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Introduction

Two services were 'spotlighted' by the Sure Start Sheerness partnership for individual evaluation, as part of the wider Sure Start evaluation. These services are the Play and Learn Scheme (PALS) and parental training services.

This report focuses on the service evaluation of PALS as it relates to the provision of its services to families in the Sure Start Sheerness area.

The purposes of the evaluation are assessing the effectiveness of PALS as it relates to:

- Service quality
- Cost effectiveness
- How well these work with other agencies and within the context of the wider partnership, and
- Whether these support the achievement of Sure Start objectives and key principles

The report identifies the very high levels of satisfaction amongst parents with regard to the Little PALS service, with local parents identifying PALS activities their favourite learning and play services. The PALS team should feel very proud of such achievements. While the results about quality are very positive, the report notes that take-up of the toy library service has been very low. The configuration of this service should therefore be examined at the earliest possible opportunity to enable it to better meet the needs of local families.

There is also likely to be considerable benefit to increasing service providers, incorporating PALS, working together to ensure a seamless service that addresses the continuum of needs of local families.

Methodology

The evaluation of PALS involved various actions to enable a comprehensive understanding of the PALS service, incorporating each of the services provided by the team.

The methodologies adopted sought to assess PALS in relation to:

- 1) Degree of integration into the wider Sure Start partnership; including the extent to which they support the achievement of Sure Start objectives and key principles
- 2) Efficacy of partnership working with external agencies, such as associated voluntary and community bodies
- 3) Success in involving clients in design and delivery of services.
- 4) Overall quality of services looking in particular at levels of satisfaction with services, in relation to various criteria about what constitutes a 'quality' service and the degree to which local families feel that a difference is being made in their own health and well being.
- 5) Cost indicators for services

In terms of exploring the issues around point 1-4, we undertook background and desk-top research, qualitative and quantitative analysis of data and interviews with PALS staff.

A variety of evaluation methodologies have been employed and include:

- Interview (September 12th) with the Senior Co-ordinator and Local Co-ordinator of PALS.
- A community survey of local parents that captured the views of 110 parents of young children living in the Sheerness area about training services.
- Provider questionnaire. An evaluation questionnaire was completed by 11 Sure Start service providers asking them to assess the service being provided by a number of Sure Start services, including PALS.

In terms of 5, unit cost analysis was undertaken by using the basic unit cost model which deduces what the average cost of a contact by reference to the total Sure Start contribution, using the average number of families supported in a given week. To enable comparison of unit costs for the purposes of assessing cost effectiveness, the following unit costs are provided:

- ❑ Sure Start family support services in two Sure Start programmes in Rotherham, where the family workers provide home visits that incorporate play activities.
- ❑ Behavioural support team workers studied as part of *Unit Costs of Health and Social Care 2002*¹, albeit with an inflation uplift assumption of 4% year on year in the costs of these workers.

¹ PSRRU, *Unit Costs of Health and Social Care 2002*, p.139

An overall picture

The Play and Learn Scheme provides a number of services for parents and their very young children in the Sheerness area.

PALS employs four play workers and is led by a Local Co-ordinator (Jennie Thompson who has recently come into post).

Little PALS

Little PALS is a drop-in play service for parents and carers with children aged to 4. The session gives parents the opportunity for their children to interact with other children and for parents to socialise too. The social element of the session is considered to be a very important one by PALS staff.

Sessions take place once per week for an hour and a half. Sessions are broken down so that the time is semi-structured. Sessions are divided into:

- A free play time
- Refreshment time
- Group time

Parents remain responsible for their own children during the session and staff emphasised that Little PALS is not a service where parents can leave their children.

Each session is attended by between 10 and 23 children and is staffed by three play workers.

Baby PALS

Baby PALS was developed on the basis of needs identified by parents. Parents indicated that they did not feel that Little PALS was suitable for very young children. Baby PALS seeks therefore to provide the same sort of service as Little PALS but in an environment more appropriate for very young children and babies, with the service accommodating children up to the age of 18 months and their parents.

In addition to bringing parents together to socialise, Baby PALS also acts as a forum to give advice to parents with Steve Tomlin (Sure Start Health Visitor) attending sessions to give informal advice and support.

Baby PALS sessions are held once per week for an hour and a half and are staffed by two play workers. Given that the service is aimed at very young children, the capacity of the service is lower with a maximum of 8 children able to attend. Attendance of sessions is normally in the region of around 5 children.

