An evaluation of Provider forums for Sure Start Hoxton
Abstract

All Sure Start programmes are required by the government to carry out ongoing local evaluation.

‘In addition to monitoring specific services and activities, the Programme’s routine/rolling evaluation will involve reviewing the effectiveness of the Partnership, the management structures and collaborative working arrangements by professionals from different agencies in supporting the objectives and key principles of the Sure Start initiative. Local evaluation work will build in feedback from parents and other community members as part of the ongoing evaluation….. The evaluation process will also work with service providers within the Sure Start Programme gathering some of the issues of management development, social enterprise and quality assurance, to ensure the ongoing strengthening and development of the Programme.’

(Delivery plan 2002)

This evaluation will provide the means for decision-making about whether the provider forums accomplish what it is they are designed and developed to accomplish. A three-part evaluation schema provides a framework for describing a methodology that facilitates such determinations.
Introduction

Background

The Provider forums were set up in response to issues identified by the Board of Hoxton Sure Start involving the need for day to day management of staff working in commissioned services, which are set up to deliver outcomes based on targets required by the central unit.

‘For staff whose work is to be managed elsewhere (trainee Health Visitors, trainee Social Workers, Speech and Language therapists, or qualified staff) we would prefer them to be employed by that discipline’s agency, as a means of demonstrating their commitment to Sure Start principles but also, as a way of ensuring a higher probability of future and continuing funding for these roles.’

(Delivery plan 2002)

Every service has a ‘service level agreement which clarifies what will be delivered and defines the targets to be worked towards. The documents are devised by the programme manager in consultation with the provider organisation and in response to the requests of the board.

Provider forums were created to answer worries concerning the need for the programme to have a full understanding and extensive input into the operational level of the services. They were also intended to create a team feeling amongst Sure Start workers, which had been highlighted as a concern in other programmes.

The programme is now entering its second year and is now in a position to be able to employ staff directly, whereas previously the programme had adopted primarily a commissioning approach. Due to this change of approach to the recruitment of providers, it is essential that the reasons and outcomes of such meetings are evaluated and the merits considered, to form the basis of the ongoing planning of the programme.
Aims and Objectives

There is undoubtedly great care taken in planning, developing, and delivering the provider forums, however it is still important to determine their relevance, effectiveness, and efficiency as a vehicle for the goal of creating an integrated Sure Start management team.

The aim of this evaluation is to systematically and methodically collect and analyse the information required to justify such determinations.

The evaluation begins with the planning stage. This involves determining evaluation requirements, specifying the objectives and then identifying the sources of information and data collection methods. The last planning step is to prepare an evaluation schedule with involvement by all providers.

The second section of the evaluation continues with the preparation and administration of data collection instruments. The collected data is then analysed and interpreted.

The final section includes drawing conclusions, formulating recommendations for programme improvement, and developing a plan for accomplishing any necessary corrective action.
Methodology

Evaluation requirements

The results of this evaluation are intended to enable decision-making about whether the provider forums are accomplishing what they are designed and developed to accomplish. Accordingly, it is important to communicate closely with those individuals or groups who make such decisions and focus on the information they require.

Stakeholders

The major stakeholders involved in the provider forums are identified as the board, the programme manager and the providers themselves. As the providers themselves represent the subject group of the research, the programme manager, as the operational representative of the board, was vital to the planning stage so that the evaluation purposes could be specified. The providers as the major stakeholders with their continuing funding being dependant on the delivery of relevant targets were involved as fully as possible by using the forums themselves as the method to generate the research instrument by which the outcomes could be measured. It was agreed to take the format that the programme currently uses to review all of its expenditure. This required the approach of setting milestones based on the outcomes decided and to review the service against these. There is also provision within this system to review or redefine the projects in the light of any findings and adopt the service as deemed appropriate especially considering the early stage of the programme.
Requirements of the programme manager

A preliminary discussion was conducted with the Hoxton Sure Start programme manager and a management expert to clarify the results that needed to be provided by this evaluation, these were agreed to be:

- Determine the effectiveness and efficiency of the existing provider forum strategy for creating an integrated management team
- Determine if the forums should be continued, developed, modified, or discontinued
- To identify all common concerns and issues related to service provision;
- To strategise the best ways forward, in conducting the provider forums.

