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Summary

Introduction

This report presents the findings of an evaluation of Sure Start Higham Hill's performance in reaching hard-to-reach parents and identifying any barriers that might prevent or discourage these parents and their children from benefiting from Sure Start services.

Sure Start Higham Hill defined the hard-to reach groups as travellers, teenage parents and families who speak a language other than English as the main language in the home.

Sure Start Higham Hill commissioned Partners in Evaluation to address the following areas:

- A summary of current UK research into providing services and barriers to service take up for hard-to-reach groups
- The extent to which such groups are involved with their children in the services provided by Sure Start Higham Hill
- An identification of barriers to take up of services for the hard-to-reach groups
- Ideas for involving these groups more effectively.

Partners in Evaluation knew from their experience of evaluating other Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLP's) that hard-to-reach groups are not just hard to reach but, if reached, are also hard to engage.

Sure Start Higham Hill clearly suspected that the needs of these hard-to-reach groups were not being adequately met. It follows that the evaluation was likely to confirm those suspicions and that the written report would not be an entirely positive one. On the other hand, we hope that readers of the report don't interpret it too negatively. Had we been evaluating the satisfaction levels of parents who are involved with Sure Start Higham Hill the results are likely to have been much more satisfactory. However, there is no shortage of enthusiasm and goodwill at Sure Start Higham Hill and the recommendations we have offered are very practical and easily implemented. There will, however, be no overnight miracles. As one of our interviewees commented: "reaching people and building trust takes time".

How it went

The most challenging part of the brief was to find out why the hard-to-reach parents were not accessing Sure Start services. If these parents had been defined as hard-to-reach, we anticipated that we, too, would find it difficult to reach them.

Our chosen method, which is described in section 1, was based on the premise that:

- Service providers would be able to identify some of the hard-to-reach parents who were accessing Sure Start services and that we would be able to interview a sample of them.
- That the parents who were using services would be able to introduce us to others who were not.

In practice, the service providers found it difficult to identify users from the hard-to-reach groups. A number of interviews were achieved by visiting the services ourselves but we were unable to complete our quota of interviews with parents despite spending twice as long in searching them out as we had planned. The reason for this eventually became clear: two of the hard to reach groups were hard to reach because there are simply so few of them at ward level - about six teenage parents and two or three travellers - who may be eligible for Sure Start services. There are, however, a much more significant number of parents who speak a language other than English as the main language at home and most of our interviews were with them.

The key findings, below, were discussed at an open forum of Sure Start Higham Hill staff, service providers and parents and were broadly accepted as a true representation of the situation. The only area of dissent was about the numbers of travellers in the Higham Hill ward, the chair of the local community association insisting that the numbers are actually quite high with as many as a third of families in the ward being travellers families who have settled in conventional housing but still with their own language and culture intact. We have no evidence to support or dispute this claim.

Key findings

1. Two of the hard to reach groups, teenage parents and travellers with children under four years of age, do not exist in numbers sufficient to make ward level services viable. **(Sections 2 and 3)**
2. The third group, parents who speak no or little English, exist in much greater numbers although reliable estimates have not been established. The needs of these parents are complex and varied. **(Section 4)**

3. Sure Start Higham Hill is not yet reaching any parents in numbers sufficient to make any overall impact in the area. **(Section 5)**

Other findings

Teenage parents (Section 2)

4. There are about six teenage parents in Higham Hill (no more than nine) – too few to make the provision of a very local service viable.
5. The teenage parents we interviewed have plenty of family support and a good social life. This is not the case with all single parents but where their needs are mainly educational and vocational they are best met by the borough-wide Teenage Pregnancy Reintegration Service.

Travellers (Section 3)

6. As with teenage parents, there are too few travellers at ward level to make specific services a viable option.

Parents who speak a main language other than English in the home (section 4)

7. In Higham Hill, these parents exist in significantly greater numbers than do teenage parents and travellers. They consist mainly of black Africans, Asians and eastern Europeans but many individuals from these groups will also speak English.
8. There are large variations within these groups as well as between them. Some of those who speak little or no English also come from cultural traditions that tie them to the domestic sphere.
9. For the parents who have mastered English well, being constantly in demand to act as interpreters can feel like a burden.
10. Those parents who speak enough English to access services may still find themselves isolated within a group because they do not have the confidence to approach other parents.

Barriers to accessing services

11. The reception at the Sure Start Higham Hill office is unpredictable, depending upon who is around. There is also evidence of patchy customer care in the Sure Start services and of some unnecessarily officious and bureaucratic practices.
12. The language and style of promotional literature has not been tailored to communicate effectively with a diverse population of parents.
13. Rumours about differences on the Partnership Board appear to be impacting negatively on the reputation of Sure Start in the community.

Summary of barriers and recommendations (section 5)

Individual barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Language• Culture• Language and culture combined• Time commitments• Proximity to services• Need met elsewhere
Organisational barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Inappropriate promotion• Unpredictable reception• Patchy customer service skills• Officious/bureaucratic practices
Social barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Potential for stigma• Reputation and rumour

Recommendations

Sure Start Higham Hill should:

1. Liase with the borough's Teenage Pregnancy Integration Officer and ensure that teenage parents are referred appropriately. Identify teenage parents over school-age and the truly isolated teenage parents and provide some in depth personal support.
2. Liase with the Travellers Education Service to encourage referral of travellers who might need specific support. Emphasise inclusion by

