel there is still some uncertainty about Sure Start in the community. They feel there is a lack of expectation about it, notably in relation to sustainability. This lack of expectation reflects wider disaffection reinforced by perceptions of previous area-based initiatives. This constitutes a key barrier.
• The role of the programme manager is seen to be pivotal to programme development, and programme management is viewed positively throughout the professional partnership.

• Managerial style is seen to be shaped both by Sure Start principles and a particular approach to management. Strategically the role demands a broad knowledge base for effective partnership coordination.

• The involvement of the programme manager in the planning and development of additional Sure Start programmes was challenging for the Thorntree and Brambles Farm project.

• Some stakeholders suggested the issue was isolated and had been resolved, although the possibility is noted that it could reflect distinctive aspects of Sure Start management style.

• Key challenges concerning the structural nature of the programme manager role are addressed.

• Other emerging challenges are noted. Issues include the delegation of managerial work and its impact on other areas of professional work, the constraints of time and space, and challenges associated with role expectations.

• Professional views on the ongoing challenges of parental representation and involvement are documented.
5. **Partnership development**

Partnerships and multi-agency working are central themes of Sure Start’s approach to tackling child poverty and social exclusion, reflecting recent political emphasis upon developing ‘joined up’ solutions to ‘joined up’ problems. Consequently, they are identified as a key concern for local evaluation study (Sure Start Unit, 2000).

This chapter examines professional perspectives on partnership issues in the Thorntree and Brambles Farm programme and begins with a professional overview of partnership working. The distinctive nature of Sure Start’s approach to partnership is then addressed, and current experiences of partnership and multi-agency collaboration are analysed.

Relationships between the programme and the communities of Thorntree and Brambles Farm are crucial to the development of professional/community partnership. Respondents’ experiences of these relationships are retold and integrated into wider discussion on issues associated with the recruitment of community members to the project. Challenging aspects of these processes are examined.

5.1 **Principles of partnership**

There is agreement throughout the programme that partnership and multi-agency collaboration is fundamental to the philosophy of Sure Start. Part of this relates to knowledge of the wider context.

*This isn’t something fancy you can take or leave. The truth is, for the future, the government of the day have made it abundantly clear that this is a requirement.*

There is no discrepancy between government requirements and professional aspirations on the Thorntree and Brambles Farm project. Respondents all spoke of their commitment to collaboration and joint working. They also have a clear vision of the principles upon which successful partnerships are based. These include:

- Good communication
- Openness and transparency
- Receptive to other ideas
- Knowledge of other roles
- Strong management
- Clear objectives
- Trust
- Tolerance and positive attitude
- Wide representation
5.2 Partnership and Sure Start

Sure Start professionals also talked about collaboration and inter-agency working in specific terms. One way they did this was to reflect on the distinctive nature of those processes within the Sure Start framework. Characteristics include:

- Partnership is central to the Sure Start initiative.

  *I think the difference is that it starts with partnership … it's not a particularly new way of working [but] the difference is that Sure Start is starting afresh.*

- Sure Start involves the community as partner, establishing new relationships between professionals and lay people.

  *It's the beginning of a different basis. It's a different interface with parents.*

- Those relationships heighten and maintain the emphasis on family experience and need.

  *A partnership approach helps us to keep trying to look at issues from family perspectives, so my favourite comment is ‘what does it look like from the buggy?’ You know, the mum pushing it, the toddler walking alongside, the baby in it; how does it look, how does that family experience life? I think we have to keep doing that all the time so that we don’t see the way we deliver things in terms of those agencies but what that family needs.*

- Flexibility is built in to an understanding of partnership in Sure Start, supported by current political commitment.

  *In some places I found totally inflexible approaches … Whereas I think our approach is very much, you know, “we know we need to work in partnership with you, so we need to work out how we can achieve that with you”. So I think flexibility’s the key thing … I think we have the resources and the funding and the time to be flexible, you know, which other maybe short-term projects don’t have.*

Not all respondents felt that Sure Start’s approach to partnership was necessarily different or distinctive. Some saw it as part of a general process of organisational and occupational change. Most, however, believed that the initiative adopted and encouraged a distinctive approach to partnerships. This is also apparent at managerial level.
5.2.1 Partnership and the management of Sure Start

Sure Start’s emphasis on new ways of working makes particular demands on the programme manager role (see 4.3). Given the strategic responsibility of the role to coordinate diverse organisations and agencies, there is a need for a flexible and creative managerial approach. This requires managers to have a strong vision of partnership. Crucial to that vision is the capacity to:

work outside of boxes – work outside the boxes they’ve been used to.

This approach to partnership involves working beyond the security of traditional perspectives and encouraging others to do the same to produce an integrated, collaborative response. It also demands an understanding of partner perspectives and concerns and a creative approach to the management of change.

Many people noted that Sure Start Thorntree and Brambles Farm is led by example on this issue, given the professional background of the programme manager and the inter-agency, multi-disciplinary nature of the programme.

5.3 Experiencing partnership

Progress has been made in the development of partnerships at different levels of the Thorntree and Brambles Farm programme. Strategically it is believed that:

There’s a big commitment from the agencies represented on the Board to try and change, perhaps the way their own service works and their own people deliver services, you know, to try and make them work together more collaboratively.

Similarly, team workers spoke of the personal, micro-level building of alliances and relationships with people from other agencies and organisations. They spoke too of the reciprocal nature of those alliances and their importance for enhancing existing services and leading new developments. They also brought the local communities into focus.

When you say partnership I always think of the community as well. I think that’s the most important partnership we’ve got.

One person summed up general partnership trends: ‘I think that we have come a long way in terms of partnership working’. This applies at programme level as well. However, the professional experience of partnership work is also challenging and there were a number of issues common to that experience.

