SURE START
SUNDERLAND NORTH WEST

THE ROLE OF THE EMPLOYMENT COUNSELLOR AND THE OUTCOMES OF THE SERVICE

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December 2006
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank all the parents, carers, and staff from both Sure Start and other agencies who took part in this evaluation.

The support of Nigel Malin at the University of Sunderland is also acknowledged.
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Sure Start North West was supported from the outset by Sunderland North Community Business Centre (SNCBC) through Job Linkage. Backup North (The Sunderland Action Team for Jobs) and the nearest Job Centre (Southwick) were also represented on the Partnership. These projects emphasised the need for more opportunity and support to be given to parents of young children. Sure Start North West has provided funding for an Employment Counsellor, employed by SNCBC. The post was taken up in November 2002 on a 30-hour a week basis, as a secondment from Job Linkage.

2. The purpose of the evaluation was to examine the role of the Employment Counsellor and the outcomes for families with young children. The specific research questions were:
   1. How does the role of the Employment Counsellor differ to that of e.g. Job Linkage, and what added value does it have?
   2. What barriers to employment has the Employment Counsellor encountered in parents and how has she worked to overcome these?
   3. What impact has the work of the Employment Counsellor had on families with children under four?
   4. What is the contribution of interprofessional and interagency working?

3. The evaluation was planned by the University of Sunderland local evaluation team and staff representatives from Sure Start North West. The methods consisted of a semi-structured interview with the Employment Counsellor; individual interviews with users of the service (n=7) and one case study; individual interviews with a sample of staff (n=7) and representatives from other agencies (n=4); 4-week monitoring of incoming telephone calls to Sure Start North West, and collation of existing referral forms.

4. The Employment Counsellor works to provide direct in-depth support on a needs-led approach. She works closely with Sure Start personnel and other agencies to ensure an individual tailored approach with regard to employment, training and financial advice. This has the potential to contribute to breaking the cycle of disadvantage for young children and their families.

5. The Employment Counsellor works specifically with families with children under four years of age, at a time when there are many new considerations in families’ lives for which she can offer support. By providing a flexible, outreach and home visiting service, with the attendant opportunity to develop ongoing relationships, the Employment Counsellor is able to provide a more accessible service for clients than office-based services, and may be accessing families who would not access an outlet, or indeed other forms of support.
6. There has been a move from working with people who were already accessing a service (e.g. a recreational course) to a large amount of work with regard to welfare dependency (e.g. homelessness, mental health). Whilst going into groups is still an important part of the role, over the last two years there has been a greater emphasis on home visits for intense needs as knowledge of the role and referrals have increased. There has also been an increase in the amount of crisis intervention and concerns identified by other professionals, i.e. factors inhibiting the functioning of a family that can be addressed by the Employment Counsellor. The role has also involved a large amount of advocacy work. The post requires up-to-date specialist knowledge as the exact nature of the work is often dictated by changing Government policies, changing Benefit rules, employment initiatives and legislation.

7. Working closely with Sure Start staff and other agencies has enabled ease of referral and quick response for parents. However, this does not negate the need for staff to be aware of and make use of direct referral routes, e.g. to Job Linkage and Learn2Drive. There has been good communication between staff members and some joint working with families, facilitated in part by the Request for Services system.

8. The service has also added value to other local agencies through its unique approach and engagement of families who might not otherwise have accessed their services or helping ‘bridge the gap’ to these services; helped raise awareness of their services, and contributed to their development and targets. Agencies considered that collaboration between themselves and the Employment Counsellor worked well because of a shared vision and sense of purpose and commitment; the opportunity to contribute to each others’ objectives; knowledge and appreciation of each others’ roles, strengths and boundaries; good communication, ease of contact and good rapport; trust; the complementary nature of the services; a longstanding relationship and history of agencies working together in the area; and the centrality of the Employment Counsellor’s service to a number of other community services.

9. The service has proved to be an effective way of reaching families who are in great need and providing a quick response and solution-focused approach, through which they see positive results. It has been effective in reaching fathers and working with both parents/partners and/or other family members, which impacts on the whole family, unlike other employment related services, which deal more with the individual needs of the user. In some cases this has led to further engagement with Sure Start services, including the Dad’s and Kid’s Group.

10. Performance figures show that the Employment Counsellor has been successful in helping people into employment and training. There has also been a strong emphasis on helping overcome a range of barriers to employment. ‘Preventative’ work is another important strand of the job, to help ensure that those who are employed remain in employment, for example through flexible working and accessing in-work benefits.
11. In the 2½ year period from March/April 2003 to September 2005 the Employment Counsellor recorded 298 new registrations, of whom 71 (23.8%) entered employment, 74 (24.8%) registered with Job Linkage, applied to Back Up North for funding or received self-employment advice, 135 (45.3%) entered training and 32 (10.7%) were referred to the New Deal Lone Parent Adviser. The annual figures contrast strongly with those found in the National Evaluation of Sure Start study on employability (2004), which found that, in active programmes, having 20 parents involved during the course of a year in employability activities would be regarded as a significant achievement, and that employment co-ordinators generally had individual caseloads in single figures. More detailed analysis of outcomes for parents, for example raised awareness of rights and/or responsibilities and improved economic stability via welfare, revealed the wide-ranging nature of the service and the complex issues surrounding employment and low income for families with young children.

12. The Employment Counsellor service has unique features not within the remit of other employment related services, i.e. it enables concentration and sustained intervention at a time in people’s lives when their financial position, rights and needs are likely to be changing, it enables home visits and a flexible, accessible approach, and it enables the development of trusting relationships which can make families more open to accessing other services (e.g. through visiting childcare settings together).

13. There was strategic commitment through Partnership to providing employment related support to families with young children at the Programme’s inception. Operationally, there has been good collaboration between the Employment Counsellor and local agencies to provide appropriate targeted support to families. Sure Start Children’s Centre Practice Guidance (2005) states that local authorities should involve Jobcentre Plus at the strategic planning stage so that their services can be fully integrated into children’s centres. ‘Early joint planning and formal agreement of roles will help shape common objectives and a shared vision of the expected outcomes’ (Sure Start, 2005:13). Locally, other organisations that have been committed to Sure Start North West since the outset (i.e. SNCBC, Backup North) are very important links.

14. The service is adult-focused but the work has implications for the wellbeing of children and families. The service makes an important contribution to the Sure Start/Children’s Centre target to reduce by 12% the proportion of young children living in households where no-one is working and the associated DWP target regarding children in workless households and HMT/DWP target regarding children in low income households. It contributes to the Every Child Matters outcome ‘Achieve Economic Well-Being’, and its aims for children to live in households free from low income, to live in decent homes and sustainable communities and to have access to transport and material goods, and support whereby ‘parents, carers and families are supported to be economically active’. This in turn may have an impact on children’s achievements and
aspirations for education, employment or training as well as their more immediate health, well-being and learning, for example through an increased ability to support children’s learning through addressing basic skills. The work of the Employment Counsellor not only supports parents through, for example, ensuring that they receive the correct financial and work entitlements, helping them consider options and work towards aspirations and supporting them through the process, but also developing confidence and self esteem and developing a trusting relationship that has in several cases encouraged further engagement with Sure Start services for health, family support and children’s learning.

15. The Labour Government has placed a strong emphasis on the provision of childcare to help families with young children into work, but as this evaluation has shown, the situation for families with young children in deprived areas is a lot more complex and can include reluctance to access childcare and barriers to employment. Local contextual factors also need to be taken into consideration, e.g. the significance of long-term unemployment in Sunderland. The Employment Counsellor has identified and sought to address a number of barriers to employment.