- sending out the right messages and encouraging service providers to do the same.
3. Consider how the Health Team might obtain better data on parents who are isolated because they do not speak English adequately.
 4. Consider taking English lessons into the home in order to teach a group of families together.
 5. Resist using other parents as ad hoc interpreters and go-betweens, without their specific agreement. Even then, those parents should be given proper support for the role.
 6. Make sure that service providers are vigilant, friendly and supportive to parents who lack confidence e.g. by introducing them to other parents, by facilitating relationships and by responding appropriately to any language difficulties.
 7. Review the language and style of all promotional materials (see examples of current leaflets on page 35) to ensure that they are:
 - Written in plain English e.g. “counting and reading” rather than “pre-numeracy and literacy”
 - Easy and friendly to read e.g. “Learn English” rather than “ESOL Lessons”
 - Illustrated appropriately and thoughtfully
 8. If the specific aim is to attract parents who don't speak English (e.g. to ESOL classes), make sure that materials are produced in relevant languages and to the same standard as the English language materials.
 9. Open up the window of the Sure Start premises by removing all but the key messages and latest information and review and re-arrange them weekly to present a new and fresh appearance.
 10. Train all staff in customer care skills and make quality of customer care a condition of grants to service providers.
 11. Deal promptly with any partnership problems on the Board and consider the use of an experienced external facilitator to help focus Board energies on vision and strategy.

1 Background

Sure Start Higham Hill

Sure Start is a cornerstone of the Government's drive to tackle child poverty and social exclusion. It aims to improve the health and well being of families and children before and from birth, so that children are ready to thrive when they go to school. There are 520 local Sure Start programmes in the most disadvantaged areas of England. These operate in accordance with targets determined by the national body, the Sure Start Unit. Three are specifically concerned with reaching *all* families within a Sure Start catchment area. To achieve these targets, local Sure Start programmes must make every effort to reach hard-to-reach families - groups of people who are traditionally under-represented in accessing services.

Sure Start Higham Hill is a fourth wave programme and one of four Sure Start Local Programmes in the London Borough of Waltham Forest. At the last census (2001) Higham Hill had 4,476 households, 1,624 with dependent children and about 807 with children less than 4 years of age. The census also revealed a relatively high percentage of black and minority ethnic groups in Higham Hill - nearly 40% compared with the average for England and Wales of just over 9%

Sure Start Higham Hill has a number of ongoing services, which are provided in to improve children's life chances through better access to:

- Family support
- Advice on nurturing
- Health services
- Early Learning

For the future, there are plans to join up the delivery of services provided by Local Authorities and Sure Start Local Programmes, which will result in six Children's Centres in Waltham Forest in which the local programmes will be housed.

The evaluation

Sure Start Higham Hill commissioned Partners in Evaluation to see how well they were doing in reaching hard-to-reach groups and whether there were any barriers to prevent those groups from accessing their services. The groups

they were concerned about were teenage parents, travellers and parents whose first language is not English.

The following areas were to be addressed:

- A summary of current UK research into providing services and barriers to service take up for “hard to reach” groups
- The extent to which such groups are involved with their children in the services provided by Sure Start Higham Hill
- An identification of barriers to take up of services for the hard to reach groups
- Ideas for involving these groups more effectively.

The most challenging part of this brief was to find out why parents from the specified groups were not attending Sure Start. If these parents had been defined as hard to reach, we anticipated that we would also experience difficulty in attempting to reach them. Our plan was to use a method called “snowballing”, a two-step process that would involve:

- Asking service providers to introduce us to hard-to-reach parents who were already using Sure Start services
- Interviewing these parents and offering them an incentive (a £10 voucher) to introduce us to hard-to-reach parents who were not Sure Start users

In this way we planned to interview nine service users and 15 non-users, a total of 24 parents with children under four years of age.

We also undertook to interview five service providers who could give us useful information about the specified groups, to conduct a focus group with a Roma Support Group in another Sure Start area, and to interview some key Sure Start staff. Finally we planned to hold an open seminar to explore ideas for involving hard-to-reach groups more effectively.

How it went

The evaluation started in the first week of June and was completed by the end of July 2004. Reaching and interviewing hard-to-reach parents did not go according to plan for the following reasons:

- Most of the service providers were not able to identify their hard-to-reach clients from the information they collected about them or from personal knowledge. This meant that identifying the first tier of parents took very much longer than expected. We finally conducted a number

of interviews by turning up at various activities and interviewing parents on the spot.

- Eventually it became clear that the main reason for our slow progress was because in two of the groups (teenage parents and travellers) the numbers of parents with very young children were insignificant. (See sections 2 and 3). In the third group – parents whose main language at home was other than English – the numbers were greater.
- We interviewed eight parents whose main language in the home was not English but they were reluctant to introduce us to others who weren't accessing Sure Start services. Some told us that they had been asked too many times to be the go between and interpreter by Sure Start and they felt awkward at persisting with people who were simply not interested.
- In retrospect, we believe that we didn't have enough time to build up the necessary trust and contacts to identify and approach a larger sample of parents who were labelled hard-to-reach.

We were more than half way through the evaluation before we obtained the figures that confirmed our growing suspicion that teenage parents and travellers did not exist in the numbers anticipated. We interviewed 12 parents altogether, which was only half the number we had planned. With so few travellers in the area we decided not to hold a focus group interview with the Roma Group in a neighbouring Sure Start area. Altogether we carried out in depth interviews with:

- Two teenage parents and the mother of one of those parents
- Two travellers
- Eight parents whose main language at home was not English
- Four staff members from the Sure Start Higham Hill team
- Five service providers

We also talked with two further service providers and three community groups.