5.3.1 Challenges to partnership working

- At a strategic level one of the major challenges to successful partnership work was considered to be the success of Sure Start itself. New developments led to an increasing need for information across a range of agencies and increasing demands for their cooperation and collaboration.
• Time was identified as another challenge at strategic level. The time constraints associated with submitting development plans could lead to ‘silo-type contributions’ from different agencies rather than an integrated response.

• The constraints of bidding and planning culture could also work against the meaningful inclusion of communities at the very point that their inclusion is most important. Parents and other local people are involved, but:

  * there's been no time to develop them, or prepare them for that involvement … So it’s a pity, in a way, that we couldn't have a bid that would allow us a block of money for the first year that actually pays for the bid. And you work with the people in a much more structured and longer term way.

• Time is also a significant issue for the development of partnerships at team level.

  * I don’t think we've got the communication network yet … We will, it’s whether we will be permitted to take the time that it needs to take, given that we are a high level project.

• Perceptions of Sure Start from the perspectives of other professional groups can be problematic.

  * Some of the people that I've been working with, it's more about other professionals’ points of view … It’s about Sure Start, and so I think it’s the professionals are the biggest challenges we’ve got.

This point was particularly apparent in the early stages of the evaluation when some team members spoke of encountering suspicion, even hostility, as they worked to build relationships and establish partnerships with other agencies. The recruitment of a non-local project team, allied to the notion that Sure Start could be interpreted as a judgement on existing service provision, presented a series of challenges.

Those challenges are ongoing but team members latterly report more positive responses to Sure Start as the programme has become more established. This is related both to the increasing visibility of project activity and the development of relationships and trust with other professionals and organisations. This emphasis on trust is also significant in the building of relationships with local communities. The next section extends analysis of partnership experiences, focusing in particular on community issues.
5.4 Partnership and the community

Many community regeneration initiatives failed in the past because they did not involve local residents (Neighbourhood Renewal Unit, 2002: 10; Foley and Martin, 2000). Sure Start is based on the general principles of community involvement and participation, and Sure Start Thorntree and Brambles Farm is specific in its focus.

They’re the most important people in this partnership.

5.4.1 Community involvement: processes and benefits

Community involvement is the founding principle of the programme. Partnership with local communities is an immediate aim with a view to promoting the local ownership of ideas and initiatives. Evidence of involvement includes:

- Parental representation at Board level
- Local participation in the interviewing and selecting of prospective staff
- Chairing of interview sessions by local people
- Local support by early initiatives.

A core group of parents have demonstrated particularly high levels of commitment, reorganising their everyday lives at key stages of the programme’s development.

Residents have been involved in the interview procedure, which has meant they’ve had to have some training in recruitment and selection and equal opportunities. It means a huge time commitment – bearing in mind most of the parents involved have very young children.

A strategy has been developed to ensure that these processes are inclusive rather than exclusive although, as noted earlier (4.3.4), the longer-term vision is of a more democratic nature.

We might have to develop a new way of membership so that people understand that they are part of a group that can train itself and become an elected number of parents. And I do see that as a way forward. I think we need a democratic system that contributes to the Board.

Further, it was noted that local residents involved in interview training and selection continued their involvement in other ways; at meetings, events, groups, activities and information days, thereby continuing the project’s grounding in the community. The long-term benefits to the project are apparent, and professional stakeholders perceived other, more immediate benefits.
Economic benefit was identified.

They’ll acquire skills as they go along, and perhaps, if the opportunity arises and they feel it’s the route they want to take, it might help them back to work.

Benefit was conceived on a personal level, enhancing confidence and esteem.

If we can put that confidence there, in the parents and the children, through this programme, they’ll stand up to it. And they will shine, and they will do well.

And benefit was considered from professional perspectives:

It’s a networking opportunity for everybody … It reminds us, perhaps, we are not actually doing things the right way by everything [being] really structured … You know, maybe there’s a more exciting way of doing business!

However, alongside notions of mutual benefit and the development of a core group of residents, professional stakeholders reflected on a different set of processes that are equally important to the status of Sure Start in the Thorntree and Brambles Farm communities.

The potential for the programme to be associated more with Thorntree than Brambles Farm is one concern.

The perception is, to a large degree is accurate, that we haven’t done as much in Brambles Farm as we have done in Thorntree.

This leads to wider consideration of cultural and boundary issues between Thorntree and Brambles Farm and raises the question of whether those issues could constrain programme development.

5.4.2 Communities and boundaries

Some people feel that the dual focus on Thorntree and Brambles Farm presents the programme with a particular problem.

I think there’s a difference. College Road divides Brambles Farm and Thorntree, quite clearly, and it’s quite unusual to cross that boundary.

Such boundaries are apparent, and there are likely to be others that are less so, but boundary issues do not appear to preoccupy the majority of community members currently connected to the project, nor have they emerged as significant obstacles to its development. A number of local views on this issue are set out in the following chapter.
Of more immediate concern, as noted at the end of the previous section, is the potential for this to develop into a major issue, and for the programme to become labelled as a Thorntree project. A number of key points have been made throughout the evaluation:

Much of this relates to the current status of capital development: ‘we are not a physical presence in Brambles Farm, so I don’t know if they see us as theirs yet’.

It is also reflected in the composition of parental representation at Board level. Thorntree continues to have a higher profile than Brambles Farm in terms of local representation.

Professional stakeholders spoke of the ongoing need to raise the profile of the project throughout the Sure Start area, but with particular emphasis on Brambles Farm. This remains a key aim of the programme in its formative stage and events continue to be held at both community centres.

However, in the longer term it is the aim of the programme to move beyond the replication of events and develop different Sure Start services in different locations. To some extent this is already beginning:

I think there’s a shift, we’re delivering things in outreach style. And I think that means that you don’t have to do that business of ‘are we doing the same everywhere’. It might actually develop a different sort of pattern across the whole community. People go to different places for different things which is what I would like to see happening eventually.