16. Sure Start Children’s Centre Practice Guidance notes the importance of contributing to the employability agenda, and performance indicators being developed for children’s centres are likely to include economic well-being, such as the percentage of children living in workless households. However, the guidance with regard to employment support seems to focus mainly on parents who are ready to access services outside the home and are economically active or job ready. The Employment Counsellor considered that her service would have been enhanced by the provision of a designated base, as there has been no suitable environment in which to facilitate learning and very little opportunity for families to gain peer support. This would also enable input from the wider Sure Start team, and enable promotion of families’ successes, for example through visual publicity, case studies and sharing successful ways of improving quality of life through employment. At the same time, this evaluation has highlighted the importance, in addition to centre-based services, of a flexible, accessible, outreach and home based approach that addresses a far wider range of barriers to work than those highlighted in the Guidance. This is of significance for children’s centre development as the Practice Guidance states that there should be ‘greater emphasis on outreach and home visiting, especially with families which would be unlikely to visit a children’s centre’ (Sure Start, 2005:3). The evaluation has shown the complex issues surrounding employment and low income for families with young children and how much can be achieved through a dedicated worker within Sure Start, whose role encompasses a wide range of issues including, for example, preventative work and helping parents consider their options (e.g. those on maternity leave). The evaluation has also highlighted the number and variety of outcomes that have been achieved by families through this approach, which have been enhanced through strong links with the Sure Start team and other agencies.
I. INTRODUCTION TO THE EVALUATION

Sure Start North West was supported from the outset by Sunderland North Community Business Centre (SNCBC) through Job Linkage. Backup North (The Sunderland Action Team for Jobs) and the nearest Job Centre (Southwick) were also represented on the Partnership. These projects emphasised the need for more opportunity and support to be given to parents of young children (Source: Delivery Plan, March 2002). Sure Start North West has provided funding for an Employment Counsellor, employed by SNCBC, and this post was taken up in November 2002 on a 30-hour a week basis, as a secondment from Job Linkage.

The purpose of the evaluation was to examine the role of the Employment Counsellor and the impact on families with young children. The specific research questions were:

5. How does the role of the Employment Counsellor differ to that of e.g. Job Linkage, and what added value does it have?
6. What barriers to employment has the Employment Counsellor encountered in parents and how has she worked to overcome these?
7. What impact has the work of the Employment Counsellor had on families with children under four?
8. What is the contribution of interprofessional and interagency working?

II. NATIONAL AND LOCAL CONTEXT

Tackling poverty, especially child poverty, is one of the Labour Government’s main goals. It has set a target of halving child poverty by 2010, and eradicating it within a generation. Sure Start was seen as a key initiative in this area. According to the 2004 English Indices of Multiple Deprivation, Sunderland has an overall rank of 22 out of 354 local authorities (with a rank of 1 being the most deprived). It has a rank of 20 on the income measure.

The provision of the Employment Counsellor relates to one of Sure Start’s key objectives: Strengthening families and communities. The associated target at the time of funding this post was for ‘All Sure Start programmes to have developed local targets for ensuring links between the local Sure Start partnership and Employment Service Job Centres’. A new national PSA target was subsequently introduced: ‘a 12% reduction in the proportion of young children living in households where no-one is working’ and this remains in place at the time of writing. The associated SDA target is currently for ‘Local authorities, Sure Start local programmes and Children’s Centres to have effective links with Jobcentre Plus, local training providers and further/higher education institutions’.
A ‘12% reduction in the proportion of young children living in households where no-one is working’ is also the PSA target for Objective One: Improving the availability, accessibility, affordability and quality of childcare.

Sure Start documentation also states that the Sure Start Unit will contribute to the DWP PSA target to reduce the proportion of children in households with no-one in work over the three years from Spring 2003 to Spring 2006 by 6½% and to the joint HMT/DWP PSA target to reduce the number of children in low income households by at least a quarter by 2004, as a contribution towards the broader target of halving child poverty by 2010 and eradicating it by 2020.

Current key action points for Sure Start North West related to this objective include:

- A range of information and training to be available to support personal community development and involvement
- Provide accredited training and education opportunities for individuals to develop personal development plans to support employment

The role of the Employment Counsellor also relates to the Children’s Centre Core Offer as follows:

Links with Job Centre Plus:

- Linking in with local arrangements (e.g. via the local authority’s service level agreement – for collaboration with Jobcentre Plus Childcare Partnership managers)
- Encouragement and support for parents who wish to consider training and employment

Children’s Centres ‘can also offer parents help with accessing training, work, advice and information’.

In addition, this links to the Every Child Matters Outcomes Framework (2004), particularly ‘achieve economic well-being’ – ‘parents, carers and families are supported to be economically active.’

The role of the Employment Counsellor was established in Sure Start North West to ‘specifically access parents of children 0-4 through a referral system, e.g. Health Visitor, Nursery Nurse, and work on a central, outreach and home visiting basis to work with parents on an action plan for employment development and access. This will encompass a range of services to include benefit advice, education/training, childcare, resources and other identified barriers to accessing employment’ (Source: Delivery Plan, March 2002).

III. METHOD

The evaluation was planned by the University local evaluation team and staff representatives from Sure Start North West. The methods were:
1. Semi-structured interview with the Employment Counsellor regarding her role.
2. Collation of existing referral forms.
3. Individual interviews with users of the service (n=7) and one case study.
4. Individual interviews with a sample of staff on their use of the service and its impact on their work with families (n=7).
5. Individual interviews with representatives from other agencies on their links with the service and its impact (n=4).
6. 4-week monitoring of incoming telephone calls to Sure Start North West to gain a picture of the demand for the service from callers to the Programme.

The interviews were carried out by the evaluator and responses were recorded in note form on the interview schedules, which were coded to avoid identification. The case study was compiled by the Employment Counsellor and the evaluator. The data were analysed by the staff and the evaluators together.

IV. FINDINGS

A. The Role of the Employment Counsellor

1. Introduction

The post of the Employment Counsellor is funded by Sure Start and the operational employer is Sunderland North Community Business Centre. The Employment Counsellor works to provide direct in-depth support on a needs-led approach. She works closely with Sure Start personnel and other agencies to ensure an individual tailored approach with regard to employment, training and financial advice. This has the potential to contribute to breaking the cycle of disadvantage for young children and their families. Since coming into post, examples of the support the Employment Counsellor has provided are:

- Careers information, advice and guidance
- Training and further education opportunities
- Personal development planning
- Assistance with CVs and job searches
- Benefit advice
- Employment rights including maternity/paternity
- Overcoming difficult barriers to working
- Self-employment advice
- Voluntary work guidance
- Information on local childcare providers
- Better off in Work calculations
- Financial assistance to get back to work
- Up to date information on local Sure Start activities and services
2. How the Role has developed

The role of the Employment Counsellor differs from that of other members of the Sure Start team in that it is a supportive adult service that looks at the adult first, which will in turn have a valuable influence on children’s lives (e.g. extra income; free of debt). The service developed rapidly, and because of the Sure Start emphasis on parenting and child development, many additional wider issues have arisen that have influenced work with families.

For the first year of her work with Sure Start, the Employment Counsellor was based at Winchester House, undertaking outreach work e.g. visiting toddler groups and other community groups, and responding to referrals from Job Linkage. Since then, the role has changed and developed as she has worked more closely with Sure Start staff and her role has become better known and understood. For example, there has been a move from working with people who were already accessing a service (e.g. a recreational course) to a large amount of work with regard to welfare dependency (e.g. homelessness, mental health). Whilst going into groups is still an important part of the role, over the last two years there has been a greater emphasis on home visits for intense needs as knowledge of the role has increased and referrals have increased, e.g. through Health and Request for Services. There has also been an increase in the amount of crisis intervention, e.g. caused by a sudden change in family circumstances and inability to cope, or concerns identified by another professional, i.e. factors inhibiting the functioning of a family that can be addressed by the Employment Counsellor. The role has also involved a large amount of advocacy work, e.g. introducing people to services, accompanying them on visits (e.g. to Sure Start groups, training venues and childcare facilities) and dealing with issues such as fraud investigations, Child Protection, and debt negotiations.

The Employment Counsellor provides a flexible, responsive service. For example, the exact nature of the work is often dictated by changing Government policies, changing Benefit rules, employment initiatives and legislation (such as the right for parents with children under six years of age to request flexible working). For example, tax credits were first introduced in April 2003 and the Employment Counsellor carried out a large amount of work supporting people to apply for tax credits, and is now supporting people who have been overpaid (a problem that has emerged nationally). Similarly, the change in the way in which welfare benefits (e.g. milk tokens) are administered has affected a large number of families at the same time and impacted on the nature of the work of the Employment Counsellor.