2 Teenage Parents

Social context

Britain has the worst record on teenage pregnancies in Europe with some 90,000 teenagers becoming pregnant each year and about 56,000 resulting in live births. There is no single explanation for this comparatively poor record but low expectations, ignorance about contraception and mixed messages about sex from society are thought to be significant factors. Research also shows that a history of disadvantage puts young people at greater risk of becoming pregnant in their teens and these disadvantages include poverty, being brought up in care, being the child of a teenage mother, educational problems and not being in education, training or work after leaving school. Teenage mothers are less likely to finish their education, less likely to find a good job, and therefore more likely to bring their children up in poverty. Their children tend to have poorer health and their daughters have a much higher chance of becoming single parents themselves (Social Exclusion Unit 1999).

As part of the Government's Teenage Pregnancy Strategy, a 10-year programme to reduce teenage pregnancies and provide better support to teenage parents, Department of Health guidance stresses the importance of local co-ordination across all the services that have a role in preventing teenage pregnancy or supporting teenage parents. Each of the 150 local authorities in England are required to appoint a local Teenage Pregnancy Co-ordinator (TPC) to make sure that there is a local authority wide strategy to ensure this co-ordination (DoH 2000).

Sure Start Plus was also established in 2001 to provide co-ordinated support to pregnant teenagers and teenage parents under 18 years of age. There are 20 pilot programmes, based in 35 local authorities in England (Waltham Forest isn't one of them) and funding runs for 5 years (2001 – 2006). Sure Start Plus seeks to offer support through a personal adviser who co-ordinates a tailored support package for pregnant teenagers and parents. An evaluation of these pilots found that the numbers of teenage conceptions in individual Sure Start neighbourhoods are low and this presented difficulties in establishing local work programmes with teenagers (Summary of Interim Findings 2004).

In conclusion it appears that although 56,000 teenage parents is a significant number nationwide, at ward level there are simply not enough teenage parents to make local services a viable option.

Teenage Parents in Higham Hill

There are no more than nine teenage parents in Higham Hill. Data supplied by the Regional Interactive Child Health System (RICHS) shows the following births to teenage mothers:

- five births in 2002/3
- four births in 2003/4
- one birth between January and June 2004/5

RICHS wasn't able to provide the ages of the mothers when they gave birth but those who were 16 or over in 2002/3 will now be over 18 years of age. One of the teenage parents is known to have left the area. An informed interviewee estimated the true current figure as no more than six.

A representative of the borough-wide Teenage Pregnancy Integration Service emphasised that the numbers of teenage parents are too low at ward level to make independent Sure Start provision viable.

Sure Start local programmes are postcode dictated. They will take someone from one side of a street but not the other. Once you start from that place you're in trouble.

At borough-wide level, officers are in touch with about 80 teenage parents, running a weekly group in Chingford for up to 12 school age parents (two of whom are from Higham Hill) where they offer a varied programme of social and educational activities. Three of the interviewees emphasised the importance of working in partnership with relevant services across the borough, including schools, social services, youth services and health.

We do all tend to work with the same group of people and we have to work in a constructive partnership rather than re-inventing the wheel and fighting over clients.

There appears to be no reliable data on the number of teenage parents in the borough although the Teenage Pregnancy Integration Service estimates that there are "up to 200". Information comes from a wide variety of sources – education, health visitors, PCT's, social services, Sure Start programmes - "everyone has their own database". This is not unusual; a study in a neighbouring borough, on data collection of teenage pregnancies and parents, reported that although a lot of useful information was being collected it was difficult to join it up into a coherent picture (Partners in Evaluation 2001).

What the parents think

The two teenage parents we interviewed live with their partners, one of them with her current boyfriend's family. They both have a lot of support from their own families, especially from their mothers.

My mum helps me out all the time. She baby-sits a lot. I call her whenever I need help or when I want to go out with my friends.

One of the teenage parents is due to go to college in September, to study chemistry, physics and biology, the other has no plans yet but says she doesn't spend much time in the house, "I'm always out doing something"

Both the teenage parents had been visited by the Sure Start Higham Hill Outreach Worker and had attended the Young Mother's Group. One of them only went twice:

I found it boring because all we were doing was having coffee and talking. Only two people showed up the first time and three showed up the second time. I usually go to the Lloyds Park Children's Centre and take my daughter to the park or the children's group at the centre. There is more on offer and plenty of space for the children to play.

The other teenage parent attends the borough-wide Young Mother's Group in Chingford where the mothers meet in the kitchen and prepare lunch together. After clearing everything away they can go on the internet where they look for young mums in other countries. They also learn about health and safety and practice first aid. They also go on trips:

We went to the National Gallery. We all went in a van with the babies. The babies were put in a crèche that was provided especially for them while the mums did different kinds of artwork. This is a regular thing – we've been about five times. Now we are planning a holiday and collecting old clothes and toys to sell to pay for it.

We also conducted an opportunistic interview with the mother of one of the teenage parents and found that she too, had her own two children of less than 5 years of age. It was she who had introduced her daughter to Sure Start because she thinks that "it is a good thing and good people run it". However she doesn't go to Sure Start herself because she is over 40 years old and wasn't keen to get involved with the younger mothers. When asked what service would be of use to her she didn't hesitate for a moment before suggesting a weekly crèche so that mothers could go shopping

The best day would be Monday, as that is when the benefits money comes through. If you are on benefits you have to be good

at budgeting and shopping, you have to go from one place to another to get the best price. It's difficult with children. When you have done your shopping, you drop it off at home, then go and pick up the kids. There could be a fine if you're late. It would mean less hassle, less stress for the children and mothers.

Key points and recommendations

- There are about six teenage parents in Higham Hill (no more than nine) – too few to make the provision of a very local service viable.
- The teenage parents we interviewed have plenty of family support and a good social life. This is not the case with all single parents but where their needs are mainly educational and vocational they are best met by the borough-wide Teenage Pregnancy Reintegration Service.