Toy Library

The toy library is open twice per week (Thursday 2pm to 3pm and Friday 11.30am to 12.30pm) at the FWA Family Centre and began operation in May of 2003. While about 20 parents are registered with the toy library, attendances at each session are about 1-3 parents

The service is run by two play workers.

Play-worker home visits

Home visits are provided by PALS play workers who play with children and also engage parents in activities to encourage the development of interaction between child and parent. Parents are normally allocated an hour of support per week.

Play workers assess the particular needs of each child and select forms of play that are most appropriate to that child's needs. The development of a child is monitored on a weekly basis with parents asked to record details and outcomes of play sessions. Records kept by both the play worker and parents allow the impact of play sessions to be monitored and for subsequent play sessions to be adapted to account for the ongoing development of the child. The progress of the child is monitored at 4 weeks and then subsequently every 3 months.

PALS staff indicated that home visits constitute the bulk of their work, accounting for some 80% of their workload. Play workers see about 40 families per week.

Service Evaluation

Cost of service

Using the basic unit cost model which deduces the average cost of a contact by reference to the total Sure Start grant of £43,500 (at 80%, £34,800) and undertaking about 40 home visits per week for about 45 weeks per year, the average contact cost of the PALS home visiting service is £19.33.

In seeking to identify other similar roles for comparison in terms of cost *Unit Costs of Health and Social Care 2002 (p.139)* identifies that the average cost per hour of client related activity for behavioural support service team members that work with children aged 5-16 in schools is £35 per hour in 2001/02 or £36.40 on a 2002/03 basis, assuming a 4% uplift.

By way of comparison with some other Sure Start programmes, family support workers at Sure Start Rawmarsh and Sure Start Maltby in Rotherham offer home visits that incorporate play services with children, as well as other support for parents.

Play workers PALS	Family workers Rawmarsh	Family workers Maltby	Behavioural support service
19.33	17.13	17.01	36.40

On the basis of these comparisons, PALS is arguably a little more expensive than similar service provision. However, it must be noted that the Rotherham programmes family workers are very inexpensive vis-à-vis similar types of provision.

Integration into Sure Start Partnership

Strategically

The Senior Co-ordinator of PALS indicated that she sees the organisation as a partner of Sure Start Sheerness given that they share similar aims and objectives, and that the service level agreement provides a basis for ensuring operational synergy.

The Senior Co-ordinator indicated that whilst Sure Start and PALS work closely with one another in partnership to achieve the same aims, she nevertheless sees the two organisations as distinct services and that PALS is very much an independent organisation.

The structure of PALS was cited as evidence that it is a distinct organisation apart from Sure Start. PALS play workers are employed by Swale Volunteer and Community Development Centre, are managed by the NSPCC and are funded by Sure Start Sheerness. Swale Volunteer and Community Development Centre hold staffing budgets and have employment responsibility for the play workers.

The Senior Co-ordinator expressed some concerns that, despite the service level agreement, Sure Start programme staff sometimes have sought responsibilities that PALS have not always considered to be appropriate to a funding body. Sure Start programme management have, for instance, requested line management meetings with the Local PALS Co-ordinator. The Senior Co-ordinator felt that given NSPCC management responsibilities, Sure Start Sheerness requests for supervisions duplicated a level of management that already exists and confuse lines of responsibility.

Conversely, Sure Start Sheerness is determined to ensure that the substantial investment it makes in PALS delivers a service that is most appropriate in meeting the needs of local families within the context of a package of services that address the continuum of needs of local families, of which play and learning are a part. This also strongly resonates with the broader strategic context of Sure Start Sheerness considering the sustainability of services in the longer term.

To this end, PALS and Sure Start Sheerness are working together to ensure clarity about management and to resolve issues such as the line management arrangements.

Observations and opportunities

1. The Sure Start Sheerness way of working and determination to ensure that the services it funds are appropriately integrated into the wider programme of services is to be welcomed. Naturally, for pre-existing organisations that operate within the programme of services, resolving relationships and that the services delivered support the wider programme of services involves time and commitment.
2. To this end, the work to ensure clarity about management is to be commended, so that all services work cohesively to the benefit of local families. This could also include Sure Start Sheerness looking at whether having a NSPCC representative on the Board might provide a valuable strategic link.