The Employment Counsellor considered that the service could have been further enhanced by the provision of a designated base, as there has been no suitable environment in which to facilitate learning e.g. through displaying relevant materials and enabling group discussions, and very little opportunity for families to gain peer support, e.g. in applying for jobs with support at a designated location. Similarly, there has been no recognised accessible point for individual crisis access. Whilst there is clearly a need for intense one-to-one support in private, in some situations peer support could be equally
beneficial, and some issues could be addressed on a group basis (e.g. job search and job application techniques). This situation has perhaps led to an overemphasis on the Employment Counsellor continuing to support families in the home when some would perhaps access a designated venue. This would enable access to materials and information and enable input from the wider Sure Start team, and potentially lead to greater responsibility and ownership. It would mean more intense work could be carried out with parents in a shorter space of time, thus making the achievement of goals a quicker process and speeding up progress on the road to employment. It would also enable promotion of families’ successes, for example through visual publicity, case studies and sharing successful ways of improving quality of life through employment. Further, the Employment Counsellor reported that there was no specific budget or discretionary fund attached to the service, e.g. for hardship crisis or extra support to help families. This is in contrast to other agencies working with the long-term unemployed. It was also considered that the provision of crisis funding could lead to further engagement with services through building trust.

The Employment Counsellor also reported pressures of time and lack of administration support. She is the only person offering the service and there is therefore no other point of contact for families and no cover when she is off work. There has been a heavy demand on the service, partly due to the wide-raging nature of the role, including from clients who have received assistance and continue to access the service through having established this contact. The number of incoming telephone calls to the Sure Start Programme was monitored over a four-week period, and categorised according to particular teams (e.g. Health, Play and Learning) or individuals (e.g. Involving Fathers Worker). This monitoring of telephone calls alone showed that the Employment Counsellor received 100 calls in this time (20.0% of the total calls received), second only to the Programme Manager, Administration team and Publicity who, combined, received 144 calls (28.9%).

Nevertheless, the Employment Counsellor did report feeling supported by managers in both SNCBC and Sure Start in developing the service in the way she saw fit and felt that they showed understanding and trust in her ability to work with families in the ways she considered most necessary and helpful. Her work has also been supported through the Partnership since the beginning of the Programme, and there is ongoing support from her professional network (e.g. SNCBC, Job Linkage, nursery worker) and from Sure Start colleagues. Original targets for her work were reduced to alleviate workload pressure, but, in her experience, would have been achieved with the support of another worker.

3. Barriers to employment

Overcoming barriers to employment was known to be a particularly key area to be addressed, and there has been a strong emphasis on this. The Employment Counsellor has identified barriers at community, individual and family level. At ‘community’ level barriers have been identified in four domains: political, technological, socio/cultural and economical.
Historically, this has been an area of heavy industry, particularly shipbuilding and mining, and there has been large scale redundancy (which can lead to relationship breakdown and an increase in the number of lone parents and non-resident fathers) and a change in industry, particularly to call centres (with posts often taken up by women) and car manufacturing, with lower paid jobs in comparison to previously and a complete change in labour market trends, i.e. recruitment and selection processes, working patterns and employers’ needs (e.g. temporary/seasonal work). This, together with an initial lack of training opportunities and appropriate job-hunting skills, has contributed to an increase in the number of long-term unemployed. There has been a massive change to the local labour market and a lack of skills to meet those changes (i.e. the move from being a shipbuilding area to one with a large call centre industry). Advancements in Information Technology, Telecommunications and Internet services all have basic skill implications. Resentment at the loss of industry has been observed, with some unwillingness to re-train or to travel and an increase in long-term unemployment along with increased social barriers (e.g. social isolation) and increased mental health issues and health inequalities. Changes in the consumer market and the demand for material goods to meet consumer trends have led to an increase in debt and welfare dependency. There has been an increase in the number of benefit claimants (with a high proportion of long-term sickness) and ‘black economy’.

From her previous work with unemployed residents in Sunderland North, the Employment Counsellor had encountered individual barriers to the world of work, such as lack of qualifications and experience, low wages, inability to access vacancies and ineffective CV/job search techniques, lack of awareness of transferable skills and opportunities, limited knowledge of the local labour market and In-work benefits, lack of confidence and uncertainty regarding employment aims and capabilities. Added barriers encountered amongst parents of young children have included finding it difficult to find work that fits in with family life, relationship difficulties, debt, the cost of childcare and sometimes unwillingness to use formal childcare, lack of sympathy of employers towards family needs regarding time off, difficulties regarding appropriate facilities or time allowance for breastfeeding, refusal of requests for part-time work, and some parents not being entitled to public resources (e.g. some non-British nationals). For new parents there can be added barriers, including the possibility of postnatal depression and sleep deprivation, difficulty adjusting to parenthood and children’s needs, and dilemmas over whether to return to/take up work or care for their babies full-time. The Employment Counsellor has also encountered barriers as perceived by individuals themselves, such as their age, lack of suitability and qualifications.

Ways in which the Employment Counsellor has sought to overcome barriers for parents in Sure Start North West have included providing information that changes clients’ opinion of themselves or the situation (e.g. current state of the labour market, childcare costs (accessing Tax credits); supporting clients through the Right to Request process and helping them find alternative work if
they do not achieve a satisfactory outcome; providing up-to-date knowledge of a range of funding streams and support for specific circumstances (e.g. some non-British nationals, asylum seekers, prisoners and families, and coping with a criminal record), and liaising with other Sure Start staff and outside agencies (e.g. through Request for Services) to offer support in their areas of expertise (e.g. sleep, behaviour, developmental needs, therapy). Quality of life, e.g. maintaining work/life balance and parenting issues, have a significant part to play in families’ ability to seek and maintain employment.

4. Additionality

The role of the Employment Counsellor differs from that of Job Linkage overall both in its target group and in its approach to working with clients.

The Employment Counsellor works specifically with families with children under four years of age, at a time when there are many new considerations in families’ lives for which she can offer support, such as choosing whether to stay at home, formulating and following ideas for longer term life plans or working in a way that enables them to spend time with their children (i.e. work/life balance), putting the right benefits in place, accessing family entitlements, addressing the possibility of isolation, and accessing childcare (which can include overcoming negative perceptions of childcare).

Job Linkage operates from its own outlets and some other venues but does not operate in the home; therefore the Employment Counsellor may be accessing families who would not access an outlet, or indeed other forms of support. The service also differs from an outlet service in that it has a more informal approach, usually operating on adults’ own requests or a professional’s recommendation, and usually on their own or other familiar territory, with either a need or a want to change, and identifying the possible benefits of engaging with the service. By providing a flexible, outreach and home visiting service, with the attendant opportunity to develop ongoing relationships, the Employment Counsellor is able to provide a more accessible service for clients than office-based services, which can present barriers to clients who may be unsure of the role of the professionals and feel uncomfortable meeting people ‘behind a desk’, and where there is limited opportunity to build up relationships and openly share information. It is also a less time-bound service with greater opportunity for flexibility in meeting clients at a time to suit them.

The Employment Counsellor also provides a responsive service, i.e. one that is able to respond to people’s needs, rather than a specific service operating according to the specific remits of that service. It enables her to listen to families and what they want and help them achieve the necessary steps towards that, acting as a bridge to other services and moving them onto Job Linkage if and when appropriate, as well as providing ongoing informal and accessible support when the need arises.

Further, the approach enables the Employment Counsellor to work with both parents and/or other adult family members, which can have an impact on the
whole family, unlike other employment related services, which deal more with the individual needs of the user. This means potentially supporting all adults involved with a child, for example a lone mother’s parents.

B. The impact of the Employment Counsellor’s work on families with children under four

1. Introduction

The Sure Start PSA Target is ‘a 12% reduction in the proportion of children living in households where no-one is working’. However, a baseline figure could not be obtained, so progress towards this target is difficult to measure. Nationally, between 1992 and 1996 the proportion of children living in working-age workless households was broadly constant at around 19%. Since then, the proportion has fallen to 18.4% in 1997 (the Government’s baseline year), reduced to and remained around 16% since 2003, and stands at 15.7% in 2005 (DWP, 2005). Most of this fall has been for children in couple households (Palmer et al., 2005). However, the UK has a higher proportion of its children in workless households than in any other EU country (ibid).