We recommend that Sure Start Higham Hill should:

- Liase with the borough's Teenage Pregnancy Integration Officer and ensure that teenage parents are referred appropriately. Identify teenage parents over school-age and the truly isolated teenage parents and provide some in depth personal support.

3 Travellers

Social context

The term “traveller” covers a number of communities that include:

- The minority ethnic groups known as gypsies (English, Scottish, Welsh and Eastern Europe) and Irish travellers.
- The so-called “new age” travellers, some of whom are second, third or fourth generation

There are no official figures for the number of Travellers in the UK but counts carried out by local education authorities estimate that there are in the region of 50,000 traveller children in England (OFSTED, 1996). These are the figures for children of all ages up to 16 years. Recent research in Wales suggests that many more travelling children are not included, such as those in conventional housing (Laura Morgan, 1998).

Travellers are disadvantaged in health, social care and education. They have:

- A disproportionately high infant mortality rate
- A lower take up of immunisation services
- Lower than average educational achievement
- Little contact with social services (often through choice).

A number of studies suggest that lack of access to health services by travellers are the result of complicated access procedures, low level of literacy, lack of readable information, discrimination by service providers and hostility of reception staff, as barriers to health care (Brent Irish Advisory service 1997 and the United Bristol Healthcare Trust 1990/92).

It has been suggested that high levels of illiteracy amongst Travellers are in part a consequence of repeated evictions and school changes (Morris and Clements 2001). Some studies also point to a gulf between the aspirations and values of schools and travellers “*traveller children will not find their identity valued there*”. Many children talked about how they had been bullied and taunted at school and the ambivalence of many travellers towards school came from their own unhappy experiences of it. To combat discrimination and disadvantage Traveller Education Services operate in about 130 Local Authorities in England (including Waltham Forest).

Travellers in Higham Hill

The only visible Travellers in Higham Hill are those who live on the Travellers site near Folly Lane, down a dirt track road next to a Muslim graveyard. The site is very isolated – one couldn't get there easily without a car. A short road divides the site down the middle. The cabin-like houses are very small and set well back so that each "pitch" has enough space in front to accommodate motor vehicles and a caravan or two. Everything looks well maintained but slightly run down. Several cabins were unoccupied, their windows and doors boarded up.

There are six extended families living on the site but it is unclear exactly how many children there are under the age of four. An interviewee who lives on the site told us there were four children under five. The health team reported only one child under four.

A number of travellers had been re-housed and we interviewed one of them (see below). The Travellers Education Service is in touch with most of the traveller families in the borough and runs an after school club on the Folly Lane site. Unfortunately, the service was closed for the summer and we were unable to confirm the information we had been given about the children. It seems likely that with only about 50,000 traveller children of all ages estimated nationwide, the numbers of those under four, at ward level, would be fairly low. But, at an open forum to discuss the findings of the report, this suggestion was disputed by the Chair of the Higham Hill Community Association who asserted that as many as a third of families in the area were travellers who had settled in conventional housing but with their culture and language intact. We have not been able to verify this information.

What the travellers think

We interviewed two travellers: a parent with two grown up children as well as a two year old; the other a grandmother with 14 children of her own, some of them very young but none of them under four years of age.

The grandmother lives on the traveller's site. She has a great deal of authority in her community and acts as a gatekeeper to other travellers on the site. We were told that it would be necessary to consult her before talking to other residents and we visited because she said she would introduce us to one of her daughters, who lives on the same site and has a four year old. As it turned out, we never did manage to interview her daughter, despite a number of attempts.

The grandmother thought it highly unlikely that any families on the site would participate in Sure Start activities. She explained that this was because the site is too isolated and it was difficult to get to the Sure Start venues. Having

observed the cars on site we were not wholly convinced but travellers are a very self-contained community; they feel discriminated against and prefer to stick to their own kind. When asked why she hadn't opted to be re-housed our interviewee expressed a fear that the other tenants would discriminate against her.

Our other interviewee, who had opted to be re-housed, confirmed these fears:

There is still a lot of discrimination against travellers and my children have endured bullying because of who they are. I wanted them to have a stable life and be treated like everybody else so we moved from the (travellers') site about two years ago into the house we have now. However, some members of my travellers' community see me as a sell out

This parent is a user of Sure Start services. She takes her youngest child to the toddler's group and thinks highly of the service. But she doesn't know of any other travellers who are accessing Sure Start services and emphasised the closed nature of this community and how hard they are to reach.

We are still discriminated against in Higham Hill. It's not as bad as it used to be but it still exists. There are still some shops and pubs that put up signs "no gypsies allowed". What Sure Start should do is out a sign up in their window "everyone is welcome, including travellers". That would send the right message.

Key points and recommendations

- As with teenage parents, there are too few travellers at ward level to make specific services a viable option.

We recommend that Sure Start Higham Hill should:

- Liase with the Travellers Education Service to encourage referral of travellers who might need specific support. Emphasise inclusion by sending out the right messages and encouraging service providers to do the same.

4 Parents whose first language is not English

Social context

People from minority ethnic backgrounds now represent about 6.5% of the population in Britain. They are more likely than the rest of the population to live in poor areas, have low incomes, report poor health and be the victims of crimes. (Social Trends 2000).

Minority ethnic social exclusion is complex and varies according to the economic social, cultural and religious backgrounds of the particular people concerned. There are as many different cultures, religions and languages within these groups, as there are between them. This complexity is not always understood or appreciated (Cabinet Office 2000) and it is not advisable to make assumptions even about seemingly homogenous groups.

It is often assumed, for example, that all Asian people live in self-supporting extended families and are therefore less likely to need service support (Aitken et al 1989).

It is only those from the north of Somalia (Somaliland) who have colonial connections with the UK and exposure to the English language. But Somali refugees to the UK since the late 1980's have come mainly from the South. This means that their language and culture cuts them off from mainstream British society, and decreases their access to education and employment in their new environment (Harris 2004).

