

SURE START PARR COMMUNITY RESEARCH PROJECT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Research has been conducted at Sure Start Parr by a team of Sure Start parents in order to investigate how local families feel about their lives in Parr, how they perceive the Sure Start programme and what their experiences are of the services it offers. Families with varying levels of involvement in the programme have been questioned along with those who do not currently have contact with Sure Start Parr. In addition, members of Sure Start Parr's staff and staff at local primary schools have taken part in interviews concerning the impact that they feel Sure Start Parr has had on local families.

A door-to-door questionnaire survey, designed by Sure Start Parr's parents and carers, has been used to examine the reasons why a substantial number of Parr's families are not accessing Sure Start. The data produced by the questionnaires have been analysed using the computer program SPSS and are strengthened by the researchers' observations and own experiences. In-depth interviews have been conducted with families who are involved with Sure Start Parr in order to look at people's lives: their experiences of parenthood and of other services and the way they understand Sure Start Parr as having impacted upon their lives and those of their children. In addition, innovative arts-based techniques have been employed to add further dimensions to this picture.

During the research process, consultation work and the construction of the new Children's Centre has been continuing. Sure Start's aims and objectives have shifted slightly and this change of focus is considered in the report.

The findings of the research focus on two main areas: families accessing Sure Start Parr and those families who do not (at the time the research was conducted) have any contact with the programme. In addition, reflection is given to the process of the research: the benefits of involving the local community in evaluation work of this nature and in using arts-based techniques. The Sections referred to can be found in Part B of the report.

Families accessing Sure Start Parr

- Families involved in the programme feel that Sure Start Parr has had an overwhelmingly positive impact both on their own lives and those of their children (explored throughout the report). The sense of community in Parr is much commented on, yet people still report feeling lonely and isolated before accessing Sure Start (Section 1.1 and 1.3). Attending Sure Start groups and events builds social networks that are much needed in Parr (1.3), reducing isolation and having a positive impact on mental health (1.3)

- Family is considered particularly important in Parr with participants describing large, close-knit, matriarchal families (1.3 and 2.2)
- Drugs are seen by virtually every parent and carer who participated in the research as the biggest problem affecting the community (1.1)
- Families report negative experiences of statutory services but feel that Sure Start is something different: a service they have more ownership of and one which is more inclined to listen (2.3)
- Parents learning new skills in groups and on courses are not only improving their confidence but impacting positively on their children's learning (3.1) and on their relationships with their children (3.1)
- Sure Start Parr parents and carers report being better able to communicate with professionals, particularly with their children's teachers (3.3)
- Parents working and volunteering with the programme find this a positive, rewarding experience despite reports of some tensions with members of staff (3.2)
- Sure Start parents and carers report that their attitudes towards other families have changed (3.2) and that they have greater aspirations for their children (3.3 and 4.3)
- Parenting is seen as a rewarding but difficult task with the vast majority of participants in the research choosing to spend as much time at home with their young children as possible. Sure Start Parr, through parenting courses and through more informal means, offers parents and carers techniques and ideas to assist with parenting (4.1)
- Only a small number of fathers are accessing Sure Start Parr (4.2) yet those who took part in the research report similar issues and feelings to the women questioned
- Children, with their parents, are developing social networks (1.3) as well as interpersonal skills, speech and confidence which are helping with the transition to school (4.2)
- Health benefits reported include children eating more fruit and more attention being paid to dental health (4.2). Parents report improved mental health and well being of themselves and their families (1.3 and 4.1)
- Parents and carers worry about the lack of resources for school-age children in Parr. It is hoped that the new children's centre will address some of these issues but it is felt that parents and carers need to be involved in service planning and delivery (4.3)

Families not currently accessing Sure Start Parr

- The majority of families in Parr are registered with the programme and increasingly families are becoming involved in Sure Start Parr. Word-of-mouth from other parents and carers appears to be the most effective means of achieving this (1.2).
- Almost half the survey sample would be reluctant to leave their children in a crèche (2.2) yet participants in the interviews prefer the idea of a crèche to that of a childminder (2.2)
- Survey respondents cite various reasons for not attending Sure Start Parr, including poor health, lack of transport and finding it difficult to get children ready in time. Parents sometimes lack confidence and are intimidated by the perceived "clique-

iness” of the groups. They also worry that their children are not well behaved enough to take them out (2.1)

