



**What factors contribute to and what factors inhibit the sustained involvement of families in a Sure Start local programme in North Huyton?**

**A comparative study of regular attenders and non-attenders of Sure Start services in North Huyton**

**Sure Start in North Huyton**

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## **AUTHORISATION**

**This report was approved by the Sure Start in North Huyton Management Board on 7<sup>th</sup> December 2004.**

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## **Executive Summary**

### **Aims of the study**

Sure Start in North Huyton set out to investigate the reasons for attendance and non-attendance at Sure Start services by registered families and to find out what factors would support more families to attend, with a view to increasing uptake and attendance rates.

The specific objectives of the study are to:

- Describe the reasons for attendance and non-attendance
- Identify unmet need
- Describe the barriers to participation and sustained involvement in the programme, in more detail.
- Identify factors that support attendance
- Identify factors that inhibit attendance
- Find out whether non-attenders are dissatisfied with Sure Start.

### **Methodology**

The study sought to gain the views and opinions of regular attenders (classified as service users) and irregular or non attenders (classified as non service users). A qualitative approach was taken using two research tools: face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions. Twenty in-depth interviews were undertaken with parents and carers classified as service users and 32 with those identified as non-service users.

### **Findings**

Both service users and non service users appear aware of the benefits of Sure Start for families and appear largely satisfied with Sure Start staff and services. Some gaps in service provision were identified, principally childcare to support parental activity such as training and employment, variety and choice of service, services for fathers and activities at the weekends. In terms of services for parents, many wanted more individual support such as emotional support and counselling and parenting support and advice. Few parents were using alternative services either locally or outside the North Huyton area.

The main barriers to access identified by parents were the failure to co-ordinate services with those provided for older children, which caused particular difficulties during school holidays, the shortage of childcare, lack of confidence and motivation, and shyness. The absence of organised transport to services was also considered to be a barrier at times.

Parents in both groups had difficulty in expressing their wants, needs and ambition for themselves, although they had clearer ideas for their children.

In terms of engaging more families, participants proposed the programme place more emphasis on verbal communication, have a more visible presence in the community and organise more promotional events, such as family days, open days and days out. Parents proposed utilising the skills of local people to approach families at home. Increased personal contact between the programme and eligible families was felt to be key to helping parents overcome barriers to attendance and the idea of structuring home visits, outreach work and 'door-knocking' by staff, volunteers and parents, was felt to be important. Non users in particular felt they needed increased support to attend, such as being accompanied to services by a staff member.

## **Conclusions**

The study experienced problems obtaining a representative sample using this methodology, which is an area for further research. Inaccuracies in the programme's database of service users were also highlighted, such as invalid addresses and unoccupied properties. Sure Start will need to invest time and resources into reviewing the information held on the database at regular intervals to address this.

Sure Start in North Huyton's difficulty in engaging with all families with children under 4 in the catchment area, is not unique. In response to the study findings, the programme could consider employing parents, taking on volunteers, or developing a 'buddy scheme', to engage parents in the community and accompany them to Sure Start services. The programme could also consider whether to increase its outreach and home visiting activity, as a prerequisite for centre-based work.

Although participants seemed to be aware of the benefits of the programme, non users did not see engagement as essential. The programme could perhaps place more emphasis on promoting the benefits of its services for children and families for child development.

The lack of males participating in the study and in the programme is a continuing cause for concern, although it reflects the national picture. This is an essential issue for the programme and the researcher to address.

Joined-up, accessible, universal and non-stigmatising services are obviously a key priority for parents, but it is hoped that this will be achieved through the forthcoming Children's Centre provision in Knowsley. Transport linking Children's Centres to secondary schools and residential areas, may also be a consideration.

The observations of the interviewer, suggest that the programme could explore the level of support it provides for parents experiencing mental ill-health and suffering from domestic violence. This could also be the subject of further research. Equally, the programme needs to explore how to engage 'hard to reach' families for research purposes, as this is vital to inform practice and service delivery. This will also be important to inform the evaluation of Children's Centres.

## Introduction

Sure Start in North Huyton had a registration rate of over 90% of eligible families over the financial year 2003 to 2004, ending the year with 99% registration. Satisfaction levels among parents and carers<sup>1</sup> were also high with 71% reporting satisfaction with family support services in the area, including Sure Start services, according to a survey undertaken in October 2003 (Anderson 2003). However, there were also indications that the programme may be struggling to sustain local parents' interest and to continue to engage them in activities. Average monthly activity levels over the 6 month period from October 2003 to March 2004, stood at 150 children seen out of a total of 690 children aged 0 to 3 years (according to Primary Care Trust records in July 2003). That is, 22% of eligible children. The national target for attendances is 25% - 33% of children seen each month. It is not known what proportion of monthly attendances is accounted for by the same children each month and therefore what the annual programme reach is.

The programme felt that it was possible that Sure Start was engaging only a minority of the eligible population in its activities and that further research was needed to explore whether there was unmet need in the community and why many families were not accessing services.

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<sup>1</sup> This study is interested in the views of parents or full-time carers of children aged 0 to 4 years. The two terms will therefore be used interchangeably and synonymously throughout the study.

## Background

### Aims and principles of the national Sure Start programme

The national Sure Start programme forms part of the Government's initiative to tackle child and family poverty and social exclusion. Sure Start's origins lie in the cross-departmental Review of Services for Young Children – part of the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) published in the white paper 'Modernising Public Services for Britain' (1998). Via local programmes, which were set up in the most deprived areas of the country, the Government aimed:

'to work with parents and children to promote the physical, intellectual and social development of pre-school children, particularly those who are disadvantaged, to ensure they are ready to flourish when they get to school' (Sure Start Public Service Agreement 1999).

The programme advocated closer co-ordination of education, health and day care services.

In 2002, the Government's agenda for Sure Start widened to encompass its aspirations for childcare and early years services, in response to an Inter-departmental Review of Childcare (2001). *Delivering for Children and Families* (Prime Minister's Strategy Unit 2002) looked at the progress of the National Childcare Strategy and Sure Start and outlined its plan to integrate responsibility for childcare, early years education and Sure Start within a new interdepartmental unit. In the 2002 Spending Review, the government announced additional funding to create new childcare places, establish multi-disciplinary children's centres and co-ordinate services for childcare and the early years.