Some parents who can't speak English will be refugees who may be suffering from a series of severe and interrelated problems linked to the experiences that brought them as strangers to a country in which they find it hard to settle. They may not be ready to take part or attempt to integrate with the communities around them. Women may also be restricted, by culture and tradition, to the home and domestic responsibilities.

A study commissioned by a Sure Start Local Programme found that:

Not being able to speak English was a problem for some women where translators were unavailable and family values prevented them from learning English. Where families were part of a larger community that spoke a language they were able to (understand) there was a sense of cohesiveness and the need to learn English was less. Families began to manage language barriers by relying

on relatives and friends to translate (Sure Start Barton, Tredworth & White City 2003).

This reliance on family and friends to translate was borne out by our interviews with parents (see 2.9 below). The trouble was that it was the same people who were being used again and again and this was causing its own stresses and strains.

English classes (ESOL) may not be the answer. One study found that:

Part time, intermittent classes do not provide an adequate solution, and further problems arise when varying ability levels are taught together (Harris, 2004).

Providing an appropriate interpreting service across the diversity of languages in any one area can be challenging and expensive. At the very least, written information on health and social care services should be available to all members of the community and this may mean translating information for those who do not understand English.

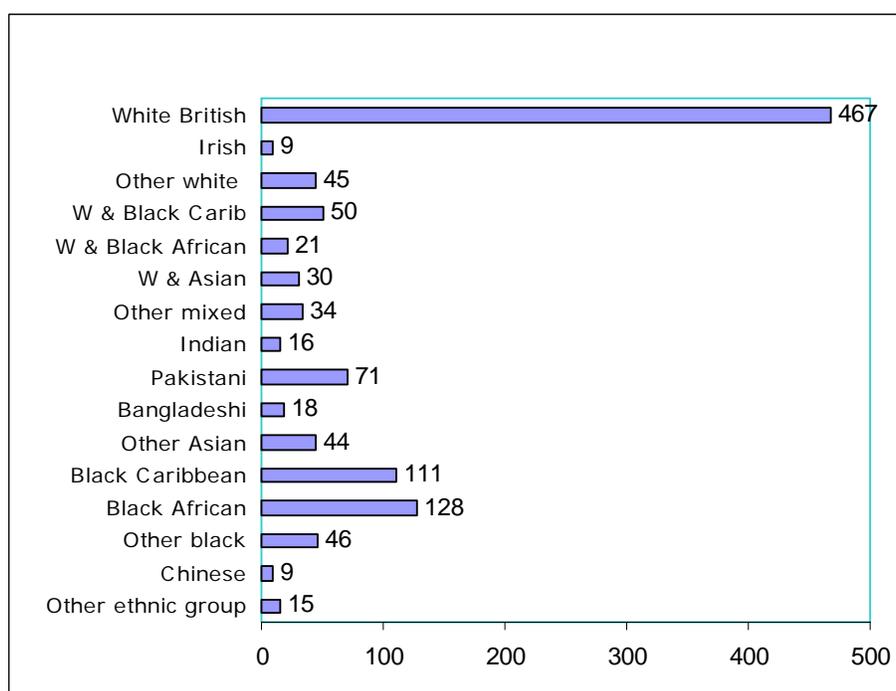
Parents, in Higham Hill, who speak little or no English

There are 1,114 children under four years of age in Higham Hill (LBWF Strategy Unit 2004) and at least 50% of these are children from minority ethnic families, British and non-British. The ethnic breakdown for children under four is presented in the table on the next page.

In order to get a rough estimate for the numbers of minority ethnic individuals whose English is poor or non-existent we made the following assumptions:

- That the white and mixed populations of children (521 and 135) would, with few exceptions, have parents who spoke English (656 children)
- The remaining 458 children come from minority ethnic populations, many of whom are also British (or come from a former British colony) and might reasonably be assumed to speak English, for example the African Caribbean children (111), many of the Asians (149) and some of the black Africans (128), plus a goodly proportion of those from the other groups (70)
- If we are to assume that all the African Caribbean children (111), 75% of the Asian children (111), 50% of the black Africans (64) and 50% of the remaining children (35) live in families that speak good enough English we are left with 137 children who may live in families who do not.

Ethnic groups for 0-4 years in Higham Hill



The top five languages in the borough, according to the London Borough of Waltham Forest are:

- French
- Somali
- Turkish
- Urdu

What the parents think

We conducted eight in-depth interviews with parents whose main language is not English. The parents were selected at random, some by the Sure Start Higham Hill team and others by us through the different services they access in Higham Hill. Six of these parents used Sure Start and two did not; we interviewed one of these two with the help of an interpreter. We were surprised at how varied their backgrounds were, coming from various countries around the world for reasons that were just as varied. Some came to the UK as students; others were refugees escaping war in their home countries while others were seeking a better life. Parents spoke the following languages at home:

- French (1)
- Spanish (1)

- Albanian (2)
- Turkish (1)
- Tamil (1)
- Ashanti (2)

There were three levels of English language competence, each bringing its own challenges.

- For those parents who speak little or no English there was a clear sense of frustration. Through an interpreter this was how one parent put it:

I can't speak English so I can't go anywhere. Even if someone calls me on the phone I can't understand, so life is very hard.

- For parents who speak some English, the problem is finding the confidence to express themselves well enough in order to ask for what they want.

Some women from my country do not feel comfortable going to Sure Start because they can't speak good enough English.

- For the parents who have mastered English well, being constantly in demand to interpret for others can become a burden.

Some of them call me & ask me when I am going so that I can be there to interpret for them. Sometimes I help them but I can't do it all the time. I am too busy doing other things with my life and can't be there to help them all the time.

