

Sure Start Preston West



An Evaluation of the Functioning Of the Partnership



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An Evaluation of the Functioning of the Sure Start Preston West Partnership

1. Purpose

The purpose of this commission was to produce a written report about the functioning of the Partnership, outlining the principal findings and making appropriate recommendations, particularly highlighting areas for more intensive and detailed future planning.

2. Method

The following methods were used: -

- a) A review of current structure diagrams and the minutes of meetings;**
- b) A review of the outcomes of the previous research undertaken by MEL Research and Service Development in respect of service user satisfaction;**
- c) A review of the feedback from the recent Management Board training event and the Partnership Children's Centre meeting;**
- d) Interviews with a cross-section of the memberships of the Partnership and Management Board.**
 - Individual interviews were actually held with 17 members of the Partnership, (including the parent chair), 10 of whom were also members of the Management Board. Some of these were also members of Board sub-committees.
 - Group interviews were also held with representatives of **Parents Together**, and a separate meeting took place with parents who were Board members.
 - Finally, the Programme Manager was also interviewed.
 - The areas to be explored were outlined to all participants at the start of the interview, but questions were differentiated to reflect the different depths of familiarity with the programme. The participants were advised that any criticism or negative answers would not be individually attributable, and that, in the interests of the parents and children of Preston West, they should answer honestly and candidly.

3. The Context

3.1 Sure Start Preston West is a relatively young 5th Wave Programme, which had experienced a very difficult development stage, with low levels of parental engagement and considerable community sensitivities.

3.2 Since the approval of its delivery plan, it has been in the early stages of service development, and has been significantly affected by delays and difficulties over the appointment of the community team leader.

4. Information from Background Documents

4.1. Structural Background

4.1.1. At the helm of the programme's development is a **Management Board**, which meets bi-monthly. It is currently composed of six parents, five representatives from statutory agencies, and five representatives from community/ voluntary groups. It is chaired by one of the parents.

4.1.2. The Board is served by, and gives delegated powers, as appropriate, to, **sub-committees**, each of which has a Chair. The sub-committees are responsible, respectively, for: - **policies and personnel; finance and monitoring; and premises**. They meet on a planned and regular basis, except where the Chair decides there is insufficient business to merit a meeting.

4.1.3. All the above meetings are administratively supported with appropriate agendas and minutes. Appropriate, brief notes are taken of discussion points, with clear action points and decisions highlighted.

4.1.4. Two forums are then available as sounding boards, and act as advocates for the programme. The first is the **Partnership**, comprised of all those who are engaged in delivering, or receiving, services within the area. This meets twice a year. The second is **Parents Together**, which meets monthly. Both these forums have the further facility to make proposals to the Board.

4.1.5. The Board receives and actively considers minutes of its related sub-committees and appears to establish clear lines of action and to make clear decisions.

4.2. Service Delivery Review

4.2.1. In a valuable survey of service user satisfaction, there were some encouraging levels of Sure Start awareness. 82 per cent of those questioned had heard of Sure Start Preston West, and, even more significantly, levels of awareness among parents who were unemployed or not seeking work for other reasons reached 84 per cent and 89 per cent respectively. This figure fell to 73 per cent for parents in full-time employment.

4.2.2. When parents were asked about their sources of information regarding Sure Start programmes, a wide variety was revealed. Leaflets and posters had their place, but word of mouth was a dominant mechanism. Of those who were aware of services, 46 per cent actually used them, this figure being fairly even 'across the patch'. Of these, 95 per cent were satisfied with the services they received. Perhaps even more significantly, 43 per cent of parents who were interviewed thought services had got better whilst 49 per cent thought that they had stayed at about the same level. Again, for a relatively young programme, these are encouraging signs.

5. The Programme of Recent Face-to-Face Interviews

5.1. Awareness and Information

5.1.1. When asked about their levels of awareness of Sure Start objectives, targets and activities, those interviewed displayed significant differences in recollection and in perspective. Most members of the **Board** indicated that they felt that fellow members should have a **detailed knowledge** of this aspect of the programme.

5.1.2. Partnership members, on the other hand, tended to believe that they needed to have a **broad sense** of the programme's **objectives and unfolding developments**, but above all to know the identity of individuals who had the detail if they required it. These people tended to be identified as the Programme Manager, her team leaders and community / outreach workers.

5.1.3. There was a strong sense that previous workshops and team-building exercises had been important in making people more widely aware of, and more confident in, each other. A number of interviewees maintained that regular contact fostered awareness and signposting.

5.1.4. Such was the level of commitment to the programme that most Partnership interviewees wanted to be kept periodically, but efficiently, reminded of the broad range of objectives and activities.

5.1.5. Whilst a number of those interviewed stressed the need to avoid calling too many meetings, a, perhaps greater, number stressed the value to them of network meetings - particularly if they could incorporate brief, 'snappy', information-sharing and issues-raising sessions. Schools and private businesses, in particular, however might have difficulty attending such meetings. E-mail might have a role here.