Operational Partnerships

Integration into the wider programme of activity

Addressing the continuum of needs of local families in a seamless way is fundamental to achieving the aspirations of Sure Start Sheerness. Consequently, service providers must work cooperatively to ensure families receive the services they need in a seamless way.

Eleven service providers within the Sure Start Sheerness Partnership were asked to rate PALS in terms of how they work within the Sure Start Sheerness partnership to enable a seamless service that meets the continuum of client needs. The results are set out at Table 1.

Table 1: Service providers assessment of PALS

Outcome	Assessment			
	Very Good	Good	OK	Poor
PALS provides feedback about clients to other Sure Start staff	2	2	3	2
PALS makes referrals to other Sure Start staff	1	4	3	0

The results point to a degree of concern among some providers in relation to PALS provides feedback about clients to other Sure Start staff which 2 respondents felt to be Poor. One of the respondents who assessed feedback as being Poor further indicated that one of the key areas for Sure Start Sheerness to address was to work towards a ‘better relationship with PALS’.

PALS staff interviewed stated, in relation to information sharing, that the majority of information they pass on takes the form of the required monitoring data, rather than discussion with other providers about the specific needs of clients themselves. Client information is shared when there is a perceived need, notably when child protection issues arise.

PALS staff felt that some communication difficulties exist between themselves and Sure Start Sheerness and that information that would be useful to PALS staff is not always relayed from other providers within Sure Start Sheerness.

On the issue of referrals into the PALS team, PALS staff stated that they prefer for families to introduce themselves to their services, especially when seeking out home-visiting support. PALS staff noted that parents who had sought out the home-visiting service tended to be more committed to the service than those referred on. Some referrals do however take place, most notably between PALS staff and from health visitors.

Referrals (or introductions as they termed by PALS) normally take the form of a self-completion leaflet that parents send to PALS. Staff at PALS try to ensure that initial contact is made with a parent within two weeks of the arrival of the application form with an initial telephone call made as soon as is possible.

PALS make onward referrals to a number of other professionals, including (non-exhaustively):

- Sure Start Sheerness
- Health visitors
- Speech and language therapist
- Family Welfare Association
- Social Services

Referrals to Sure Start are done via telephone or at meetings with Sure Start staff. PALS record all onward referrals made in order to be able to monitor whether or not action is taken by other agencies.

Internal monitoring data from Little PALS indicates that of 11 service users, 10 stated that they are able to get information about other services from Little PALS.

Working within Sure Start Sheerness

Staff at PALS identified a number of strengths and weaknesses in relation to working with Sure Start Sheerness. The results are given at Table 2.

Table 2: Strengths and areas for improvement

Area	Comments
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sure Start offers the potential to speed up the delivery of services to families in the Sheerness area and to be able to respond faster to the needs of parents and their very young children. ▪ Involvement of a broad spectrum of organisations in the programme. ▪ Better information sharing between service providers in the area.
Improvements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Need to clarify the boundaries between Sure Start and PALS.

Observations and opportunities

1. Ensuring that all service providers work together to ensure a seamless service that addresses the continuum of needs of local families is critical. This is an area where additional efforts are likely to make a substantial difference to local families.
2. As suggested in the main programme evaluation report, there might be scope for Sure Start Sheerness exploring some systemisation or co-ordination of the processes of multi-disciplinary interventions, incorporating PALS. This is to ensure effective information sharing and to ensure that all families receive appropriate services that effectively address the continuum of their needs without duplication or providers working at cross purposes.

Sure Start Sheerness could consider models used in other Sure Start areas. These include monthly case meetings between relevant providers for families that receive multiple services at Sure Start Ore Valley to ensure that the package of services provided to families are most appropriate in the circumstances. An alternative model is having a co-ordinator co-ordinate and

review actions across multi-agency multi-disciplinary teams for families that receive multi-agency service packages, as occurs at Sure Start Holloway and Sure Start Copenhagen.