Sure Start Higham Hill is trying to tackle the language problems by sponsoring ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) classes, which are held on Monday afternoons, with a crèche. One parent with four children aged under four and said she couldn't attend classes until the four year old goes to school but it wasn't clear whether this was a Sure Start restriction or one she had imposed on herself. It is highly likely that some parents would be extremely nervous of learning something new. One parent told us:

I have told them (friends who can't speak English) to take English classes but they say they need something very basic and the classes are too difficult.

Language problems weren't the only barriers to deter these parents from accessing Sure Start services. There were a number of interrelated factors arising from cultural attitudes, family responsibilities, and insecurity about immigration status coupled with reluctance to provide any information about themselves.

African parents work all sorts of hours and prefer to take their children to be looked after in each other's homes where there

are no time limitations. There are also many African parents whose immigration status is uncertain and they don't want to take their children to places where they may be asked a lot of questions.

I help interpret because their English is not so good. Some of them have their husbands interpret for them. Many of the husbands have been to school so they know English. Many women from my country stay at home to cook and look after children and older relatives. They cannot go to outside activities because they have too many responsibilities at home. I have a friend who I told about Sure Start but she says she does not have time. She says she has to cook for and look after her husband, her father-in-law, mother-in-law, sister-in-law and three children. She works very hard."

The parents who did use Sure Start were the ones who spoke enough English and they were reasonably satisfied with the services and activities of offer. But speaking just enough English is often not sufficient to deal with the business of being sociable. A couple of the parents said that having made the effort to come out in order to meet others they still felt isolated within a group.

I sit on my own and don't talk to anyone and no-one comes to talk to me

I go with my cousin but we just talk to each other because nobody comes to talk to us.

Another parent was isolated in a different way:

I have been to classes that Sure Start has sponsored and I have enjoyed them apart from the cookery class where I had a difficult time. The teacher was from Pakistan and so were most of the parents. She spoke her language with them most of the time and I didn't understand. I did complain but nothing changed and I was just happy to finish the class.

But it is difficult to gear a service to suit everybody's needs. A parent who had gone along to a coffee morning commented:

Just going there to have breakfast with a few parents who already know each other and sit in cliques to talk about men is very boring and frankly a waste of money. I think that they could provide something more useful.

Key points and recommendations

- In Higham Hill, parents who are hard-to-reach because of language and culture exist in significantly greater numbers than do teenage parents and travellers. They consist mainly of black Africans, Asians and eastern Europeans but many individuals from these groups will also speak English.
- There are large variations within these groups as well as between them. Some of those who speak little or no English also come from cultural traditions that tie them to the domestic sphere.
- For the parents who have mastered English well, being constantly in demand to act as interpreters can feel like a burden.
- Those parents who speak enough English to access services may still find themselves isolated within a group because they do not have the confidence to approach other parents.

We recommend that Sure Start Higham Hill should:

- Consider how the health team might obtain better data on parents who are isolated because they do not speak English adequately.
- Consider taking English lessons into the home in order to teach a group of families together.
- Resist using other parents as ad hoc interpreters and go-betweens, without their specific agreement. Even then, those parents should be given proper support for the role.
- Make sure that service providers are vigilant, friendly and supportive to parents who lack confidence e.g. by introducing them to other parents, by facilitating relationships and by responding effectively to any language difficulties.

5 Barriers to parental involvement

Introduction

This section looks at a range of factors that appear to act as a barrier to the take-up of services. They have been identified not just from our interviews with parents, but also from our interviews with Sure Start Higham Hill staff and with service providers, some working at a local level and others with a brief that is borough-wide. In addition we have made use of our own observation when visiting the Sure Start office and a few of the services.

The barriers have been identified in the context of our focus on hard-to-reach families but many of them also apply to other families who are not accessing Sure Start services. Hard-to-reach people are not necessarily hard-to-reach; they are essentially hard-to-engage – and this can apply to any of the families who are not getting involved.

Sure Start Higham Hill has registered over 600 families but current monitoring systems are unhelpful in determining how many of these families are actually accessing services. The most popular services appear to be the baby clinic, and the toddler groups (Stay and Play and the Tuesday Tots) with average attendance of 20 or so parents and children. With many other services and activities restricted to no more than six to ten parents at most, for reasons of space, average attendance figures indicate that no more than 100 families are actively involved at the present time. (This estimate does not include home visits by the health team)

One interviewee made this point rather forcibly:

Hard-to-reach? What about the other 700 families who are not using Sure Start?

So the potential barriers to access don't apply only to the relatively small numbers of hard-to-reach families; they apply to all eligible families in Higham Hill.

The barriers appear to operate on a number of levels:

- The individual level, which is to do with an individual's way of doing things and individual circumstances
- The organisational level, which is to do with Sure Start Higham Hill's way of doing things

- The social level, which is to do with the attitudes and levels of acceptance and support in the community

Individual barriers

Parents themselves in sections 2, 3 and 4 described the impact of individual circumstances on take-up of services. The main ones were:

- **Language and culture**

The majority of parents we interviewed were those who spoke a language other than English at home. Although a number of those were able to get by with varying degrees of confidence, it was clear that both language and culture presented a serious barrier to accessing services and that the two working together represented the most serious barrier of all.

English classes may provide a solution to those parents who are not tied to traditional female roles and have the confidence to learn in public but they are not likely to be used by women who have many domestic responsibilities, are expected to stay in the home and might be very frightened of unfamiliar classes in the company of unfamiliar people and their ability to cope.

- **Lack of time**

A number of parents mentioned the question of not having enough time. We have no idea whether this is a reality in all cases but there is clearly a particular problem during school holidays when older children need to be looked after, or for parents in employment.

