

FATHERS' INVOLVEMENT: SECOND DRAFT

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***INVOLVING FATHERS***

**NORTH LEYTON SURE START  
LOCAL EVALUATION 2004**

**SECOND DRAFT**

A report by the Centre for Urban and Community Research, April 2004

## Introduction: The evaluation process

This is a summary of the report of the Fathers Involvement Study conducted by the Centre for Urban and Community Research (CUCR) for North Leyton Sure Start's local evaluation in Spring 2004.<sup>1</sup> The research was commissioned to look at what Sure Start North Leyton had already done to support fathers' involvement and to determine what else might work locally.

We observed a range of Sure Start events, meetings, service and activities, spoke to a range of practitioners within the Sure Start team, and spoke to local parents, both fathers and mothers. We visited the following Sure Start funded projects:

- Soft Play: three visits
- Toddler Time: three visits
- Health Visitors Clinic: two visits
- Messy Play: two visits
- Music Makers: two visits
- New Babies Group: one visit
- Turkish Advice And Interpreting Service: one visit

In addition, we have attended a Board meeting, a Staff meeting, and a Parent Link meeting. We conducted a number of interviews at these groups:

- At Soft Play: 1 white SS father, 2 Asian SS fathers, 1 white non-SS father, plus a telephone interview with 1 white non-SS father who lives in Leyton but on the wrong side of the High Road who attends Soft Play.
- At Messy Play: 1 black British SS father, 2 white British SS fathers, 1 African-Caribbean SS father.
- At HV Clinic: 1 black British SS father, plus 9 non-SS (mostly Asian) fathers
- At Music Makers: 1 African-Caribbean SS father.

In addition, at these groups we spoke to numerous mothers about their partners' involvement. We also conducted eight telephone interviews with fathers already on sure Start's contact list.

We also attempted to develop a programme of events that would be both positive experiences for fathers and research opportunities. These were not well attended, attesting in part to the difficulty of involving men in this sort of work. We organised a computer training session, which was not attended, a canal walk, which one family attended (due to bad weather, we went to an indoor play centre instead) and a focus group, which one father attended.

All quotes are in *italics*. They are anonymous; any names used are not the parents' real names. These quotes perceptions and experiences of residents who we spoke with, rather than our views or literal facts.

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<sup>1</sup> The principal researcher was Anan Collymore and the research team included Ben Gidley, Mark Edmondson, Jane Tooke, Imogen Slater and Vic Seidler. Ben Gidley was the principal author of this report.

## 1. Involving Fathers

In this section, we will set out our approach to the issue of involving fathers, before moving on to looking at different types of fathers in the area.

### The “hard to reach”

There is a focus within Sure Start nationally on providing services to “hard to reach” groups. It is, however, important to realise that “hard to reach” is not a straightforward category whose members will be the same everywhere, but, instead, varies from area to area, depending on a range of factors. Often, for example, “hard to reach” is taken to mean the same as “black and minority ethnic”. But Sure Start in North Leyton has been relatively successful in reaching and involving parents from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Some communities have proven to be easier to involve than others, and resource allocation is generally informed by this.

Often with the “hard to reach”, precisely because they are hard to reach, numbers accessing services may be lower than with services and activities aimed at families in general, and at a higher cost. Thus, work with the “hard to reach” might appear in monitoring data to be less “cost effective” than general services. However, working with the “hard to reach” is vitally important, as such groups are often in the most need of services and activities.

Sometimes, reaching the “hard to reach” is not done through particular projects or pieces of work – examples of Sure Start funding targeted activities include swimming for Muslim families and advice for Turkish-speaking families. However, often reaching the “hard to reach” means workers investing extra time or effort, or taking a different approach. This can make it hard to quantify the cost of reaching the “hard to reach”.

### Why are men “hard to reach”?

There are several different types of barriers to fathers' involvement. On one side are barriers to do with:

- **Socio-economic factors**, such as wage levels or childcare costs. This was a major factor for most of the parents we spoke to, with fathers working long hours or shifts. (Statistics show that British fathers work longer hours than fathers anywhere else in Europe – and amongst the small sample we spoke to locally, some were working six day weeks and ten hour days to provide for their families, thus limiting how long they could spend with them.)
- **Cultural attitudes**, including in the culture in general, the local culture of the area, or the different cultural backgrounds local fathers come from. An example would be gendered roles in the home. One woman at a Messy Play session told us that there was little chance of her partner attending any of the Sure Start events as he viewed childcare as “*women's work*”. A father we spoke to said that other fathers he knows from the area have the

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attitude that childcare is the mother's responsibility and won't get involved in events because of that.