One of the criticisms of the Government's vision was that it was mainly driven by labour market considerations (Moss 2002), which could be inferred from a statement by the Minister for Sure Start, Early Years and Childcare:

'The childcare review showed that integrated services best serve our children and their families and that childcare helps reduce child poverty by helping families, and in particular lone parents, back into work. That's why we are determined to continue the transformation of childcare, early years and Sure Start services'.

(Strategy Unit press release, 6 November 2002)

Sure Start local programmes continue to provide a targeted service in neighbourhoods where a high proportion of children live in poverty, working with parents and parents-to-be to improve their children's life chances through better access to family support, advice on nurturing, health services and early learning. Some key principles of local programmes are to develop existing services in the area, involve all carers and build on their strengths, avoid stigma by providing a service for all and to promote the participation of all

local families at every stage. Sure Start encourages a broad take up of services and programmes are intended to be available, accessible and non-stigmatising (Smith 1999). It is hoped that local programmes will bring the expertise of working with vulnerable populations to the Integrated Children's Services agenda (Eisenstadt 2004).

Sure Start in North Huyton, originally branded as Sure Start Fincham, Hillside and Woolfall Heath, is a 'trailblazer programme' that received government approval in January 2000. The programme offers the core services of outreach and home visiting; support to families and parents; access to good quality play, learning and childcare; primary and community health care and advice and support for families with special needs.

### **Previous research**

A parental satisfaction survey of 256 parents in the Sure Start in North Huyton catchment area (Anderson 2003) highlighted a number of contradictions between service take up, parental satisfaction levels and knowledge of services. The research questions raised provided the basis for this study.

The survey found that satisfaction levels with family support services<sup>2</sup>, including Sure Start services, were high among users and non users, familiarity with Sure Start and registration rates were also high and that the majority of parents felt supported in their role as parents. On the other hand, take up of family support services was relatively low and a substantial minority of parents reported that they do not receive information on support services. The study recommended that the programme concentrate on increasing the uptake of family support services and raising attendance levels. It also recommended that the programme take into account the barriers to accessing services identified by parents and take action to address these.

Given that Sure Start aims to provide services that are accessible to all and to offer pathways out of poverty, it is not enough to be reaching just over one fifth of the eligible population. The two principal recommendations for further research that resulted from the survey, were therefore to seek to understand why many families are not taking up services and to understand more about the families who are, including their patterns of attendance. The programme was advised to look at the characteristics of people who are not accessing support services, to find out for example whether they are particularly vulnerable, or in need of services.

The study also raised questions about parental expectations and perceived needs, as 78% of participants said they felt supported as parents. The programme wanted to explore the reason for the apparent discrepancy between the latter and the large number of parents not accessing services. It

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<sup>2</sup> Family support services have been interpreted in their broadest sense, incorporating all services for children and their families, including play and learning opportunities and parenting information and support.

was suggested that a comparison could be made with research findings from other Sure Start programmes and development initiatives.

Lastly, further research was proposed to look at fathers' involvement with children's services, including Sure Start, and their uptake of services.

In response to the questions generated by the survey, a qualitative study of contributors and inhibitors to attendance and a reach study were proposed. The former was intended to add depth to the information gained in the user satisfaction survey and the latter to provide the statistical background to accompany this. Both studies narrowed their focus from *all* family support services provided in the area, to those provided by Sure Start on this occasion, but it is hoped that the findings will be of some relevance for other service providers. The findings of the reach study are contained in a separate report. Research into fathers' involvement in children's services will be the subject of a future study.

## Aims of the study

The programme set out to investigate the reasons for attendance and non-attendance at Sure Start services and find out what factors would support more families to attend, with a view to increasing uptake and attendance rates. The findings will be compared with an analysis of the statistical information gathered by the programme, including family attendance patterns across services, drop off rates and the number of children and families who are active participants in the programme.

The specific objectives of the study are to:

- Describe the reasons for attendance and non-attendance
- Identify unmet need
- Describe the barriers to participation and sustained involvement in the programme, in more detail.
- Identify factors that support attendance
- Identify factors that inhibit attendance
- Find out whether non-attenders are dissatisfied with Sure Start.

The researcher wanted to explore a number of themes. As most parents surveyed in 2003 had said that they felt supported as parents, the first centred on parental expectations of family support services. The researcher was interested in whether carers were accessing alternative services. The study also set out to explore parents' perceived needs, unmet need and parental aspirations for themselves and for their children. It was possible that parents did not feel a need for support services, perhaps because they felt they had sufficient social networks and support, or because they did not see the value of social or educational programmes.

The flexibility and responsiveness of Sure Start services was a further area of enquiry. The study explores whether support is adapted to the changing needs of children (i.e. age-stage appropriate) and the needs of different groups, for example parents, children, teenage or young parents and fathers. As the survey showed few parents accessing services antenatally apart from more traditional health services, the study wanted to find out what services parents wanted and needed antenatally. Similarly the survey showed that most parents felt they did not get parenting advice and support, therefore the researcher wanted to explore whether parents wanted advice and support on parenting and, if so, what advice and support they wanted.

It is evident that the way in which services are delivered is key to their success. The study was therefore interested in whether carers felt that Sure Start services were of high quality and wanted to explore which models of service delivery carers preferred, whether it was outreach, centre-based, detached, group-work or individual work. Regarding parenting support in particular, it is said to be important for parents to retain (or regain) control of their situation, thereby resolving their own difficulties and that services should

support rather than threaten their autonomy. Linked to this was the question of whether parents felt they were treated as experts on their own child, in other words whether their knowledge of their child was valued. The researcher sought to find out *how* parents felt parenting advice and support should be delivered, for example formally or informally. The relationship with Sure Start staff (between parent and service provider) was also felt to be essential and that it should be one of mutual respect. Parents' perception of staff was therefore of interest. Finally, the researcher wanted to find out whether Sure Start services (or any particular activities) carried a stigma.