5.4.3 Community recruitment

The involvement and participation of parents and local people in Sure Start is a strategic requirement (Sure Start Unit, 2002), as well as a desired aim. Sure Start Thorntree and Brambles Farm has recruited a core group of people whose commitment and enthusiasm has helped to establish the programme (see 5.4.1). That commitment is appreciated by professional stakeholders, although it is felt that the project also needs to develop its partnership with the local communities.

You’ve got the initial contacts and then it’s looking at who are the second people in the circle. There’s a lot of excellent, community people … who may not come forward unless they’re asked.

This is a challenging process on a number of levels:

Respondents noted that local stakeholders needed to be encouraged to share their experiences to promote Sure Start as an inclusive programme: ‘they are the key people who are going to encourage other people to become active’.

Those key people require support themselves, particularly at a time when other members of the community can be sceptical and unconvinced.
We need to look at how we maintain the enthusiasm of the people who are already in the group and create opportunities for them to continue that level of interest.

- Reaching new people or people whose networks are not extensive is particularly problematic in a cultural environment in which ‘word of mouth’ knowledge is highly valued.

- Local politics and family rivalries have to be understood and managed.

- Traditionally hard to reach groups are not only hard to reach and recruit, but may not necessarily be welcomed by others.

- As noted earlier (4.2.3 and 4.2.4) local expectations, both generally and in relation to previous experience of community-based initiatives, can work against participation.

The above represent some key challenges currently experienced by Sure Start Thorntree and Brambles Farm in processes of community recruitment. The next chapter balances those arguments, setting out the views of a group of parents with varied knowledge and experiences of the programme.

5.5 Summary

- Partnership working is central to the vision of the Thorntree and Brambles Farm programme. Key points include the centrality of partnership, emphasis on new professional community relationships, flexibility of working practices and managerial style.

- Progress is being made in the development of partnerships both strategically and at a micro level.

- Challenges to partnership working at a strategic level include: increasing demands on agencies, the constraints of planning and bidding culture and time issues around the submission of plans.

- Time was also a significant concern at programme level, together with problems associated with perceptions of Sure Start from perspectives of groups already working locally. Those perceptions are beginning to change as the programme develops.

- Community involvement is the founding principle of the programme and professional stakeholders considered the community to be their principal partner.

- Parents are represented at board level and involved in the interviewing and selection of prospective staff.
• Stakeholders perceived a series of benefits of involvement for both communities and professionals. They also emphasised the inclusive nature of their approach to community involvement, although a more democratic system of representation is envisaged as the programme develops. A core group of parents have already committed themselves to Sure Start.

• It was recognised that a key challenge for the programme is to ensure that it is perceived as both a Thorntree and Brambles Farm initiative. Boundary issues are apparent but do not yet appear to be a significant obstacle to development.

• Thorntree has a higher profile than Brambles Farm in terms of representation at Board level.

• Stakeholders feel it is important to develop partnerships with the local communities. Challenges include encouraging key people to share their experiences of Sure Start. It was also noted that these people need support themselves. Issues around local politics, ‘word of mouth’ culture, hard to reach groups and local expectations were also apparent.
6. Local views and experiences

The two previous chapters document the professional development of Sure Start Thorntree and Brambles Farm. This chapter broadens the study, bringing local views and experiences into focus. As noted earlier (3.3), parents contributed to the evaluation in different ways. Some spoke in informal meetings conducted in local school nurseries; others were interviewed more formally. Collectively, they produce data of a varied and diverse nature that give important insights into local opinion, knowledge and experience. They also suggest areas for further study that would enhance the programme’s evaluation portfolio.

A recent study commissioned by the Sure Start Unit and conducted by MORI offers a useful framework for organising and categorising data on local views and experience (Sure Start Unit/MORI, 2001). Empirical categories include: client satisfaction, access to services, awareness, family support, play and learning, childcare and impact on the local community. A number of categories proved valuable to this evaluation and the chapter begins by looking at levels of local awareness of Sure Start on Thorntree and Brambles Farm. Views on raising awareness are then considered and effective ways of recruiting parents are identified. The chapter moves on to discuss parents’ perspectives on the key benefits of the programme to date, and highlights some developments they would like to see in the future. The concluding section assesses local opinion on the relationship between communities and boundaries.

6.1 Awareness of Sure Start

Parents displayed different levels of awareness about the programme. Some had a rounded knowledge of Sure Start aims and objectives; others were knowledgeable about specific projects, notably BLAST, but seemed less well informed about the programme as a whole.

However, a lack of detailed knowledge about Sure Start does not necessarily equate with a lack of awareness of the programme. For example, although some parents believed they had no knowledge of the project and were unfamiliar with Sure Start personnel beyond a school environment, they did reveal a superficial awareness of programme publicity and activity. They:

- Recollected seeing Sure Start posters in the Post Office
- Had some awareness of the ‘drop-in’ facilities at local schools, although they had not yet used the facilities
- Knew that activity days had taken place in the past
- Made a connection between Sure Start and the possibility of day trips

This suggests there may be a growing awareness of the programme at community level that is currently difficult to conceptualise. Some members of the project team articulated this view: ‘there may be things that I’m not aware of where people are getting used to something with Sure Start’s name on it’.
A number of parents also identified an underlying awareness in the community, although they qualified this with the suggestion that many local people are hesitant and reluctant to commit themselves until Sure Start becomes more visible.

*I would say [Sure Start is] very well known. I think the people themselves won’t actually believe – if that’s the word I can use – that it’s actually going to happen until they actually see the extensions going on the buildings, and the place actually up and running. Yes, there’s been so much promised to Thorntree and it’s never materialised and I think they’re maybe a bit sceptical that this is going to be another ‘pie in the sky’.*

This reaffirms the importance of the relationship between capital investment and programme profile, and reinforces earlier discussion on local disaffection as one of the principal barriers to programme development (4.2.4).