Data Collection

While Part 1 focused on planning, this part of the evaluation schema describes the process of collecting and then interpreting both qualitative information and quantitative data. In order to ensure the usefulness of the information and data collected, the method used needs to be carefully determined.

Preparing the instrument

The preliminary stage of the methodology uses the provider forum itself as a focus group to assess qualitative information such as opinions and attitudes.

The use of focus group research will allow organised discussion with the providers to glean first hand information about their views and experiences of the forum. Focus group interviewing is particularly suited for obtaining several perspectives about the same topic and the benefits of focus group research include gaining insights into people’s shared understandings of working life and the ways in which individuals are influenced by others in a group situation.

Problems may arise when attempting to identify the individual view from the group view, for this reason the issues derived from the forum are to be used solely to identify key areas for further research, which will then be used to construct a questionnaire instrument. The questionnaire will then be administered to the providers individually, ensuring that all participants are fully engaged in every aspect of this evaluation.
The Focus Group session

The group dynamics of the provider forum was particularly useful in gathering data on specific issues. The application of the provider forums themselves enabled a broad spectrum of insight into areas which could not have been clearly defined from an individual's perspective.

Many times one individual’s opinion would lead another to formulate a successive or sometimes alternate opinion thereby reinforcing or broadening the parameters of the issue raised.

Facilitating or moderating a focus group is recognised as a particularly rewarding and/or hazardous experience. The importance of the moderator’s role could not be over emphasised, as they are the pivotal person in any focus group interaction. Therefore, given the nature of the group as well as the level of interpersonal dynamics present in a focus group interview, the person conducting the group should be experienced in leading discussions, which have the potential to become behaviourally volatile. For this reason it was decided that the programme manager themselves would be the ideal candidate for this role, as this would also avoid the prospect of participants behaving differently in the presence of a stranger.

Feedback from Focus group:

The provider forum was conducted in the same manner as usual. There were 6 providers present in addition to the programme manager who facilitated the meeting.

The meeting started with a feedback session from all providers present about the main focus for their work at the present time. It was then explained that an evaluation process was being conducted and an open discussion was needed to discuss and identify main issues on which to base questions for further research.

The comments and issues uncovered during the discussion were noted during the process and were then used as discussion points between the programme manager and a management expert to define the following issues for further research into the provider forums:

1. Time management (issues about finding time and prioritising)
2. The purpose of provider forums
3. Team interaction
4. Communication
5. Combating isolation (part of a bigger picture)
6. Sense of being valued (reassurance about work)
7. Understanding of Sure Start as a concept
8. Networking (with other professionals)
9. Sense of ownership/involvement in targets and programme
Constructing the questionnaire

The issues identified from the group discussion topics were used to construct the questionnaire instrument. A five point Likert scale was used, providing the options of strongly agree, agree, no opinion, disagree and strongly disagree. Two open-ended questions were also used to further assess reasoning behind the key topic of management teams.

This questionnaire was then administered to nine providers who agreed to be interviewed individually in an environment outside of the usual forum. A consultant either met or conducted a telephone interview with each provider within his or her work environment.

Time management

An important difference between members of a management team is the way they manage their time. If time management is an issue it is important to propose practical suggestions for improvement. These questions provide a quantifiable assessment of how integral to the work of individual providers the forums have become.

- I find it easy to attend the provider forums
- The time spent in provider forums is an important part of my role
- I consider provider forums a priority

The purpose of provider forums

This set of questions was formulated to assess the individual’s level of understanding of the importance of their attendance at the forums. It was important to observe whether the participants understood both the outcomes set by the board in initiating the forums and also the participant’s comprehension of the importance of their input.

- I have a clear understanding of the purpose of provider forums
- It is important to the Sure Start team that I attend the forums
- My attendance is important to other providers
Team Recognition

Organisations need to take a holistic approach to teams. Sure Start’s business strategy and goals need to be supported by the team culture and it is important therefore that the strategies adopted are regularly modified and aligned. The commissioning approach to services adopted by Sure Start Hoxton created the need to evaluate the team feeling amongst providers who were operational within different organisations.

This set included an open-ended question about the importance of being part of a team to find how far a team culture had been fostered.

