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Introduction

Two services were 'spotlighted' by the Sure Start Bexhill and Sidley partnership for individual evaluation, as part of the wider Sure Start evaluation.

These are the Bexhill and Battle Under Fives Association (BBUFA) and Sidley Community Association. This report focuses on the service evaluation of Bexhill and Battle Under Fives Association (BBUFA), as it relates to the provision of services to Bexhill and Sidley Sure Start families.

The purpose of the evaluation is to identify the effectiveness of BBUFA and Sidley Community Association services, including:

- whether these support the achievement of Sure Start objectives and key principles
- how well these work with other agencies
- how the services promote the role of, and involvement of local parents and
- service quality
- cost effectiveness

BBUFA provides two very distinct services to support Sure Start families and children in the area; providing direct support to parents and children through the mobile crèche service, alongside support to service providers in the Bexhill and Sidley area through membership services to BBUFA.

The mobile crèche service received high levels of satisfaction. Whilst the cost of the service falls towards the higher end for play-groups, the high level of attendance and perceived impact on outcomes indicates a cost-effective service. The role of the development worker is highly regarded in terms of providing grass-roots level support and information to services, with opportunities for expansion with regards to information dissemination for better established services. The parent and toddler group support worker was also perceived as a valuable resource to draw upon for service providers, enabling a higher quality of service provision. Opportunities exist for mechanisms for feedback and service development to be implemented.

Methodology

The evaluation of the BBUFA service was conducted on a number of dimensions:

- 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
- 4) Overall quality of services; including assessment the extent to which services meet user needs and expectations.
- 5) Cost indicators for services

To gain an understanding of BBUFA services on these dimensions, the evaluation involved various levels of analysis. These include background and desk-top research, qualitative and quantitative-analysis of data and interviews at all levels of engagement- with service users, paid staff, member associations and service co-ordinators.

A variety of evaluation methodologies have been employed and include:

- **Team focus group:** A semi structured group interview was held with the team to cover issues such as the relationship between the project and the wider Sure Start Agenda, and operational matters such as monitoring and (self) evaluation, service design and delivery.
- **BBUFA member association interviews (June 2003)** Three 30-minute semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with voluntary organisations in their capacity as members of BBUFA. All interviewees were informed that interviews would be treated as confidential.
- **Service-user Interviews (February 2002 - June 2003)** 10-minute face-to-face structured pen-and-paper interviews were conducted with 18 parents attending parent-get-togethers over two occasions.

In terms of 5, unit cost analysis was undertaken by using the basic unit cost model which deduces the average cost of a crèche session by reference to associated Sure Start contribution.

The value-for-money analysis of the mobile crèche services uses estimated average attendance rates per week against the grant made available for services as they relate to mobile crèche service provision. Development and support worker costs deduce the average cost of a contact by reference to total associated Sure Start contribution. To enable comparison of unit costs for the purposes of assessing cost effectiveness, the following unit costs are provided:

Mobile Crèche Service

- ❑ BBUFA service costs as funded by Sure Start
- ❑ Average nursery cost per half day.

Development worker / Support worker

- ❑ Development worker and Support workers service costs as funded by Sure Start
- ❑ Current salary rates for comparable service provision

An overall picture

BBUFA, a registered charity, has been running for over 10 years, and retains the same objectives as when it was first established.

...to enhance the development and education of children under statutory school age by encouraging parents and carers to understand and provide for the need of their children through under 5's groups

BBUFA provides a range of services for organisations or individuals involved in the provision of services for carers and children less than 5 years under years within and outside the Sure Start area. In order to receive services organisations are required to become members of BBUFA. Membership costs vary depending on the status of the member. These categorisations are shown below.

Member status	Costs
Play-group and nursery	£35 per year
Parent and toddler group	£10 per year
Individuals	£10 per year

BBUFA has a total membership of 45 organisations, however only 18 (just over a third) of these organisations fall within the Sure Start area and, hence are supported by Sure Start funding.