### 6.1.1 Raising awareness and understanding

Despite acknowledging a growing awareness of Sure Start on Thorntree and Brambles Farm, all parents who participated in the evaluation believed that local awareness and understanding of Sure Start could be enhanced. This is consistent with the views of the parent group in the Sure Start Unit/MORI (2001) study.

Suggested channels of communication included:

- Community adverts on television
- Information on the internet
- Lively information sheets/leaflets

Parents spoke in particular about the number of letters and leaflets they receive and reflected on the need for Sure Start material to be different and distinctive.

*Most letters are plain white paper and I get enough of them – they go in the kitchen drawer.*

The **Leaps & Bounds** newsletter is one document that goes beyond a traditional information sheet format. However, it was felt that a lot of other Sure Start material could be made more distinctive by the use of colour and innovative design. The use of children’s drawings was suggested by parents as one way of making publicity and information material more attractive. It was also thought that the inclusion of photographs of children on Sure Start would have a similar effect.

Prominent key words are also crucial to the immediate impact of a letter or leaflet. ‘Free’ was thought to carry a certain weight.

*I’ve had newsletters and some people like me you just think it’s junk mail, but if you get ‘free’ on top … free in big words.*
'Children' also demanded attention.

*If I get something, if it says it's for you then I normally put it in the bin, but if it spots the children I'll look at it.*

In summary, parents believed that distinctive, colourful and prominently worded information sheets could help raise local awareness of Sure Start on Thorntree and Brambles Farm. However, whilst parents acknowledged the importance of these issues, they also believed there are more effective ways of informing local people. These relate to their own early experiences and the processes involved in bringing them into contact with the programme.

### 6.1.2 Points of contact

Initial points of contact between Sure Start and members of the parent group were diverse. Key people and forums include:

- Friend-relative
- Sure Start staff
- College
- Social Worker
- School
- Activity day/event

It would be valuable to know more about the ways that parents are recruited to Sure Start, and a map of key routes and effective points of contact could form part of future evaluation. This report gives an insight into the potential complexity of the issue, highlighting considerable diversity relative to the size of the parent group.

Despite this diversity, however, most effective points of contact are based upon relationships. No parent identified material as the sole or key factor in their recruitment. Respondents talked instead of the importance of friendships and the value of ‘word of mouth’ knowledge.

*People on an estate trust their friends, and if their friends are seen, you know what I mean, its trust in people they know rather than coming into a building of complete strangers. But if their friend who they know and trust and they’ve know for so many years has come and had a word with so-and-so down at Sure Start, and it’s worked for them, well then they’re more likely to come as well.*

For many people this emphasis on local friendships and personal trust marginalises the impact of professionalism, at least in the initial stages of a project.
I think if someone from the team had approached me it would have been like, you know, ‘thinking about it’. But if another mother tells you ‘they do this, they do that, and it’s good for you and they do this with the children’, you think ‘oh well, that’s better’. You feel a bit more comfortable if another parent tells you about it rather than a professional person.

However, others acknowledged the importance of relationships with professional people and institutions, such as health visitors, social workers and local schools. For some parents, rather than being set apart from ‘word of mouth’ knowledge, professional opinion was thought to be equally valuable in establishing the programme in the community. This reinforces an earlier point that parents cannot be considered as an homogenous group and that Sure Start will mean different things to different people (4.2.4). Some of those meanings inform the following sections of this chapter, the first of which discussed local views on the immediate benefits of the programme.

6.2 Some key benefits

Parents identified a number of key benefits, both for their children and themselves, that could be attributed directly to Sure Start investment on Thorntree and Brambles Farm.

- Parents feel that Sure Start is already making a difference for children and the immediate impact of the BLAST project was highlighted.

  Sure Start are going in and [children] are getting the help straight away, instead of having to be referred and wait months and months.

- The professional status of Sure Start facilities, work and personnel is valued and trusted. That confidence is already enabling parents to plan for the future.

  When September comes I know the ‘wrap around’ nursery’s gonna be there … I know Sure Start’s providing it, I know it’s gonna be government standard so I am gonna trust them.

- The immediacy of access to professional people in an informal setting is considered important. Sure Start staff are valued for their expertise and knowledge base, and also as individual people.

  I can come in here and approach somebody and just have a quiet word with them rather than have to make an appointment and go to the doctors … I feel it’s a befriending service as well, and I feel they are very friendly and approachable.

- Improved access to professional advice, together with the approachability of Sure Start staff, has encouraged parents to address problems that may otherwise have intensified. It is also increasing their confidence to manage those problems on an everyday basis.
Sure Start Thorntree and Brambles Farm has encouraged some people to develop knowledge and learning in more formal ways. Parents have participated in conferences, activities and courses, achieved formal qualifications and pursued further college work.

Parents involved in the interviewing of prospective staff and in the representation of the community at Board level felt they had gained in confidence and acquired new skills as a result of their experiences.

Some individuals have also extended their social networks and acquired wider knowledge about the locality through involvement in the programme.

*Your children make friends for you … I would not have been involved with so many people and so many courses and different activities.*

*The social, like socialising with parents and getting to know the parents and you find out about the area more, they tell you different things.*

This knowledge and involvement led some parents to suggest that Sure Start is already beginning to influence the ‘spirit’ of the Thorntree and Brambles Farm communities.

### 6.2.1 Sure Start and community spirit

One of the main findings of the Sure Start Unit/MORI (2001: 5) study identifies an increased level of ‘community spirit’ with parents working together to improve their local community as a result of Sure Start. This study examines the impact of Sure Start one year into the programme.

Sure Start Thorntree and Brambles Farm is in the formative period and was not expected to demonstrate similar levels of change at this stage. Nonetheless, some parents feel that the programme is beginning to provoke a stronger sense of community.

*Community’s getting closer, you know, like before you’re in your own house and that’s it. You don’t go out of doors, you don’t speak to your neighbour or anything, but now I think the community’s come back together again. I think people are talking to each other in the street.*

It is beyond the scope of this report to gauge the prevalence of this view amongst the wider population of Thorntree and Brambles Farm. However, a number of parents noted the increasing potential for Sure Start to connect people.