Of the people in Sunderland who were of working age (i.e. those aged 16 to 64 for men and 16 to 59 for women) the employment rate was 71.2% during the summer of 2004 (June to August), compared with an average for Great Britain of 75%. This compares to 66.1% and 74.7% respectively for the same period in 1999 (Source: ONS).

The targets for the Employment Counsellor were initially all related to registration and entering employment/self-employment. However, as much of the work has been on an outreach and individual rather than group basis, and due to the complex nature of the work and the amount of long-term developmental work (with a majority of the clients being long-term unemployed), it was identified early on (September 2003) that the targets were unrealistic. Nevertheless, the Performance figures show that the Employment Counsellor has been successful in helping people into employment. It is also important to stress that ‘preventative’ work is another important strand of the Employment Counsellor’s work, to help ensure that those who are employed remain in employment, for example through flexible working and accessing in-work benefits.

2. Performance figures

Clients seen when the service was first being developed were not referred by the Sure Start team, but were contacted through the Employment Counsellor’s outreach activity and referrals from Job Linkage. Since approximately March 2004 referrals have been received from Sure Start staff as the nature of her work has become clearer.

Data on outcomes for clients were put through different layers of analysis. Initially, as originally compiled for Job Linkage, outcomes were analysed into
five main categories regarding numbers of registrations, numbers into employment or training, numbers of referrals to the NDLPA and numbers registering with Job Linkage or Back Up North, or receiving self-employment advice. Monthly figures for 2½ years were analysed in this way as shown below.

a) Annual Figures

The Employment Counselling Service Performance Figures for March/April 2003 – March 2004 are shown in Table 1 below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Mar/Apr</th>
<th>May</th>
<th>Jun</th>
<th>Jul</th>
<th>Aug</th>
<th>Sep</th>
<th>Oct</th>
<th>Nov</th>
<th>Dec</th>
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<td>8</td>
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<td>87</td>
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<td>People into employment</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referred to NDLPA *</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People into training</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* New Deal Lone Parent Advisor, Job Linkage, Back Up North, self-employment advice

Of the total number of people registered in this year, 37% gained employment, 54% were helped into training, and 16% were either assisted to register with Job Linkage/Back Up North Funding or given self-employment advice. 12 lone parents were also referred to the New Deal Lone Parent Advisor. It should be noted that, for each year, the number of formal registrations does not equal the number of people seen, e.g. at toddler groups, Sure Start groups, craft events, who may have accessed advice on the spot but not registered.

The Employment Counselling Service Performance Figures for April 2004 – March 2005 are shown in Table 2 below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Apr</th>
<th>May</th>
<th>Jun</th>
<th>Jul</th>
<th>Aug</th>
<th>Sep</th>
<th>Oct</th>
<th>Nov</th>
<th>Dec</th>
<th>Jan</th>
<th>Feb</th>
<th>Mar</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Formal Registrations</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People into employment</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referred to NDLPA * /external agencies</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People into training</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J L reg/BUN * funding/SE*</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Of the total number of people registered in the year April 2004 – March 2005 23% gained employment, 41% were helped into training, and 31.7% were either assisted to register with Job Linkage/Back Up North Funding or given self-employment advice. 19 lone parents were also referred to the New Deal Lone Parent Advisor.

The Employment Counselling Service Performance Figures for the six months from April 2005 to September 2005 are shown in Table 3 below:

Table 3: Performance Figures April 2005– September 2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Apr</th>
<th>May</th>
<th>Jun</th>
<th>Jul</th>
<th>Aug</th>
<th>Sep</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Formal Registrations</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People into employment</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referred to NDLPA */external agencies</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People into training</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J L reg/BUN * funding/SE* advice</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* New Deal Lone Parent Advisor, Job Linkage, Back Up North, self-employment advice

A summary of the figures for the 2½ year period from March/April 2003 to September 2005 is given in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Summary of Performance Figures March/April 2003 – September 2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Formal Registrations</th>
<th>People into employment</th>
<th>Referred to NDLPA/external agencies</th>
<th>People into training</th>
<th>J L reg/BUN * funding/SE* advice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mar/Apr 03 – Mar 04</td>
<td>87 registrations</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr 04 – Mar 05</td>
<td>161 new clients</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr 05 – Sept 05 (6mths)</td>
<td>50 new clients</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>298</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

|                | 23.8%               | 10.7%                  | 45.3%                               | 24.8%                |

It should be noted that these annual figures contrast strongly with those found in the National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) study ‘Improving the employability of parents in Sure Start local programmes’ where ‘in active programmes having 20 parents involved during the course of a year [in employability activities of all kinds] would be regarded as a significant achievement’ (NESS, 2004a:92). Further, this national evaluation also found that ‘Employment co-ordinators generally had individual caseloads in single figures’ (ibid.).
b) Further Analysis of Client contact and outcomes:

i) In one snapshot month

In order to provide a picture of a typical month, the Employment Counsellor’s work was analysed in more detail regarding the reasons for contact and the nature and amount of client contact in that time. October 2004 was randomly selected for this purpose. A subsequent analysis of outcomes for these clients eight months later was also carried out.

Some client contact was through referral and some through the Employment Counsellor attending Sure Start groups and services (Dads’ Group, Snowdrops, Baby Clinic). In this month the Employment Counsellor also attended meetings with external agencies and a meeting of the Community Core Group, undertook volunteer supervision and professional training (Health & Safety) and was involved in staff recruitment.

36 clients were seen during this time and 11 of these (30.5%) were fathers/male carers. Six were new clients and thirty were existing clients. During this period 10 clients were seen twice, 7 were seen three times and 1 client was seen four times.

The information displayed in Table 5 below gives examples of the reasons for which parents/carers accessed the Employment Counselling service. In some cases, parents/carers gained advice on more than one of these issues during a consultation.

Table 5: Reasons for Contact (October 2004)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason for Contact in October 2004</th>
<th>Number Seen</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advice on courses</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice on training / training plan</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information on working from home/business start up</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Family Tax Credit/Child Tax Credit</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment advice</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn2Drive course</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budgeting/money matters</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistance with job application</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistance with filling in claim form</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits advice</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing advice</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debt advice</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternity Information (flexible working/rights/advice)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice on local groups</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childcare</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dads Group</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progress review</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The client contact list was analysed eight months later (June 2005) in order to examine the outcomes of the service for these clients. The outcomes of the contact are shown in Table 6 below.

**Table 6: Outcomes of Support Given in October 2004**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome (as at June 2005)</th>
<th>Number of Clients</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community Volunteer</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gained employment full-time</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>part-time</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gained qualification/award or completed course</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working towards qualification/award</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attending group</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referred to specialist service*</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge gained regarding entitlements</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge gained regarding employment opportunities</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge gained regarding childcare</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Specialist services – family therapist (counselling, anger management), family debt awareness, Request for Services.

**ii) Over one year (April 2004 -March 2005)**

Analysis of the typical month and qualitative data from interviews with the Employment Counsellor, parents, staff and representatives from other agencies indicated that the nature of the Employment Counsellor’s work and the outcomes for families were much more varied and complex than was shown in the performance figures. Therefore, the data on clients in one full year were examined in further detail.

161 new clients were seen during this year. Of these, 46 (28.6%) were fathers/male carers, including two uncles and one grandfather. In 23 cases (14.3%) both partners or both parents/carers of the child were seen. Thirty-nine (24.2%) of the clients were lone parents and one of these was male.

The majority of clients accessed the service through self referral (28.6%) (e.g. through service promotion at outreach, cold calling), health visitors (27.3%) and nursery nurses (18.6%). There were 13 referrals from Job Linkage, seven through the community (e.g. through word of mouth with family/friends) and the remainder were from other members of the Sure Start team, e.g. Family Therapist, Community Development Worker, Toddler Power Worker, and other agencies such as nursery and SNFZ. The majority of referrals were with regard to raising people’s awareness of their rights (e.g. employment or tax credit rights, maternity/paternity rights, CSA, benefit entitlements) and/or responsibilities (parental responsibility, including supportive role), and working with people’s expectations, both realistic and unrealistic, and this sometimes entailed acting as an agent on the client’s behalf.

