

**Sure Start Crawley:
Parents' Perceptions of the Bewbush and
Broadfield Children's Centres**



A Report by the Research Department

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Children's Centres have been created at both Broadfield and Bewbush in Crawley. Broadfield is a new build and was opened for business in January 2005. Prior to becoming a Children's Centre, Broadfield has been a Fifth wave Sure Start Programme with some services and activities already established. Bewbush Children's Centre has been created by converting the Bewbush First School building. At the time of the evaluation, it had not yet opened for business.

As part of the programme development, the Crawley Sure Start Programme Manager felt it would be a useful and appropriate to have an understanding of parent perceptions of the Children's Centres.

1.2 Aims and objectives

The aims of the evaluation were to explore parent's understanding and perceptions of the two centres.

2. Methodology

The evaluation was carried out during April and May 2005 using two focus groups to ascertain parent's perceptions. The focus group at Bewbush was convened specifically for the purpose. A parent who is a representative on the Sure Start Steering Committee, volunteered to engage parents at the various activities/sessions she attends and to help those who were willing to take part to fill in forms agreeing for their contact details to be passed to the evaluator. After the evaluator received the forms, contact was made with each of the parents to assure confidentiality and to explain the purpose of the Focus Group. Attempts to engage parents in a similar manner at Broadfield were unsuccessful so the Focus Group was held during a 'Bumps and Babes' session.

The Focus Groups were taped after permission had been sought from participants, and the transcriptions analysed to identify common themes.

The evaluation was carried out by an evaluator from the National Children's Bureau.

2.1 The questions asked

- What do you think goes on/will go on in the Centre?
 - What do you think a Children's Centre is?
 - Who's it for? E.g. children/young mums etc
 - What do you think of the building/who has paid for it?
- How accessible is it to you?
- What do you think of the people who work here? E.g. welcoming/helpful etc.
- What is your perception of the Broadfield/Bewbush Children's Centre i.e. is it for you too?
- What's it like living in this area with young children? – i.e. environment/facilities
- What other services/activities would help you?

3. Findings From the Focus Groups

Six parents attended each of the focus groups. The Bewbush Focus group was carried out in the presence of two observers who were students on Childcare Courses at the University of Chichester

3.1 Knowledge of the Children's Centres

BEWBUSH FOCUS GROUP

There was a general lack of knowledge about Bewbush Children's Centre and little knowledge of the Broadfield Centre. Although building works had been taking place at the school for some time it was clear that the community had not been informed as to what the building was going to be used for:

'There are mums in the playground saying 'what are they going to do with the First school then?...The only people that I know that know about it are the people that have got anything to do with it or knew a security guard on the building... I don't actually know if anybody else knows about it.'

Parents had heard of Sure Start through a variety of ways such as attending activities, though picking up leaflets when they attended Sure Start, from friends, their doctor or from attending a course. No-one had heard about it through their Health Visitor. One parent had attended the initial Children's Centre meeting at the Hawth in Crawley but was frustrated that she had not been kept informed:

'They did a massive meeting up there and a lot of the childcare organisations in the area attended but it seems that after that I wasn't actually kept up to date with any of the things that had gone on. I put my name down kind of like to be part of it, but then I didn't really hear much about it.'

BROADFIELD FOCUS GROUP

Parents from Broadfield had mainly found out about Sure Start through visiting the Health Clinic where the Playgroup leader was promoting Sure Start, from the Health Visitor pack, through word of mouth, the Grapevine magazine and 'by accident' whilst visiting Broadfield House.

3.2 Advertising

Parents from both Focus Groups felt that publicity about Sure Start had been poor: 'not enough people know what Sure Start is'.

BEWBUSH FOCUS GROUP

'One of the things I've found with it is lack of advertising. I don't know anything. I haven't seen anything about it... most people in Bewbush probably don't even know they exist.'

'I only hear of things that happen when I come to 'Teddy Tots' and I don't go every time, I missed them two trips because I hadn't been.'

The parents made constructive suggestions about how to advertise the activities such as placing a notice board close to the notice board by the shops and in the Chemist's window.