*When you talk to another parent you realise yourself that it’s not just you who has problems, everyone’s got the same problem, its just getting them resolved. You don’t feel alone because everyone has the same feelings.*
This sense of becoming part of a more inter-connected community is a particular feature of the views of parent representatives. They note that much of their role is conducted on an informal level, with people approaching them for information and opinion, leading to the extending of social networks and involvement. The Sure Start Unit/MORI (2001) research suggests that this process intensifies and becomes more complex as programmes develop. This is a key area for further study. As noted earlier (5.4.1), it is the long-term aim of Sure Start Thorntree and Brambles Farm to establish a systematic approach to representation and involvement. Further evaluation in this field would inform and support this process.

6.3 Some things parents would like to see

In addition to discussion on the immediate benefits of Sure Start, parents reflected on their hopes for the future and the ways that the programme could help realise them.

- The provision of high quality child care/play group facilities is a priority. Local thinking on new development is twofold. One the one hand, parents want to see evidence of that development.

  So, when’s it all going to start? What’s going to happen here?

On the other hand, they convey a confidence in Sure Start work and personnel.

  Sure Start, you know they’re gonna be professionals. It gives you peace of mind so you can leave the kids, go to work and you’re not really worried about them.

- The need for a clean and safe environment for play is another priority. The development of the Play Area was thought to be particularly vital given that: ‘there’s nothing round here for our children, not young ones anyway’.

- The lack of personal transport is a significant problem and this raised discussion about the possibility of organised trips away from Thorntree and Brambles Farm. It was believed these would be stimulating for children and important socially for parents.

- Most of the parent group wanted to see supervised physical activities for young children.

  You could have one of the team or someone from the leisure … Just have like a goal post just for the ‘little uns’ running about, there’s plenty of land isn’t there.

- Parents talked positively about Sure Start open/activity days: ‘the open days they’re great, [people] love to come to them’. It was hoped that similar days would be arranged in the future, but parents also wanted them to be established on a regular basis: ‘maybe do one a month’.
Apart from activity days, parents felt that a regular point of contact with Sure Start would be valuable. One suggestion was for a regular coffee morning.

Even if they had a coffee morning for parents to come down and sit and talk … quite a few parents have said to me: ‘I want to get involved, you know, find out more’.

They’re curious. They wanna talk about parent problems, find out what Sure Start’s about and have a coffee morning.

Regular points of contact would also enable people to integrate Sure Start into their personal routines. Professional stakeholders are aware of the potential of this approach and the value of further study is apparent.

Some people suggested that more notice could be given about forthcoming Sure Start events and activities, giving parents more time to make arrangements to attend.

It was also considered important for Sure Start to maintain contact with parents after they had registered with the programme. A ‘thank you’ letter was proposed and this is now part of the registration process.

Many of the parent group involved in this evaluation live on Thorntree, and some members felt it would be beneficial for parents across the Sure Start area to meet.

We should mix, you know have an open day where we can meet Brambles Farm parents, somewhere in between.

The following section considers this issue in more detail.

6.4 Communities and boundaries: a local view

It was noted in an earlier section (5.4.2) that the dual focus on Thorntree and Brambles Farm could be problematic, although there is no evidence that boundary issues have emerged as significant obstacles to Sure Start development. Certainly there are historical and geographical differences between the two estates, and for some people those differences do underpin local, cultural identities.

There’s a lot of barriers to get over because there’s a big barrier between Thorntree and Brambles Farm … It’s them and us, and it’s always been like that.

For other people, the populations of Thorntree and Brambles Farm are not ‘divided’ from one another in a cultural sense; rather, people’s routes and routines seem to be shaped by practical concerns such as family, friendships, school, shopping. However, for many of the parent group in this evaluation those concerns and relationships do not lead a significant movement across estates. As one person observed: ‘people don’t really want to walk very far do they?’
It may be, then, that peoples’ everyday concerns and routines constitute more of a challenge to Sure Start than cultural membership, that boundaries are more about practical issues than cultural identity. The successful integration of Sure Start into local lives is likely to be sensitive to those issues and this perspective corresponds with the philosophy of Sure Start Thorntree and Brambles Farm.

6.5 Summary

- Parents displayed different levels of awareness about the programme, from a detailed knowledge of Sure Start aims to a more superficial awareness of activity and publicity.

- It was suggested that many local people are reluctant to commit themselves to Sure Start until it is made more visible.

- The parent group felt that local awareness could be enhanced; publicity material could be made more distinctive, possibly incorporating photographs and children's artwork.

- The value of ‘word of mouth’ knowledge was considered crucial to the effective establishment of Sure Start in the community. Local friendships and personal trust were emphasised. The importance of relationships with professional people was also acknowledged.

- Parents identified key benefits of Sure Start investment on Thorntree and Brambles Farm. These include the impact of key services, confidence in Sure Start personnel, informal access to expertise, family support, personal development, extended social networks and wider local knowledge.

- Some parents felt that Sure Start was beginning to generate a stronger sense of community, although this view was expressed by people already committed to the programme.

- Parents want to see evidence of new development. High quality child care/playgroup facilities and safe play areas are priorities. Organised trips, physical activities for children and more open days were also wanted.

- Regular points of contact with the programme would be valuable. Parents suggested coffee mornings as a way to accomplish this.

- More contact between Thorntree and Brambles Farm parents was considered important, although peoples’ everyday routines and concerns may currently constitute a challenge.