Proximity to services, mentioned by an interviewee on the travellers' site is clearly important, especially in a borough where 40% of households don't own a car (2001 Census).

- **No perceived need**

Finally, there are some parents, like the two teenage parents we interviewed who receive plenty of support from their family and don't need the services on offer or access services that do meet their needs elsewhere.

Organisational barriers

- **Promotion**

Visits to the Sure Start Higham Hill premises revealed a number of promotional and public relations barriers:

- The shop front is so completely covered with notices and leaflets that the result is information overload. This also makes it impossible to see inside (although one gets the uncomfortable feeling that those inside can very easily see you). Once inside the reception is unpredictable depending upon who is around. The seating area and the box of toys provide a warm and friendly touch.
- The language of the promotional literature is itself a barrier, especially for those with language and literacy problems. Example: one leaflet advertises sessions on “*pre-numeracy and literacy*”, “*strategies for bi-lingual and language development*”, and “*supporting children in new environment*”. Another example: the leaflet that advertises English classes to non-English speakers is written only in English. Furthermore it uses overcomplicated language and jargon such as *ESOL LESSONS; English for Speakers of Other Languages, and Outreach Workers*. (See appendices)
- There is a bright and colourful general leaflet to introduce Sure Start but the translation into other languages is produced only in black and white, which falsely gives an impression of a less valued population of parents.
- There is clearly an intention to make the materials look attractive but poor layout, a jumble of styles and poorly chosen images (such as the people in office clothes, sitting formally around a table with pens and paper, to illustrate the English classes) detract from their attractiveness and impact.

These may all seem like small things but, together, they add up to an unpredictable reception for parents and a confusing set of messages that fail to communicate, as they should. One very effective promotional tool is the colourful Sure Start Higham Hill van – no writing, nothing complicated, but just a warm and friendly image.

- **Policy**

Sure Start Higham Hill operates a policy that can be summed up as “Sure Start funds for Sure Start people”. This seems, at one level, very reasonable but in practice it means that parents are greeted with “*What*

is your registration number?” or “What is your postcode?” This can seem overly officious and bureaucratic and might even frighten some people away. There are, of course, ways and ways of asking this question and some people may have a level of interpersonal skill that enables them to do it with welcoming warmth - but from most people it strikes an inappropriate note in a service that is trying to encourage parents to use it.

- **Practice**

The feedback from most of the parents who used Sure Start ranged from reasonably to very satisfied. But a few parents had had negative experiences, such as the parents who sat by themselves and were too shy to approach the other parents, or the parent who reported her experience in the cookery class where the tutor lapsed into speaking in her own language to her own community. (See section 4)

We also observed some careless customer care during a visit to one of the services, with staff signing parents in but too absorbed in paper work to notice their isolation and facilitate their integration within the group.

Social barriers

- **Stigma**

Some of the Sure Start Higham Hill staff and service providers feel that there is a stigma attached to becoming involved in Sure Start because it is known to operate only in disadvantaged areas of the country. However the parents we spoke to didn't mention this as a significant factor.

- **Attitudes**

From our interviews it appeared that there are issues about the effective functioning of the Partnership Board and that differences between partners has resulted in antagonism within the Board and beyond in parts of the wider community.

There are lots of politics and issues of control.

There are too many gatekeepers, people who are protecting their own bit, their own power base.

Some interviewees pointed out that too much was being expected of a fairly young service and there was a low tolerance of the inevitable teething problems:

Sure Start has lots of money and there were huge expectations. People didn't realise that building trust and extending reach takes time.

Everything has to be perfect, there mustn't be a spelling mistake or everything becomes a huge inquest. Sure, there have been mistakes but we must learn from them.

Negativity seeping out into the public domain threatens Sure Start Higham Hill's reputation and becomes an obvious barrier to access for parents.

Negative things spread fast. People say: I can't be bothered with Sure Start. There is a need to build bridges and as quickly as possible.

Summary of barriers

Individual barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language • Culture • Language and culture combined • Time commitments • Proximity to services • Need met elsewhere
Organisational barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inappropriate promotion • Unpredictable reception • Patchy customer service skills • Officious/bureaucratic practices
Social barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential for stigma • Reputation and rumour

Findings and Recommendations

- The reception at the Sure Start Higham Hill office is unpredictable, depending upon who is around. There is also evidence of patchy customer care in the Sure Start services and of some rather officious and bureaucratic practices.
- The language and style of promotional literature has not been tailored to communicate effectively with a diverse population of parents.

- Rumours about differences on the Partnership Board appear to be impacting negatively on the reputation of Sure Start in the community.
- Review the language and style of all promotional materials (see examples on page 33) to ensure that they are:
 - Written in plain English e.g. “counting and reading” rather than “pre-numeracy and literacy”
 - Easy and friendly to read e.g. “Learn English” rather than “ESOL Lessons”
 - Illustrated appropriately and thoughtfully
- If the specific aim is to attract parents who don't speak English (eg ESOL classes), make sure that materials are produced in relevant languages and to the same standard as the English language materials.
- Open up the window of the Sure Start premises by removing all but the key messages and latest information and review and re-arrange them weekly to present a new and fresh appearance.
- Train all staff in customer care skills and make quality of customer care a condition of grants to service providers.
- Deal promptly with any partnership problems on the Board and consider the use of an experienced external facilitator to help focus Board energies on vision and strategy.

