



Reaching Out

Evaluation Summary 2002/3

Middlesbrough District

Sure Start Thorntree and Brambles Farm

By

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Introduction

This evaluation summary report documents findings from evaluation undertaken over the period November 2002 – March 2003 with the aim of:

Identify parental views of 'Reach' within Sure Start Thorntree and Brambles Farm.

This aim matches national initiatives in place to review Sure Start working practices and their effects on service provision (Ness 2000, Sure Start Unit 2002). This evaluation is the 2nd stage of evaluation carried out by the University of Teesside. The first evaluation was completed in June 2002 and documented the formative stages of the Sure Start Thorntree and Brambles Farm over the period January-June 2002 (Jackson 2002). (The term service providers used here includes: (1) members of the partnership (2) programme staff (3) professionals and (4) community representatives). The evaluation examines the views and experiences on key issues related to the reach of the programme.

Methodology

The evaluation methods consisted of semi-structured interviews, sample experiences and a questionnaire survey. Data was obtained from a diverse research population of: (1) local parents, including non-users and (2) service providers. It has taken account of Sure Start national evaluation activities which has focussed on the question: *What are we doing and how well are we doing it?* (Ness 2002). The University of Teesside Community Evaluation Research Unit Team has followed the 'Theory of Change' approach to evaluation which has been developed to suit evaluation of complex community initiatives and has been favoured in a number of recent UK government initiatives.

Community programmes, such as Sure Start, are often dependent upon partnerships between public, private and voluntary agencies as well as communities. As such, they present challenges for evaluators because they are: complex, they have multiple strands of activity operating at many different levels, their objectives and strategies often change over time, and outcomes are frequently difficult to measure.

The approach taken involves and takes into account 'stakeholders' understanding of the aims and outcomes of the evaluation process. This method of evaluation has been mainly qualitative in nature and provides in-depth data about parents' views of the reach of Sure Start Thorntree and Brambles Farm. Whilst these findings cannot be said to be representative of the

population as a whole, they do provide useable information for programme planning and development and complement other aspects of the Sure Start evaluation.

The evaluation activities consisted of:

- Semi-structured interviews with users: 9 parents and 4 parents were interviewed in two separate focus groups; 25 users were interviewed individually
- Individual interviews with 15 parents with younger primary school age children
- 14 sample experiences as collected by Sure Start Team
- 10 individual interviews with non-users: parents with pre-school age children who did not use the service
- 30 anonymous questionnaires* to users and non-users with pre-school age children
- 6 individual interviews with partners from the management board
- 1 focus group interview with partners from a primary school
- 1 focus group (2 people) interview with partners from another primary school
- 1 individual interview with a community representative (a local councillor) and 5 individual interviews with 4 professionals from other organisations which may be relevant to Sure Start (Housing, Domestic Violence Forum, and the Refugee Unit)
- Several meetings, discussions and interviews took place with the programme manager, deputy and community engagement officer.
- Other sources of data are from telephone conversations and field notes.

* The questionnaires were administered by the evaluator, key players working for partner organisations and by parents getting other parents to complete them

Findings:

Views and Experiences of Focus Group Interviewees

1. Parental use of services and levels of involvement in the programme are diverse.
2. Parents can be regarded as a relatively heterogeneous group.
3. Most found out about the programme from the health visitor and through written information.

4. An assertive and aggressive approach to promoting Sure Start using mail shots to the population en-masse (users and non-users) was thought to be a good idea. Word of mouth approaches were welcomed.
5. It was felt that promotional material should stress: (1) the friendly atmosphere (2) a list of services, especially day care provision and (3) appeal to fathers.
6. Sure Start staff felt that involving more parents locally is limited by the resource capacity of the programme.
7. Most said that room for improvement could be found in communicating the exact nature and type of services to people in the neighbourhood.
8. Aside from stressing the need for dynamic and good quality promotional activities, most could not identify any barriers to programme development.
9. Service providers have a range of views related to strategies for increasing the reach of the programme to hard-to-reach parents. It was felt that word of mouth methods and good quality written material were essential activities that needed to be continually encouraged and scrutinised.
10. Most said the best feature of Sure Start was that it had helped them make new friends.
11. It was felt that a significant number of parents were resistant to authority and this was why they did not use Sure Start.
12. Sure Start staff felt that significant barriers to programme development were: (1) social exclusion and concerns about safety (2) disenchantment, disaffection and resistance to authority amongst some young parents.
13. Levels of trust and sharing in childcare between parents is limited.
14. On average, parents felt there are two people they could call on to help with childcare (e.g. family and friends).
15. Safe and good quality play areas are needed.
16. Reasons given for parents not using Sure Start were minimal and speculative. Most had little contact with, or knowledge of, non-users.
17. Parents are concerned about bringing up children in a neighbourhood which they see as having social disorder, crime and drugs.