- The most common reason given for not attending is being too busy; the more children people have , the more likely they are to give this as a reason (2.1)
- Two thirds of the survey sample thinks that there is a connection between Sure Start Parr and Social Services. There is evident suspicion of professionals (2.2 and 2.3)
- Respondents tend to see Sure Start Parr as a positive service but as a service that they do not need, a service for other people (2.1)
- Younger mothers tend to be more reluctant about accessing Sure Start Parr whilst grandmothers and older mothers tend to be more enthusiastic (2.2)

The participatory research process

- The research team has had success in recruiting families to take part in the research. Families not currently accessing the programme appear to prefer to see a fellow parent rather than somebody "official". Community researchers are thus accessing families that an external evaluator would be unlikely to speak to (5.3)
- The research team feels that their input in designing the questions and collecting and analysing data means that the findings are richer and more insightful as a result (5.1)
- Training delivered to the community researchers was informal and flexible (5.1)
- Community researchers enjoy the work and find it rewarding. They have developed confidence, communication skills and empathy (5.1) and (5.3)
- Community researchers have found that, during the door-to-door survey, they were able to spread the news about Sure Start Parr and as a result, new families have accessed the programme (5.3)
- Using the arts in the research has opened up the project to an increased number of families who have gained a wealth of benefits (5.2)
- Employing the arts in the dissemination of research findings reaches a wider audience and tells participants’ stories in a thought-provoking, emotionally engaging way (5.2 and 5.3)

Sure Start Parr is an exciting and commendable programme, innovative and constantly evolving. It has been running for almost five years and parents have been involved in the running of the programme from the beginning with the result that services are tailored to the needs of the local community. Those issues raised by the parents and carers, volunteers and members of staff taking part in the research have led to the following recommendations:

Families accessing Sure Start Parr

- Parental involvement is crucial to the sustainability of the programme and should be continued (explored throughout the report). Families should continue to be listened to and communication links between families and staff members developed (3.1)

- Opportunities for parents and carers to volunteer and work for the programme should continue to be developed (3.2)
- Parents and carers working and volunteering for the programme should be encouraged to feel part of the Sure Start Parr team (3.2)
- The drug problem in Parr is of great concern to families and could be acknowledged by the programme and addressed through joined-up working with other services, for example offering training in drug awareness (1.1)
- When parents/carers stop accessing groups and courses for a period of time, they could be contacted by telephone or postcard from the programme (3.1). This is a task that parents could be involved in
- If there are staff changes in the crèche, this could be better managed by a hand-over period in which the new member of staff shadows the existing one, thus providing a less stressful transition for parents and children (2.2)

Families not currently accessing Sure Start Parr

- Promotion of the programme needs to continue since people are still not clear what Sure Start Parr has to offer and who can access its services (1.2 and 2.1)
- The involvement of parents and carers in this promotional work is successful, both in terms of recruiting new families and in building capacity in those parents and carers involved in the recruitment (2.1 and 3.2). Training and support needs to be provided to ensure that the information being given out is accurate and up-to-date (3.2)
- More work should be carried out in encouraging fathers to access Sure Start Parr (2.1 and 4.1)
- Parents and carers worried about their children's behaviour should be made aware that they are welcome at the programme's groups whether or not their children behave perfectly (2.2)

The participatory research process

- Community research should be built into the programme on an ongoing basis and should continue to be flexible in order that parents and carers can be involved (5.1) A means of delivering continuous feedback from the research to the programme should be built in
- Research could focus on why the men in Parr are reluctant to become involved in the programme. Ideally having fathers on the community research team would aid this process (5.3)
- The arts projects set up as a part of the research should continue as far as staffing and resources allow. Participants - parents, carers and their children - report a host of benefits. There is considerable interest in making the pantomime an annual event!