- **Particular family circumstances**, like a painful separation or difficult work/care balance, or the role of the extended family. For example, many of the parents we spoke to were struggling with very difficult arrangements that made it hard for them to take an equal role in childcare.

These are largely beyond the power of Sure Start to change in the short term, although a long-term shift can be brought about by promoting positive images of involved fatherhood and providing spaces and opportunities that help individual families overcome the structural constraints they operate within.

On the other side are:

- **The attitudes of caring professionals**, e.g. excessive suspicion around child protection issues, or patronising approaches to men's awareness of their children's health.
- **The delivery of Sure Start projects and activities**, e.g. very feminine spaces, or opening times.

These are the sorts of things that Sure Start can take action on in the short term and will be discussed in more detail in the next section of the report.

The tension between these different levels is well illustrated by the following dialogue between a father at a Sure Start group and a member of our research team. He felt that the fact that there are not more fathers is related to socio-economic factors rather than the events themselves. He added that fathers "*are either working or they don't look after their children.*" In terms of fathers involvement he felt that it is "*a shame*" that you don't see many men involved with their children and that he couldn't believe this was due to the fact that they all work. He then went on to say that "*North Leyton is a funny area, it is a poor area but that a lot of middle class people are moving in because of property prices.*" When pressed as to how this was related to the issue of father's involvement, he said "*maybe it is to do with what men from different class, ethnic or educational backgrounds think their role is as fathers.*" Similarly, another father we spoke to said "*you won't get lots of blokes going to groups in this area*". When asked what he means by this he said that there are "*too many absent fathers and not enough blokes who want to do things with their kids.*" He states: "*It is synonymous with working class areas.*" When pressed on this comment, he said that there are a lot of people on low incomes and working long hours, and also that age is a factor. What these fathers were drawing attention to is the complexity of the cultural and economic factors impacting on involved fatherhood.

### **Bringing men into Sure Start through activities**

Working with men involves a difficult balance between, on one hand, providing a safe, open, comfortable, non-judgemental space in which men feel at home, and, on the other, developing positive attitudes to gender equality and involved fathering, which might challenge traditional male patterns of behaviour.

Working with the "hard to reach" must proceed through a number of stages. On the one hand, simply providing enjoyable activities for members of "hard to

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reach” populations, such as men, is not enough; they must be followed up more sustained work, building services and more developmental activities from them. As one worker said to us about the football activities that Sure Start ran, “I think it is a good idea, but it is only a grounding for subsequent work.”

On the other hand, it is important to acknowledge that you can't just draw members of “hard to reach” communities into the orbit of Sure Start and then expect them to just start engaging with general Sure Start provision. An intermediate stage is required, building relationships and trust. The organisation Working With Men, who are experienced in such work, use the concept of “*edges of familiarity*” to describe this. This is the idea of providing something that men are used to, but building in elements that go beyond this, and so on.

The previous round of activities aimed at men (the football and bowling events) did not structure in follow-up activities, but left the men drawn in hanging. This is one of the reasons that North Leyton Sure Start made the decision to focus on fathers' involvement for the local evaluation, i.e. to plan how such follow-up activities might be structured.

On a positive note, there was some evidence from our interviews that there is a shift in fathering attitudes across the culture. One father said his main reason for being as involved as he is in his son's activities is that his father spent little time with him as he was growing up and feels he missed out on a lot and doesn't want to repeat that with his child. This sort of desire to be more involved than the previous generation was mentioned by other fathers too. Two fathers spoke of the difficulty of *learning to be a father*, and how committed they were to this. One Muslim man, for example, said that if it is your first time as a parent you haven't experienced it before. He said he has recently made more effort to spend time with his son, and do things with him, to play and read with him – the change and improvement in their relationship has been noticeable. “*My son used to only ask his mum for things, now he asks me too.*” A white British interviewee said that all this is a new experience for him. He described his family upbringing as “*traditional*” and said that his own father had nothing to do with the children in any way other than for authority or punishment; he sees himself as different from this.

Another positive point is that the sort of services Sure Start offers to families (e.g. baby massage) were recently the preserve of the rich or of alternative lifestyles. This shows that a lot can change in a short time if there is the will to bring about change.