• I see myself as part of the Sure Start team
• The providers in the forum share common issues and concerns
• Everyone’s contributions are valued in the forums

Communication

It is important to construct a model of communication for teams to work effectively. A strong communication network will ensure that the management team remains cohesive between forum meetings. The purpose of this set was to find out how participants viewed the forums as tools for communication and also to allow them to suggest the need for further networking

• The provider forums are an efficient method for gaining information about other Sure Start services
• Face to face communication with peers is important
• It would be useful to have an ongoing communication system with other providers between forums

Combating isolation

In their role, providers are asked to play a dual role as both part of the Sure Start team as well as an integral part of the specific organisation for which their services are employed. It is important to gauge whether this dual role leads to isolation. The questions were aimed at drawing conclusions about how important the provider forum as a support system was recognised to be.

• The provider forums offer an essential support system
• Provider forums act as a hub for my everyday activities in the workplace
• The provider’s roles and services form the Sure Start team
Sense of ownership

It was agreed that an evaluation of the participant’s feelings about how well they were represented in the forums and whether they saw their attendance as integral to the effectiveness of the forums, would provide important data for the programme.

- The issues important to me are addressed in the forum
- My views are valued in the forums
- If I did not attend it would impact on the effectiveness of the forum

Understanding the Sure Start concept

It was clearly important to assess whether participants had gleaned a deeper understanding of Sure Start through attendance at the forums, as this is integral to their ability to communicate the Sure Start ethos through their services. The question about representing sure start was aimed at measuring how far they identified themselves and their work with the Sure Start concept.

- I understand the concept of Sure Start
- I am able to explain all aspects of Sure Start to others
- I represent Sure Start

Networking

Team interaction and networking is essential to a successful sure start programme. It is important to assess the degree to which individual members recognised their fellow workers as peer supporters and to try to measure whether the forums themselves were leading to further contact amongst members outside the forum environment.

- Other providers at the forums are important to my own work
- Important partnerships are formed in the provider forums
- The provider forums create links between services
Sense of being valued

Fairness, environment and inclusion are essential parts of ensuring that a team member feels valued by an organisation. This set was focused on the impact of the forums on ‘sense of worth’ experienced by participants. It was also important to measure whether members saw that their work as a part of a whole strategy as represented by the Sure Start board decisions.

- My ideas play an essential part in developing the programme
- The work I do contributes towards Sure Start targets
- I am an integral part of the Sure Start programme
Findings

The aim of this report was to evaluate how effective the provider forums are for achieving the goal of an integrated Sure Start management tool as identified by the board. The provider forums operate within a number of management strategies including service level agreements, review meetings and target setting meetings, with the programme manager representing the board at a tactical level.

The following headings outline the key findings from the methodology:

Time management

There was general agreement that time management was not a problem. 7 of those asked either agreed or strongly agreed that it was easy to attend the provider forums. 1 of the 9 providers was of no opinion and 1 disagreed. This response mirrored that of whether the providers considered the provider forums a priority, with 1 of the respondents again indicating that they disagreed. However when asked whether the forums were worthy of the time allocated and essential to their role, all 9 of the providers agreed that they were, with 4 feeling strongly about it.

![Bar chart showing I find it easy to attend the provider forums]

![Bar chart showing The time spent in Provider Forums is an important part of my role.]

The purpose of provider forums

All of those asked agreed that they had a clear understanding of the purpose of the provider forums, with 4 of the 9 strongly agreeing. When asked what they felt the purpose of the forums was, responses included:

- Information sharing
- Team building
- Planning ideas
- Development of services
- Building confidence
- To refer clients to other services

The majority of providers felt that due to the purpose of the provider forums it was important that they attend for the Sure Start team, however when asked whether it was important to other providers that they attend 3 of those formerly in agreement were of no opinion.
Team recognition

All respondents felt that they were part of a Sure Start team. When asked what they felt the importance of being a team was the responses included the following:

- Mutual support and encouragement
- Joining up services
- Parents feel more confident dealing with a team
All providers agreed that the forums highlighted shared common issues and concerns and also all agreed that other providers valued their contributions in the forums.