The client list was analysed in September 2005 to assess the range of outcomes for the families. Outcomes were categorised into 13 different domains that emerged during analysis. Some work was obviously still ongoing, particularly in more complex domains such as addressing hidden
harm. These outcomes give an indication of the wide-ranging work of the Employment Counsellor and the complex issues surrounding employment and low income for families with young children.

Only 19 parents had outcomes in a single domain. For the majority there were outcomes in between two and four domains and the highest number was ten. Furthermore, each domain may have incorporated more than one outcome (e.g. attending several courses; overcoming more than one barrier). Similarly, some parents have been referred for more than one reason. It is also important to note that for many families there will not be a linear progression from referral, as further issues often arise as the relationship is developed or as their circumstances change (e.g. becoming homeless). The domains, and number of outcomes in each, are shown in Table 7 below.

The domains with the highest number of outcomes for parents were raised awareness of rights and/or responsibilities, realistic/unrealistic expectations; increased employability, formation of action plan; improved economic stability via welfare; and overcoming barriers to employment.

Improving economic stability via welfare was the area in which the Employment Counsellor herself considered that her work had had the most impact, for example through supporting clients in completing application forms or when they have misunderstood or been given incorrect information.
Table 7: Outcomes for Clients seen April 2004-March 2005 in 13 identified domains

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcomes for Employment Counsellor Clients: Definitions</th>
<th>No. of outcomes achieved (n=161)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Raised awareness of rights and/or responsibilities, realistic/unrealistic expectations; includes acting as agent on client's behalf e.g. employment rights, maternity/paternity rights, tax credit rights, CSA, benefit entitlements, parental responsibility including supportive role.</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Safeguarding and promoting welfare e.g. family relationships, housing, debt counselling, through multi-agency working, including specialist support identified by parent or Employment Counsellor re. Assessment Framework (e.g. counselling, paediatric advice, child health and development).</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Improved economic stability via welfare e.g. correct benefit entitlement; transitional points (e.g. 29th week of pregnancy, new parents, coping with crisis e.g. bereavement); social fund assistance; protecting those who are unable to work e.g. disability support; appeals.</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Hidden Harm Addressed e.g. drugs, domestic violence, bereavement, postnatal depression, mental health, relationship difficulties (sensitivity to issues and timing of appropriate interventions).</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Increased social inclusion e.g. attending Sure Start/community groups e.g. Dads’ group, toddler groups; Learn2Drive.</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Issues Addressed through Advocacy e.g. inequalities addressed (e.g. refusal of benefits); fraud investigations; debt/CSA negotiations.</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Improved job readiness e.g. basic skills; confidence; Learn2Drive; unrealistic expectations addressed.</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Increased employability; formation of action plan. e.g. short courses (e.g. 1st Aid); engaging with Job Linkage; job search/interview techniques; job seeking.</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Overcoming barriers to employment e.g. accessing childcare; childcare costs met; clothes; better off in work calculations; Learn2Drive; lone parent support.</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Impact of parenting issues on employment addressed e.g. achieving work/life balance.</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Economically active; making a positive contribution e.g. planning for future economic growth through training and education, volunteering, formation of long-term action plan.</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Gained employment (and correct in-work benefits according to entitlement).</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Changed/stayed in employment</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Progressional Routes: Case Study of Interventions and Outcomes

The case study showed progressional routes for one family from initial contact, through interventions, including addressing and resolving other emerging issues, to outcomes for children and families. The route from initial expression of a long-held aspiration to refining of career aims and gaining a place at University is shown in the case study undertaken for this evaluation and provided by the Employment Counsellor for the Sure Start/City of Sunderland booklet ‘Sure Start. Local Programmes to Children’s Centres: the story so far 1999-2005’. Rachel* (*not her real name) attended a Sure Start promotional visit and told staff she had always wanted to become a midwife. She felt that there were barriers to this, which were explored with the Employment Counsellor, and an action plan was drawn up to support Rachel back into work, including applying for funding for driving lessons and undertaking relevant courses, leading to enrolment on an Access to Nursing College course, with support in resolving childcare issues that arose. This in turn led to a refinement of career aims and Rachel gained a place at University. As noted in the booklet, the outcomes were that the family were supported to maximise their economic well-being, Rachel achieved her career aim, her self-esteem and confidence grew, and the children were able to access early education, thus, for example, increasing their social opportunities. A diagrammatic representation of this case study is reproduced in Appendix One.

4. Parents’ / Carers’ Perceptions of the Service

Interviews were carried out with seven service users. In one case, two other family members were present who had also used the service through this contact.

The interviews provided examples of the range of reasons for contact with the Employment Counsellor and processes involved in working towards outcomes for families, in the majority of cases in collaboration or through joint working with other professionals from Sure Start and other agencies. For example, a mother who contacted Sure Start as she wished to access a nursery place after returning from abroad revealed that she had been informed that she was not entitled to benefits, and was referred to the Employment Counsellor. She was able to rectify the matter, and also worked with the mother to suggest courses to help reduce her isolation as she felt ‘I need something to do, I need time for myself, I feel isolated and it makes you stressed’, and to develop interests and skills that could be of benefit for working in the future and fit in with her priorities in wanting to get herself and her child settled rather than ‘rushing into work’. Other issues also emerged with regard to the family situation (e.g. support required with paperwork for housing and visa applications, handling money) and the child’s learning difficulties, for which
the support of the Community Paediatrician was accessed, leading to specialist referral. Close liaison between staff from different teams within Sure Start has enabled them to work together for the benefit of the child (e.g. accessing a nursery place and relevant courses and services) and the family’s changing needs (e.g. changing entitlement to allowances as the child’s difficulties are diagnosed, changing family situation and entitlement to access Job Linkage). The mother reported that ‘it feels like everybody has an active interest in us’. For another family, the birth of children with health difficulties had led to joint working between the Employment Counsellor and the Sure Start health team to alleviate trauma through accessing appropriate support services and financial allowances in a new and unexpected situation, and ‘coming to terms with not being able to go back to work, but at the same time helping us think about the future and plan for future work to fit round the children and to never say never’.

The interviews showed how an initial area of need expressed by a parent often led to a quick resolution (e.g. receiving the right benefits) but also led to the development of a trusting relationship with the Employment Counsellor in which wider family needs, priorities, goals and aspirations were addressed, often on a long-term basis, some for more than two years, e.g. working with one or both parents to find work, gain specific work skills to enter employment, liaising with other agencies to address barriers such as basic skills (spelling), or helping parents work towards future aims (e.g. short courses to facilitate access to training in childcare, such as First Aid and Learn2Drive). ‘We’ve told her what we’re interested in and she’s looked it up, or she rings us up and says this course is coming up and it gives us a boost to get onto courses’. Support has been given to parents who reported that they would not have gone to other services e.g. through accessing correct benefits and ‘knowing where we stand financially’. Working in the home has also meant meeting other family members such as the mother’s sibling and parent who similarly would not have accessed services, but asked for, or accepted, support from the Employment Counsellor as a relationship developed in the home setting, for example accessing childcare after initial reluctance, providing time for a ‘break’ for the whole family and opening up opportunities such as accessing courses that ‘I wouldn’t have dreamt of doing, let alone known where to go’. The Employment Counsellor worked with some parents starting from a very low level of confidence and self esteem, e.g. through having to finish work through loss of night-time childcare, subsequent incorrect information regarding entitlements and ‘being too depressed to find out for myself’, linked to ‘partly a matter of pride’. After initial uncertainty and reluctance to accept support due to ‘feeling that professionals were set against me’, and through encouragement from a Sure Start health visitor, this parent accepted a visit from the Employment Counsellor, who helped fill in entitlement forms, accompanied her to appointments and helped sort out housing problems. ‘When I stopped work I went from being confident to not answering the door or the phone, but now I’ve gone from not moving from the couch, spending a year on the settee, to getting back to my own self. I can talk at appointments with her support because I feel she’s on my side. Now I’m starting to help myself more because I know the system – I’d never been out of work before, work was my sanity and I’d like to go back’. Over time
this mother has also decided to accept therapeutic support through the trust that has been built up and the more secure financial and housing situation that has been achieved.