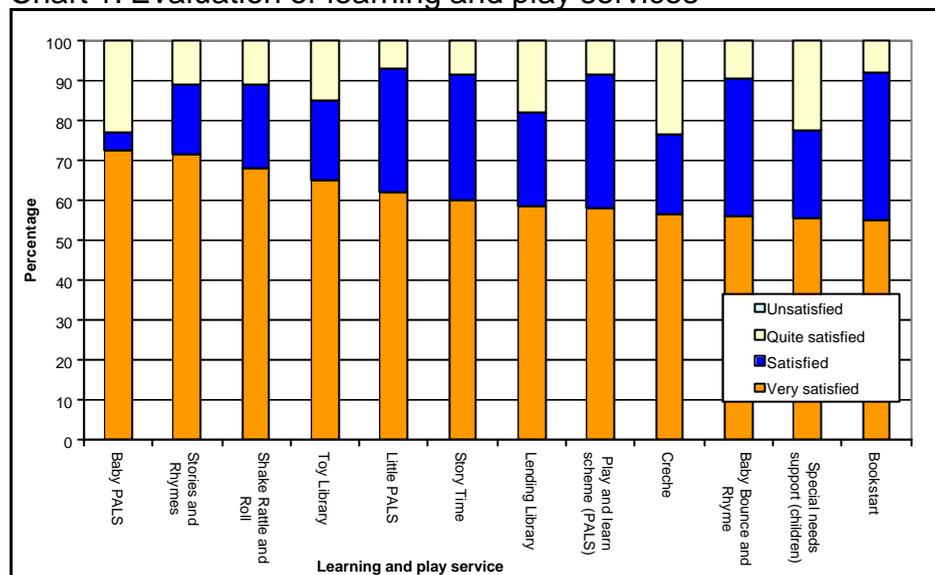
3. As also recommended in the main programme evaluation report, there may be scope for increasing referral rates, and thus ensure families receive the services they need, should providers have greater awareness of what other services are on offer. To this end, Sure Start Sheerness could consider promoting increased referrals between services and introduce systems whereby service providers record the number of referrals received and made, perhaps employing the model of PALS staff. This will provide valuable information for testing the effectiveness of projects and the way in which they contribute to a wider programme of activity that provides a more seamless service for local families.

Service Quality

Parental satisfaction with services

The community survey interviewed 110 parents of very young children in the Sure Start area to ascertain their opinion in relation to a number of key thematic areas. The results for learning and play service are set out at Chart 1.

Chart 1: Evaluation of learning and play services



Whilst the results for all learning and play services are very good, those services provided by PALS emerge as having very high satisfaction ratings.

Little PALS received the highest overall satisfaction rating of any learning and play service with an extremely high 93% of parents indicating that they were Satisfied or Very Satisfied.

Baby PALS received the highest proportion of respondents indicating that they were Very Satisfied at 73%.

The results at Chart 1 demonstrate conclusively that the services provided by PALS are extremely well thought of by parents in the Sheerness area.

A number of comments provided by parents in the community survey further underline satisfaction with the services provided by PALS. Quotes have been arranged thematically beneath:

Little PALS

- *Little PALS is friendly.*
- *Little PALS – they have everything there – care workers are excellent. Kids learn well and mix well.*
- *Little PALS has helped my daughter gain confidence in playing with other children and making new friends, and she also gets to do many different activities. She looks forward to it every week.*
- *Little PALS – kids really enjoy getting messy and I don't have to clean up.*
- *Little PALS – lots of toys to play with.*

PALS (general)

- *PALS – lots of help for the children.*
- *PALS visits are always good and give you a rest.*
- *PALS build child's one on one confidence and encourages development through play.*
- *PALS workers coming with toys teaching parents as well as child.*

When respondents were asked to indicate their favourite learning and play service, the single most commonly cited service was Little PALS, cited by 8% of the survey population, while PALS home-visits were the next most commonly cited service (noted by 6% of parents). See Table 3 for results in full.

Table 3: Favourite learning and play service of respondents

Learning and play service	Number of respondents	Percentage of survey population
Little PALS	9	8.2
PALS (home visits)	6	5.5
Shake, Rattle and Roll	3	2.7
Bookstart	3	2.7
None	2	1.8
Baby Bounce and Rhyme	2	1.8
Story Time	2	1.8
Crèche	2	1.8
All	1	0.9
Library (non-specified)	1	0.9
Fun Days	1	0.9
Play and Learn Scheme	1	0.9
One O'Clock Club	1	0.9

As Table 3 demonstrates, PALS services accounted for the favourite learning and play service of 14% of parents in the Sheerness area, an excellent result for the service.