A further theme was factors that inhibited access to Sure Start services. The most important barriers to access identified in the parental satisfaction survey were: difficulty in obtaining childcare, followed by lack of confidence, activities being held at an unsuitable time, being in paid employment and lack of time and transport. In addition to these are factors that are known to impair a parent's ability to parent effectively, namely: drug or alcohol dependency, mental illness (such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem), domestic violence or parental or child ill-health (Cleaver 1999). These could also act as barriers to attending services. There are many other potential barriers to access relating to parents' lives, ranging from stress, isolation, fear of crime and lack of social confidence, to a negative perception of professionals, to name but a few. Other barriers could be service-related, such as an overload of services or service information, or information that is not accessible. Services may be held at the wrong time or not be co-ordinated.

The last theme for exploration was contributing or motivating factors for attendance. These might include the provision of childcare, transport, joined-up provision and support to attend services.

## Methodology

The study sought to gain the views and opinions of parents and therefore a qualitative approach was taken using two research tools: face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions. The target group was adults living within the Sure Start area in North Huyton, who had full-time caring responsibilities for children aged 0 to 4 years. The research was led by the research officer for Sure Start in North Huyton. The fieldwork was commissioned from a research consultancy, Community Concepts Ltd. and overseen by the research officer.

### Face-to-face interviews

Interviews were in-depth and semi-structured. The intention was to undertake 60 interviews; 40 with non users of Sure Start services and 20 with service users. Candidates were selected from the programme's database of registered families, using a systematic stratified random sample with a sampling interval of five.

The sample was drawn from parents or carers who had registered with the programme between 1<sup>st</sup> April 2002 and 31<sup>st</sup> March 2004. The reason for choosing this time period was to exclude families who had been registered for less than 3 months, as it was not possible to establish an attendance pattern within such a short period. On the other hand, the researchers did not want to include families who had registered prior to April 2002, as the recall period would have been too great.

The selected list was then split into 2 groups. The first were families who had used the service 5 or more times within the identified period<sup>3</sup>. These were categorised as 'service users'. The second were families who had used the service 4 times or less. For ease of reference, these will be referred to as 'non service users'. One hundred and forty-eight individuals qualified as *service users* and 141 as *non service users*. The service user category was subdivided into 'low frequency users' (families who had used services between 5 and 9 times), of whom there were 67 and 'medium to high frequency users' (who had used services more than 10 times), of whom 81 qualified. The range for the latter category was from 10 to 221 attendances.

The rationale for selecting these cut-off points for service usage was that the highest concentration of records was around the 1 to 3 attendance count, which demarcated the non service users. The service user split was likewise calculated on the basis that there was a high frequency around 5 to 9 attendances, then a thinning out from 10 to 221. The researchers intended to select approximately 10 low frequency users and 10 medium to high frequency users, to ensure breadth of opinion.

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<sup>3</sup> The first service use for most families is at the registration visit and this is included in the attendance count. Therefore there is no record of 0 attendance.

All registered families were informed of the research in May by means of a newsletter and advised that they may be approached for permission to take part. Interviews were conducted by a qualified interviewer with experience in social research and took place between 20<sup>th</sup> June and 12<sup>th</sup> July. Selected candidates were accessed by home visits and the interviews operated on the principle of informed consent. In the majority of cases the interviewer was invited into the home of the interviewee, otherwise interviews took place on the doorstep.

The average interview duration with service users was 30 minutes, whilst interviews with non service users tended to be shorter. The duration was governed by the level of response from the interviewee, with some sessions lasting up to 90 minutes. Interview times were varied and included evenings and weekends in an attempt to ensure that eligible families had an equal opportunity to participate. In the majority of cases, interviews were recorded with a Dictaphone, with the participant's consent, otherwise the researcher took notes.

The consultancy adopted a 'three knock policy', in an attempt to secure an interview. (That is, each household was visited on up to 3 separate occasions.) This practice sought to reduce participant bias. Details of fieldwork activity were recorded in a fieldwork log to allow for examination of the refusal rate and invalid addresses. Each participant received a £10 supermarket voucher in recognition of their time.

The interviewer followed a semi-structured interview format (see appendices 1 and 2). The themes for service users and non service users were similar, although the latter gave more emphasis to possible barriers to participation. At the end of the interview, carers were asked if they would like to participate in a group discussion to talk about local services and support for families with young children in more detail. The names of consenting parents were noted for follow-up purposes.

The interview format was piloted on 16th June with 4 consenting parents and carers, who are part of an established user group, to check its validity.

### **Focus Group discussions**

Two focus group sessions were organised initially: one for service users on 14<sup>th</sup> July and one for non service users on 16<sup>th</sup> July. Both took place in local community centres.

Sixteen service users and 14 non service users stated at interview that they would be prepared to participate. Interested parents were contacted either by telephone, letter and/or home visit post-interview, to remind them of the details of the focus group they had agreed to attend and to identify any support needs. Support included the offer of childcare on site, transport and the assistance of a support worker.

Topic guides followed a similar format for both groups. Both sessions lasted for approximately 80 minutes, were managed by a facilitator and observed by the Sure Start in North Huyton research officer. Both sessions were recorded using a Dictaphone, after permission had been sought from participants.

A second focus group with non users was subsequently arranged for 13<sup>th</sup> September, as the commissioning officer had concerns about the quality of the first focus group discussion.

## Findings

The findings are divided into 2 sections: service user views and non service user views.

### SERVICE USER VIEWS

#### In-depth interviews

Twenty interviews were undertaken with service users and the following section of this report provides an overview of the key findings generated from the consultation. The sample comprised 10 low and 10 medium-to-high frequency users. Among the medium to high candidates there were 24 'refusals' comprising 2 not residing at the address, 1 refusal and 21 eliciting no response. As for the low frequency candidates, 19 were unsuccessful, comprising 2 not residing at the address, 1 family no longer eligible for services, 1 refusal and 15 eliciting no response. The gender profile was 1 father interviewed alone, 1 interview with the father present and 2 interviews took place with the partner present (gender not specified).