## 2. All kinds of fathers

In this work, we have used the word “father” to refer to all male carers, including stepfathers, non-resident fathers, grandfathers and others. In North Leyton, as in all areas, there are many different types of male carers. There can be no “one size fits all approach” to working with fathers. Projects in other areas that have been successful in working with fathers have targeted services to specific groups of fathers (either instead of or as well as working with fathers in general). Some of the types of fathers are:

### 2.1 Working fathers and non-working fathers<sup>2</sup>

*Working fathers*, like working mothers, are constrained by working hours in their involvement with their children or with a programme like Sure Start. Many of the mothers we spoke to at Soft Play and Messy Play sessions said that their partners occasionally came to the groups if they were off work, but that their working hours stopped them from going often.

For these fathers, activities and services need to happen in the evenings or at weekends. Many fathers, for example, spoke of taking their children swimming on Saturday.<sup>3</sup> For working fathers, we recommend piloting a programme of activities and services outside the school day and assessing the level of take-up after a period of at least a month.

However, working fathers told us that they are often so tired at the end of the working day that they might not be interested in coming to activities or services in the evenings. One said that he often feels exhausted during the week as he works shifts – he felt that one of the reasons he sees so few fathers at Soft Play is that they probably feel just as tired as he does and possibly don't have the energy for it. Likewise, for many working fathers, the weekend is quality family time which they might not be interested in sharing with other families. Because of this, it is possible that take-up will not immediately be high.

*Non-working fathers* are able to access the services and activities put on by Sure Start during the school day. For them, the barriers are in terms of perceptions of using such activities as “feminine” or not feeling welcome. For non-working fathers, we recommend targeted promotion of existing services, plus piloting some dedicated activities, such as occasional “breakfast clubs” or father-and-child reading schemes. These might best be developed in partnership with primary schools and pre-schools.

Many families we spoke to didn't fall into simple categories like “working father/caring mother” or “out of work dad”, but instead were juggling complex

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<sup>2</sup> We are using “working” here to refer to paid employment, recognising that caring for children is hard but unpaid work.

<sup>3</sup> There is currently a weekend swimming session for Muslim Sure Start families, alternating week to week for fathers and mothers. This has been successful and it is important to develop culturally specific and culturally sensitive services. However, talking to non-Muslim families, it seems that there is some demand for swimming provision for non-Muslims too. The Cathall Leisure Centre was seen as a particularly family-friendly venue. More recently, Sure Start has started a Saturday Baby Massage project, which has successfully attracted male carers.

work/childcare arrangements. For example, a father we met at one play group looks after his child two days a week and his partner does two; the child is at nursery two days, the other day they look after her together.

### **2.2 First-time fathers**

First-time fathers have particular issues, e.g. around learning about parenthood and coming to terms with their responsibilities. Parenting classes for men have been tried in other areas, sometimes successfully, but these tend to reach fathers who are less socially excluded and already keen on being involved carers. The key route to these fathers is through health visitors and midwives, who should be encouraged to include fathers more in their assessments and referrals.

### **2.3 Grandfathers**

In some families, particularly where the parents are young, the grandmother is the primary carer or takes on a large amount of the caring responsibility – we met a number of grandmothers at play sessions. Grandfathers, however, are not currently engaging in Sure Start activities. Again, either targeted activities – e.g. a granddads appreciation day – or targeted recruitment to activities aimed at male carers in general – e.g. a quiz night – would be necessary to involve them.

### **2.4 Stepfathers**

It is important to recognise stepfathers as a distinct group of male carers, who often feel marginalised from childcare services. However, there are not any particular activities or services which would be relevant only to them.

### **2.5 Men as main carers**

We did meet two men who were the main carers in their families, their female partners having returned to work. They accessed a number of play activities put on Sure Start during the week. Proportionally very few children under four have men as their primary carers, and it is likely that the numbers in North Leyton are fairly small. As with other non-working fathers, we recommend targeted promotion of existing services.

### **2.6 Non-resident fathers**

Non-resident fathers constitute one of the hardest to reach of all categories of parents. We met only one during our research, who is actually the primary carer of his child. In other areas, services have been targeted at this group, with limited success. DIY Dads, for example, ran a weekend nursery aimed at non-resident fathers and their children, as an alternative to McDonalds for “weekend dads”. This had limited take-up, despite heavy publicity. DIY Dads also ran a Handover Project, to provide a safe space for separated couples to exchange their children. Again, the take-up was limited, and this would probably be too resource-heavy for Sure Start North Leyton to undertake. As with some services for fathers, it might be more within the remit of a borough-wide male inclusion strategy, which we will discuss below.

### **2.7 Younger fathers and older fathers**

One father we spoke to at a play group pointed out that both he and the other father present are in their thirties and so *“have done all the partying and don't feel tied down by children... For younger parents there is a conflict of interest. As a young parent you'd be breaking the mould if you stayed around.”*

Younger fathers are a particularly socially excluded section of the community. Some successful work with young fathers elsewhere has been telephone advice lines, fathering courses in schools and youth clubs, and support groups for young fathers.