Parents valued the personal nature of the service, for example through home visits and working according to individual need and through the Employment Counsellor getting to know families well. For example:

‘You feel more comfortable in your home environment and I like it that she’s not behind a desk looking at you’.

‘There’s lots out there, but nothing that helps you as a person – there are lots of schemes but you feel like a “stat”’.

‘She helps you according to your own priorities, for example looking at the quality of life we want, spending time with our child and fitting round him, not wanting to put him into childcare while he’s young, but still wanting to support ourselves’.

‘She knows us well enough to know what we’d be interested in, in terms of courses’.

They valued the support with accessing other service or support:

“You come up against brick walls and it’s good to have somebody who knows what they’re talking about, who knows the system and the right questions to ask”.

And the ongoing nature of the support:

“It’s nice to know there’s somebody there to ask, “What do you think about this?” And she gives you other options as well”.

Examples of the perceived impact of the service include:

- Increased confidence and self esteem, and ability to help themselves, e.g.

  ‘Now I can talk and hold my own in a meeting with her support’.

  ‘Through her support I now know the system and what to do’.

- Helped adjust to new and unexpected situations, e.g. becoming unable to work because of family circumstances:

  ‘I’ve never had to apply for benefits before, the whole family has always worked’.

- Social inclusion, e.g. encouragement to Sure Start groups through development of trusting relationship:
'I saw posters for Sure Start but it seems daunting to go in to things like toddler groups, but now I go because of my faith in [Employment Counsellor]. If she says it seems right I'll go ahead and do it'. (e.g. Early Start course)

- Decision to access childcare:
  
  ‘I was reluctant to use childcare, but she took us [mother and child] into the nursery to meet the staff and I trust her judgement’.

- Decision to accept further support, e.g. engaging with previously suggested services once issues of priority have been addressed:
  
  ‘I feel ready now’.

- Knowledge and confidence to help others:
  
  ‘My neighbours knock for help now. [Employment Counsellor] has encouraged me to help others. I use what she has taught me with other people, like Child Tax Credit and letters of resignation’.

Parents commented that the Employment Counsellor had helped them think through their ideas for the future and pointed them in the right direction towards achieving their own goals. She had provided an informal service and built up trusting relationships in which parents had become confident to express concerns that were acted on if desired, and had been inclusive of other family members. The information she provided was ‘well organised and well presented’.

C. The contribution of interprofessional and interagency working

1. Within Sure Start working systems

   a) Joint Working through a ‘holistic’ approach

Through Request for Services the Employment Counsellor is able to undertake joint working with individual families, and professionals draw on each other’s expertise to support families. Joint home visits have taken place with staff, e.g. the Toddler Power Worker, who have undertaken training to deliver courses (e.g. Family Nurturing, Behaviour Management), in order to meet parents on their home ground and encourage access to relevant services or offer specialist knowledge and support in the home. Staff considered joint visits important as ‘it can be disconcerting to have a lot of people, especially in cases of low mood, low self esteem or lack of confidence’. In addition, the Employment Counsellor reported that staff were prepared to ‘drop everything’ to meet a family, and felt that this was partly due to the development of a relationship in which staff trusted her judgement on urgent need, as well as a mutual commitment to the welfare of families. An
ethos of willingness to share expertise was also evident within the Programme.

Staff who were interviewed all felt that the role of the Employment Counsellor strengthened the services offered by Sure Start and enhanced their own practice. They valued their direct access to this service and the information provided (e.g. leaflets) that they kept on hand to pass on to families - 'ready access to information as well as a person'. They emphasised the importance of the Employment Counsellor as 'part of the package', and vital to a holistic approach to working with families and a recognition of the interacting nature of issues within families. For example, sleep deprivation can impact on a working parent's ability to keep a job and on the children, and working closely with colleagues enables a quick response to such difficulties. Further, there have been cases in which a health visitor or family therapist, for example, has identified concerns regarding health or family support but also other issues that may impact on the therapeutic value of their work and need to be addressed before their work is successful or, indeed, will be accepted, stressing that 'benefits, employment issues etc. are such a prominent issue in a deprived area' and 'unless we work with immediacy of need, other services will not be of value or might not be accessed' and 'we can't move on with play and stimulation if the burning need is a roof over their head – we have to tackle the most important issue, which is often financial'. In addition, 'if we negate those issues and try and address other issues we are only addressing half the story' and 'dealing with issues such as benefits and debt advice reduces the stresses this can lead to in the family home'. They also commented on the important 'bridging' aspect of the service and the 'gentle process' of introducing families to other members of the Sure Start team. It was felt that 'parents sometimes open up in different ways to different people, for example if they feel threatened by a health professional, and this service enables a fuller picture of the family and more working together to address needs'. Moran et al (2004) highlight 'the importance of recognising that parenting is influenced by a wider range of interactive and interdependent factors. Attention to and understanding of users' life circumstances (including their sex, living situations and general well-being) as well as their cultural and ethnic background appear to be a fundamental pre-requisite to engagement of parents with services . . . Paying attention to families' pressing background needs often turns out to be the starting point for would-be parent educators' (Moran et al, 2004: 99). Similarly, Forehand and Kotchick (2002:380) state that 'Parents cannot fully engage in parent training unless their other basic needs have been adequately addressed'.

Staff also felt that having an Employment Counsellor 'increases your ability to fulfil your own role through knowing you can safely pass issues on. You feel safe knowing that if there is a need you can safely pass it on and know it is going to be addressed, rather than passing it on to an external agency where there is no ongoing contact'. This 'leads to feeling I can reassure families and helps build trust with families'. They were confident in the appropriate use of her expertise 'at grass roots level' and commented on her 'ability to ask the right questions'. One person commented that, 'I know about other services but I prefer to go through the Employment Counsellor because I know the families
will get a more personal service’. Her specialist knowledge and expertise were felt to be time and service saving for the staff and also ‘frees us up to concentrate on our own work’. Her work with adults with literacy and numeracy problems, e.g. helping them with forms, was seen to give confidence and help overcome detrimental effects. It was felt that ‘other workers are not familiar enough with individual forms such as the disability allowance form to be able to do this in a quick and efficient manner’. Collaboration with members of the team was felt to work well because of the informal, relaxed and flexible approach used. When staff referred families to the Employment Counsellor they reported good information sharing with themselves, as she explained to the referrer how she was working with a family, enabling them to reinforce this and answer any questions through their existing relationship with the family. It was felt that it was important to display good staff communication to families in this way, and also that this liaison helped build positive relationships within the team.

There was variation in the amount that staff felt confident or able to do themselves in relation to employment/financial issues. The administration team felt that information provided by the Employment Counsellor had increased their knowledge of services offered by agencies such as Job Linkage and enabled some direct signposting (e.g. to College). Some staff commented that, although they had learned from the Employment Counsellor, they did not feel they had the capacity, confidence or local community network to work in this field in detail. Others felt that if all staff were given more training on signposting to other agencies, rather than always referring to the Employment Counsellor, this would enable more appropriate targeting to avoid overworking and unnecessary involvement, depending on the complexity of the issues and families’ own capabilities. Recently the Programme has started to invite workers in from other relevant agencies to explain and promote their services and increase the team’s knowledge.

Finally, the nature of her service and the depth of her knowledge also mean that the Employment Counsellor is accessed by colleagues to provide information and advice if and when necessary in their own lives and careers.

b) Developing new initiatives

The Employment Counsellor has also contributed to the work of Sure Start in other ways. For example, she has worked with the Community Development Worker (CDW) on developing a volunteer programme, including identifying possible recruits and ensuring that the CDW and volunteers were aware of responsibilities where volunteers were claiming benefits. She has also developed individual training plans for volunteers, so that the scheme is mutually beneficial. Through her own initiative, and in collaboration with other members of the Sure Start team, the Employment Counsellor has been able to develop work with fathers in the Programme, through relevant training and with the support of management.
2. With other agencies including Job Linkage

a) Reasons for interagency working and impact on parents

The Employment Counsellor has strong operational links with other agencies in the local area. She liaises with other agencies according to families’ needs. For example, she acts as an advocate for parents (e.g. regarding benefits, fraud investigations, appeals against decision-making) and for the benefit of families, e.g. working with Job Linkage and Backup North to access funding or support, with Families Need Fathers to access legal advice for fathers, and with Housing. She is also an authorised agent for Inland Revenue to speak on clients’ behalf.