#### Knowledge of Sure Start

As expected, all participants were aware of Sure Start. They were also able to identify a range of services which the local programme provides. The table below sets out the most frequent answers:

Activity	Number of responses
Days Out	8
Playgroups	7
Fun bus	6
Safety advice & equipment	6
Activities for kids	3
Parent & toddler groups	3
Fetes/Christmas fetes	3
Fathers groups/activities	2
Courses	2

The best known service was the provision of days out, followed by playgroups<sup>4</sup>, the Fun Bus and safety advice and equipment.

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<sup>4</sup> Sure Start in North Huyton does not run playgroups as such. However, parents were using their own terminology and the programme does offer a number of play and learning activities. As for the parent and toddler groups, a number are *supported* rather than run by Sure Start, although a fathers and toddler group ran for a period and has now become a Sure Start parent and toddler group. Two parents also named after-school clubs, which are for an older age group and are run by other agencies. They have therefore not been included in this table.

There were some misconceptions about the services that Sure Start provides specifically for parents and carers. A number of parents thought that only single parents were eligible for support. Support for fathers did not feature highly and afforded one mention.

#### *Methods of communication*

In terms of publicity and information, a significant number of participants identified newsletters and leaflets as the only method by which they had been made aware of the Sure Start programme. Parents emphasised the importance of marketing to raise awareness of Sure Start activities. In addition, the majority highlighted the importance of transmitting information by word of mouth, stating that friends, family and professionals (such as health visitors) played a significant role in raising programme awareness and promoting services. A number stated that without having had personal contact with Sure Start staff, they would not have made the first step to becoming involved with the programme. Most parents received information through the post, with only one participant indicating that they had received a home visit from a staff member.

#### *Frequency and nature of communication*

Parents received general information about the Sure Start programme on a fortnightly or monthly basis. There appeared to be an inconsistency over the frequency and nature of information received by participants. Some indicated that they received information about specific services and were sent invitations to special days, including pampering sessions and family outings. Others stated that they received cards for their children's birthdays and 'goody' bags from time to time. The service received did not appear to be uniform.

As for the design, content and overall appearance of Sure Start literature, users agreed that it was colourful and attractive and that the information contained within the leaflets and newsletters was clear, informative and easy to understand. The use of bright colours, diagrams, maps and pictures to supplement the text, added clarity and was felt to stimulate interest. One parent commented:

'The information is brilliant. They let you know everything that is going on and all the information you need is there.'

Only one participant felt that the information provided in Sure Start literature was insufficient.

#### *Suggestions for improvement*

The low level of personal contact with Sure Start staff was an issue for a number of participants. Parents indicated several times that they would like more home visits to be made, as they felt that this would assist parents such as themselves to overcome potential barriers to accessing services.

'Home visits would be good to chat and see if the person is okay [...]. Also, staff assisting [with attendance] for the first or [first] couple of times would be good'.

Perceived barriers included lack of confidence and misconceptions about the services that Sure Start provides.

Initially most participants expressed the view that Sure Start advertised sufficiently. However on further exploration, over half suggested using home visits and 'door knocking' to raise greater awareness of services. Other suggestions included advertising at bus stops, on the radio and in the local paper and handing out leaflets outside schools. More community family fun days were proposed to disseminate information and raise the profile of the programme and the opportunities it offers to local families.

### **Use of other services**

The researchers sought to explore whether families may be accessing services provided by other agencies, which might affect their participation in Sure Start. Nearly 3 in 4 participants stated that they were not aware of any other organisation locally that provided services targeted at families and young children. However on further examination, participants agreed that the Gate community centre and the River Alt Resource Centre were venues at which services could be accessed. Participants then qualified that they made use of these because the activities were targeted at older children, comprising activities such as discos and play-schemes.

Parents then identified Page Moss family centre, Twig Lane clinic and Longview and Beechwood schools<sup>5</sup> as other key facilities providing services within the community.

### **Accessing Sure Start services**

The majority of service users attended Sure Start activities alone with their children. Only one participant attended with a partner, 5 attended with other family members and 2 attended with friends.

Nearly all participants agreed that the services offered were easy to attend because they were local and within walking distance for most, although a number stated that transport to and from activities was a barrier to involvement on occasions. Suggestions to support the involvement of residents who cannot access services on foot, included a shared car scheme and a shuttle bus service. It was felt that these would support greater and more frequent service use.

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<sup>5</sup>St Chad's in Kirkby and St Dominic's were also mentioned. But it was unclear whether participants were referring to the church or school in each case.

Regarding the scheduling of programme activities, a number of parents and carers who had older children at school felt that the timing of Sure Start activities fitted in well with school drop off and collection times. This feature of the Sure Start programme allowed carers to plan and schedule their days. On the negative side, a number had problems taking full advantage of Sure Start's services during school holidays, as the programme does not provide activities for older children alongside those targeted at the Sure Start age group.

When questioned about which activities and approaches would support their greater involvement in the programme, the most common response again centred on increased personal contact via home visits to local families. It was felt that by building up a relationship with staff and gaining a greater understanding of the programme before attending activities, carers would be able to address and overcome obstacles such as lack of confidence, lack of motivation, poor health and fear of attending a service alone. One person stated she:

‘would like more access to the crèche to get time out for [herself] and to try and gain some social skills, jobs and training.’

### **Barriers to access**

Users identified a number of issues which prevented them from taking full advantage of the services available. The two issues most frequently raised were lack of activities for older children and the lack of available childcare or crèche facilities. These appeared to be a particular problem for those wishing to access training or education courses.

When asked to think more broadly to consider what may stop parents in general from accessing Sure Start services, participants identified 2 main barriers to involvement: a lack of awareness and lack of understanding of services. To address this, a number suggested adopting a more consistent marketing strategy to ensure that everyone received the same information at the same time. The ideas for improving local awareness and increasing take up rates included improving communication, as outlined previously, and utilising the Sure Start shop more effectively.

