

## Barriers to Engagement

### 1. Introduction to Mexborough Sure Start

Mexborough Sure Start is a 5<sup>th</sup> wave programme approved in December 2002. As a relatively new Sure Start the team and the services they deliver are still developing as new people come on board. As the Sure Start is at this early stage it was thought timely to carry out some formative evaluation work to look at the barriers to engagement experienced by the local community and to seek solutions to these from both potential service users and staff working with them. Arc Research and Consultancy have carried out other work looking at barriers experienced within local communities and devised the following piece of work in association with the programme manager and the parental involvement workers who set up the focus groups.

### 2. What we know about barriers to engagement

When new projects are set up in local areas certain issues arise in terms of engaging with their local community. These issues can roughly be divided into ones which are typified as practical barriers to engagement e.g., transport, childcare, finances; and those that can best be described as psychological e.g., fear of the unknown, lack of motivation; a third area identified in Mexborough was linked to cultural barriers to engagement faced by men in relation to activities with children.

For this piece of research we were keen to elaborate on these broad barriers and to examine the barriers to engagement within the Mexborough context. To do this we developed a method whereby traditional barriers to engagement were presented to a group and they were asked to select the one that best described the situation in Mexborough in relation to Sure Start activity. This was then used as a basis for a workshop discussion looking at particular local barriers to engagement and most importantly suggesting solutions to these. This developmental element of the research was thought to be important in terms of moving the debate on and engaging the workshop participants in developing local solutions to the barriers to engagement they experienced.

In total nine focus groups were held:

- ◆ Three with staff groups
- ◆ One with a group of men in the George and Dragon
- ◆ Five with mothers at a variety of venues in the Mexborough area.

### 3. Barriers to Sure Start engagement

The barriers to engagement experienced by parents in Mexborough were different for men and women based upon their experiences and expectations of Sure Start. We also experienced some differences between groups dependent upon where the group took place and in relation to the geography of the different interview locations.

The views of staff on what was preventing engagement by the local community reflected to some degree their own experiences of Sure Start, along with their perception of the local community.

#### 3.1 Practical barriers to engagement

In Mexborough specific barriers to engagement experienced in relation to Sure Start activity were different depending on the group interviewed however lack of information; and problems with the activity in some respect were common across groups. Other issues appeared to be more group specific and depended on the specific local circumstances of the group involved, these included transport, access, and finances.

##### 3.1.1 Lack of information

Problems with information stemmed both from what parents experienced as problems with the reliability of the information provided as well as problems with having any information about Sure Start activity. Several groups at different locations experienced these problems:

*'We have had times when we have been told about sessions – they have been advertised as happening – only to get there and find no-one around and that no such groups has been set up.'* (Rockleigh)

*'I didn't have a clue where this place was or that it existed. I was sat at home cleaning out my cupboards this morning and if I'd have known this existed I would have been up here instead.'* (Hallgate)

*'There is a need to improve communication between everybody – staff, parents and childminders. You get too much contradictory information or no information at all.'* (Dolcliffe Hall)

*'There is not much information as regard activities for men.'* (George and Dragon).

## Solutions

The parents we talked to were very happy to offer solutions to the problems that they experienced with information on Sure Start. These were often to do with developing new modes of communication to ensure the widest reach as well as making sure the information available was correct.

*'There could be a regular newsletter that keeps us informed of things.'*  
(Baptist Church).

*'There should be just one person that you deal with and they should be responsible for getting back to you instead of passing you on to the next one.'* (Bingo session).

*'Most of the things I get to find out about are through the post. I don't get much about Sure Start through the post.'* (Hallgate)

*'I work for Tesco and we have a notice board – I've not seen a Sure Start notice on there but it would be a good idea to put one there.'*  
(Baptist Church).

It would appear that parents in the Mexborough Sure Start area are aware of Sure Start but have problems in finding out about specific activities and some people have had bad experiences in accessing services which has made them more circumspect about the information that they now receive. This was also recognised to be a problem by the Sure Start staff who offered the following ways forward.