Older fathers are less socially excluded, but in developing activities for fathers it is important to remember that some physical activities might appeal more to younger fathers than older ones – this is why we would recommend using a range of activities, e.g. both football and cricket.

### **2.8 Fathers from different cultures**

North Leyton is incredibly culturally diverse. Among the cultural and ethnic backgrounds present are: Pakistani, other South Asian, African, Turkish, Eastern European, African-Caribbean and white British. Each culture has a different approach to masculinity, to families and to fathering, which again means that no one size fits all approach with men will work.

Among many of the ethnic groups in the area, there is a strong tradition of men not being involved in parenting but rather acting as the breadwinner or in a disciplinary role. For example, a number of South Asian mothers and fathers said that men don't get involved in looking after children in their culture, a point that was made about Albanian and Kosovan culture by a worker we interviewed. This is something that will need to be broken down to some extent before involved fathering can really take hold. This requires a wider cultural shift than Sure Start is able to bring about by itself.

### **2.9 Fathers in general**

Despite the diversity of fathers, there are some features which seem common to many different fathers. In particular, men reported to us that they preferred physical or activity-based things, rather than talk-based things. For example, one father we spoke to talked about his involvement as a father in terms of being active, doing physical things with his son like swimming. He praised a Sure Start group that he felt had helped his son start walking. This sort of physical emphasis seemed strongest where the father was talking about a son, but was true too of fathers of girls. A mother told us that her partner looks after the children three days a week and usually plays with them in the park, goes to groups if it is cold. He particularly likes involving their daughter in activities. *“It is to stimulate her.”* She explains how he goes to groups for the children, not to meet people: *“that is a difference I come for friends, he's not like that.”* Another mother we spoke to said that her takes a very active part in his son's activities and enjoys the more physical aspects that Soft Play offers. Swimming was something mentioned by a number of fathers and mothers as something dads would do with their kids.

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In contrast, many women we spoke to at the groups said that one of the reasons they went was to chat with other mothers in order to overcome their isolation, even picking a particular group because it was where their friends went. Some of the mothers said that this might put men off going. During this discussion, some of the mums half-jokingly suggested that there are newspapers at the groups to encourage men, so they wouldn't have to chat, while a non-Sure Start father we spoke to who used one of the groups said *"I tend to read the paper, women go to meet other parents, I don't, I go to get some peace, and women go to talk. My main motivation is to get out of the house and it is good for my son to interact with other children and to have different toys."* Another father, a first time user at one of the groups, when questioned about the friendliness of other adults told us that he doesn't mind if nobody talks to him. He takes his son swimming every week and no one, except the instructor talks to him there: *"I do it for him, not to be social. As long as he's happy I don't care."* He then goes on to explain how it is interesting that the mums who take their children swimming *"all have a conversation, but I just play with my child."* He adds that he is not usually stuck in all day and so he doesn't need that interaction with adults.

These gendered differences, though, are not universal to all men and all women and it is important not to stereotype fathers' needs too much. One mother we spoke to said her partner was happy to socialise with women at Soft Play, but that this wasn't true of her friends' partners. *"It depends on the mentality of the men. Tommy doesn't mind chatting to women."* A father we spoke to at a different session of the same group said that he is often the only man at the group: *"Occasionally there are other men but I don't necessarily talk to them; I tend to interact with people based on whether I get on with them rather than along gender lines.* He added that *"interaction is desirable but my main concern is that my daughter enjoys herself."* Another father said *"I don't mind being in an all female environment. A few guys I talk to about that are a bit freaked by that. They give general reasons like feeling a bit awkward. If anything you are treated as a bit of a novelty as a father."*

However, the advantage of groups like Soft Play and Messy Play is that they strike a balance between activity-based provision (play) and socialising, so potentially appealing to both men and women if they are managed well.

### 3. Involving Men in Sure Start North Leyton

We believe that Sure Start North Leyton has done good work to engage with fathers. It uses many positive images of fathers in its publicity, and has done since the very start. It uses gender-neutral names for its services, and has a positive and welcoming attitude towards parents. It has delivered a short programme of dad-targeted activities. However, some barriers to involving men still exist. In this section, we talk about some of the barriers to male involvement, and look at what Sure Start has already and might in future do to tackle these barriers.