Some concern was expressed about ‘favouritism’ towards some users and ‘cliques’. Parents felt this led to some users feeling excluded or marginalised from certain services or activities, like day trips.

Physical access to services was highlighted as a potential problem for some families as certain parts of the catchment area are some distance from Sure Start venues and in many cases families did not have access to reliable transport. Again, a shuttle service or a car pool were proposed as solutions to this problem.

Participants also cited lack of confidence and motivation as two important factors that prevent families, in particular lone parents, from accessing Sure Start services. Again, there was a view that more home visits, especially for young first time mothers, and more personal contact would help to overcome these barriers.

Another perceived barrier was having children of differing ages. Parents felt that whilst Sure Start was able to cater for their younger children, it did not offer activities for older children. This was particularly noticeable during school holidays and resulted in families seeking out activities and services which offered something for all the family.

Other suggested barriers included a parent being in paid employment, lack of time, poverty and lack of interest in the Sure Start scheme.

In terms of any other issues which needed to be addressed to encourage more local families to participate, parents identified that the programme should offer more activities at the weekend, be more active in the community and help to foster community spirit. Other suggestions centred around advertising. Participants suggested giving out more information about what is going on, using bigger posters and children's characters between 8.30 and 8.45 a.m. to catch families' attention and advertising the crèche for those in paid employment.

Participants also had ideas to facilitate access, such as including everyone and not leaving anyone out, asking parents what they want and asking young mothers if they are aware of the services. Liaising with schools, having more open days and employing more staff to increase activities were also proposed.

Lastly, participants put forward ideas for activities, including increasing family days out, offering days out just for adults and activities for adults, craft activities for children and activities for fathers.

### **Support & service satisfaction**

In general terms, the majority of participants were very positive about the support both they and their children received from Sure Start. There was a strong feeling that Sure Start provided valuable advice and respite for the family. One parent expressed that her family has benefited because:

'They are mixing with other children and learn to interact and parents are meeting other mothers'.

More specifically, participants stated that Sure Start supported them in a number of ways, including: the provision of safety equipment, feeding cups and bowls, advice on health issues such as smoking cessation, counselling and emotional support. However a number felt that they would benefit from

more home visits and greater opportunities for accessing individual counselling and support.<sup>6</sup>

Participants stated that they felt their children had benefited from being involved in the Sure Start programme and that improvements in their children's learning and development, including their social skills and ability to interact and share with other children, had been apparent. One parent said that Sure Start has helped her son, who never used to speak to anyone apart from his mother. He has begun to talk and play football. The same parent explained that Sure Start had helped her son lose weight through a healthy diet and exercise, after he was getting bullied at school for his size.

As for their personal gain as parents, participants felt that they had also benefited from using Sure Start's services. One parent felt that the support and services from Sure Start staff facilitated 'a learning curve for parents'. Another commented:

'You can ask them [the staff] about anything'.

Parents indicated that without Sure Start, they would not have been able to access the otherwise expensive child safety equipment for example. One participant explained that she was very grateful for the support she received, as she feels that without Sure Start she would have had to give up her home and move back in with her mother, as she was unable to afford the cost of childcare while she was in work. In addition, being able to talk to other parents, Sure Start staff and 'counsellors' (as participants termed them), was very important. Having time away from their children and the family was also highlighted by a number of parents and carers as a valuable support.

Overall there was a high degree of user satisfaction with Sure Start services, with 4 in 5 stating that they were very happy with the programme. Particularly important services offered by Sure Start were felt to be the Fun Bus and the fruit and vegetable van (or Food Co-operative). Trips and days out were also highlighted by participants as a favoured activity run by Sure Start. In terms of their satisfaction with staff's approach to delivering services, participants felt that Sure Start staff were generally friendly, enthusiastic and supportive. One parent commented:

'It is good that they [Sure Start] help young families. The environment is good. You are made to feel welcome as soon as you walk in. It is good for the kids and good for you.'

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<sup>6</sup> The programme does not offer counselling as such, although some staff are trained in counselling and integrate this into their work. The post natal depression and Webster Stratton groups may be regarded as counselling sessions, by parents.

She went on to say:

‘Once you go there, you are one of the family. You don’t feel as if you are going to a doctor. It is like talking to a friend. They give confidence and do not judge.’

The high level of service satisfaction among participants was confirmed when they were asked to rank the service out of 10 (1 being very poor and 10 being excellent). An average score of 8.4 was recorded, however 6 participants rated Sure Start with 9 or more (4 rating the service 10 out of 10).

### **Range of services**

Initially the majority of users were satisfied with the range of services on offer and did not perceive any gaps in provision. However when prompted, users agreed with a number of suggestions for improvement. These included: activities for older children, activities at the weekend, more home visits, more activities for fathers and more crèche facilities. Courses (including dress making, cookery classes and driving lessons), the provision of hot food and transport were also proposed and lastly, the suggestion that Sure Start should be more active in the community in general – offering more activities for the family, fetes and fun days and tea & coffee mornings, amongst others.

### **Focus Group**

The focus groups sought to explore the issues raised in the interviews in more depth, around 3 key themes: parental aspirations for their child, support to parents in their role and personal development. An underlying theme was the barriers to achieving any of the above.

Only 4 parents attended<sup>7</sup> this session, out of a possible 16 who were willing and available to attend. The limited number restricted the scope of the discussion, however the researchers decided to proceed and some useful information was obtained. The following key issues emerged.

### **Parental aspirations**

Early questioning sought to gain an insight into participant’s daily lives and how they and their family spent their time. It emerged that the majority of participants’ time was centred around their immediate neighbourhood and the Huyton area. Parents described shopping in the town centre, going to McDonalds and staying at home with the family, to play in the house and the

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<sup>7</sup> One participant, whilst eligible, had not taken part in the in-depth interviewing, but was accompanying a friend.

garden. The fact that their activity was mostly local appears to have been due to a number of factors, including: health reasons, financial constraints and a lack of confidence, awareness of the opportunities available and ambition. One participant described a typical week as follows:

'Monday, I get up, get the baby ready, go to the Post Office to get my money and go and spend my money, buy toys and treat the baby. He likes Mondays. We do go out the rest of the week, but we don't have the money.'