*'Consistency is the key. There should be consistent leaflets dropped to the homes of those that are registered to let them know that they are not forgotten and that there are still things out there.'* (Child and family health service group)

*'We need to distribute information in places that the hard to reach visit like cheap freezer shops, bingo halls and such like.'* (Family support and outreach group).

*'It is important that if they are going to start a project then they follow it through. Make sure you have proper staff in, make sure you have it starting at the times advertised because if you get disengaged people coming to one of these things and it doesn't happen then you will find they won't trust you and won't come again.'* (Rockleigh).

*'We are thinking of having a welcome party for families with new births on certain days of the month when they will be invited and get a welcome gift and all the information so that they will be aware of what is happening within Sure Start across all the professional areas.'* (Child and family health service group.)'

Sharing of information between the different Sure Start teams was also identified as an area in which improvement could occur.

*'There is a lack of information offered to health visitors ourselves. Lack of co-ordination within Sure Start is a problem.'* (Child and family health services group.)

*'We need more systematic planning of events and a greater degree of cross-referencing between the other two groups.'* (Outreach and education).

*'An excursion can be sold out within an hour while other members of staff somewhere else are booking people onto it.'* (Early learning and childcare group).

### 3.1.2 Dissatisfaction with Sure Start or the activities offered

This was expressed in different ways by a number of groups but could be summed up by Sure Start not providing what people wanted. This suggests that more work might be needed to find out what local people want from Sure Start and working with the community. This was acknowledged by staff in their discussion of this.

*'The trouble with Sure Start is that they provide you with things that they think you should have rather than things you actually want.'* (Rockleigh).

*'The times that it is open mean that those who work, especially men, can't get to it. You would get more men to these sessions if you do a proper men's session – not between 1 and 3 for bacon sandwiches and a cup of tea. My husband works 8 – 5 and there is no way he can come between those times.'* (Bingo session).

*'If you have one child of two years of age and another at one you can only have one of them here so you have to carry or push the other one back and forth and it's a real bind.'* (Dolcliffe Hall).

*'They don't want to provide the courses you want to take you further but only those they (Sure Start) think will get the hard to reach involved.'* (Rockleigh).

*'It's best when it is seen as a community rather than just a Sure Start activity. We have set up a session at Bank Street with music and we are getting more and more people every week.'* (Early learning and childcare focus group).

*'There are a lot of community groups in Mexborough that have been here for years and are quite successful at it and when Sure Start came along there was a certain amount of fear from these community groups'*

*that Sure Start would take over because they had the resources and power. This became self-fulfilling in that some of the smaller community groups are losing their clients – going from smaller playgroups and going to Sure Start where they have better toys and don't have to pay to get through the door. There is animosity from groups in the community. If parents are involved with these other community groups then they will be influenced by these sentiments and it can act as a barrier.' (Child and family health group).*

### **Solutions**

Solutions to the above centred on finding out what people wanted and providing a variety of services that covered the whole spectrum of needs from working dads, to people looking to develop themselves further through education or training. Important considerations in terms of Sure Start provision more generally was a desire for Sure Start provision to be open to all parents, that there was too much concentration on hard to reach families; and for Sure Start activities to be more community focussed.

*'There should be more consultation to find out what local people's needs are – for example they are offering computer courses for unemployed dads but what about dads who are doing shiftwork.' (Rockleigh).*

*'What we really need is ownership within the community of the activities that we are doing. Then parents will identify Sure Start through the service provision rather than the name itself.' (Family support and outreach group).*

### **3.1.3 Difficulties with access/resources**

Whilst childcare did not appear to be a problem in preventing engagement other associated issues did. For example, being able to cater for children of different ages was felt to be important for some families whilst others talked about specific problems in terms of access to services.