#### 3.1 Staff gender

The National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) has conducted a major evaluation of Sure Start programmes' engagement with fathers.<sup>4</sup> It has identified a number of issues across the country, including the predominantly female environment or lack of male presence in Sure Start services. One mother we spoke to felt that it would encourage more fathers to get involved if their were male staff at the play groups, while another felt that staff should be more proactive in recruiting men, to make them feel more welcome.

Some Sure Starts have responded to this sort of issue by seeking to recruit **Male Involvement Workers**. Sure Start Denaby Main and Conisbrough in Doncaster and Sure Start Teviot and Chrisp Street in East London are two examples.

No such post exists at North Leyton, but Sure Start here has two male workers already, a higher number than many Sure Starts (although one is part-time). This already has the effect of providing a more men-friendly/gender-equal environment. One of the male workers, a "Local to Local" worker (i.e. tasked with engaging different sections of the community) has already done work to engage fathers, described below in section 2.3. As well as this, the fathers we spoke to did not in most cases feel that female staff treated them differently as men. For example, interviewees described staff as "*very friendly and approachable*."

Given this, we do not recommend recruiting a Male Involvement Worker, as the returns would not be worth the investment. Instead, we recommend a formal action plan to ensure that current staff take on board male involvement issues. The dissemination of this report might be a key stage in that, or training could be bought in, e.g. from DIY Dads or Fathers Direct.

However, a Male Inclusion Worker might be an element in a **borough-wide strategy**, which Sure Start North Leyton might initiate in partnership with other Sure Starts, the Early Years Partnership and the primary schools, who might each part fund such a post. The lesson of the Doncaster Male Inclusion Worker would reinforce this, where successful work was delivered in partnership with local schools and across more than one Sure Start programme. This sort of partnership is also essential for the mainstreaming and sustainability beyond the

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<sup>4</sup> NESS *Fathers in Sure Start* September 2003

life of the Sure Start programme. Another lesson of other Male Inclusion Workers is the importance of flexible working hours: the postholder would have to be willing to work evenings and weekends.

### 3.2 Existing Services

We found that many of the fathers we interviewed had limited **awareness** of Sure Start services. For example, a father that took his child to the Sure Start-funded Muslim-only swimming sessions once a fortnight said he had not heard of Sure Start; he felt there were *“hardly any”* activities for children in the area. Although some of the fathers we spoke to had a much greater awareness, the majority only knew of one or two Sure Start services.

We visited a number of sessions of **Soft Play, Messy Play, Music Makers and Toddler Time**. We found that these are relatively male-friendly. For example, no groups had gender-specific names like “mother and toddler group” and the staff were welcoming towards men.

The groups are accessed by a small number of **male carers**, who did not appear to be excluded or marginalised. For example, two fathers go to Toddler Time fairly regularly and Soft Play appears to have two regular male users, as well as other dads who drop in from time to time (at one of our visits, there were four fathers). One father we spoke to at Soft Play was taking time off work to take responsibility for his child while his partner was ill, but he had used the service when he had taken paternity leave. He was very positive about it, feeling that it was a safe environment and his son enjoyed it. He also felt that the interaction with other children had helped him. Another father at Soft Play told us he attends because it is close to where he lives, and is on at convenient times. It is also *“safe”* and has a *“nice atmosphere”*. When asked about being male, he responded that it doesn't bother him being in a female environment. A first time user told us his first impressions are that it is good: *“clean and not too overcrowded”*. He has brought his son because it is good for him to mix with other kids. He says that being a father in this environment doesn't bother him: *“I don't feel embarrassed because there are lots of women here”*.

One barrier to men's involvement in such groups comes from the **female users of the groups**: women sometimes initially feel distrustful towards them. A group of mothers we spoke to at a group admitted that they wouldn't, for example, invite a new father to the park afterwards the way they would a new mother, but said that once they got to know them they would (as with one dad who regularly attends). One said: *“Not many [men] come [to this group] but those who do often come with a paper. My husband wouldn't come, he says it's my job.”* When questioned, she said that it's easier just to accept that he's like that. She also said that she didn't think he would enjoy coming because he wouldn't *“let go”*. She explained that the mothers who attend get very involved jumping around etc and that her husband would find this embarrassing. These sorts of gendered differences are hard to break down and constitute a major barrier to men's involvement, as well as pointing to the need for some targeted activities (see below).