- Key areas for further evaluation were identified throughout the chapter. These include: analysing informal and formal aspects of parent representation, mapping ways parents are effectively recruited to the programme, and studying everyday routes and routines with a view to integrating Sure Start into local life.
7. Understanding quality

Guidelines on the evaluation of Sure Start identify ‘quality’ as one of the major cross cutting processes that require evaluation at local level (Sure Start Unit, 2000). This final chapter addresses this important theme which is an appropriate concluding topic; it consolidates many of the key themes of the evaluation as a whole. The chapter begins by noting the elusiveness of the meanings of quality and discusses two approaches to the problem of definition. Elements of those approaches are then combined to form a framework for considering stakeholder views on quality issues and meanings.

As with previous chapters data are set out under headings that express the views of parents and professionals, and correspond with local evaluation requirements. Key themes include: a holistic view of quality; relationships and partnerships; processes and service delivery; structural issues and perceptions of outcome.

7.1 The problem of definition

Quality is a term much used yet notoriously difficult to define, and the elusive nature of its meanings provokes wide-ranging debate. One commentator whose work forms a cornerstone of that debate is Avedis Donabedian. Donabedian (1992, 1980) discusses quality on three levels: process, structure and outcome. Process refers to the actual delivery of services and embraces all aspects of the delivery process (e.g., access, professional activity, administration). Structure includes but also goes beyond matters of resource and capital development, bringing such issues as power, work procedure and the coordination of expertise into focus. Outcome is about end results, from quantifiable rates of change to client satisfaction and experience.

Another approach to the problem of definition focuses on the relationship between quality and group interests. Here, different definitions of quality and approaches to its improvement are shaped by diverse group interests and experiences. Groups are involved in a struggle to determine which definitions and approaches will be most prominent. Pollitt (1993) discusses this ‘politics of quality’ perspective in the field of health care. He identifies three versions of quality in that field – medical, service and experienced quality – and notes the relatively low status of the ‘experienced quality’ of patients/users.

7.1.2 An analytical framework

The above examples give some insight into the elusiveness of quality and its capacity to provoke debate. However, elements of the above perspectives on quality can also be combined to the benefit of this evaluation.

For example, Donabedian’s distinction between process, structure and outcome offers a valuable framework for organising respondent views on quality. It enables important differences between key themes to be identified and categorised, and employs concepts and terminology well established in the study of quality issues.

Pollitt’s observation that users’ perceptions of quality are less prominent than professional views is also important. He says that in the ‘struggle for quality’, local
knowledge and experience constitutes ‘the type of quality we currently know least about’ (Pollitt 1993: 163). As noted earlier (5.4), the lack of engagement with local knowledge has resulted in the failure of previous community-focused initiatives to meaningfully involve communities in processes of change. Sure Start promises a new strategic approach in the field of community development, and the incorporation of local knowledge in service design and delivery is central to that approach. This chapter addresses the shortcoming identified above, according equal status to the views of professional and local people.

7.2 A holistic view

Descriptions of quality reveal priorities, things that matter to people. Data produced in this part of the evaluation demonstrate the breadth of issues that people consider important to them, either as parents or professionals. Respondents separated out those issues as they talked, but for many of them a holistic view of quality represented an important starting point.

_It comes into every layer of what we’re doing; people, equipment, training, courses, all aspects of child development, and health development … that’s what quality’s about._

_It’s the right thing, in the right place, at the right time, to the right people, in the right way._

This reaffirms the programme’s strategic vision of Sure Start as an integrated approach to community regeneration. Quality is associated with, and believed to impact upon, all aspects of programme philosophy, performance and experience.

This abstract view of quality as an all-embracing principle is a particular feature of professional accounts. Parents relate quality more immediately to key concerns and personal issues, yet often link these together and associate them as a whole with ‘quality’. This suggests that some parents may also subscribe to, or be moving towards, this holistic and multi-dimensional view.

7.3 Quality and process

Respondents also accounted for quality on a micro level, selecting aspects of their involvement with the programme to convey the things that matter most. All of the contributors to this evaluation considered quality in relation to key Sure Start processes. Priorities include inter-professional and professional/client relationships and the nature and delivery of professional work.

7.3.1 Relationships and partnerships

Quality was clearly associated with the development of relationships. Trust, respect and an appreciation of others’ viewpoints were all considered guiding principles of professional and personal conduct.

_I’d want to look at quality in terms of how the family with the buggy experience us._
A particular aspect of quality is respect for the people that you’re dealing with … They you’re talking about the quality of the physical things, the environment that you create for people to work and live and meet people … the quality of advice, the quality of care, the quality of professional services. And it all stems from that sort of basically bit of respect, I think, from the staff to each other and to the clients.

This emphasis on personal respect was also a key element of quality from the perspectives of local people, allied to expectations of professional courtesy and behaviour.

I think being treated respectfully, I think being treated as an individual, and I suppose really getting the answer of whatever I’ve asked for in a confidential professional way.

And quality was considered to be a foundation for the building of relationships between Sure Start Thorntree and Brambles Farm and other professional groups.

Relationships with professionals, improving them … And actually I think that goes back to quality … Quality is actually what made the difference to the professionals. They see us as a certain standard.

It was noted earlier (5.3.1) that the challenges of establishing partnerships with other professional agencies are becoming more manageable as the programme becomes established. Judgements of the quality of Sure Start services and staff by other professionals are part of that process, enabling those partnerships to be enhanced.

7.3.2 Quality and consistency

Building on the previous point, key stakeholders felt that notions of ‘consistency’ and ‘standard’ were fundamental to local as well as professional interpretation of the programme, framing and influencing judgements on the nature of Sure Start provision.

Quality actually means having a standard, a consistency so that people know when there is an activity there is a certain standard that will be met in terms of health and safety, in terms of child care, in terms of provision.

Sure Start professionals acknowledge the importance of ‘consistency’ and ‘standard’ on both strategic and inter-personal levels: ‘it’s in everything we do as a team’.

7.3.3 Quality and delivery: the example of BLAST

Local perceptions of Sure Start processes in this study, beyond notions of consistency, respect and appropriate professional behaviour, were relatively uncluttered. Quality services improve people’s lives. Consequently, Sure Start is about:
Being there for the young children really and the parents. 
... Supporting them yeah, supporting the child’s needs.