*'Timing of Sure Start services is a problem – it should tie in with school. There are too many clashes.' (Rockleigh)*

*'There is an issue regarding safety – there is a set of steps at the fire exit which is an issue for mothers with children and people in wheelchairs.' (Hallgate)*

### **Solutions**

The new building was thought to be a solution to many of the problems with current provision, however difficulties in terms of catering for families with

different aged children was seen as a difficult problem to solve. The following suggestions were made.

*'What you need is a crèche for every activity – but we haven't got the space, facilities or crèche workers to do that.'* (Early learning and childcare focus group).

### 3.1.4 Lack of finances

Whilst finances tended to be mentioned by all of the groups to some degree they were a major issue for the bingo session held at Hallgate. This may reflect the immediate issues faced by that group and their concerns.

*'We have a lot of people who are on low pay and need some kind of support for the trips that Sure Start organises. It means that many people are excluded from going who most need to go and it makes them feel worse.'* (Bingo session)

*'Of all the money that has gone into Sure Start it is a pity that at least once a year there is not some subsidised trip that everyone can attend.'* (Bingo session).

*'Some weeks I can afford to pay for a playgroup but others I can't. My shopping and bills come first, even though the playgroup is only a pound I have to miss it. If it's a free facility you can go every week. A donation box would be good.'* (Hallgate).

### Solutions

Money was seen as a large barrier to engagement in some of the groups and one that Sure Start had the means to overcome. Suggestions were that some activities could be subsidised to make them more available.

*'It needs to be free or subsidised – the first question people will ask is how much is it going to cost. If you take them out to a leisure park at the end of the day someone with three or four kids will find it really expensive. People do want to go but it needs to be subsidised, not necessarily free, but much of the expense needs to be paid for to put it within their reach.'* (Bingo session).

### 3.1.5 Lack of transport

Like finances this was picked out as being particularly important for certain groups but as not important as all for others. This may reflect the location of the groups and their access to transport. For example the group at Rockleigh

were happy with the transport as they had use of the DMBC minibus and lived close to the centre, for others this was not the case.

*'It's a real problem for those who live up at Highwoods and want to come down here and vice versa – they have to walk it.'* (Bingo session).

### **Solutions**

Solutions offered were in respect to making better use of the existing minibus, sharing cars and more buses generally to be more family friendly.

## 3.2 Psychological barriers to engagement

All the groups cited some psychological barriers to engagement that ranged from fear of the unknown, stigma associated with Sure Start activity, fear of authority; and a lack of motivation. For the staff these psychological barriers were seen as more important than practical barriers which were thought in some cases to be used more as excuses for not participating rather than actual barriers.

### 3.2.1 Fear of the unknown

The act of walking into a new environment and meeting new people for the first time was seen as one that prevented many people from taking part in Sure Start activities. This was expressed across all the groups and was a barrier identified by staff as key to engaging people.

*'This is the biggest problem – a lot of people are scared to come here.'*  
(Bingo session).

*'It is those parents with their first born that are hardest to reach because they are less liable to know anyone else with a child and therefore come into contact with Sure Start. That was the case when I had my first.'* (Rockleigh).

### Solutions

Parents were keen that Sure Start activities come to them through outreach and that parents themselves were used as a resource to attract and encourage other parents. There were also comments related to attracting hard to reach groups such as men through offering different types of activity where the child was the focus.

*'There should be a parents session every so often just to explain what goes on and what the children can get out of it.'* (Dolcliffe Hall)

*'My health visitor never said anything about Sure Start but it should be something they do.'* (Rockleigh)

*'It's better that it is a outreach worker than a health visitor because a lot of people don't see the health visitor as a friend but as a threat – a reminder that it might be seen that they can't parent their child.'*  
(Rockleigh)

*'If an outreach worker had been around when I had my first child and introduced me to something like this I would have jumped at it.'*(Rockleigh).