**The providers in the forum share common issues and concerns**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>No Opinion</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
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**Everyone’s contributions are valued in the forums**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>No Opinion</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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**Communication**

There was strong agreement that the provider forums were an efficient method of gaining information about other Sure Start services, with 2 of the 9 respondents strongly agreeing. All respondents stated that the face-to-face communication provided by the forums was important. When asked whether an ongoing communication system between forums would help strengthen the communication system, 3 of the 9 strongly agreed, 3 agreed and 3 were of no opinion.
Combating isolation

There was generally no opinion (5) or disagreement (3) to whether the forums acted as a hub for everyday workplace activity. With only 1 feeling it did. However most of those asked felt that the provider forums were essential as a support system, with only 1 of the 9 asked feeling it could be better.
The provider forums offer an essential support system

Provider forums act as a hub for my everyday activities in the workplace

Sense of ownership

Most agreed that the provider’s roles and services formed the Sure Start programme, with 1 of no opinion and 1 in disagreement. 8 of the 9 respondents agreed that the issues important to them were addressed in the forum and that their views were valued in the forum. However there was mixed feeling as to whether if they did not attend it would impact the forum, with 3 having no opinion and 1 disagreeing.

The provider’s roles and services form the SureStart programme
Understanding the Sure Start concept

All respondents stated that they understood the Sure Start concept and 8 out of 9 felt they were able to explain this concept to others.
Networking

When asked, 8 of the 9 providers agreed that the other providers at the forum were important to their work and that important partnerships were formed during the sessions. 1 of the 9 respondents had no opinion. There was strong agreement that the provider forums create links between services.
**Sense of being valued**

5 of the 9 providers had no opinion of whether their ideas play an essential part in developing the programme, 2 felt they did and 1 felt strongly that they did. There was however strong agreement that the work they did contributed towards Sure Start targets and that they were an integral part of the Sure Start team.
My ideas play an essential part in developing the programme

The work I do contributes towards SureStart targets

I am an integral part of the SureStart programme
Recommendations and action plan

Since the aim of this evaluation is to consider the effectiveness of the provider forums for creating an integrated management team, this section intends to offer ideas for improving the service and ultimately devise an action plan for implementing the recommendations.

The findings underline that time management was not a major problem for the providers and also clearly suggested that there was general agreement that the forums were an important integral part of the provider’s work. It did become apparent however that individuals might find regular meetings problematic, for this reason it would be worthwhile incorporating some time management training into the sessions, which would also reinforce the importance of the forums. Time management training may include sessions including the prioritisation of goals and objectives, adopting strategies for dealing with interruptions, organisation and delegation.

All of the providers seemed clear about why provider forums had been set up and demonstrated a good understanding of their own individual needs. As there seems to be less comprehension about the importance of individual input it might be advisable to conduct some team building exercises. Simulations are an effective method for working on motivational techniques and team building. Further discussion with the programme manager would be necessary to develop a strategy for incorporating this type of tool.

The forums evidently do facilitate a sense of networking and create links between individual members. The information sharing capacity works well as a process to explore and explain the concepts of sure start. However whilst the forums do foster a good communication strategy there is some suggestion that further contact between meetings would be helpful and this could take the form of a discussion and support board available on the website. This facility also offers the opportunity of widening the forums to larger groups and other stakeholders in the future. This option appears particularly viable as provider response indicates that the Provider forums are not currently viewed as a hub for everyday activities. It is recommended that this further investigation considers the other types of team building structures or culture that are currently supporting the workers.

Although there was a good understanding about how individual’s work moved the programme towards the targets there was much less belief expressed that the providers input effected the development of the programme. Perhaps on a periodic basis, providers could be asked to complete feedback forms, which could then be integrated into the board’s decisions at a strategic level.
# Action Plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendation</th>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
<th>Timescale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time management training</td>
<td>Increase accessibility</td>
<td>Programme Manager</td>
<td>To be Implemented from April 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team building exercises</td>
<td>Increase individual input</td>
<td>Programme manager + providers</td>
<td>Immediate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion and support strategy</td>
<td>Increase networking and contacts</td>
<td>Programme Manager through website</td>
<td>Summer 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback forms</td>
<td>To formalise provider input to board</td>
<td>Monitoring officer</td>
<td>April 2004</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX

Questions for Evaluation

1 • I find it easy to attend the Provider Forums.

☐ I strongly agree.
☐ I agree.
☐ No
☐ I Disagree
☐ I Strongly Disagree

2 • The time spent in Provider Forums is an important part of my role.

☐ I strongly agree.
☐ I agree.
☐ No
☐ I Disagree
☐ I Strongly Disagree

3 • I consider Provider Forums a priority.

