

Drop-in Services- Project Evaluation

Background

The Drop in Services project has services provided by both the Family Support Team and Early Years Team of the Sure Start programme.

The Family Support Team aims to facilitate team work with parents, parents-to-be and children to provide information, advice and support to promote independence, confidence and improving parenting skills.

The Early Years Team aims to provide quality childcare and play opportunities to support families and other professional organisations, working towards improving child development and the ability to learn.

Project objectives

As the project has no formal documentation, it is difficult to identify specific objectives for it, other than in relation to the overarching objectives of the national Sure Start Programme and in relation to the overall remit of each team.

Contribution to Sure Start Delivery Plan

The Drop in Services programme provides cross-cutting support to all four Sure Start Objectives. The Delivery Plan incorporates a range of Public Service Agreement (PSA) and Sure Start Delivery Agreement (SDA) targets attached to each broader objective, several of which have relevance for the Drop in Services Project (see Table below).

Sure Start Programme Objective	Performance Target
<p>Objective 1: Improving social and emotional development. In particular, by supporting early bonding between parents and their children, helping families to function and through early identification and support of children with emotional and behavioural difficulties.</p>	<p>SDA Target: All local Sure Start Programmes to have agreed and implemented, in a culturally sensitive way, ways of identifying, caring for and supporting mothers with post natal depression.</p>
<p>Objective 2: Improving health, In particular, by supporting parents in caring for their children to promote healthy development before and after birth.</p>	<p>SDA Target: Parenting support and information available for all parents in Sure Start areas.</p>
<p>Objective 3: Improving the ability to learn. In particular, by encouraging high quality environments and childcare that promote early learning, promote stimulating and enjoyable play, improve language skills and ensure early identification and support of children with special needs.</p>	<p>PSA Target: Achieve by 2004 in the Sure Start area a reduction of 5 percentage points in the number of children with speech and language problems requiring specialist intervention by the age of 4.</p> <p>SDA Target: All children in Sure Start areas to have access to good quality play and learning opportunities, helping progress towards early learning goals when they get to school.</p>
<p>Objective 4: Strengthening families and communities. In particular, by involving families in building the communities capacity to sustain the programme and thereby create pathways out of poverty.</p>	<p>SDA Target: 75% of families report personal evidence of an improvement in the quality of services providing family support.</p>

Source: Sure Start Delivery Plan: Denaby Main & Conisbrough 2001

Linkages with partners and other Sure Start projects

Sure Start projects are beginning in Mexborough, Maltby and in Southey and Shirecliffe in Sheffield. Staff arrange to come and visit to have a look around and learn from good practice. Specific appointments had to be arranged for their representatives because there were so many people wanting to visit.

The new Male Inclusion Worker has links with the Worker at the new Sure Start at Mexborough; it is intended that they may organise shared activities for this.

Project operation

Early Years Team

Denny's Den is the Early Years Team's drop-in area within StoryBook House. It aims to *"provide support and quality play opportunities to children aged 0-4 and their families in the Sure Start Area with a safe and secure indoor and outdoor play area"*.

It currently runs a Monday to Friday, morning and afternoon timetable of open access sessions, including "Build and Explore", "Cook and Taste", "Let's Get Messy", "Once upon a time" and "Number Time". Other agencies may use the sessions too, for example, observation assessments for SEN. It was commented that some sessions have taken off better than others, but that the team have tried mixing the timetable of sessions around to attract as many people as possible. The actual session content changed according to what was wanted, for example, to include more craft and introducing a cooking session. One morning is currently closed to accommodate crèche facilities for the Time Out for Parents Course that is running. Two mornings are taken by a paid-for 'tots r us' group. It is said to be important that there is some continuity of sessions, so that parents can fit into a routine

Numbers attending are affected by the weather, but the sessions do have "regulars"; on average, 5 parents/carers. For the first two or three sessions that parents attend staff maintain a slight distance to allow them time to explore the activities, get to know staff. After this point, staff gently introduce aspects of the learning. This is a very flexible approach to take, in order to respond to the sensitivities of parents.

Family Support Team

The services of the Family Support Team are more periodic in nature. The aim of the service is to provide another avenue by which Sure Start staff can work at building relationships with families in the area. Services include sessions that aim to support parents. These include a tiny tumblers group held weekly at the Leisure Centre, baby

massage, milk matters, and monthly pregnant mums group; if mums do not attend the group, the midwife will go out and see them. A new group is being planned for parents and children under 1 year old; it is hoped that this will be at the new building, with messy play possible without parents having to worry about clearing up.