18. Help with post-natal depression was said to be very important.
19. Levels of trust and reciprocity for childcare between parents is limited.
20. Back to work schemes and parenting advice are welcomed.
21. On average, parents felt there are two people each they can call on to help with childcare.
22. Parents in the areas of (1) Thorntree and (2) Brambles Farm appear to have little contact with each other.

Views of parents with slightly older children

1. Only one person could identify barriers to programme development and this explanation referred to resistance to official services.
2. In relation to views about bringing up children in the neighbourhood, social disorder, crime and drugs are major factors, parents are concerned about safety.
3. There is a strong sense of attachment to the area.

Non-Users Reasons for not using Sure Start

1. In relation to views about bringing up children in the neighbourhood, social disorder, crime and drugs are major factors; parents are concerned about safety.
2. There is a strong sense of attachment to the area.
3. Younger parents tended to be less critical of the area.
4. Most said partners/close family members were most important in helping bring up children.
5. Most felt there was nothing anybody else could do in helping them bring up children.
6. The remainder felt that a safe environment was needed most.
7. All were aware of Sure Start.

8. There was no common factor amongst the reasons expressed for non-use of Sure Start; reasons mentioned comprised:

Lack of interest

Preferred to be independent

Time constraints

Clique of parents involved

Youngest child has too many problems

Unwilling to go from Brambles to Thorntree

Activity 'full-up'

Responses to anonymous questionnaires

1. Most expressed negative views of the neighbourhood related to, social disorder, crime and drugs, parents are concerned about safety.
2. Most felt that bringing up children presented considerable challenges because of social problems in the area.
3. There was a strong sense of attachment to the area in terms of kinship bonds and support networks.
4. The need for safe play areas was mentioned frequently.
5. On average, two people were most important to parents in bringing up their children; the first person mentioned was usually the mother.
6. Concern about safety was the major need expressed by most parents.
7. One third of parents felt that providing play facilities was the most important thing that Sure Start could do for them.
8. One third of parents expressed no preference for any particular service from Sure Start.
9. One third of parents expressed miscellaneous preferences for particular services from Sure Start.
10. Most did not answer the question concerned with how they found out about Sure Start.
11. A small majority said they found out about Sure Start from the local primary school.

12. Of half who said they did not use Sure Start, the vast majority did not give a reason for this; those who did said:

'I'm not interested'

'I don't like going to things like that'

13. Sure Start activities most appreciated by parents were diverse and there was no common factor linking the answers together.
14. Benefits of using Sure Start were diverse and there was no common factor linking the answers together.
15. The vast majority of parents who were using Sure Start felt their needs are being met.

Sample Experiences

1. The main source that influenced parents to use Sure Start was the health visitor.
2. The other source mentioned by parents to a lesser degree was leaflets given out by school teachers.
3. A range of services were used.
4. A range of achievements were identified, no one common factor links the list of achievements together.

Reach figures

1. Following advice from the Sure Start Unit, the programme has recently changed and developed their procedures for recording Reach figures.
2. Available monitoring data does not give information on the quality of contact with families.

Recommendations

1. It is recommended that the local views and experiences described in this evaluation be fed into the Local Sure Start planning and development work, and work currently being undertaken to improve 'reach' and marketing.
 2. It is recommended that monitoring data include information on the quality of contact with families.
 3. In line with a 'participative' evaluation approach, it is recommended that decisions on future areas for evaluation are made which involves all stakeholders and the evaluation team.
 4. It is recommended that project stakeholders attend evaluation workshops in future in order to develop their own evaluation skills.
 5. It is recommended that further evaluation be conducted along with reference to the Sure Start Unit's evaluation criteria (Sure Start Unit 2002: Annex 6 p.25).
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References

NESS (2002) Henderson, J., Wilkins, K. and Barnes, J. Getting Started with a Sure Start Programme Evaluation, Accessed NESS website May 2002

Sure Start Unit (2002) Guidance on Evaluating Sure Start, Planning and Delivering Sure Start: 6th Wave Edition Annex 6: Sure Start Information on Evaluation. Accessed NESS website May 2002

Jackson, P (2002) Establishing Sure Start: Key Issues, Processes and Challenges, Middlesbrough; University of Teesside