5.1.6. Whilst on the subject of information-sharing, most interviewees commented positively on the issue of the periodic Newsletter, and a number of interviewees advocated the further exploration of e-mail and of the possibility of a fortnightly bulletin for Partnership members.

5.1.7. On the negative side, however, it emerged that there was a perception that, with a very few exceptions, local politicians appeared disengaged by the achievements, and further potential, of Sure Start programmes for their constituents.

5.2. *Service Delivery*

5.2.1. A number of questions were asked to establish the level of co-ordination between services. It emerged that some services can arguably be delivered independently of other services. Others are totally dependent on other services to make potential clients aware of what they offer. The majority are somewhere in between. Services are much more effective if delivered in co-ordination with each other.

5.2.2. Some universal services such as libraries and Job Centre Plus stressed the value of the access that Sure Start gave them to hard-to-reach families. A private childcare business was pleased to have been designated as a neighbourhood nursery under the Government's related initiative.

5.2.3. In the area of basic skills, continuing education, and employment, however, there was a palpable sense of uncertainty and a degree of frustration. A variety of agencies was involved, but at the margins of the programme. Compared to other agencies, few ground staff appeared to be locally engaged in the programme, whilst senior managers and staff with wider physical areas to cover struggled to develop programme familiarity, personal contacts, and a pattern of coherence and progression.

5.2.4. A feature that emerged in both the User Satisfaction Survey and amongst the parents of this exercise was a belief that childcare provision and wider activities for children are unevenly distributed across the patch. This is a very important area of service delivery for parents and should be assessed by the newly appointed Community and Learning Team Leader in association with the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership.

5.2.5. What matters above all, where services are delivered, whether separately or in coordination, is that the quality of services to children and their parents is high. Interviewees tended to indicate that their services would be better, the more they co-ordinated with partner agencies. There was a general perception that co-ordination was improving through awareness and mutual confidence.

5.2.6. A remarkable feature of the programme was the respectful and purposeful relationship between statutory, voluntary and community agencies, each of whom saw each other's complementary value.

5.2.7. Signposting was increasing. Health service representatives indicated that their staff had always had a signposting role, but now they felt they had effective organisations towards whom to signpost their clients.

5.2.8. Voluntary and statutory agencies indicated that they placed a high premium on effective staff training about signposting and associated procedures, including confidentiality requirements.

5.2.9. Effective signposting depended on general awareness, up-to-date information and commitment. To make the most of signposting opportunities, members of the Board, in particular, but also of the Partnership, had a vital role in disseminating information to those whom they represented. Their commitment to undertaking this role, allied to the commitment and alertness of direct service delivery staff, were vitally important ingredients to the programmes.

5.2.10. There was general confidence that emerging service delivery issues would be tackled at routine meetings or via personal contact. As a second line of defence, there was confidence that such issues would be picked up by the Programme Manager. Their resolution would be a matter of credibility for her personally and for the programme as a whole. The Programme Manager and her co-ordinators were seen as the linchpin to service delivery. They should have close access to parents and their representatives; they should spot the gaps, and initiate, and support, new developments. They should drive the programme forward.

5.2.11. The Programme Manager did not exist in a vacuum, however, and she should continue to use the support network of other programme managers and the developing role of Lancashire County Council as Accountable Body.

5.3. *Community Sensitivity*

5.3.1. Virtually all those interviewed felt that that the programme board and management had got their approach to the community about right. There was an awareness of community issues, and the perspectives of different sub-areas were both recognised and addressed. It was noted that there was a good cross-representation of parents on the Board. The development of provision at area-based satellites was commended.

5.3.2. A number of interviewees commented how the programme had a strong initial foothold in Larches and Savick, but this had been balanced by strong moves in Ingol and Tanterton. The temporary location of the programme base in Ingol had been very beneficial in this respect.

5.3.3. There was a perception that strong community associations had made a healthy, valuable contribution to the development of the programme. INTAG in particular was seen to be getting to the hard-to-reach. This currently healthy dynamic has the potential to change into rivalry, and there is therefore a need to ensure that they continue to work closely together.

5.3.4. Many interviewees commented on the genuine efforts within the programme to get parents on board. Discussions with parents revealed how there may be an untapped resource available within the community. Some parents of young children had their wider extended family relatively close at hand. Others, however, had neither the support that a wider family would give them nor the social contact and the access to wider experiences. Sure Start could both provide a valuable function for the parents themselves in this respect but also benefit itself from their sense of challenge. Such parents, properly supported, could provide the time, commitment and skill to become the 'torch-bearers' and 'engine-room' of the programme.

5.4. The Board and its Sub-Committees

5.4.1. This structure received universal approval.

5.4.2. The Board's composition is balanced. A number of those interviewed commented on the useful and productive mix of statutory and voluntary agency representatives and the active involvement of parent Board representatives from different parts of the programme area.