The Boosting Language, Auditory Skills and Talking (BLAST) project was repeatedly used as an example of this process in action.

Sure Start have gone into the nursery and it’s getting dealt with straight away, where parents probably didn’t know about it, the children having speech problems.

If it hadn’t been for Sure Start going in and doing it, you know, it wouldn’t have been recognised till the years to come and then it would have been too late.

The BLAST project is one of many initiatives being developed at local level, but it is probably the most immediate and visible Sure Start presence on Thorntree and Brambles Farm at the present time. The immediacy of the project has played a key role in consolidating local awareness of the wider programme during the formative period (6.1).

BLAST embodies the philosophy of Sure Start, with its evidence base, its focus on partnership and added value, its understanding of local need. Even the very idea for the project emerged from a conversation at local level.

BLAST also helps to show that the direct, local appreciation of Sure Start ‘going in and doing it’ glosses, perhaps even misrepresents, the more subtle processes of service delivery. As one person noted, Sure Start is ‘not [about] us saying ‘we want to teach you to be different”. Rather, it is about understanding and engaging with local people, working with them to meet challenges and open up opportunities.

So I think a lot of the quality issues are around the way that we impart information helps parents to understand what quality means.

BLAST constructs quality in this way, enrolling professionals, parents and children in a partnership for change. It still ‘goes in and does it’, but in a more collaborative way than the local views depicted above suggest.

What is also suggested is that the study of ‘quality’ could be a particularly useful tool for unpacking differences between the perspectives of key stakeholders and, if employed strategically throughout the life of the programme, for illuminating patterns of change.

### 7.4 Quality and structure

Donabedian’s perception of the structural dimension of quality incorporates a wide range of organisational/programme features and does not concentrate exclusively on resource and capital development. Nonetheless, resources and capital programmes are important structural elements, and they are key concerns for Sure Start Thorntree and Brambles Farm in the formative period.
7.4.1 Structural development

The strategic importance of capital development is a recurring theme of this evaluation. Delays in site construction have impacted on local and professional perceptions of the programme and, consequently, the structural element of quality is not currently viewed as favourably as process quality.

There’s a kind of anticlimax about [the programme]. It’s been discussed for so long … We’re getting delays, delays, delays.

However, some construction work is now in progress and further capital plans have been approved. There is a widespread belief that the realisation of those plans will ground Sure Start more securely in the local and professional communities.

It definitely needs the fabric establishing on the three sites and I think it will add a lot of consolidation to what they are doing. It will give them a sense of base, a sense of foundation to the communities. It will give each of them a home for things like the crèche, for the play areas, for their therapies, for their meetings, for their counselling and support for families in distress tying in other agencies such as Social Services and Housing; those things I think will become established once the buildings are ‘in situ’.

7.4.2 Cost-effectiveness

Consideration of the cost-effectiveness of Sure Start involvement on Thorntree and Brambles Farm is another prominent structural issue, although key partners felt that meaningful assessments of cost-effectiveness could only be made after an appropriate amount of time.

I think cost-effectiveness is a big question to ask in the future, because that’s unknown.

Well you’re talking value for money aren’t you really, I suppose, and I don’t think you can judge that yet. Sure Start is not a quick start.

However, ‘Assessing value for money’ is an ongoing requirement and is envisaged as an integral part of programme development. Local programmes are encouraged to relate to the principles of ‘Best Value’, originally conceived in processes of local government modernisation. These principles encourage programmes to continually scrutinise services, compare them with alternatives, consider competition as a means of securing service efficiency, and consult users, partners and the wider business community in the refining of performance targets (Sure Start Unit, 2000).
7.5 Quality and outcome

Process, structure and outcome constitute a framework for both articulating and managing the meanings of quality. Ellis and Whittington (1993: 20) describe quality as ‘a moving target’. However, for some professional stakeholders the target is plain to see. Quality is fundamentally a matter of:

Impact. It’s the effectiveness of outcome … What is the purpose of the Sure Start project, what is it attempting to do, and then to what degree does it achieve that … So I would look at quality in terms of to what degree a family is being supported. To what degree is a particular issue like speech delay being reduced as a problem … How many children have had so much support they no longer have a speech delay problem.

This reflects earlier discussion on local perceptions of service delivery processes (7.3.3), demonstrating perhaps that the ‘going in and doing it’ interpretation of Sure Start is not the preserve of a single group.

7.5.1 Outcome and satisfaction

The outcome element of quality was also meaningful to stakeholders on other levels, particularly in terms of the conduct of professional/client relationships and local level satisfaction with service delivery processes.

What [quality] would fundamentally mean to me at the point of delivery is that the patient feels that they’ve had the best care that could be afforded to them … They should be getting the right care, in the right place, at the right time, by the right person, who is nice and kind and listens and understands their point of view, but is also realistic and honest with the patient. The patient should feel valued … That’s what it’s all about. It’s what the patient feels.

This understanding articulates themes that are evident throughout this evaluation, particularly the professional respect for individual lives (4.1.1) and the valuing of local knowledge and experience (5.4).

7.5.2 Outcome and programme development

Finally, having interpreted outcome in terms of the impact of the programme on key social concerns and its capacity to value and give expression to local experience, professional stakeholders brought developmental issues into focus. In particular, they suggested that the dominant, holistic view of quality – the association of quality with ‘every layer of what we’re doing’ – encouraged people to reflect critically about work processes and practices.

We’re talking about the way in which we do things, always questioning ourselves. Is what we’re doing the right thing, right now you know is there a better way of doing it? … It’s something you need to be looking at … as a team. It’s in everything we’re doing.
Throughout the study team members spoke of the open forum of team discussion and the capacity for discussion to generate new ideas: ‘it’s a real hothouse of ideas’. Thus, the programme’s approach to community development is considered to be continually evolving and developing, which represents an outcome in itself.