Whereas a wide range of services are provided with membership to BBUFA, Sure Start funding is targeted at a select range of services. The total range, including those supported by Sure Start funding, is shown in Box 1 over page.

**Box 1: Overview of BBUFA services
(* Sure Start funded)**

- ***Development worker services** Visits (one per half term) to provide information and support on funding, recruitment, business structure, staffing issues, up-dates on Ofsted Directorate and training
- ***Mobile crèche service** Available to parents and voluntary organisations. Hired, on a daily basis, by the parent-get-together services, held every weekday for 2 hours / 4 days per week?
- ***Parent and Toddler Group Support Worker** Ad hoc service provision, approximately once every half term, providing soft-play and craft sessions
- **Resources for loan** Variety of resources, such as multicultural boxes, puzzle boxes and music boxes, provided free of charge to members. Also provide office stationery and equipment for low cost
- **Training support** Information, links and subsidies for NVQ Early Years and Education (levels 2 and 3) and certificate in Play-group practice; Subsidised mini-courses and workshops
- **Networking opportunities** Links to statutory and voluntary associations (such as EYDCP, Ofsted Directorate, social services, Bexhill College), liaison between members
- **Information and advice** Newsletter every 6 weeks, open-meetings with guest speakers, lunches, AGM

Average attendance at the Parent-get-togethers is approximately 15 parents and remains relatively constant, but this can vary depending on a number of factors; such as time, nature of group, weather etc.

Using the basic unit cost model which deduces the average cost of crèche provision by reference to the total Sure Start contribution, using average attendance of parents at groups and the grant made available in 2002/03 as it relates to crèche provision, the average cost of one BBUFA mobile crèche 2 hours session is £18.90. This cost-analysis includes all on-costs such as capital upkeep, recruitment etc

On the basis of comparison the national average cost of nursery provision ¹ the BBUFA costs are slightly higher.

Table 1: Value for Money Analysis of Mobile Crèche Service Provision

Mobile Crèche Service (per 2 hr session)	Average Nursery Cost (per half-day)
£18.90	£12.80

This slightly higher cost can be attributed to the ‘mobility’ aspect of the crèche service (i.e. upkeep of the van and expenses). These costs would not normally be incurred in a standard crèche service, and provide a unique aspect to the BBUFA service. It also needs to be taken into account that the BBUFA service is run in conjunction with the parent-and-toddler service coordinators, and so provides similar provision to nursery care, but also incorporates a play & development aspect.

Using the basic unit cost model which deduces the average cost of a contact by reference to the total Sure Start contribution, using average visiting rates for 2002/3 and the Sure Start grant made available in 2002/03:

- ❑ The average contact cost of the BBUFA development worker service is £83.00
- ❑ For the parent and toddler group support worker £39.81.

Whilst these costs appear ostensibly fairly high, it would be invalid to consider these costs without taking into account the additional service provision for member organisations.

With regards to the average cost per hour of direct service provision, this is £15.72 for the development worker position and £11.32 for the parent-and-toddler group support worker.

Service Evaluation

Integration into Sure Start Partnership

The BBUFA development worker provides the overall link to Sure Start Programme Management with regular meetings. The positive impact of Sure Start is felt by all those in the team delivering this project. Sure Start objectives are strongly represented in the objectives of the service. Sure Start is clearly perceived to have impacted on service provision, particularly through access to wider referral networks to promote the service and develop partnerships with relevant service providers, and improved access to training.

Parental Involvement in Service Design & Delivery

The involvement of parents in shaping membership services is not directly applicable; however parents still remain the ultimate service user. This expands opportunities for membership to BBUFA; providing additional support through helping organizations develop mechanisms to involve and establish parents in design and delivery of services. This would provide support to both the members and BBUFA in assessing user need.

An informal mechanism is in place for members to feedback to BBUFA, through network meetings to the development workers and committee members. However this direct process may act as a barrier to suggestions for improvements or complaints, and a more anonymous system (such as questionnaires) could be put in place and is currently being looked into by BBUFA.