BROADFIELD FOCUS GROUP

The parents' perception was that Health Visitors are not engaged in promoting the programme and yet they see their role as pivotal:

'If they don't get told, they're not going to ask... health visitors should be promoting it a lot more. I never heard a word about Sure Start from my health visitor, they should be mentioning it pretty much every time they see a baby...'

One parent had reported that she had had a negative response from her Health Visitor who had arrived to check the baby whilst she was attending the 'Bumps and Babes' group. However, the Health Visitors only visit by appointment and so the Health Visitor would naturally have expected her client to be at home when she visited:

'My health visitor phoned to do her weight or something and my husband said, 'oh she's out'. And she said, 'well, where is she?' He said 'she's at 'Bumps and Babes' group. And she said 'well, what's she doing there?'...Blimey, she's supposed to be promoting it.'

It was also perceived by parents that there is a lack of co-ordination between the Health Visitors and Sure Start. However, this may be because parents' are confused regarding the difference in the service being delivered by Sure Start.

'For example, baby massage – I phoned up and did one with the Health Visitors in a group where Sure Start were running one as well. Financially this was a bit of a waste of money to have two different groups or organisations doing the same thing.'

This lack of understanding was acknowledged by a parent who commented that there was little understanding of the advantages of the way Sure Start services are delivered as opposed to services provided within the community: *'They're not promoting the sort of difference between this and the standard community centre type group. I mean this is better.'*

Parents generally perceived that there was a lack of advertising and posters generally do not clearly describe the purpose of Sure Start: Although one parent had read a poster in her doctor's surgery, she had not like to ask about it: *'it doesn't really give an idea of what it is...it takes confidence to say, you know, excuse me what's that?'*

Another criticism of the advertising was that the literature does not always specify who exactly the groups are for and what the purpose of the group is. A grandmother had turned up to the Bumps and Babes group with a young toddler: *'She turned up here thinking her grandson could come to this group...but you don't know what age 'Bumps and Babes' really is.'*

One mother had gone to a group with the expectation that she could take her baby with her because the publicity had not been specific. *'It may be my misunderstanding but when I did Yoga I thought it was yoga with the baby and when I came up to do it I found out that it wasn't.'*

3.3 Knowledge concerning the nature of Sure Start/Children's Centres

BEWBUSH FOCUS GROUP

At the time of the focus group, the Bewbush Centre had not yet opened and parents were unaware of what was going to be offered.

There was a general understanding that the children's centre is something to do with day care but there was not a lot of knowledge beyond this.

'it's for the children in the area to help their parents because they can collect their children from the school and bring them here so that mums can work on 'til six and pick them up later'.

There was an understanding that Sure Start was to help parents with young children on low incomes:

'Broadfield is where the poverty is. That's where they started it off. They carried it over to Bewbush because they realised we had a demand as well but probably not as big a demand as they've got over there.'

However, there was some scepticism as to the real motivation behind providing children's centres:

'My perception is they're only doing this because they want to get women out to work that have got kids...that's the perception I got when I went to the Hawth meeting because what they kept doing was, they kept pushing the children day care centre and I didn't hear about any thing else. What they kept saying was 'yes, we can get you out to work' and I said 'well actually, for me to work I don't need childcare...So it's like, I actually got the impression that it wasn't really about what we needed, it was about what they wanted to do.'

BROADFIELD FOCUS GROUP

Broadfield parents had a better knowledge than the Bewbush parents about what is available in terms of services/activities provided by Sure Start. They mentioned 'Bumps and Babes', 'Kindermusic', the Toddler group, Nursery, a childminder's group and that fact that there was going to be a café. They also knew that there was a Breastfeeding group, a Speech and Language therapist and that there were 'trips' during the holidays. They believed it was for 'anybody who's got a child from when they're pregnant up to the age of 8'. Their perception was that everything offered was 'free'.

The parents generally had a fairly accurate idea of what Sure Start is although the emphasis as far as they were concerned was on children's socialisation and learning rather than providing help for parents:

'It was set up in deprived areas to get parents included, to help in giving practical advice to parents in work and things like that and also to get the babies and children included in group activities, social activities, things like that to develop their education before they go to school.'