Nonetheless, it seemed most of the **female carers were fairly positive about men** coming to the groups. Having a male researcher at various sessions (with his daughter on one occasion) went down very well, both with the mothers and with the small number of fathers. One mother said: "*The more fathers that come the better. My husband has been when he has time off work, it is good if there are other men here because then they feel less intimidated.*" One mother reported that dads are particularly popular with the kids. Of her own partner she noted that when he is the only dad in a group other children want to play with him and he finds this quite hard sometimes. (This was something we observed at one Soft Play session where only one man was present.) She added that they feel "*it is because for children who don't have a father around it is a novelty to have a man around*". But she also added that their daughter gets jealous if her father plays with other children.

A second barrier is **professionals' attitudes towards men**. Some fathers we spoke to identified issues around feeling that they were not treated quite equally by professionals. A father at one group said that he was sometimes treated as if they did not really know what was best for his kids, particularly on health issues. (When asked how he feels about the gender of Sure Start workers, he told us that although he feels quite at ease in the company of women and is not put off by new situations, there is sometimes an issue with his son's behaviour. At times he feels his son is deemed as aggressive by the Sure Start workers and mothers of other children and he is uncomfortable with that, but admits that he is far more lenient with the boy than his partner is and thinks that there is pressure for him to behave as a mother would.) Another father at a different group said that he felt that, when he first came, one of the staff was always trying to give him advice; "*she was a bit over concerned*", and that perhaps this was because he was a father. Another father said that he tends not to deal with childcare or health professionals, but leaves this to "*the missus*".

Nonetheless, we did not observe any examples of this type of behaviour, and the professionals we spoke to were all very positive about men's involvement. On the whole, as well, fathers were positive about the professionals they encountered. One father we interviewed described the staff as "*very caring*" in general and one in particular as "*excellent*", another described them as "*OK*" and "*helpful*". We asked one father if he felt he was treated any differently as a father and he said "*not at all*"; he feels he is treated "*really well*" and "*it's the same really*". Another said "*I can't say I've been discriminated against!*"

One father told us that He hasn't felt the professionals treated him differently but sometimes feels "*weird*" because he is the only dad there. A third barrier, then, is the perception of the groups as quite **feminine spaces**, with an emphasis on chatting and socialising. At Messy Play, the general consensus amongst a group of mothers we spoke to was that their partners would never attend the group as it was viewed as something of a "*women's social club*" and "*a bit of a clique*." One mother at Soft Play told us "*my husband would feel out of place... He takes her out, but not to a group.*" She said that this is because there is a stigma about it being a "*mother and babies group*" (despite the fact that this isn't how it is billed). She added that some men don't like sitting down and chatting, whereas others

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who do like doing that are at work. For these women the chatting aspect of the group was very important as well as allowing their babies to mix. This perception was confirmed by some of the fathers present. This is an extract from one of our researchers' field notes:

*Another Asian father has turned up to join his partner with their child. I go and talk with them and she tells me that she used to come regularly but she has started work. She wants her husband to bring their child but 'he says it is for women, but I have told him that there were fathers here and they have just left'. I ask him if he would consider bringing his child here He tells me that he doesn't take his child to groups because he is happy staying at home and he doesn't like special places. She asks me to tell him that he should come as there are other fathers here. I just say that there were some fathers here earlier. 'If there are men here then maybe I can go'. She continues pressuring him to say that he will come. He says that he will.*

The major barrier, for men we spoke to not using the groups, was the **times at which services are offered**. Again and again, working fathers said that they could only access things at the evenings or weekends, unless they were taking time off because their partner was ill, for example.

In terms of the groups themselves, the only criticism we received from a father was that the groups weren't **structured** enough. "*Having a soft environment is excellent for toddlers. But I don't like the lack of structure. There is no ethos of stopping for the children to have a break. The staff are fine but it is all a bit ungoverned. For instance, the children are allowed to eat in the soft play area. And I asked one women not to give food to my child but she still does it. Whereas the church groups I go to do that.*" Whether this perceived lack of structure is a particularly male response is uncertain, but this point was not made by any other father. (In fact, one father specifically liked the relatively unstructured nature of Soft Play and Messy Play.)

As well as the play groups we visited, we spent time at the **Health Visitors Clinic**. There, many fathers were present, but almost always with their partners. It was noticeable that the one father (Afro Caribbean, main carer) who turned up without his partner seemed somewhat ill at ease in these surroundings. He did say that his unease stemmed largely from the fact that he was on his own and felt that there was a perceived expectation that the mother should be there when it came to matters regarding the child's health. In contrast, two Asian (non-Sure Start) fathers said that one thing they always involved themselves in was issues to do with their children's health: "*it was imperative to fully comprehend the advice the Health Visitors were giving*". With both these men (one of whom was in an arranged marriage whose wife was quite new in the country), their English was considerably better than their wives' and it seemed that this was a factor in their coming.