Specific feedback mechanisms have been employed to meet member's needs, such as evaluation forms employed for training and feedback of members is used to develop training opportunities.

Whilst Sure Start are perceived to have impacted on BBUFA service provision, BBUFA are clearly regarded as retaining the same focus on service objectives; providing grass-root support to those services most in need. Member organisations appreciate BBUFA's prioritisation of support which is perceived as focussing mostly on those '*that are setting-up or struggling*', as members feel confident this support would be extended to them '*if we ever need them*'.

Further advantages were also identified as resulting from BBUFA's involvement with Sure Start Bexhill and Sidley. The extra funding was attributed with providing better quality services through decreasing waiting times and increasing the number of services available.

Whilst the benefits of additional Sure Start funding are recognised by members, comments also highlighted some disadvantages resultant from BBUFA's involvement with the Sure Start partnership. The main disadvantage is the increase in paperwork resulting from the monthly monitoring reports implemented by BBUFA on behalf of Sure Start. One member stated that *'as I work in a voluntary capacity I find this time-consuming and unnecessary. I get no return for it'*.

A further impact felt by the members of BBUFA is the 'thinning' of service users, as they are spread over the new services introduced by Sure Start. Concerns were expressed that when Sure Start services coincided with members services, this would impact on attendance as parents would prefer a service at which refreshments were provided free of charge. It is recognised however that Sure Start *'make every effort'* not to clash with services.

This gap in service user involvement is also applicable to the mobile crèche service. Whilst there is a book of policies and procedures detailing the complaints procedure continually available to parents, respondents were not aware of any feedback or complaints procedure. Additional opportunities for feedback are provided through the development worker, who regularly accesses the parent-get-togethers to discuss parent's needs. This provides a useful feedback opportunity, but again the direct nature of the communication may impact on parent's responses. Standardised procedures such as these described above should be implemented to give a voice to parents and ensure optimal service delivery.

Service Quality

As a consequence of the integrated nature of service provision of BBUFA it is difficult to separate the impact of services funded explicitly by Sure Start, and hence evaluate them as autonomous entities. However with multiple funders full-range of service provision is not supported by Sure Start. Whilst in the most part this evaluation focuses on key services funded by Sure Start Bexhill and Sidley, wider service evaluation is also incorporated as necessary.

The Sure Start funded services provided by BBUFA are those of the development worker, the support worker and the mobile crèche service. In addition to these services BBUFA also liaises with parents regarding

service access and actively promotes Sure Start services. These aspects are implicitly evaluated within the report.

The evaluation has drawn on two distinct client groups. The key services of development worker and support worker have been evaluated by membership organisations. The mobile crèche service has been evaluated by parents/ carers. For purposes of clarity this evaluation separates the two services incorporated in the evaluation.

Development and Support Worker Services

Members have a wide range of services available from BBUFA. A number of services are automatically received by organisations, such as half termly visits from the development worker. In addition, there is a variety of services that members can choose to use, such as the services offered by the support worker (soft-play and craft sessions). In consideration of this variability our consultation has taken the form of an unstructured in-depth interview to allow for flexibility in service-user evaluation.

Meeting Demand

User Profile: Membership organisations

Eighteen organisations within the Sure Start area are currently members of BBUFA. These comprise seven toddler groups; seven playgroups, three nurseries and one school, and can be considered to be fairly comprehensive in terms of under 5's service provision within the area.

Service Requirements

As a long-running organisation BBUFA is now an integral aspect of service provision to organisations for under 5s and their families. Consequently BBUFA provides a fairly unique service by virtue of its reputation and membership is considered by many organisations as a mark of quality.