One parent did mention parents in the context of helping them to socialise, 'to get them out of the house and that'.

However, there was no mention that the Children's Centre would provide full day care or that it would help parents in terms of getting them back to work.

One parent commented on the fact that Children's Centres were an economic way of providing resources:

'If they put everything into one centre you can maximise the use of the funding that's available. Whereas if you have to fund ten different groups, you need to fund ten different set of toys, or ten different set of drinking cups... but if it's all centred in one central location you can make the best use of funding...you can share the toys around each group...so you can buy more toys, better quality toys...'

3.4 Concerns

BEWBUSH FOCUS GROUP

It was clear that parents had little knowledge of what will be provided through the Children's Centre and there was concern that it was only for young children and not teenagers:

'they [teenagers] also need a place to go...a lot of these teenagers are looking after children, siblings themselves. They need some help and support as well...who it will be for e.g. teenagers? Special needs children? Will there be disabled facilities...?'

There was also concern from one parent as to whether or not she would be able to afford the services provided: *'But are these things going to cost me any money?'*

3.5 Comments after seeing the Broadfield Centre promotional DVD

Although the DVD was shown to the Broadfield parents, they had seen it before and some, in fact, had taken part in the filming. Bewbush parents, however, had not seen it before.

BEWBUSH FOCUS GROUP

After seeing the DVD one parent commented that she thought it was going to be mainly for children and did not realise there were facilities for adults.

Parents were concerned as to whether or not they would have the same services as being provided at Broadfield as they did not feel the Bewbush building would be large enough to accommodate everything that was shown on the DVD.

One parent talked about her experience of lacking support when she had post natal depression prior to Sure Start being in the area. She recognised how different her experience would have been had the Centre been established at that time.

'I had post natal depression after I had [name] and that was one of the things that I found really difficult to deal with. That was why I started coming to Teddy Tots because I didn't feel that I had any support. I was on antidepressants and stuff but it seemed that I didn't actually have anyone saying 'yes, we'll help you'... As if there were people going 'yes, we'll help you, we'll help you', but didn't. So I think in that case if you're kind of connecting to one service you're going to become aware of all these other services that are happening. Whereas that, I got referred by my Health Visitor, it took them six months to phone me up. They phoned me up, they spoke to me on the phone, buttered me up for two

hours and said basically, there's nothing else we can do for you. I actually felt as if I'd been fobbed off at the end of it. So I kind of did feel that if something like that [Sure Start] was running when I'd had [my baby] I probably would've had an easier time of it. Or I would have been connected to someone that could have helped me rather than being fobbed off by different parties all the time.'

3.6 Location of the building

BEWBUSH FOCUS GROUP

Parents thought that because the Centre was at the school it was a good central location but they also inferred from its proximity to the school that it had a link with education: *'I know that the Headmistress has got something to do with it, I know, and other teaching bodies. There was a Governor who had something to do with it'*.

They also thought the centres would be area specific:

'I was under the impression that it was for Bewbush parents but then also there's that thing that you can't stop other people that have got the same difficulties as we've got from coming and making use of the facilities'.

BROADFIELD FOCUS GROUP

One of the parents at the focus group was a Bewbush parent who accesses the Broadfield Centre. She was concerned about the location of the Bewbush Children's Centre, which she perceived as being in a rough area, and said that she did not propose to use it:

'It's a good location in so far as it's being in school, but then the school shouldn't be where it is either...It's right behind a rough pub so I probably would avoid my children going to that school and I would probably avoid the area personally...'

The other parents commented on the location of the Broadfield Centre. As far as access is concerned, parents found it easy if they were able to drive but not so easy on foot. It had taken one parent about 20 minutes to walk to the Centre.

Unlike the Bewbush parents, they saw Broadfield Centre as being available to people from both areas but thought that once Bewbush centre was established, people would tend to go to the one nearest to where they live.