Three approaches to reaching the hard-to-reach

There is more than one way of tackling the problem of reaching hard-to-reach people. We found three main approaches:

The targeted approach

This approach focuses on reaching people at the extreme end of the scale (the hard-to-reach). The basic steps for designing and managing targeted programmes are outlined in literature developed by the health services where inequalities in health and health provision are a current priority (DoH 2002) and in a Sure Start Unit planning guide (Sure Start)

The targeted approach stresses the importance of having good quality data about the people you wish to target, listening carefully to their version of their needs, setting some clear programme objectives and implementing them creatively.

The drawbacks are:

- Good quality data about some hard-to-reach groups is very difficult to obtain, for example about parents who speak little or no English. Systematic local data collection by health teams might eventually shed light on the size and nature of the targeted group but until that happens, interventions can only be limited in scope.
- Targeting some hard-to-reach groups might only further stigmatise a service that is intended for for all disadvantaged people.

The general approach

The Health Development Agency (HDA) has recently challenged the idea of focussing attention on the most socially excluded. It argues that programmes aimed at the most difficult to reach deal with only a small number of people, and have little effect on the overall situation. The HDA points out that although the hard-to-reach may be very much in need, there are many more people who are also disadvantaged. This approach suggests that programmes should be designed to reach the majority of those in need and not just those at the extreme end.

The drawbacks are said to be that treating everyone in the same way just perpetuates the inequalities that exist in society. However, the HDA argues

that inequalities can be dealt with through special measures within general programmes.

The individual needs approach

Knowing the People Planning (KPP) has a set of simple but sensible ideas that were designed for the mental health field and have been tested in New Zealand and the UK. I am simplifying it rather, but this approach argues that the numbers of really needy clients are small enough to enable services to assess and respond to needs on an individual basis e.g. we have six people who desperately need childcare; fourteen people who would like to learn English; seven people who need support in the home. KPP argue that this is more effective in delivering results than in the more generalised “hit and miss” services planned for a general category of clients.

The drawbacks to this approach are:

- It is used with known clients and can't work where the clients are not yet known.
- However as the Sure Start Higham Hill health team begins to access and get to know its clients, this approach may be possible.

No one and only way

The three approaches described above are not mutually exclusive.

Common sense suggests that whatever the choice, good quality data, a needs assessment, some clear objectives and creative implementation are the basics of all the approaches.

It is also clear that Sure Start must reach the majority of eligible families in the area in order to make any overall impact.

And finally, the individual needs approach is worth pursuing in some instances. For example, during our interviews we were told about a parent who couldn't access services because she had no pushchair or buggy for her three pre-school children. This is a problem that could be solved easily and at very little cost.

Practical advice from elsewhere

Sure Start Unit Planning Pack

Sure Start for all: Guidance on involving Minority Ethnic Children and Families. This pack also includes some useful resource material and a list of specialist organisations.

Language support

The DoH and Refugee Council have a very useful section on language support in their publication "*Caring for Dispersed Asylum Seekers*" June 2003. This can be downloaded from the DoH website.

Amongst the recommendations are:

- Where possible, interpreters should be trained, supervised and supported as integral members of the team
- Use of friends and relatives is not appropriate for discussing personal problems
- In appointments which use an interpreter, use simple language wherever possible and speak slowly

The same publication also advises:

- Many cultures do not use surnames. Some use a different order of names, usually the family (surname) will come first. It is important when taking down details that the name order is correct.
- Different religions have different days of worship and staff need to be sensitive about these when making appointments. A multi-faith calendar, which gives the celebration days for different religions, may be a useful acquisition.

The London Borough of Barking & Dagenham

The London Borough of Barking and Dagenham Equalities and Diversity Dept have produced a list of 19 ways to reach the hard-to-reach on their website. Here are just a few of them.

Be clear about who they are:

The first rule of communication is to know your audience. It's easy to assume hard-to-reach groups are homogenous. They are not. So try to find out as much as you can about them.

Know what they read, see and hear:

Every group in society is reached somehow. That's because commercial companies make it their business to track down and sell to different audiences. Find out who is already talking to the people you want to reach.

Look at levels of literacy

Barking & Dagenham has high levels of illiteracy. Ask yourself how many people can understand your message.

Think how they will make up their minds about you

Look at the way you interact and get the code right: dress, language and style. The way they perceive you will affect your relationship. Try to ensure that the people on your team convey the right messages in their manner. (If they look bored or too busy they will give a poor impression)

Get the language right

What words are meaningful to the groups you want to reach? You will be more successful if you use their words rather than yours.

The Radford Shared Care Project – Garden Street Family Centre (NCH Action for Children)

This project offers intensive assistance to their hard-to-reach families – those where children are at risk or the families are under stress. It aims to enable parents to acquire skills and fulfil their parenting role by sending trained workers into the home to give advice, guide, teach, suggest and prompt parents on a range of skills including baby care and handling difficult behaviour.

Sure Start New Town & Park

Sure Start New Town & Park, in the London Borough of Newham, have negotiated a single sex protected swimming session in their own local swimming pool. This, in conjunction with crèche facilities has been successful in reaching parents from other cultures who don't normally access such facilities.

Some key messages from the Department of Health

- Take a whole systems approach to planning services.....involving the community and partner organisations.
- Have good quality data about the local population is important for a needs approach. Health visitors and community nurses, working alongside PCT public health specialists, can play an important role in community profiling.....
- Think imaginatively about using different settings to target messages and services to hard-to-reach groups (e.g. mosques, schools, mobile clinics). (Also supermarkets, shopping centres, the post office and churches)

(Addressing Inequalities – reaching the hard-to-reach groups: National Service Frameworks – A practical guide to implementation in primary care, August 2002)

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Appendix 3

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Appendix 1

Sure Start Planning Pack. *Sure Start for all; Guidance on involving minority ethnic children and families*.

HDA website: <http://www.hdaonline.org.uk/html/research/inequalities.html>

KPP website: www.kpp.org.nz