With children in the household, routine emerged as an important feature of daily life. Participants described getting the children up in the morning, organising breakfast, sending them off to school (if they had children of school age) and going to the crèche and other Sure Start activities. School holidays did not appear to differ greatly from term time, as activities and routines did not seem to change. Trips out appeared to be the only thing that differentiated the two.

The facilitator sought to explore parents' aspirations for themselves and their children. Participants were asked to dream a little and construct an ideal day. Parents seemed to find it difficult to formulate how they would ideally like to spend their time. One participant, however, wished that she could do more with her child 'to give him a better start in life' - something she had not had herself. This parent clearly strove to change things for her family. She set time aside each day to play with her child, carrying out painting, cooking, counting etc. She had participated in a 'Positive Parenting course', which is designed to help parents find positive ways of managing their child's behaviour, and was willing to discuss parenting issues with other (sometimes more experienced) parents, in an attempt to become a better parent in her own eyes.

The rest of the group agreed that they all wanted a better start for their children. One parent wanted to take more advantage of local childcare services and obtain a crèche place for her child, however she was frustrated by the lack of opportunities for her child and felt that her son was missing out by not having a childcare place. Another participant felt that she needed to be more involved in her children's lives both in and outside school and encourage them to make friends with children in the neighbourhood and 'play out' more often.

All recognised that they were instrumental in shaping their children's lives and were aware that in order to be successful as parents, they needed to invest significant resources and commitment in their children's upbringing. The group felt that spending time with their children and offering them love, were the two most important ingredients that would give their children the best chances in life.

#### *Parental time*

The discussion had centred around parent's aspirations for their children up to this point. The facilitator then sought to investigate what participants felt were

important for themselves as parents. The responses encompassed reading, going to bingo, visiting the shops, cleaning, mixing with other people and doing jigsaws and puzzles. A number of factors appeared to limit parental activity, namely feeling isolated, health issues, lack of confidence, lack of awareness of opportunities, insufficient money and absence of a network of friends.

The researchers explored the issue of personal development with parents. Some had attended training courses, including cookery, Positive Parenting and first aid. Some of the reasons given for participating in these courses were to help build confidence, meet people and make new friends, and learn new skills. As one parent explained, she attended a course:

‘to give [her] some confidence. Help [her] get out a bit more’.

Participants did not feel that training with a view to (re-)entering the employment market, or to improve career prospects, was a priority for them at present. They gave a number of reasons for this, including health problems and difficulty in accessing childcare. One parent explained:

‘I might go back [to work] when the kids are older’.

### **Awareness of Sure Start and other children’s services providers**

Regarding other organisations providing services for local families and their children, no participant was able to spontaneously name an organisation besides Sure Start that operated in the area, although after prompting participants stated that they had occasionally used the Gate centre for first aid training and bingo. The Page Moss family centre was also mentioned, where participants had attended cookery, Positive Parenting and stress management courses and support sessions.

As expected from service users, awareness of Sure Start was high. With help, participants were able to describe what Sure Start meant to them:

‘Come to Sure Start its: fun, for the community, for parents and their children’ and

‘Come to Sure Start it does trips, days out, lets parents and children get together, activities for children and parents, safety equipment - either free or at cheaper prices – [and] courses’.

Participants confirmed that Sure Start was an important organisation within their lives and the lives of their children and stated that they were all still regular users.

Regarding communication and information, participants were aware that Sure Start marketed its services via leaflets and newsletters. They also confirmed that they were able to recognise Sure Start’s corporate colours and logo, whereas this was not the case for other social care organisations.

Participants also stated that they found the information contained within Sure Start literature useful and kept it as a source of reference for the future.

### **Sure Start services & non service users**

When asked about gaps in service provision, participants named, amongst others: crèche facilities, family fun days and entertainment, such as:

‘regular community events where people come together’.

Participants also identified parental support and activities as lacking, namely:

‘...being shown how to do things. You know, you don’t get a book with a baby [about] how to be a parent’.

The facilitator used a shopping analogy to encourage participants to draw a parallel between the factors that influenced their choice as customers and those that influenced them as service users. The key responses were: *price and value for money* (the product was affordable), *accessibility* (the product is available easily and when they need it), *word of mouth* (the product has been purchased by a friend or family member who is pleased with it and has told others) and *advertising* (which raises awareness of the product, highlights its positive points and encourages potential customers to try it out or continue to use it).

The group felt that Sure Start was doing a good job with those who used the service and they could clearly see the benefit of their involvement in the programme. As for what forms of contact Sure Start had made with them, some participants had received a phone call advising them of a Sure Start activity and some had also received home visits from members of the Sure Start team.

When asked what the programme needed to do to encourage the involvement of new families and non-users, participants stated that the programme should advertise more in the form of newsletters and leaflets, in addition to communicating by word of mouth. Parents were asked to suggest other approaches Sure Start may need to consider to encourage non users, to get involved. The response was ‘knock on doors’, although, interestingly, this time participants felt this activity should be undertaken by other local parents and carers. Other responses included holding family meetings, giving out information on the street at key local venues including the supermarket and post office, putting up posters in shops and ensuring that Sure Start provides the right services which are needed by local people.

The standard of service was also raised as a factor that would influence parental choice. Participants felt Sure Start should strive to provide the highest quality of service at all times. This would help to encourage more local parents and carers to participate in Sure Start activities.

Participants felt families were not using the services and support offered by Sure Start primarily because they lacked the information to help them make an informed choice. Again they cited a lack of confidence and motivation as obstacles to getting involved. Two participants stated that they had overcome this barrier with the help of Sure Start staff who had firstly visited them at home and then slowly introduced them to the Sure Start services available to them and their children. This approach had in both instances paid dividends and participants felt that this could be rolled out to target other eligible parents and carers who were not using the service at the present time. Participants agreed that, as local parents and carers, they had a role to play in marketing the service to non users and encouraging them to get involved in the programme, as did health and other professional workers.