We also visited the **Turkish Advice and Interpreting Service**, which was used by fathers, again often with their partners. Here the issues were around fathers locked into the Turkish ethnic economy and therefore not learning English to support their children's integration and often not being particularly interested in the education system.

### 3.3 Targeted activities

North Leyton Sure Start has already ran a programme of events for fathers, using football and bowling. These were successful, but need to be followed up, both with further activities and with more Sure Start relevant (i.e. children-centred) activities. A core group of men were identified through the work, who could play a part in promoting future Sure Start dads activities.

Many of the men we interviewed were keen on some sort of activities specifically for dads. Some wanted to meet other dads, but most were focused on activities they could be involved in that would benefit their kids. Only one father explicitly said he wasn't interested in activities aimed just at fathers and not their families: "*I already have my own friends who don't see often enough now.*" Other fathers said they were not particularly keen on activities for dads, but were open-minded; for example, one said that he would be "*willing to try things and see what they were like.*" Another was quite new to the area and welcomed the opportunity to meet new people in general, rather than dads in particular. One father explicitly said he would like to do things with other fathers as a break from looking after his children – although he pointed out that his partner thought this was unfair as there were no activities just for mums without their kids.

When talking to fathers and to our Evaluation Sub-Group, a number of suggestions were made for men-friendly activities. These included:

- **Sport:** Football remained popular. Draper's Field was suggested as a venue – it has showers, facilities and AstroTurf and is close to North Leyton. Local parents also suggested that cricket activities would be popular with fathers, particularly among men of Caribbean or South Asian descent and among older fathers. The former Essex County Cricket ground is close to the North Leyton area, and Sure Start is currently in discussions about match funding some development there. Two fathers suggested badminton and tennis. Obviously, these would be activities for fathers only, which could perhaps be combined with more educational or discussion time, and possibly culminate in tournaments to which whole families could be invited as spectators.
- **Before and after school starts:** A local mother told us that a number of non-working fathers take their children to the local primary schools in the morning. Working with the primary schools, it would be possible to develop activities for these men, e.g. breakfast events or social events after they've dropped children off. DIY Dads in Lewisham successfully organised one-off dads' breakfasts at primary schools, which were marketed in terms of fathers supporting their children's education; these were well-attended, particularly by African fathers.
- **Quiz night:** Some parents suggested that quiz nights would be popular. One suggestion was for these to be in a pub – the Hare and the Hounds near B&Q and the Three Blackbirds on Leyton High Road were both mentioned as relatively family-friendly. However, quiz nights need not be

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in a pub, but could be in other venues that were more accessible to non-drinking people (e.g. Muslims). Quiz nights could be targeted either at men alone or at whole families.

- ❑ **Computer training:** Both local fathers and Sure Start workers suggested that computer training would be popular with local dads. This would appeal to those who were looking to build their skills for the job market (whether unemployed or in low pay work) and could be sold in terms of getting prepared to help their children with homework. The computer training we organised did not get any takers, but this may have been for other reasons.
- ❑ **A pool tournament, darts, dominos:** As with cricket, dominos might reach out to a wider range of cultural backgrounds than darts or pool.
- ❑ **MCing or Djing workshops:** This was suggested as appealing to younger dads.
- ❑ **Cultural events and trips** to the theatre and sightseeing in Central London e.g. the London Eye. The father who suggested this said he felt that this kind of activity would attract more people to come and therefore they would then know about Sure Start: *“if you have an enjoyable experience and you have been made to feel welcome you tell other people about it.”* One father suggested visits to children’s theatre. Another idea is the relatively nearby Museum of Childhood.
- ❑ **Walks and trips to the seaside or countryside:** Trips and walks were popular. One father said these would *“provide a much needed change of environment for both the parents and kids.”* We would suggest that Epping Forest is North Leyton’s doorstep and places such as Buckhurst Hill, Theydon Bois and Epping are within easy traveling distance. Epping has a busy market place (and a big concentration of charity shops on its High Street!). There is also the nature reserve at Swaines Green in close proximity to the High Street and the Forest is easily accessible too from the town.

Other suggestions from our research team included:

- ❑ **Sure Start barbeques**, aimed at the whole family but allowing the men to take responsibility for some of the food, thus making them feel valued and important.
- ❑ **“DIY SOS” days at local childcare facilities** that need refurbishment, to involve fathers in childcare spaces, showing that their skills as men are valued in a childcare context.