3.7 The Staff

BROADFIELD FOCUS GROUP

The parents were full of praise for the staff whom they felt were very helpful and made everyone feel included:

'They go out of their way as well to make sure that everyone's included...I've been to some baby groups which are so cliquey, people are in their own small groups, they don't talk to new people, it's horrible but the staff here, they do go out of their way to make sure that doesn't happen to a new mum or a new parent coming in...'

There was also a recognition that staff are well qualified in childcare and could be trusted with giving advice and looking after their children:

'they know a lot about kids and how they develop... I'm quite happy to leave her in the crèche now. When I first came I wasn't whereas now I'd be quite happy to leave her while I go and do another activities...'

3.8 Frustrations

The main source of frustration had been about the delay in the provision of the childcare and poor communication concerning the delays.

BEWBUSH FOCUS GROUP

One of the parents who had regularly attended the Broadfield Centre expressed frustration over the delay in opening the day care centre and the effect this would have had had she been relying on the nursery opening to start a job.

'I was under the impression that the day care centre was actually supposed to open in October, we were told, like last year, so if I'd actually planned on getting a job, I would've done it then which would have been a massive disappointment...'

Another, who had moved into the area a year ago expressed her frustration with the lack of communication concerning the opening of the creche:

'When I came here I came straight here to the crèche to register my daughter... There was a waiting list. I had to pay for the waiting list. I am still waiting for a call. I haven't had a call and then I heard that Broadfield had opened...'

BROADFIELD FOCUS GROUP

One of the Broadfield parents had been similarly frustrated by the delay in the opening of the nursery which she perceived had been 'mismanaged' and the lack of communication about what was happening:

'The nursery opening...it was mismanaged. I had her name down as I was supposed to going back to work in February...she had her name down for months and months and months and we hadn't heard anything, it was supposed to open on this day, it was supposed to open on the day I went back to work. I eventually got a phone call two days before I was scheduled to go back to work offering me a taster session. It was just badly managed...I'm sure there were reasons for that but communication of those reasons might have been helpful when part of Sure Start's objective is to help parents into work and things like that. Quite often messing parents about on a nursery is just the last thing you need when you're coming off maternity leave and trying to get back to work, or starting a new job, you've got and interview, you've been offered a job, insecurity over your childcare is not what you want...'

Another source of frustration was that some of the IT courses are not advanced enough, especially for those who may be wishing to return to work.

'I think they should have more advanced courses to like help you apply for a job. There does seem to be assumption that people don't have very many skills at all. Some of the training seems to be geared towards people who don't have any computer type skills whatsoever and I think that's a bit...I don't know if I'm making an assumption but the training does all seem to be a quite base level.'

Another source of frustration for some parents was the timing of classes which for some parents was too early especially if they had other children to organise.

'Some of the classes are not the right time... nine o'clock in the morning, if you've got other kids, for parents to get out at that time in the morning... I just think I can't be bothered.'

3.9 Gains

Parents were asked about what they felt they had gained from accessing Sure Start. As services are not yet set up at Bewbush, the question was only asked of the Broadfield parents.

BROADFIELD FOCUS GROUP

The parents at the 'Bumps and Babes' group spoke very positively about their experience of Sure Start and the change it had made to their lives. They really enjoyed the fact that it had given them the chance to socialise, make friends, share problems, get ideas and to learn about bringing up children. :

'I didn't know anybody in Crawley at all. I didn't know anyone at all, so it was nice to come to a group where everyone's included and you can get to know people. It's made a big difference.'

'to come and talk to other mothers especially if they've got other kids that are older, you just get ideas and I've learnt loads since I've been here.'

Peer support was greatly valued by these parents, and the opportunity it gave them to share problems and ideas with each other had given them a belief in themselves as parents:

'It's given me confidence in being a parent. It's quite difficult, isn't it, being a parent for the first time... I think if you get to see what everyone else is doing and share advice it gives you confidence. Like helpers will only give you the initial idea... they won't go beyond that, whereas other parents will help you...'

However, one parent who would have liked to access peer support advice from the Breastfeeding group had felt too intimidated to go along:

'I was going to go there because I'm having problems but the idea of walking into a group where everyone knows each other and saying, you know, I am having this problem breastfeeding and that problem breastfeeding, it's quite an intimate thing isn't it, to share with strangers...'