The group was asked to put themselves in the shoes of the programme's managers and identify what the programme should do as a matter of urgency to encourage greater local involvement. Advertising and raising awareness were felt to be key. Participants felt that the programme needed to raise its profile and continue to do so on a regular basis. They reaffirmed many of the ideas that had arisen in the focus group and in the interviews. Other proposed methods included telephoning and standing in shopping areas to give out information and talk to people about the service and the opportunities it offers local parents, carers and their children. Participants also suggested undertaking more consultation with parents and carers to regularly check their needs and ensure that they are being met by the programme. At no point did the group suggest how current services might be improved and or revised.

Finally the facilitator asked the group to rate the Sure Start service on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being very poor and 10 being excellent). Two participants rated the service with 10, whilst the two others scored the service with an 8 and a 7, stating that there was room for improvement. When questioned about this, the participants stated that the programme needed to offer 'different things' from time to time, such as swimming classes, sewing courses, cookery, beauty courses, computers, first aid courses (including first aid for children), support for new mothers and expectant mothers, and pamper sessions.

## NON SERVICE USER VIEWS

### In-Depth Interviews

In total, 32 interviews were undertaken with non service users, which was 8 interviews short of the target. While starting with a random sample, all 141 eligible households were exhausted in seeking to generate 40 interviews. Reasons for failing to secure an interview included: the family not residing at that address (9 candidates, of whom 4 were reported to have moved), the house being unoccupied (5 candidates), receiving no response (89 candidates) and lack of permission from the householder (6 candidates). The 3-knock policy was exceeded in an attempt to raise numbers, with some households being visited up to 6 times.

In terms of gender balance, there was no interview with a male carer exclusively, although the father or partner was present at 2.

Whilst every attempt was made to engage participants in a meaningful discussion, the interviewer experienced a large amount of 'yes', 'no', 'don't know' responses, which limited the findings.

### **Knowledge of Sure Start**

All of those questioned had heard of Sure Start and whilst most were aware of the programme's former name, very few knew that the name had recently been changed to Sure Start in North Huyton. All were aware of the Sure Start brand name and felt that Sure Start had an established role in the community. The majority were aware that Sure Start provided support for families with young children, however there was some confusion as to the precise age range. Only two participants mentioned activities for fathers and one person thought that services were only available to single parents. It was clear that the facilities provided for adults, such as training courses were not widely known, although those who were aware of these services recognised their importance and were highly complementary of them.

Only one person was unaware of the services provided by Sure Start, with the majority able to list a number of activities. The most popular responses were services offering childcare activities such as the Fun Bus, nursery and crèche facilities and 'mother'<sup>8</sup> and toddler groups. However, the list of activities and services mentioned was diverse, ranging from the provision of fruit and vegetables (the Food Co-op), safety equipment and food taster sessions, to library facilities<sup>9</sup>, a swimming club<sup>10</sup>, pampering days and family days out.

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<sup>8</sup> These are advertised as 'parent and toddler groups', but in practice, few fathers attend.

<sup>9</sup> The programme runs a library outreach service and Book Start scheme, in addition to a mobile Toy Library facility.

<sup>10</sup> The programme runs a Splash and Sing session for parents and their children. Alternatively, the parent may have been referring to another service provider.

Strong views were expressed that there were insufficient (or no) activities provided for older children, although at least two participants mentioned that their older children were already attending activities (such as football) and one was aware that there was provision for older children during the school holidays. Overall, having children of different ages was seen as a barrier to involvement in the Sure Start programme.

In summary, there was a feeling that whilst Sure Start needed to publicise the fact that its main aim is to engage parents and carers of children under four, there is also a need to support and promote services for children of school age. This was highlighted as being particularly important during school holidays, when the provision of such a service would enable family groups to benefit more fully from the Sure Start programme.

### **Involvement in the Sure Start programme**

Although those interviewed were classified as non-users for the purposes of this study, nearly 1 in 5 stated they had participated in a Sure Start activity within the last three months. These activities included crèches, 'mother' and toddler groups and library facilities. When the time period was increased, participation in Sure Start services increased within this cohort to almost 1 in 3. This time, services utilised included the crèche and 'mother' and toddler groups, as before, as well as nursery facilities, the play bus (Fun Bus), and Toy Library. In addition, several participants had had regular contact with midwives and health visitors, who may have been from Sure Start or generic services. Three people had also received safety equipment from Sure Start.

A significant number of participants stated that they had initially come into contact with Sure Start via the health service, following the birth and registration of a child.

It was clear that contact was being maintained between the non users and Sure Start, with the majority receiving leaflets and/or newsletters on a regular basis. It appears that Sure Start has more contact with some families than they do with others, as some regularly received Christmas and birthday cards, whilst others had no regular contact other than newsletters.

The prevailing view was that, whilst participants were technically non users, they were aware of the benefits Sure Start could provide to them and their families.

'Sure Start is a good idea for parents who can't take kids out [and] gives people the opportunity to get involved in courses and things.'

'The children love it. They get attention and are welcomed. The mothers meet people they have not seen for a while and meet up with new people'.

Many confirmed that they would like to take a more active role in Sure Start activities. However, it was clear that a number felt isolated within their own community with comments such as:

‘I don’t really speak to anyone around here’ or  
‘I don’t bother with the neighbours’ and  
‘I like to do my own thing’

being a recurrent theme. One participant said that they would find it difficult to become motivated enough to take part. One parent recognised that

‘There is no excuse to be sitting at home on my own, [as] there is always something to do and things to go to.’

At the same time, she said the main factor preventing her involvement was the she ‘won’t go out’. She realised that it would be helpful for her to attend more, but ‘the baby is a bit of a handful’.

A range of other reasons for non-attendance were given, such as having ‘no-one to go with’, having insufficient information, the age range of siblings, personal choice and lack of motivation. One parent said the main reason for not attending was that it ‘slips [her] mind’ and felt that the main barrier for other parents was ‘laziness’. Another woman could not use services, as she ‘works nights, so sleeps in the day’. She said the main reasons for non-attendance were:

‘trying to find the time with work and kids, but also [personal] choice’.