Benefits for families have included:

- Informed, appropriate and quick response

Through the personal contacts that have been developed over time at local level, the Employment Counsellor is able to ensure that she has the correct up-to-date information and best advice to offer families. On an individual basis, information is often accessed via the Internet due to time restrictions. Working with agencies such as Shelter and Contact-a-Family provides her with specialist knowledge at the preparation stage of working with families, enabling her to engage with them in an informed way and in a manner that is sensitive to their particular situation. Similarly, close links with SNCBC, which deals with all age groups, increase her knowledge of what is available for other family members, and who to refer to, e.g. youth workers, youth projects, men’s clubs, self-employment advice, recreational courses. Further, using the right contacts enables the quickest response for clients. For example, clients due to attend job interviews can be quickly referred to Backup North and receive a quick response, e.g. getting clothes for the interview, which can increase confidence. Working with Job Linkage enables quicker access to training as Job Linkage has funding to buy in training rather than go through mainstream where there are more eligibility criteria. In addition, working
alongside other agencies means that the Employment Counsellor’s input does not always need to be as intense, enabling her to concentrate on families of high priority (although input is still monitored).

- **Transitional work**

Acting as an advocate or agent helps develop trust in the service and credibility, and sometimes enables clients to express other issues of concern and to be receptive to further ideas. Interprofessional and interagency working helps action planning with clients, as it facilitates smoother transition from an initial difficult need into further action, e.g. confidence building, inclusion.

b) **Impacts of the service on other agencies**

   i) **Added value/enhancement of service offered**

Representatives from other agencies reported that the service of the Employment Counsellor had impacted on the service they offered clients through:

- Providing a new, specific and specialised service that adds value to the existing service through home visits and the different level of service offered; additionality that cannot be provided at a Job Linkage outlet, through extra time, in-depth work, home/community visits and the opportunity to discuss issues that clients would not feel comfortable talking about at an outlet
- Enabling mutual referral and offering areas of expertise outside their own specific remit
- Engaging people who would not necessarily have taken up training or education or engaged with other services such as Job Linkage and Backup North whose clients tend to be job ready and motivated when they approach; bridging the gap for people who need extra support to access services through providing home visits and building up rapport; filling a gap for clients who are not job ready; helping young mothers access services such as the NDLPA through accompanying them and introducing them to the adviser; helping ‘break down the officialdom barrier’.
- The ability to work with clients over a longer period to gain confidence and motivation and provide a stepping stone to their own services
• Providing a referral point for their own clients, e.g. those who attend courses and express the need for further advice; a central figure to refer to rather than referring to a number of different agencies
• Promotion of their own services, e.g. explaining courses offered on a one-to-one basis; helping raise awareness and increase publicity of the NDLPA service and enabling access to a wider audience
• Providing input into courses e.g. suggestions regarding content of debt awareness course and provision of leaflets
• Knowing clients well and working one-to-one means not only helping fill courses, but also filling them appropriately through knowing what would benefit individuals.
• Helping to improve the coordination of services under the SNCBC umbrella
• Helping agencies achieve their own targets (e.g. NDLPA target re child poverty, improvement of SNCBC’s training outcomes through increasing numbers participating)

ii) Changes in services as a result of collaboration

It was reported that, due to the service of the Employment Counsellor:

• Training providers had developed new courses/run taster sessions around the identified needs of the Employment Counsellor’s clients, e.g. confidence and motivation; pre-employment course for parents
• Some of the Job Linkage outlets had changed the way they work through greater appreciation of clients’ needs beyond simply looking for a job and appreciation that not all clients are job ready

iii) Learning

Individuals from different agencies felt that they had learned from the service in the following ways:

• realisation that ‘there is a massive number of people in the Sunderland North side who require her service – I wouldn’t get to know that without her because I am office based - those clients wouldn’t come in and we wouldn't know about them if we were waiting for them to come through the doors’; that there is ‘a desperate need for this kind of role. The client group has a range of issues that are much greater than we have worked with’.
• Learning that ‘clients need a huge support structure, in-depth service and home visits, not just CVs and job searches. 80% of her job couldn’t be carried out at an outlet’.
• Greater awareness ‘of what’s out there in terms of benefits and support’.
• Increased knowledge as course leader e.g. regarding debt awareness
From the point of view of families, the representatives from other agencies felt that the Employment Counsellor had proved to be an excellent engagement tool, who provided positive experiences for parents and was seen as a less official figure than, for example, a careers adviser. Parents were seen to have increased in confidence through having their needs met and the service had helped pave the way to other services and activities and helped overcome barriers.

c) Effective collaboration

All those interviewed agreed that collaboration between the Employment Counsellor and themselves worked well. This was because of:

- a shared vision and sense of purpose and commitment to helping people move forward, also shared sense of realism about what can be achieved
- helping each other achieve our objectives (e.g. numbers accessing training, childcare, numbers into employment)
- knowledge and appreciation of what others do and where their boundaries are – ‘who does what best’
- good communication, ease of contact and good rapport
- trust in each other’s judgements and in confidentiality
- services complementing each other and being developed where there is known to be a need
- a longstanding relationship and history of working together
- the centrality of the Employment Counsellor’s service to a lot of community services and ability to offer services across the board.

d) Areas for further development with regard to other agencies

The Employment Counsellor felt that, although she had worked alongside Jobcentre Plus, given more time, it would have been beneficial to have worked more intensively with DWP as a whole in order to access more families, particularly through the father, as the majority of JSA claimants tend to be male. It would also have been beneficial to become more involved with relevant DWP/HMT departments such as Benefits sections (e.g. welfare, tax credit) in order to help gain a broader understanding as organisations of the whole family picture beyond the individual claimant.

V. SUMMARY AND KEY FINDINGS

The Employment Counsellor works to provide direct in-depth support on a needs-led approach. She works closely with Sure Start personnel and other agencies to ensure an individual tailored approach with regard to employment, training and financial advice. This has the potential to contribute to breaking the cycle of disadvantage for young children and their families.

The Employment Counsellor works specifically with families with children under four years of age, at a time when there are many new considerations in families’ lives for which she can offer support. By providing a flexible,
outreach and home visiting service, with the attendant opportunity to develop ongoing relationships, the Employment Counsellor is able to provide a more accessible service for clients than office-based services, may be accessing families who would not access an outlet, or indeed other forms of support. It is also a responsive service, i.e. one that is able to respond to people’s needs, rather than a specific service operating according to the specific remits of that service.

There has been a move from working with people who were already accessing a service (e.g. a recreational course) to a large amount of work with regard to welfare dependency (e.g. homelessness, mental health). Whilst going into groups is still an important part of the role, over the last two years there has been a greater emphasis on home visits for intense needs as knowledge of the role has increased and referrals have increased, e.g. through Health and Request for Services. There has also been an increase in the amount of crisis intervention and concerns identified by another professional, i.e. factors inhibiting the functioning of a family that can be addressed by the Employment Counsellor. The role has also involved a large amount of advocacy work. The post requires up-to-date specialist knowledge as the exact nature of the work is often dictated by changing Government policies, changing Benefit rules, employment initiatives and legislation (such as the right for parents with children under six years of age to request flexible working).

Working closely with Sure Start staff and other agencies has enabled ease of referral and quick response for parents. However, this does not negate the need for staff to be aware of and make use of direct referral routes, e.g. to Job Linkage and Learn2Drive. There has been good communication between staff members, mutual referral and some joint working, facilitated in part by the Request for Services system. The service has also added value to other local agencies through its unique approach and engagement of families who might not otherwise have accessed their services or helping ‘bridge the gap’; helped raise awareness of their services, and contributed to their development (e.g. new courses, raised awareness of clients’ needs and circumstances, better informed service) and to their own targets. Agencies considered that collaboration between themselves and the Employment Counsellor worked well because of a shared vision and sense of purpose and commitment; the opportunity to contribute to each others’ objectives; knowledge and appreciation of each other’s roles, strengths and boundaries; good communication, ease of contact and good rapport; trust in each other’s judgements; the complementary and needs-led nature of the services; a longstanding relationship and history of agencies working together in the area; and the centrality of the Employment Counsellor’s service to a number of other community services.