In summary, quality has proved to be an appropriate topic for final analysis. Descriptions of quality reveal priorities, and in the process of examining some key stakeholder concerns and beliefs, this chapter consolidates many of the themes and findings of the evaluation as a whole.

**Summary**

- Quality is a much used term, yet difficult to define. Donabedian’s distinction between process, structure and outcome is useful for organising stakeholder views of quality.

- Many professionals referred to quality in holistic terms, reflecting the programme’s strategic, integrated vision.

- On a micro level, inter-professional and professional/client relationships emerged as important quality criteria. Key themes include: trust, respect and the appreciation of other viewpoints.

- Professional conduct and courtesy were important to parents.

- Notions of ‘consistency’ and ‘standard’ influenced local and professional judgements of Sure Start and underpinned the development of partnerships.

- Parents valued the immediacy of the BLAST project, and this immediacy has been important to the programme during the formative period.

- BLAST embodies the Sure Start emphasis on collaboration, although parents perceived it more in terms of the direct application of expertise.

- Resource and capital development are prominent structural concerns; the structural element of quality is not viewed as favourably as process quality.

- Cost-effectiveness is identified as a key structural issue.

- Quality as outcome emphasised the requirement for Sure Start to demonstrate quantifiable social change. However, respondents also considered outcome in terms of the qualitative experience of parents/clients, and the team’s experience of programme development.

- Overall, the study of quality is a useful tool for analysing different stakeholder perspectives and, if employed strategically over time, could be valuable for illuminating patterns of change.
References


Sure Start Thorntree and Brambles Farm. (2001b) *Capital Development Programme*.


APPENDIX 1A

Sure Start Thorntree and Brambles Farm – interview schedule for partnership stakeholders (Jan 2002)

Context (background)

How did you become involved with Sure Start Thorntree and Brambles Farm?
What are the key problems the programme is trying to tackle?
Are there significant differences between the communities of Thorntree and Brambles Farm?
Currently what profile do you think Sure Start has in those communities?
What history of community involvement in Thorntree and Brambles Farm is there on which the project might build?
What are the main challenges of community recruitment?

Partnerships/other perceptions

How important are multi-agency partnerships to achieving the goals of Sure Start?
In what ways does Sure Start encourage and support staff from different agencies to work together more effectively?
Is there anything distinctive about the Sure start approach to partnership?
In your opinion, what makes for a successful partnership?
The development plan sets out the vision of the partnership – have you encountered any obstacles to the implementation of the plan?
Have there been any changes to the development plan?

Professionalism

Have staff developed new skills as a result of working in a community based/partnership project like Sure Start?
Conversely, have they encountered any particular problems?
What are the key issues involved when a new professional team is being established?
Does Sure Start have a particular philosophy on teamwork?

Outcomes/visions

What would you say are the long-term outcomes that the programme is aiming for?
What changes do you expect to see in the near future?
Have changes taken place in the way partner agencies are working?
Have there been any noticeable developments in the participation of community groups/users?
Are all groups satisfied with the progress/nature of the project?
How does/will the programme make links with services for older children on Thorntree and Brambles Farm?
Has there been any strategic involvement with other Sure Start programmes or other community initiatives/eg HAZs, EAZs?

Any other comments?
APPENDIX 1B

Sure Start Thorntree and Brambles Farm – interview schedule for organisational stakeholders (Jan 2002)

Context (background)

How did you become involved with Sure Start Thorntree and Brambles Farm?
What are they key problems the programme is trying to tackle?
Are there significant differences between the two communities?
Currently what profile do you think Sure Start has in those communities?

Community/Partnership work/other perceptions

Do you know anything of the history of community involvement in Thorntree and Brambles Farm that the project might build on?
Have you found that history problematic in any way?
What are the main challenges of community recruitment?
How important is partnership working to achieving the goals of your work?
What partnership agencies are you involved with in your work with Sure Start?
In what ways does Sure Start support you and other staff from different agencies to work together more effectively?
Is there anything distinctive about the Sure start approach to partnership?
In your opinion, what makes for a successful partnership?
The development plan sets out the vision of the partnership – are you familiar with the plan?
Are you aware of any obstacles to the implementation of the plan?
Are you aware of any changes to the development plan?

Professionalism

Have you developed new skills as a result of working in a community based/partnership project like Sure Start?
Conversely, have you encountered any particular problems?
How important is your work with Sure Start to your professional career?
Teamwork/team-building – what have been the key challenges and benefits to date?
Would you say Sure Start has a particular approach to teamwork? If so, what?

Outcomes and visions

What would you say are the long-term outcomes that the project is aiming for?
What changes do you envisage in the shorter term? Key milestones.
What barriers do you foresee to those achievements?
Have there been any noticeable developments in the participation of community groups/users?
Are all groups satisfied with the progress/nature of the project?
Does your work bring you into contact with other Sure Start programmes?
Do you work in partnership with other community initiatives – HAZs, EAZs?

Any other comments?
APPENDIX 2

Sure Start Thorntree and Brambles Farm – interview schedule for parents
(Apr 2002)

Context (background)

How did you become aware of Sure Start?
How did you get involved in the Sure Start programme?
How well known is it in the Thorntree and Brambles Farm communities?
Could publicity have been improved? In what way?

Expectations

What were your expectations of Sure Start?
Have those expectations been met? In what ways?

Experiences

What does Sure Start offer you/your family?
What benefits have you/your family gained from it?
Could the Sure Start programme be improved? In what way?
Has Sure Start influenced your lifestyle?
What are the main things, for you, that affect the quality of Sure Start services?

Representation

* As members of the Sure Start Board – what does being on the Board involve?
* What have you gained from it?
* Any problems associated with it?
* Have you been involved in the interviewing of staff? What did you gain from this experience?

Any other comments?