*'You won't get much out of a blanket leaflet shot. It has got to be more personal than that – that you actually go out and see them.'* (Rockleigh staff).

*'Parent-mentoring getting parents to bring others that they know along to sessions should be tried out.'* (Rockleigh).

*'In my mind if you want to attract male parents you have to appeal to the children by having good activities that they want to come back for.'* (George and Dragon).

*'We should have more family type activity.'* (Dolcliffe)

*'Knock on doors and it seems to work. You are not going to pester them – all you are going to do is to tell them who you are.'* (Bingo session).

### 3.2.2 Stigma associated with Sure Start activities

Linked to the above fear of the unknown were specific barriers associated with the activity being run as part of Sure Start. These were to do with the stigma attached to Sure Start, it being for deprived or needy families, and the expectation that something would be required of them.

*'I'm a typical mum and I think most mums think like me. My daughter has a Sure Start bib but I won't let her wear it. It came in a pack and is a really good quality bib but I don't want it to be seen on her.'* (Baptist Church).

*'Sigma is really a problem. The attitude that I am not going there because it's for poor people is really strong.'* (George and Dragon).

*'At the same time those people who are viewed as underprivileged don't want to go because they are too proud. It's a viscous cycle – you can't get people involved if they think they will be seen as a problem group.'* (George and Dragon).

*'Some people think that I am not going in there because I am going to get roped into all sorts.'*(Dolcliffe)

*'One of the things that people have said to me for not coming is being associated with drug users (drug rehabilitation centre). I have told them that they don't even use the same part of the building but it does put people off.'*(Bingo session).

### Solutions

How Sure Start and Sure Start users are seen within the local community is an issue in terms of getting parents on board and in maintaining their

involvement. Whilst Sure Start has a need to contact the hard to reach there is a danger that other families may be put off by a perceived failure to meet the needs of their families.

*'They need to re-assure people that it is not for poor people.'* (Baptist church).

*'An open day session to show people what it is like and that it is not full of druggies.'* (Bingo session).

### 3.2.3 Lack of motivation

For the staff involved in the focus groups there was also an acknowledgement that people could be put off engaging in Sure Start by a fear of the unknown, but the staff also talked about an associated lack of motivation within some families.

*'Your problems come not when you have first time mums with new babies who only have that baby to think about but with mums who have several children. It is hard for them to think of things for all their children to do and they end up not doing anything.'* (Family support and outreach group).

*'People not being able to accept that they are vulnerable and that they live in a deprived community and that they regard it as an insult that we are helping them as members of a deprived community.'* (Early learning and childcare focus group).

*'One of the barriers is the feeling that we need to keep away from professionals because they are watching you.'* (Child and family health group).

Associated to the issue of motivation there was some discussions amongst the professionals as to who Sure Start was and should be for, and the priorities it should focus upon.

*'If they thought they could come to us and give all their information out without it going any further they would be more willing to come forward. They would if they thought we were independent of Social Services and benefits – but we are not and they are very suspicious.'* (Family support and outreach group).

*'You get parents who want to do baby massage but not get involved in other aspects – especially middle class parents.'* (Early learning and childcare).

*'There is a need to focus on those that need it most – all the money that has gone to Sure Start should have gone to that 10%.'* (Early learning and childcare).

## **Solutions**

Professionals thought that Sure Start was in a position to tackle these barriers to engagement by offering a wide menu of services that would appeal to a variety of people and approaching them through different means. However there was also an acknowledgement that some people may not want to become Sure Start users.

*'We need to make the point that the aim is to bring more resources and support in for every family. However it is very difficult because the government agenda behind Sure Start is to target deprived families and neighbourhood.'* (Child and family health service group)

*'We require activities for individuals and groups with different needs so that they can access what is comfortable to them. We need to be able to cater for a broad range of people in different circumstances and for parents to see that we do.'* (Family support and outreach group).