Although the results at Chart 1 indicate that no parents stated that they were Unsatisfied with PALS services, 2 respondents indicated in the survey that they felt that PALS services needed improving – one parent indicating that improvements were needed in relation to Little PALS, and one in relation to Baby PALS. The comments of these parents are given below:

- ❑ *Little PALS can be a bit condescending.*
- ❑ *Baby PALS – didn't understand what it was for or what to do. Did we play with children or would PALS workers play, or was it a joint effort? No one told me what to do or introduced me to the session.*

These two comments, whilst negative, need to be contextualised in the broader proportionality of near universal approval of the Baby PALS service and extremely high satisfaction ratings with regard to Little PALS.

To ascertain what parents thought of the service providers being used by Sure Start Sheerness to deliver services, parents were asked whether or not there were any providers that they were not comfortable with.

The results also conclusively demonstrate that the service providers working alongside Sure Start Sheerness are as highly regarded as the

programme itself, with only one respondent indicating that they were not comfortable with NSPCC. As the parent observed:

- ❑ *NSCPP – attitude when you approach management is condescending and patronising.*

Internal monitoring data from Little PALS reinforces the findings of the community survey and indicate high levels of satisfaction with the service. Using an attitudinal scale where 1 was the lowest rating (Very poor) and 5 the highest (Very good) the internal evaluation indicated that the majority of respondents gave the service a score of 5 in relation to each statement. The results are given at Table 4.

Table 4: Internal Little PALS evaluation results

Statement	Evaluation rating				
	1	2	3	4	5
Is the group welcoming?	0	0	0	4	7
Is the group safe and clean?	0	0	0	2	9
Are the toys/equipment suitable?	0	0	0	0	11

Comments from the internal evaluation closely emulate the quotes found in the community survey. Thus:

- ❑ *Provides a safe and secure, disciplined environment where children can mix.*
- ❑ *All the kids seem to enjoy themselves and the play workers are keen to help if you need it.*
- ❑ *It keeps her quiet! I get to talk to grown ups!*
- ❑ *The wide range of activities on offer, both fun and educational. Particularly the different types of arts and crafts.*

Provider perspective on quality and impact

Eleven local service providers were asked to assess the quality of the service provided by PALS in relation to a number of key outcomes both in relation to its work with local parents and their very young children. The results are set out at Table 5.

Table 5: Service providers assessment of PALS

Outcome	Assessment			
	Very Good	Good	OK	Poor
Client friendly times for service	4	4	0	0
Easy for clients to get to service	4	5	1	0
Friendly service	8	1	0	0
Professional service	8	2	1	0
Improves child development	5	4	1	0
Improves parents skills	5	4	1	0

The results for most of the outcomes listed are positive. The majority of service providers rated each factor Very Good to Good. Service providers indicated two particular strengths of PALS - Friendly service and Professional service.

Areas to make improvements

When interviewed, staff at PALS indicated that they felt that working with Sure Start Sheerness was helping them to make a difference to parents and their young children in the area.

PALS staff felt that working with a Sure Start programme enabled diverse and creative ways of working that were not previously possible giving both PALS and Sure Start the opportunity to make a real difference to the lives of children in the area. However, in terms of making some improvements, PALS staff identify:

- ❑ That the toy library service needs review to ensure that the service meets the needs of local families.

Designed as a service to be available to as many possible parents in Sheerness, staff noted that around 20 families are registered with the service, albeit that generally attendances are about 1 to 3 families per session. Families using the service were said to be pleased with it, but it was recognised that not nearly enough families had engaged with the service.

- ❑ While PALS staff felt that, generally, Sure Start was having a positive impact on parents and their young children in the area, they felt a greater focus is necessary on young children and providing services for them. PALS staff interviewed felt that the level of need was such in Sheerness that children cannot afford to wait for their parents to receive training and to develop, but need direct intervention to assist in their own needs.

Observations and opportunities

1. PALS should feel very proud of the extent to which local families and other service providers are happy with the quality of PALS service provision.
2. The results point to the value of having more groups and toys for local families, as well as to specifically offer home visiting services.
3. PALS is to be commended on reviewing the toy library to ensure that it better meets the needs of local families. In undertaking such a review, PALS could explore models such as toy library provision at Sure Start St Matthews where local parents themselves run the toy library, or at the Kings Cross Homelessness Project that lends toys to local families as part of their home visiting service.
4. In the main programme evaluation report, an away day with all providers to develop an action plan for addressing key priorities is recommended. This forum could provide an opportunity to explore issues connected with increasing the focus on the needs of young children. Moreover, as recommended at page 8, if NSPCC had a greater strategic link with the programme, such as through the Management Board, such issues could be dealt with on a whole programme basis.