The service has been effective in reaching fathers and working with both parents/partners and/or other family members, which impacts on the whole family, unlike other employment related services, which deal more with the individual needs of the user.
Performance figures show that the Employment Counsellor has been successful in helping people into employment and training. There has also been a strong emphasis on helping overcome a range of barriers to employment. ‘Preventative’ work is another important strand of the Employment Counsellor’s work, to help ensure that those who are employed remain in employment, for example through flexible working and accessing in-work benefits.

In the 2½ year period from March/April 2003 to September 2005 the Employment Counsellor recorded 298 new clients, of whom 71 (23.8%) entered employment, 74 (24.8%) registered with Job Linkage, applied to Back Up North for funding or received self-employment advice, 135 (45.3%) entered training and 32 (10.7%) were referred to the New Deal Lone Parent Adviser. The annual figures contrast strongly with those found in the National Evaluation of Sure Start employability study (NESS, 2004a), which found that, in active programmes, having 20 parents involved during the course of a year in employability activities would be regarded as a significant achievement, and that employment co-ordinators generally had individual caseloads in single figures. More detailed analysis of outcomes for parents, for example raised awareness of rights and/or responsibilities and improved economic stability via welfare, revealed the wide-ranging nature of the service and the complex issues surrounding employment and low income for families with young children.

VI. CONCLUSION

The Employment Counsellor service has unique features not within the remit of other employment related services, i.e. it enables concentration and sustained intervention at a time in people’s lives when their financial position, rights and needs are likely to be changing, it enables home visits and a flexible, accessible approach, and it enables the development of trusting relationships which can make families more open to accessing other services (e.g. through visiting childcare settings together).

The service has proved to be an effective way of reaching families who are in great need and providing a quick response and solution-focused approach, through which they see positive results. The service has also been successful in reaching a large number of fathers/male carers. In some cases this has led to further engagement with Sure Start services, including the Dad's and Kid’s Group.

There was strategic commitment through Partnership to providing employment related support to families with young children at the Programme’s inception. Operationally, there has been good collaboration between the Employment Counsellor and local agencies to provide appropriate targeted support to families. The NESS study found that it was ‘the quality of the collaboration with the other agencies which determines the success of Sure Start local programmes in tackling the issue of employability, and especially the links and networks that programme managers and staff bring with them to the programme’ (NESS, 2004b:1). Further, ‘collaborations
are more successful where they can help all the organisations involved to achieve their objectives’ (ibid.). Sure Start Children’s Centre Practice Guidance (2005) states that local authorities should involve Jobcentre Plus at the strategic planning stage so that their services can be fully integrated into children’s centres. ‘Early joint planning and formal agreement of roles will help shape common objectives and a shared vision of the expected outcomes’ (Sure Start, 2005:13). Locally, other organisations that have been committed to Sure Start North West since the outset (i.e. SNCBC, Backup North) are very important links.

The service is adult-focused but the work has implications for the wellbeing of children and families. As noted in the Children’s Centre Practice Guidance ‘Living in a household where nobody is working is a significant indicator of poor outcomes for children. Research shows that they are less likely to achieve their potential. Employment helps lift families from poverty. It also has a positive effect on children’s mental health, behaviour, social integration and educational performance’. (Sure Start, 2005:37) The service makes an important contribution to the Sure Start/Children’s centre target to reduce by 12% the proportion of young children living in households where no-one is working and the associated DWP target regarding children in workless households and HMT/DWP target regarding children in low income households. It contributes to the Every Child Matters outcome ‘Achieve Economic Well-Being’, aims for children to live in households free from low income, to live in decent homes and sustainable communities and to have access to transport and material goods, and support whereby ‘parents, carers and families are supported to be economically active’. This in turn may have an impact on children’s achievements and aspirations for education, employment or training as well as their more immediate health, well-being and learning, for example through an increased ability to support children’s learning through addressing basic skills. The work of the Employment Counsellor not only supports parents through, for example, ensuring that they receive the correct financial and work entitlements, helping them consider options and work towards aspirations and supporting them through the process, but also developing confidence and self esteem and developing a trusting relationship that has in several cases encouraged further engagement with Sure Start services for health, family support and children’s learning.

The Labour Government has placed a strong emphasis on the provision of childcare to help families with young children into work, but as this evaluation has shown, the situation for families with young children in deprived areas is a lot more complex and can include reluctance to access childcare and barriers to employment. Local contextual factors also need to be taken into consideration, e.g. the significance of long-term unemployment in Sunderland (with 2.6% unemployed for over five years, compared to 2.2% in the North East and 1.6% in Great Britain in April 2003). The Employment Counsellor has identified and sought to address a number of barriers to employment and the study confirms the finding of NESS that ‘some parents in Sure Start areas face a range of complicated barriers to work, and require intense and sustained support to deal with them’ (2004b:1). These multiple barriers need multiple and personalised approaches (NESS, 2004a:54).
Sure Start Children’s Centre Practice Guidance notes the importance of contributing to the employability agenda, and this is confirmed by a statement that performance indicators being developed for children’s centres are likely to include economic well-being, such as the percentage of children living in workless households. However, the guidance with regard to employment support seems to focus mainly on parents who are ready to access services outside the home and are economically active or job ready. It provides useful guidance on joint initiatives with Jobcentre Plus working through children’s centres, on schemes to improve basic skills and adult education classes, joint open days and links with local employers. The Employment Counsellor considered that her service would have been enhanced by the provision of a designated base and resources (and a designated budget e.g. for crisis support and childcare provision for non Sure Start courses), as there has been no suitable environment in which to facilitate learning e.g. through displaying relevant materials and enabling group discussions, and very little opportunity for families to gain peer support, e.g. in applying for jobs with support. This would also enable input from the wider Sure Start team, and enable promotion of families’ successes, for example through visual publicity, case studies and sharing successful ways of improving quality of life through employment. At the same time, this evaluation has highlighted the importance, in addition to centre-based services, of a flexible, accessible outreach and home based approach that addresses a far wider range of barriers to work than those highlighted in the Guidance. This is of significance for children’s centre development as the Practice Guidance states that there should be ‘a greater emphasis on outreach and home visiting as a basis for enabling greater access to services for families who are unlikely to visit a centre’ (Sure Start, 2005:3). The evaluation has shown the complex issues surrounding employment and low income for families with young children and how much can be achieved through a dedicated worker within Sure Start, whose role encompasses a wide range of issues including, for example, preventative work (i.e. helping parents stay in employment, e.g. through knowledge of and access to employment rights and benefits) and helping parents consider their options (e.g. those on maternity leave). The evaluation has also highlighted the number and variety of outcomes that have been achieved by families through this approach, which have been enhanced through strong links with the Sure Start team and other agencies.
References


Rachel* – Mother of three children aged 8 years, 3 years and 3 months

Rachel attended promotional visit at Sure Start. During a visit she told staff she has always wanted to become a midwife.

Rachel felt there were barriers to becoming a midwife: she had failed her driving test and could not afford to re-take it, plus the cost of course fees and childcare.

Sure Start’s Employment Counsellor drew up an action plan to support Rachel back into work.

Rachel undertakes courses at Sure Start including First Aid and Life Support for Children and Adults.

Rachel enrols on Access to Nursing course with City of Sunderland College.

Funding was obtained from Back Up North Innovation Fund to pay for driving lessons and a driving test. Rachel passed her test.

Outcomes for children and families:
- The family have been supported to maximise their economic wellbeing.
- Rachel has achieved her career aim and her self-esteem and confidence have grown.
- The children were able to access early education, and their social wellbeing improved.

Rachel’s career aims changed to Theatre Nursing and she has been offered a place at Northumbria University.

Sure Start partners with Job Linkage to fund additional childcare costs at a local nursery.

Childcare unavailable on college site.

* All names have been changed.