5.4.3. All Board members stated that they felt welcome, well-prepared and informed (if sometimes over-informed) at Board meetings; that the purpose of agenda items, and their outcomes, were clear; and that they did not sense any intentional, or unintentional, marginalisation of members.

5.4.4. They believed that they met at about the right level of frequency, and sub-committee members welcomed the growing trend of calling off their meetings when there was an insufficient agenda.

5.4.5. There was a sense of strong, central direction, which was generally approved. Appropriate consultation was seen to be taking place, and parents were making an evolving and increasing contribution. It was generally felt that the Board would continue to need strong leadership, in particular to counter the possibilities of sub-area rivalries.

6. Summary of Findings

- 6.1.** As a relatively young programme, Sure Start Preston West Partnership has made impressive progress ;
- 6.2.** There appears to be a high level of community awareness of the programme and encouraging levels of usage.
- 6.3.** Even among those members of the community who were thought to be harder to reach, there seems to be relatively high levels of programme awareness;
- 6.4.** Community associations and voluntary agencies appear to hold out the prospect of making closer contact with parents who are harder to reach;
- 6.5.** The above progress may be due to the attitudes and involvement of members of the Partnership, amongst whom there are markedly high levels of commitment and good will. There is a strong sense of 'can-do', which seems to reflect significant levels of interpersonal contact and confidence. A number of those interviewed attributed this to the level of investment which had been made in team building;
- 6.6.** There is a strong awareness of the need to 'signpost' parents and children to other service providers, and a confidence that it will be followed up effectively;
- 6.7.** The programme benefits from strong leadership at both executive and Board levels, and this does not seem to be at the expense of emerging parental engagement. There is general confidence in the form of management and leadership that has been adopted.
- 6.8.** The Programme Manager is seen as approachable, effective and credible, and the Board is seen to be very well chaired. Sub-committees are seen to be purposeful and effective;
- 6.9.** It is worth stating that voluntary agency representatives felt, unusually, that they were equal partners in this Programme, and that the word 'partnership' meant something here;
- 6.10.** There was a high level of satisfaction with the integrity of the approach to parental engagement. People felt it was genuine and beginning to bear fruit.
- 6.11.** There was common agreement that the Programme had tackled the issue of its sub-communities realistically and with integrity. It had acknowledged that they existed, and tried to understand and respond to the different perspectives.

7. Conclusion and Implications

- 7.1.** There can be no doubt at all that, as a relatively young programme, Sure Start Preston West has made impressive progress. Despite staffing difficulties and a large, quite fragmented, catchment area, it has managed to sustain momentum and engender remarkable goodwill, confidence and engagement. Most critically, its genuine efforts to engage parents across the patch are beginning to produce promising results.
- 7.2.** Because of the strong leadership at both board and executive levels that it enjoys, the programme is unlikely to become complacent. However, there are areas of uncertainty and of underperformance that need attention so as not to let down children and their parents; and areas that call for increased vigilance in order to maximise opportunities for those same people.

8. Recommendations

The Partnership needs to:-

- ensure that its constituent members are appropriately informed about its objectives, targets and activities, and make the most of their role of passing information on, and acting as advocates for, the Programme;
- ensure that its engagement with parents gathers pace;
- review how it moves forward with those parents who are harder to reach;
- begin to tackle the relatively uncharted waters of continuing education and employment programmes;
- review the perceived unevenness of childcare provision;
- ensure that it steers a steady course between the interests of sub- localities and continues to collaboratively engage with their community associations;
- ensure that it engages the interest of a wider range of politicians and their servicing officers.

With this agenda in mind, the Partnership should: -

8.1. aim to ensure that: all **Board members** know the programme's targets and objectives and are able to list the activities being undertaken to pursue them; and that all **Partnership members** know the programme's objectives and where to obtain further detail about specific targets and activities via identified individuals, published literature or e-mail;

8.2. review the feasibility of including short, **time-limited** briefing sessions so that participants can find out about each others work, raise issues and raise awareness about specific activities;

8.3. review the possibilities of making more use of e-mail for swift circulation of new or revised information;

8.4. provide an opportunity for Board and Partnership members to review the effectiveness of their dissemination and advocacy roles;

8.5. review how it can capitalise on the energies of that significant group of parents who wish to stay at home to raise their children, but who would welcome the stimulus and company of an active part-time community role;

8.6. review in 12 months' time the growth of the influence of parents, and provide evidence of their role in evaluating and re-shaping current provision and submitting ideas and proposals of their own;

8.7. review in 6 months' time the lessons being learned by those involved in working with the hard to reach, and in particular the respective roles of voluntary agencies, outreach workers and parent advocates;

8.8. support the new post holder in providing a framework for basic skills, continuing education and employment

8.9. review, at local levels, the provision of childcare and other children's activities, and assess whether it is accurate that there is an unevenness of provision and, if so, how it can be addressed;

8.10. review how it can achieve more general political interest.