Membership also meets demand for a networking body which acts as liaison between service providers. This role has been augmented in some respects by Sure Start. For example, BBUFA used to be the sole caterer of events such as fun-days. Now Sure Start has responsibility for the urban-based fun days (as they are based in the Sure Start area) freeing BBUFA to focus on rurally-based fun days. However BBUFA continues with a number of networking events within the Sure Start area; including AGMs, open-days and networking lunches. Whilst there

remains capacity for additional membership within BBUFA, current membership is fairly comprehensive with the majority of service provider organisations in the Sure Start area signed up.

The development worker's outreach role, in terms of visiting members and providing information, was perceived as a useful service and one that is unique to BBUFA. Similarly the support worker's soft-play and craft sessions were considered a useful practical support mechanism and met a demand for providing a variety of play services for families in the area. There is a demand for crèche services within the area, and the mobile crèche services provides a range of support to organisations, from supportive care whilst parents are present (such as at the parent-get-togethers) to taking full care of the children.

Meeting Expectations

BBUFA is well known within the Bexhill and Sidley area, and to this extent member expectations were accurately aligned with the services provided by BBUFA. The general opinion of members was that the services provided by BBUFA are '*very good*', '*very useful*' and '*helpful*' .

Members have a strong perception that BBUFA retains a focus on helping organisations most in need; those in the process of starting-up or that are struggling. It is for this client group that BBUFA was perceived most useful. For services being established it provides an essential knowledge base and practical support mechanism. For those services struggling BBUFA provides practical advice and support, alongside the capacity to assist organisations with grant applications. In turn, however, the perceived reliability and consistency in prioritising and implementing these objectives provides psychological support to more established, self-sufficient organisations. Member's comments are highlighted in Box 2 below.

Box 2: Meeting expectations

If there are any problems I find BBUFA helpful and easy to talk to. They are important for services that are setting-up or struggling, and as members it is good to know that they are there if we ever do need them

BBUFA has retained the same focus on service objectives: providing support to those services most in need and keeping their support at grass-roots level

However this perceived focus of support can be seen to force limitations. One well-established organisation stated a need for more information updating organisations on developments from the Ofsted Directorate and how it relates to their specific organisation.

A lack of clarity in communication is, in the main, due to the confusing and conflicting information issued from Ofsted within the last few months, rather than any confusion on the part of BBUFA. Indeed, BBUFA place importance on developing strong relations with BBUFA and disseminating this accurately to their members. This has included numerous reports in newsletters and a networking lunch with the Ofsted inspector for Rother area.

The lack of focus felt by the aforementioned member may be resultant from not reading the newsletter and hence more direct methods of communication could be employed to disseminate information, such as directly through the development worker allowing for discussions to clarify any points of concern or in targeted leafleting.

One of the most positively regarded aspects of information disseminated by the development worker was around training, such as training requirements and funding. In addition funding information and practical support in securing funding was considered a valuable resource to be able to tap. To a certain extent however information and advice provided by the development worker was considered vital to organisations getting established but of lesser value to those who are up and running and familiar with resources and standard practices. It is not surprising of course that those who know more require less information.

The BBUFA development worker visits member organisations once every six weeks (approximately once every half-term). This frequency is considered sufficient by members in terms of providing key information and support on an on-going basis.

The services provided by the support worker tend to be on a more ad hoc basis than the development worker. The soft-play and craft sessions are available to members when they *'need something different or extra support'*, and are seen as a beneficial service for parents and families.

Mobile Crèche

Meeting Demand

User Profile: Parents

Parent's use of BBUFA services is confined to the mobile crèche service provided at the parent-get-togethers. Due to the specific nature of the services the consultation methodology employed was a structured 10 minute questionnaire.

A total sample of 18 parents was interviewed. Only one parent was male, hence the vast majority of the sample (95%) were mothers. Ages fell in a normal distribution between 18 and 44 years, with the majority of parents (73%) falling between 25 and 34 years. In terms of ethnicity every parent was 'white', and the vast majority described themselves as British with four parents not stating their nationality. There were no parents who had any difficulties understanding English. This profile can be considered representative of parent-get-together service users and the Sure Start population.