### 3.4 Targeted services

The NESS major evaluation of Sure Start programmes’ engagement with fathers has identified Sure Start opening hours and fathers’ employment hours as a barrier to men’s involvement, and this is supported by our findings, both from the anecdotal evidence of Sure Start workers and from what the working fathers we

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spoke to said. Currently, almost all of Sure Start North Leyton's services and activities are during the school day, and therefore inaccessible to most working fathers, as well as working mothers. We recommend that **selected services outside school hours** are piloted. These might include health services (e.g. a Thursday evening Health Visitors' Clinic<sup>5</sup>) as well as play activities (e.g. a weekend swimming session, a Saturday Music Makers or Soft Play session). These could be piloted over a period of time and take-up by fathers and working parents assessed.<sup>6</sup>

Services *just* for dads – e.g. **dads groups** – are much harder to get off the ground, and evidence from across the country suggests that these work only if (a) there is some sense of demand for these coming from fathers and (b) a dedicated worker has the time to really nurture such groups. None of the fathers we spoke to expressed a particular interest in dads' groups. As with the Male Inclusion Worker discussed above, it may be that this is something that would be more relevant to dads of older children, and this might therefore be a project to be delivered in partnership with primary schools. Primary schools and libraries also might support a **dads and children reading project**.<sup>7</sup>

A less resource-intensive suggestion is **advice sessions**: drop-in sessions providing advice to fathers on issues like paternity leave, benefits, family tax credits and fathers' legal rights, perhaps alongside other issues that are not specific to fathers. These could be targeted in particular at separated and unmarried fathers.

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<sup>5</sup> St James Sure Start has an evening HV clinic which attracts more fathers.

<sup>6</sup> If the parents accessing these services after a trial period were already accessing Sure Start services during the week, then the extra services would not be cost-effective.

<sup>7</sup> A list of dad-positive children's books has also been supplied to North Leyton Sure Start by CUCR.

#### 4. Summary of Recommendations

In conclusion, we recommend:

- a. **Targeted activities** for particular groups of fathers within the area and for fathers in general.
  - We suggest that the Evaluation Sub-Group might form the basis for a **working group** on this topic.
  - **Possible activities** could include quiz nights, walks, football activities, cricket activities, pool or darts tournaments and barbeques. (These are listed above in section 2.3.)
  - The late spring and **summer** would be the best time to initiate this programme, as many of the activities would be outdoors. A good time to officially launch the programme might be Father's Day in June.
  - We recommend a **mix of men-only, father-and-child and whole-family events**. It was felt at the Evaluation Sub-Group that some fathers of younger children are intimidated about taking out their children, and they might prefer whole family events. On the other hand, it is important to create spaces and times for men to be together to support each other's needs.
  - Going through **mothers** would be key to promoting these activities.
  - One suggestion would be **parent-only events**, organised by parents. This would require some training in event organising, which would help out of work parents become more employable.
  - It is important that these activities build in a **follow-up programme**, with fun activities being followed up by more directly Sure Start-relevant work, such as father-and-child reading programmes or health promotion work.
- b. **Targeted services** for particular groups of fathers within the area and for fathers in general.
  - Key services would include advice sessions, focusing on separated fathers' legal positions, working family tax credits and paternity leave.
- c. **Piloting extensions of existing activities/services outside the school day**. We recommend piloting the extension of a small number of existing services and activities in the evenings and weekends, e.g. a Thursday evening health visitor clinic or a Saturday Music Makers session. These could be fortnightly or weekly.
  - After a suitable period, take-up could be assessed to determine whether it would be cost effective to make these integral parts of the Sure Start programme.
- d. **Promoting father friendly culture within the programme and its partners**. We believe that North Leyton Sure Start is a relatively father-friendly programme, but that it is important to formalise a father-friendly policy.

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- **Workshops** for staff and service providers, or even training from experienced bodies like DIY Dads or Fathers Direct, are suggested.
  - An excellent suggestion from the evaluation forum was for local dads to be trained by such bodies to act as **trainers** to train local professionals.
- e. **Initiating a borough-wide Male Inclusion Strategy.** North Leyton Sure Start could build on the work it has already done to take the lead in initiating a borough-wide Male Inclusion Strategy.
- This would work best in **partnership** with Primary Schools as well as the Sure Starts, and target not just the fathers of under-5s but a larger age range (e.g. up to the end of Primary School).
  - The **strategy** might include breakfast clubs for fathers at primary schools, services targeting non-resident fathers, courses in fathering, and introducing fathering awareness education at secondary schools and youth clubs.
  - Such work might attract match funding from the **Neighbourhood Renewal** Fund.
  - Other partners might include **faith groups**, such as the Mosque.