One parent spoke about her experience of accessing a Speech and Language therapist for her young daughter through the normal channels and how offering such a service as a drop-in at Sure Start would make such a difference to others in a similar position.

'My daughter went for a speech therapy assessment... she was three years old and just getting ready to go to school and we had to wait eight months for the assessment. The idea that you've got a drop-in that you could just sort of pop along to one day...that's brilliant, that's really good.'

Another parent spoke about her previous negative experience of toddlers groups, prior to accessing Sure Start, which she had found isolating.

'I went to one or two groups as well that had nannies that used to get to them... it was a social event. Park the kids on the floor and the nannies all go off and get together.. it was really cliquey and horrible... so this is a massive difference.'

Two of the mothers who had been to the Open Day and on some of the trips spoke about how much their children had enjoyed the experience: *'I did the Treasure Hunt. Two hours in the rain! The kids loved it. They thought it was fantastic.'*

3.10 Suggestions for future services

BEWBUSH FOCUS GROUP

The parents were asked about the services available to them in the area and their ideas about what should be included in their 'ideal' Children's Centre. Lack of time prevented these questions being asked of the Broadfield Focus group

A number of suggestions were made as to what other facilities or activities they would like:

- a swimming pool
- fitness sessions with crèche,
- trips out
- picnics.

3.11 The Area

Parents in Bewbush were asked about what they considered 'good' and 'bad' about living in the Bewbush area as parents with young children. Most felt they were served quite well in terms of facilities/activities but disliked the environment.

Good	Bad
Leisure Centre – Good Facilities – Tumble Tots	Litter
School	Crime
Sure Start	Glass
Community Centre – Teddy Tots	Dog Mess
Parks	Drug Dealers in the shopping area
Adventure Playgrounds	Teenagers
	Pub

3.12 Parents' 'ideal' Centre

The parents were asked to think about what they would include if they were designing a Centre themselves. A number of suggestions were made concerning the types of services/activities and facilities they would find useful:

Services	Advice	Activities	Facilities
Psychologist - behavioural problems	Drugs/Alcohol	Subsidised trips	Minibus
Counselling	Domestic	Faith/church/Sunday School	
Marriage Guidance	Benefits – Job Centre	Football for the under 5's	
	Citizens Advice Bureau	Ballet	
	Schools – teachers coming in	Secondhand baby-equipment/school uniform	
		Cooking for kids	
		Basic Hygiene	
		Health/pampering/massage/reflexology etc.	

3.13 Hopes for Bewbush Centre

After seeing the promotional DVD, parents were asked about their expectations of the new Centre. They felt it would provide:

- Extra opportunities (Trips)
- Fun & mixing with other children
- The opportunity to attend groups and classes
- Activities in holiday time 'make school holidays much better.'

'I think it'll be a good thing, especially if it's a place with coffee for the parents you know, to relax a bit.. I think it's great.'

4. Conclusion

It is clear from this evaluation that parents who attend the Broadfield Centre have a good perception of the Children's Centre and are very happy with the services/activities they are accessing. They were also very praiseworthy of the staff at the Centre and of the building itself. The focus group consisted mainly of first-time mothers and most were not fully aware of all that was available to them.

As the Bewbush Centre or Sure Start were not established at the time of the evaluation parents were not very informed about what the Centre was or what would be available to them. Only one parent was accessing the Broadfield Centre. It is hoped that by taking part in the evaluation parents' knowledge about what will be available will have increased.

It was also very obvious from the evaluation that the publicity to date has been poor and that the Health Visitors have not been fully engaged with promoting the Centre/Sure Start.

5. Recommendations

- (i) Health Visitors are encouraged to be more fully engaged and to take on a promotional role.
- (ii) Greater efforts made to raise the profile of the programme generally
- (iii) Publicity material clearly defines the age-range and purpose of services/activities
- (iv) The IT skills classes be reviewed to include more advanced skills
- (v) Timings of some of the activities be revised
- (vi) Consider the suggestions made by parents when planning new services