One anomaly in the sample was the relatively low proportion of lone parents (11%) compared to the community survey (22%). This may be as a result of the nature of the parents that attend the parent-get-togethers, however the small sample size does not allow for full validation of this conclusion.

With regards to those with special needs the number of parents and children were relatively small. Only two parents had special needs and similarly only one child presented with special needs. These low levels may be indicative that this harder-to-reach group is not being targeted and there is an opportunity to build on this client group.

Service Requirements

Sure Start Bexhill and Sidley provide a wide range of play and learning services within the area, and alongside this there are a number of child care services within Bexhill and Sidley. The Parent-and Toddler Groups are the third most highly regarded play and learning service in the area, showing high levels of satisfaction relative to other groups and high levels of awareness. The crèche service is an integral part of the service quality provided at the parent-get-togethers.

The crèche service provided by BBUFA does provide a unique service in certain respects. The mobility of the 'mobile crèche service' allows for greater flexibility in terms of providing larger scale child care to parent-and-toddler groups or nurseries. The childcare workers provide both supportive childcare whilst parents are present and supervisory childcare if parents need to leave their children. Both these functions allow parents to have '*time-out*', either to relax with their children or to

carry out activities, e.g. training, shopping etc. These aspects are highlighted in comments in Box 3.

Box 3: Aspects that have worked well for the Parent-get-together crèche service

I like the idea of qualified helpers so that my child can go and do his own thing, and I have a break from keeping a vigilant watch on my child

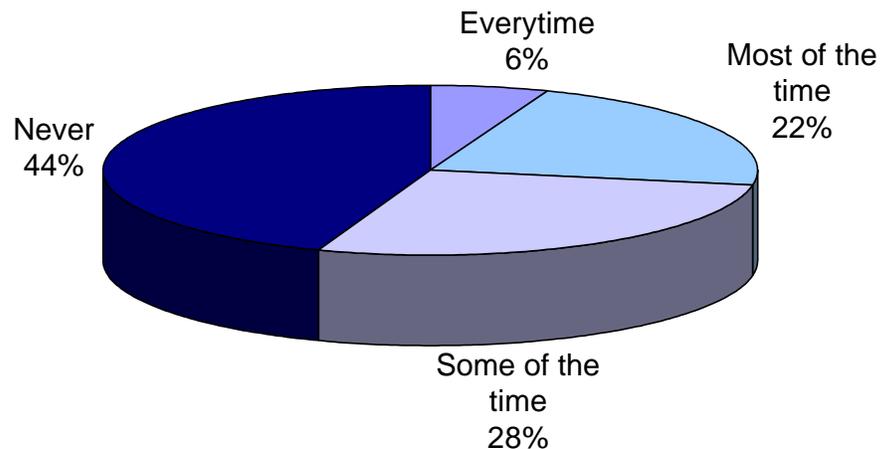
Children can go and get on with the other children, which allows parents to be able to chat, providing freedom for both parents and children

I can leave the children in the crèche and do the shopping

I get time to just sit and chill during a difficult pregnancy

Whilst the crèche is always available at the parent-get-togethers, the majority of parents said that they had not left their children in the full care of the crèche services. This frequency of service use in this respect is shown in Chart 1 below.

Chart 1: Frequency of using crèche for child care



The main reason cited for this, was that the crèche service was not needed in terms of child care as opposed to supportive play and activity work. A number of parents use the crèche service when there was training, however in general the parent-get-togethers provide more of a social occasion for parents, and hence children are generally not left.