A Parent Planning Group is held weekly for parents and carers who want to get involved with making suggestions and organising events with the Sure Start facilities and staff. Meetings are held at the new building, where crèche facilities are available for parents/carers who attend. The group facilitator is particularly conscious about letting parents suggest ideas, asking for input then drawing together the ideas. Attendance at the group has been fairly low, however, and the focus is on generating ideas to get more parents involved. Some attend once then do not come back because it is *“not what they are looking for”*; there seems to be interest in a parent support group, and as such plans are being generated for a regular coffee morning. Unfortunately, the low attendance at the Parent Planning sessions would imply that this is perhaps not the most effective way of ensuring parents are getting services that they want from Sure Start; perhaps other methods should be explored.

A Male Inclusion Worker has recently been recruited to concentrate on getting Dads more involved on a day to day basis along with holiday activities, for example, by organising gardening, football and barbecues. Visits to Dads will be based on initial names and addresses gathered; additionally, the worker intends to attend families with health visitors and nursery nurses.

Barriers to parental involvement had been identified as including familiarisation with staff, some parents *“don’t know how to laugh, have fun”* and that the new building is *“quite daunting”*. If parents are particularly anxious about visiting StoryBook house, Sure Start staff will meet them at the door and take them through.

A Mobile Dental Unit exists to offer low key, dental health advice. It is less formal than mainstream provision and dental staff take their lead from teachers and community groups with which they work. Parents commented they were getting too much information so Sure Start responded – they can give more time, more resources, more staff and can do things differently where mainstream provision cannot respond.

It has been said that there is a “*big divide of communities*” between Conisbrough and Denaby Main, and as such, the Family Support Team have responded by taking their drop-in sessions to alternative venues, for example, the weaning team go into schools, playgroups and baby clinics. Conisbrough also has large established playgroups so Sure Start staff take information in and work alongside them.

It was suggested that there was limited awareness of Sure Start and that perhaps the activities of both teams should be advertised more. This was particularly pertinent for people in Conisbrough; that they “*do not get involved much*” and that it can be difficult to attend without a car. Word of mouth seems to be the most common way of finding out about the sessions, although advertising material is also placed in all the schools, via health visitors, in the local newspaper and via nursery nurses.

One member of staff works both at a local school and at Sure Start and commented that this allows her to encourage parents to try the sessions as she has a relationship with them and they can feel comfortable that they will know someone when they attend.

School nursery nurses sometimes refer parents to the sessions, leaflets and displays are put up in clinics. There was also some discussion as to producing posters and fliers to further advertise the Parent Planning group. It is the case, however, that advertising material for some activities has perhaps over emphasised the limited number of places available, which may have put some parents off attempting to attend.

It was commented that because of a historical personnel issue, midwives in the area do not refer parents to Sure Start; a situation that perhaps could be investigated further and addressed accordingly.

Project targeting

The Drop-in Services Project seems to be targeted at all parents and carers to either come along and engage in structured play with the children, or to come along to sessions which provide support, learning and advice for the parent/carer. Methods for targeting appear to be via general publicity (for example, posters) or referrals (for

example, health visitors, GPs and nursery nurses). The methods for targeting could perhaps be more efficiently defined, along with the actual target group. Once groups have been identified, the most effective method of communication can also be tailored to each group. Also, at present, all the sessions take place on weekdays during 'office' hours. This may therefore be preventative to working parents or carers with other responsibilities, but who may enjoy the opportunity to take part. If the target group is, however, non-working parents/carers, this should be defined as such and activities/communications adapted accordingly.

Anecdotal evidence would suggest that the numbers of parents/carers attending from Conisbrough has been equal, but no quantitative data has been provided to support this. In addition there appear to be no formal targets for involvement that the project aspires to reach.

Beneficiary feedback

The Sure Start project as a whole has a comment box, via which parents can make suggestions or raise issues. The Manager of Sure Start collates and presents any data required for evaluation purposes.

Both Teams have found that parents, particularly those who attend regularly, have become wearied by filling in feedback forms. As such, this method is used infrequently and most contributions are gathered verbally. Where any work is being done with children, if parents were unhappy or had particular issues they wanted to raise, it would be done so quickly and directly.

Family Support Team

A Parents Week ran during February, comprising of activities everyday with free crèche facilities. Activities included 'Cook 'n' Eat', 'Make and Messy Workshop for Big People', fitness classes and beauty classes. Feedback was positive, with comments indicating a desire for more of such activities to be arranged, plus the suggestion that a small charge could be made if it meant that more activities could be provided.