☐ I strongly agree.
☐ I agree.
☐ No
☐ I Disagree
☐ I Strongly Disagree

4 • I have a clear understanding of the purpose of Provider Forums.

☐ I strongly agree.
☐ I agree.
☐ No
☐ I Disagree
☐ I Strongly Disagree

5 • What is the purpose of the provider forums?


6 • It is important to the SureStart team that I attend the forums.

☐ I strongly agree.
☐ I agree.
☐ No
☐ I Disagree
☐ I Strongly Disagree

7 • My attendance is important to the other providers.

☐ I strongly agree.
☐ I agree.
☐ No
☐ I Disagree
☐ I Strongly Disagree

8 • I see myself as part of the SureStart Team.

☐ I strongly agree.
☐ I agree.
☐ No
☐ I Disagree
☐ I Strongly Disagree

9 • What is the importance of having a SureStart team?

☐ I strongly agree.
☐ I agree.
☐ No
☐ I Disagree
☐ I Strongly Disagree

10 • The providers in the forum share common issues and concerns.

☐ I strongly agree.
☐ I agree.
☐ No
☐ I Disagree
☐ I Strongly Disagree

11 • Everyone’s contributions are value in the forums.

☐ I strongly agree.
☐ I agree.
☐ No
☐ I Disagree
☐ I Strongly Disagree
12 • The provider forums are an efficient method for gaining information about other SureStart services.

☐ I strongly agree.
☐ I agree.
☐ No
☐ I Disagree
☐ I Strongly Disagree

13 • Face to face communication with peers is important.

☐ I strongly agree.
☐ I agree.
☐ No
☐ I Disagree
☐ I Strongly Disagree

14 • It would be useful to have an ongoing communication system with other providers between forums.

☐ I strongly agree.
☐ I agree.
☐ No
☐ I Disagree
☐ I Strongly Disagree

15 • The provider forums offer an essential support system.

☐ I strongly agree.
☐ I agree.
☐ No
☐ I Disagree
☐ I Strongly Disagree

16 • Provider forums act as a hub for my everyday activities in the workplace.

☐ I strongly agree.
☐ I agree.
☐ No
☐ I Disagree
☐ I Strongly Disagree

17 • The provider’s roles and services form the SureStart programme.

☐ I strongly agree.
☐ I agree.
☐ No
☐ I Disagree
☐ I Strongly Disagree
18 • The issues important to me are addressed in the forum.

- I strongly agree.
- I agree.
- No opinion.
- I Disagree
- I Strongly Disagree

19 • My views are valued in the forums.

- I strongly agree.
- I agree.
- No opinion.
- I Disagree
- I Strongly Disagree

20 • If I did not attend it would impact on the effectiveness of the forum.

- I strongly agree.
- I agree.
- No opinion.
- I Disagree
- I Strongly Disagree

21 • I understand the concept of SureStart.

- I strongly agree.
- I agree.
- No opinion.
- I Disagree
- I Strongly Disagree

22 • I am able to explain all aspects of SureStart to others.

- I strongly agree.
- I agree.
- No opinion.
- I Disagree
- I Strongly Disagree

23 • I represent SureStart.

- I strongly agree.
- I agree.
- No opinion.
- I Disagree
- I Strongly Disagree

24 • Other providers at the forums are important to my own work.

- I strongly agree.
- I agree.
25 • Important partnerships are formed in the Provider forums.

- [ ] I strongly agree.
- [ ] I agree.
- [ ] No
- [ ] I Disagree
- [ ] I Strongly Disagree

26 • The provider forums create links between services

- [ ] I strongly agree.
- [ ] I agree.
- [ ] No
- [ ] I Disagree
- [ ] I Strongly Disagree

27 • My ideas play an essential part in developing the programme.

- [ ] I strongly agree.
- [ ] I agree.
- [ ] No
- [ ] I Disagree
- [ ] I Strongly Disagree

28 • The work I do contributes towards SureStart targets.

- [ ] I strongly agree.
- [ ] I agree.
- [ ] No
- [ ] I Disagree
- [ ] I Strongly Disagree

29 • I am an integral part of the SureStart programme.

- [ ] I strongly agree.
- [ ] I agree.
- [ ] No
- [ ] I Disagree
- [ ] I Strongly Disagree