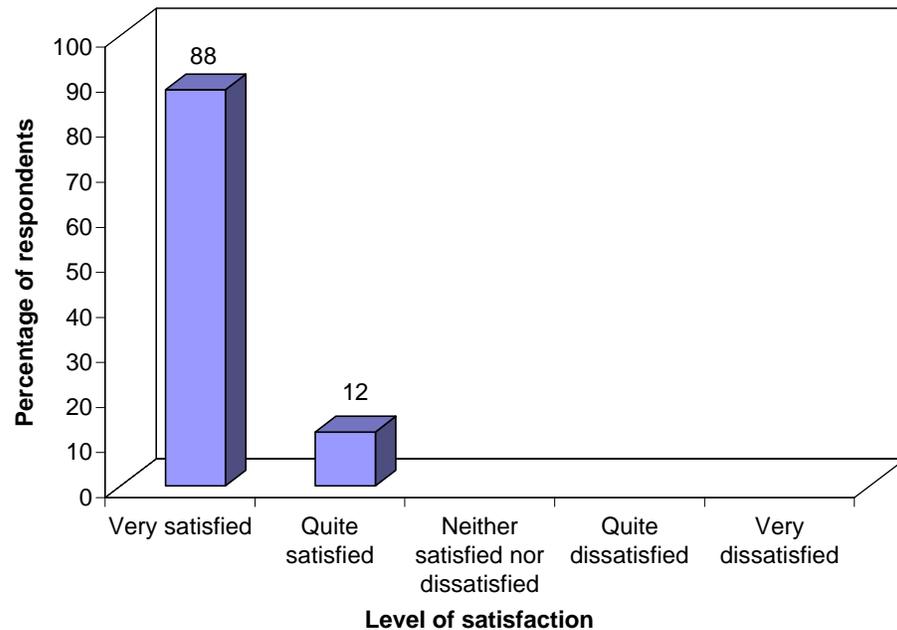
A service requirement that was identified by some parents was a more baby friendly aspect; *'I would like more baby things, under one's, or a corner cordoned off for younger ones as babies can get trampled on by the older ones'* and *'perhaps a specialist worker for babies or one of the crèche workers to work solely with babies'*. This service specific requirement has been identified by BBUFA and considered unsuitable for the parent-get-together sessions. This was because it has been seen to encourage segregation between parents and children, moving the emphasis of the integrated play that is focal to the service. A baby corner is provided in the crèche only services however, and BBUFA is conducting further research with parents in how best to address these issues.

Meeting Expectations

Service Quality

BBUFA provides a high quality crèche service that is very well regarded by those attending the parent-get-togethers. The parent-get-togethers themselves are very highly regarded relative to play and learning services in the Sure Start area¹, and this level of satisfaction is reflected in the crèche service, as shown in Chart 2 below.

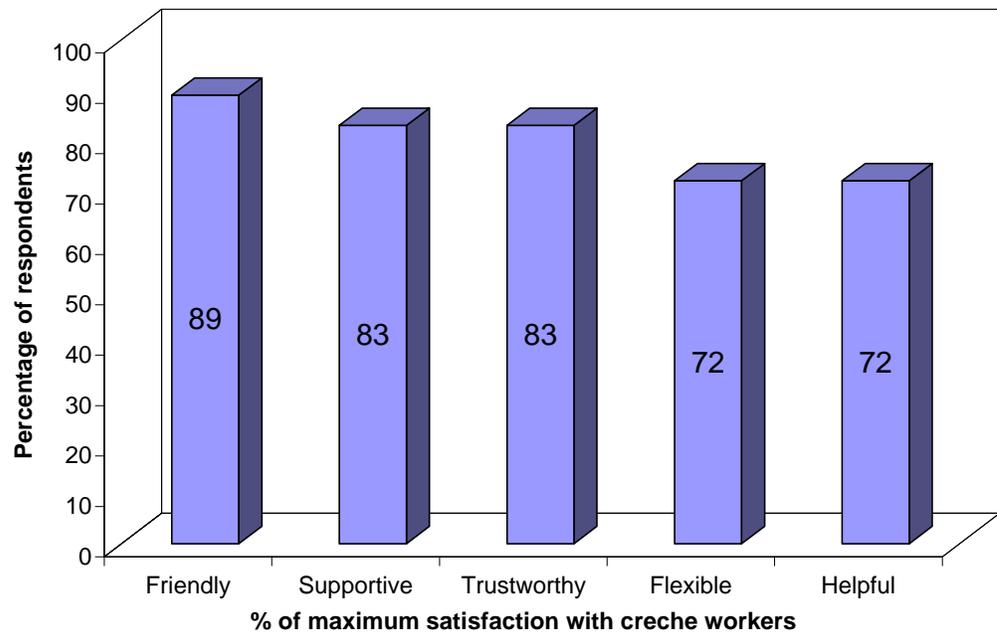
Chart 2: Levels of overall satisfaction with crèche services