It was commented that *"If [parents] know you they feel comfortable"*; that is, they are able to raise problems or questions directly. This links in to the overall focus of the team to build such relaxed relationships with parents. Parents do take the activities home, for example, there is anecdotal evidence of children singing the songs with their parents at home. It has also been found that some parents are very young themselves and have limited experience of play. The drop-in services aim to support such parents and give them the opportunity to laugh and enjoy themselves with their children.

One mum commented that *"Sure Start changed my life"*; having had postnatal depression with her first three children, she did not with her latest child.

Early Years Team

Comments made by parents attending Denny's Den were very positive, particularly praising the quality of the facilities and toys, the care provided by the staff and that it *"get you out of the house"*. It was thought to be particularly good as a 'wet weather' activity; that *"you can keep the children in the home or you can bring them here"*. It was also commented that the sessions provided constructive play as opposed to free play, and this was thought to be beneficial. One parent also mentioned that she had been inspired to attend a training course and another was going to begin using the nursery facilities.

It is apparent that it can be difficult to track demand, as on some days it is busy and others it is not. On attending the sessions on different days, the most children attending at one time was approximately eight. It was commented that if there are too many children attending it can be challenging to provide the small ratio attention, but this needs to be balanced against appearing too overbearing for parents.

Project Management

Early Years Team

The Early Years Team holds records of children and their parents (which includes postcodes for any take-up analysis). However certain problems have arisen including the number of different forms that need to be completed (for example, One for Sure Start and another for the Children's Fund). Handouts are given to parents detailing activities they can reproduce at home. The Team uses Planning Forms to organise the structure of the sessions. These have taken different forms in order to identify, which worked best

in terms of detailing the activity, planning for resources required and subsequent evaluation of the success of the session. It is important to achieve a balance between the amount of writing required and the value gained from judging and recording the success of a particular activity session.

Family Support Team

Both teams have monthly team meetings, at which internal issues and plans for activities can be discussed. It may also be considered that having a joint meeting, perhaps every two or three months, would be beneficial to encourage joint working and exchange of ideas.

Milestones and Outputs (as per appraisal/actual/variance/unexpected)

As there is no formal project documentation for the Drop in Services project it is not possible to compare the project against any specific project milestones or outputs. Whilst it is clear that the project supports a number of PSA and SDA targets, it is more difficult to quantify the contribution of the projects to broader outcome objectives.

Although there is a need to minimise any adverse impact of local data collection and bureaucracy, there is however a need to ensure that the project is able to provide data to evidence activities and progress, in particular its success in engaging with parents from across the Sure Start programme.

Value for money (with appropriate comparisons if available)

Without more detailed data on the number of parents accessing the Drop in Services (individuals as opposed to repeat users) it is difficult to assess the value for money of the project. Although the project currently provides a function within the community, perceived low levels of involvement would suggest that the cost per parent involved is very high. Although there are opportunities for the project to support more parents from across the programme area, real value for money will not be achieved until a significant increase in involvement occurs.

Summary and recommendations

For those parents and children who access the drop-in services, there is no doubt of the enjoyment and benefit gained. It is the case, however, that the numbers benefiting are not as high as would be desirable.

Project staff in both teams are aware of the difficulties and that the majority of parents who attend are *“pretty clued up anyway”* – those that need help don’t come. Overall clarification of the groups being targeted by the Drop-in project would be advantageous, as this would help define how best to focus communication materials, activities provided and the times of such activities.

Further routes to access parents are being utilised, including the community nursery nurse and referrals through the health visitor. The Community Nursery Nurse often accompanies parents to the first couple of sessions then hands over to Sure Start staff; this works particularly well as it allows them to know about the background of the family and the optimum ways to communicate with them.

More effective advertising and presence within Denaby Main but particularly within Conisbrough is a must. The advertising should focus on the positive effects of the services provided both for parents and their children, but should not give the impression that places are restricted, as this can invoke a negative reaction. If over-subscription occurs, it is better to maximise on this in whatever ways possible; perhaps in terms of working in partnership with other facilities in the area, for example, space in the Leisure Centre. The two teams could also consider more joint working, particularly because of the current split site situation. Parents’ Week seemed to be especially effective and could provide further opportunity to share staff, resources and ideas to maximise attendance. It may also be considered that having a joint meeting, perhaps every two or three months, would be beneficial to encourage joint working and exchange of ideas.