*'Somewhere along the line we have to accept that some people are not going to access the service no matter what we do and are quite happy going along in their own way.'* (Early learning and childcare group).

### 3.3 Cultural barriers to male engagement

Both men and women we talked to in the focus groups talked about the difficulties for a Sure Start programme in getting men involved. These difficulties were not only associated with practical barriers to male involvement such as opening hours but were also attributed to the local culture.

*'The problem is the area – most men around here see looking after the children as a women's thing rather than a man's thing.'* (George and Dragon).

*'I won't let other parent's children sit on my knee. I feel bad about it and it's not fair on the kids but you don't want people to think you are dodgy.'* (George and Dragon).

*'Men see looking after the children as a woman's pursuit. Men, even those who are on the dole, always have other business.'* (Early learning and childcare group).

This is an issue for Sure Start nationally in its bid to engage with more men within a climate where this is not seen as culturally acceptable.

#### **Solutions**

Having more men around Sure Start generally may go some way to making Sure Start more welcoming to men. Other solutions offered within the focus groups were about engaging men through their wives and children.

*'The best way to get to men is through their wives – men will come if they are encouraged to do so by their wives or if they tell them to.'* (George and Dragon).

*'Day trips are great and would really attract people. They might be expensive but parents really like them. They attract not just deprived people but those who are not so poor, that is a good thing because you get away from the stigma.'* (George and Dragon).

### 3.4 Positive steps

Both staff and parents recognised that Sure Start has progressed substantially since it first started and that this was reflected in Sure Start overcoming some barriers and being thought of as part of the community.

*'It seems to work through the health visitor as the first point of contact or the promotions that Sure Start has done. It is really effective, but it needs to be carried on- not just done as a one off. People forget so it needs to be done consistently.'* (Bingo session).

*'About three months ago there was a really negative sentiment where the community were really against Sure Start. It was really difficult but that has definitely eased off lately. It's much more positive. The attitude seems to be changing. When we got some of the dads to have their legs waxed for Children in Need and during the Christmas ceremony we had a great response and it really helped to put Sure Start in a good light. Sure Start was seen to be part of the community and helping the community.'* (Early learning and childcare group).

These advances are significant considering the suspicion with which the community viewed Sure Start and the difficulties encountered by the staff in engaging different groups.

## 4. Conclusion

Mexborough Sure Start has faced a considerable number of difficulties in its initial encounters with the local community and in developing services. These difficulties are common to many Sure Starts during their set up phase and the staff of this Sure Start should be congratulated on the strides that have been made so far in overcoming obstacles. This was clearly demonstrated in the research.

Where barriers are on going several of these can be attributed to the temporary nature of the current provision. Where barriers to engagement remain parents and staff were keen to talk through the problems and to come up with solutions that were locally specific and built upon a developing partnership between Sure Start and the local community.

## 5. Action points

The staff and parents of Mexborough Sure Start have made many suggestions throughout the research on ways to engage the local community.

- ◆ A regular newsletter is sent to each family with timely, accurate and consistent information
- ◆ Outreach activities are carried out through the parental involvement workers at baby clinic to engage parents
- ◆ Consideration is given to having free or heavily subsidised events for those for whom finances are a barrier
- ◆ More and wider consultation takes place with the wider community on what is provided, where and when
- ◆ Consideration is given to how to accommodate families with different aged children at all Sure Start activities
- ◆ A parent mentoring system is set up to encourage new parents
- ◆ A welcome party system is set up
- ◆ Notice boards are used more widely to contact people
- ◆ Individuals within Sure Start take responsibility for planning and cross-referencing events to prevent misinformation and in order to provide a consistent service
- ◆ Thought is given to how to engage dads, particularly through family events and through their partners and children
- ◆ Thought is given within Sure Start on where resources should be targeted in terms of the hard to reach and maintaining engagement with current users
- ◆ A drop in/open session should be held to highlight that Sure Start is for everyone.

These can be used as the basis for further development.