Only two respondents were less than 'very satisfied' with the crèche service. This extremely high level of satisfaction is reflected in the high opinion held of the crèche workers. This is shown in Chart 3.

¹ Sure Start Bexhill and Sidley Community Survey, June 2003

Chart 3: Percentage of respondents stating maximum satisfaction with attributes of crèche workers



These levels of satisfaction were reflected in parents comments regarding the crèche service. When asked which aspect of the parent-get-together worked well over 50% of parents mentioned an aspect provided by the crèche. Some of these comments are listed in Box 4 below.

Box 4: Crèche worker attributes

The staff are friendly and helpful, the facilities are available to leave the children in the crèche and do the shopping.

The helpers are good

The atmosphere is flexible and relaxed

My little boy is happier at Sure Start compared to anywhere else and I think that is because of the helpers

Crèche workers begin at the beginning so that the children have a good relationship with them

In line with the high levels of satisfaction, when asked about improvements 60% of parents said that they could not think of any improvements, with comments such as '*none, it is brilliant compared with those that I have used in the past*'. Those who did mention improvements focussed on there main areas:

- Diet (10%): provide organic or healthy food for parents and children
- Times of crèche (10%): increased flexibility and increased hours of provision
- Baby specific service (10%): specific area/ toys/ worker for babies

Suggested improvements notwithstanding, no parents stated that they had ever had cause to complain. This may account for the absence of any formal or informal complaints or feedback procedure for the crèche service. Establishing a formal feedback procedure would provide a valuable opportunity to encourage parent's involvement in shaping the design and improving the delivery of the crèche service.

Impact of Service

The overall efficacy of a service can be assessed by the impact that it makes on clients. However it should be remembered that the impact of the crèche service provided by BBUFA is inseparable from the impact of the parent-get-together. This needs to be taken into account in considering the benefits parents feel they receive.

Over four fifths of respondents felt that the service had a positive impact on their health and well-being, and just under nine tenths said that it had a positive impact on their children's health and well-being. These are shown in Table 1 and Table 2 below.

Table 1: Impact of Parent-get-together and crèche service on parent's health and well-being

Aspect of health and well-being (No of respondents = 18)	Percentage of respondents (%)
Reduced isolation/ social opportunity	67
Reduced levels of stress	61
Improved general mood	56
Improved my relationship with my children	50

Increased self-esteem	39
Increased confidence as a parent	39
Improved parenting skills	39

Table 1 highlight that a key function of the parent-get-together is social. The relaxed and friendly atmosphere results in reducing levels of stress and improving general mood. When asked what had worked well about the service parents comments reflected this and can be seen in Box 5 over page.

Box 5: Impact on health and well-being

Flexible and relaxed atmosphere

It is a chance to meet other parents

Easy to get to talk to people

It is open to new members and not cliquy like a lot of similar groups

It is good for socialising with friends

The impact on children’s health and well being was perceived to be even higher that that of parents. The level of impact is shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Impact of Parent-get-together and crèche service on children’s health and well-being

Aspect of health and well-being (No of respondents = 18)	Percentage of respondents (%)
Reduced isolation/ social opportunity	78
Increased confidence	72
Improved general mood	61
Developed learning	56
Improved behaviour	28

The impact on children reflects the impact made on parents. The greatest impact was felt on increasing socialisation, and in response increasing confidence and improving general mood.