Shyness and a lack of confidence were barriers highlighted by a number of participants. To combat this, a number thought that it would be beneficial if Sure Start could arrange for them to be accompanied and introduced on their first attendance at Sure Start, to ‘break the ice’.

## **Communication and information**

As previously mentioned, the majority of participants received letters and leaflets through the post on a regular basis. There was however a lack of consensus as to whether too much or too little information was received, with responses more or less evenly split. Overall, the information provided was considered to be of good quality, very informative, clear and well laid out. Over half were made aware of Sure Start services verbally, through friends and neighbours, health visitors and schools. Word of mouth as a means of communicating information was considered to be very important.

The general consensus was that whilst the written information received was useful, there was a lack of detailed information regarding Sure Start activities,

times and locations. For example, one person found the information hard to understand, as:

‘the layout is complicated and times are not very clear’.

Again views differed, with some indicating that information was received too far in advance and others that it was received at too short notice to enable people to take part in the activities. Some thought that information should be produced weekly and others monthly.

Like the service user group, non users had a number of ideas that they felt would improve awareness of Sure Start services and activities. These included advertising in shops, post offices and at bus stops (or in any area where people congregate), using KCR radio and local papers (which in many cases are free and delivered to each home within the target area). One participant felt that Sure Start should consider engaging prominent people, such as local celebrities or community leaders, to assist in getting the Sure Start message across. The participant felt that these figures could be used to try and engender a greater feeling of community spirit, something which a number of participants said was lacking.

A number highlighted the power of word of mouth and emphasised that more information should be passed via this means. Whilst it was clear that this approach was already being used and providing a degree of success, more, it was felt, could be done in this area. There was a suggestion to structure the approach to include regular home visits and planned door-knocking activities around the community, thereby handing out information whilst at the same time talking to parents and carers.

### **Sure Start services**

Overall, participants were happy with the services Sure Start currently provides, however they made a number of suggestions for service improvement. Parents perceived that the services on offer were restricted by a lack of funding, which especially affected the provision of trips and days out. One person suggested holding fund-raising events such as raffles and bingos to raise money to help cover the costs of these activities.

Another participant stated that there was a need to ‘dangle a carrot and make things more exciting’ to encourage people to get involved. Other ideas included the provision of additional activities such as keep-fit for mothers, more events such as days out, pantomimes, summer fetes and open days, or as one participant expressed:

‘Activity days once a month to bring people in’.

Participants felt that by providing these activities Sure Start would be able to attract more carers towards the service, if advertised effectively. Again it was felt that advertising should include more direct contact either through home

visits, door knocking or by telephone, as well as following the more traditional routes of leaflets and advertisements.

The majority clearly perceived that participating in Sure Start activities brought benefits for themselves and their children. They were aware that the service offered children and parents the opportunity to interact with their peers, learn, develop new skills, play together and for parents to take some “time out”. As one parent who uses the Toy Library expressed:

‘My son is made up with the toys and they are different to what he normally gets. [It] helps them interact and learn to share. [He] learns different games and they are more educational than what [I] would normally buy’.

Another parent said Sure Start would benefit her family as

‘the baby will learn more and the day trips will allow for kids to interact with each other’,

although she hasn’t attended activities in the last 3 months. Another said:

‘The baby has calmed down since attending the crèche. Although it is only one day a week, it allows time out for the parents.’

At the same time, there was a prevailing view that Sure Start was not an essential service, but rather a service that they could dip in and out of when they needed it. Sure Start was not regarded as a consistent feature of families’ lives.

The provision of crèche and nursery facilities was raised by a number of participants. Whilst they recognised the value of these facilities for themselves and their child, there was a view that these activities would allow them ‘some time out for themselves’, but would not support them sufficiently to undertake training or get back to work. The limited number of places was also highlighted as a difficulty and participants interested in this service felt that Sure Start needed to provide more places to support local need. Several participants stated that they were currently awaiting the allocation of a nursery place.

Limited capacity was a feature of another favoured Sure Start activity, the Fun Bus. This service was highlighted as an excellent activity which was very popular with children, enabling them to mix with others prior to attending nursery or school. However again, the limited number of places and the restricted geographical area covered by the bus was raised as a concern and something which needed to be reviewed.

In summing up the existing services offered by Sure Start, one participant expressed that the programme needed to review its activities on a regular basis and stop repeating the same thing.

‘They do the same thing over and over again. They should improve on the variety of activities’.

This was a key factor in this individual reconsidering her involvement with the programme.

### **Access to Sure Start services**

When questioned about key local venues, the most common responses were the Gate community centre and the River Alt Resource Centre. Page Moss family centre, the Sure Start shop and Twig Lane clinic were also mentioned by a number of participants. These centres were considered to be in the heart of the community and easy to access.

Whilst in the main there did not appear to be any issues with physical access to the facilities, two participants thought that assistance with transport would be helpful, with perhaps a mini bus being provided from time to time.

The majority felt the timing and timetabling of services was good. On the whole, morning and afternoon activities were seen to fit in with school runs and other daily activities, although a minority commented that the programme needed to fit in with school hours for older children and stated that they would like to see more on offer at weekends.

One parent was concerned that the River Alt Resource Centre was not as good as it used to be and that better security was needed in the surrounding area. The person concerned felt that the current lack of security might be a barrier to participation for others, as well as herself, and off-putting to carers wanting to take their children to Sure Start activities.

### **Use of other services**

In relation to accessing services outside Sure Start, participants identified a number of church-based organisations that offer facilities such as crèches, nurseries and mother and baby groups, on a much smaller scale than Sure Start. These included St Chad’s and St Dominic’s. One participant mentioned St George’s Fields, which offers boxing and football facilities for older children.

In summary, participants did not appear to be accessing alternative service provision in the North Huyton, or surrounding, area.

## **Satisfaction with Sure Start services**

Given their knowledge of the Sure Start programme, and the fact that a significant number had had first hand experience of the service, participants were asked to rank their level of satisfaction with the service on the 1 to 10 scale. Surprisingly, despite their mainly stop-start involvement in the programme, more than 3 in 5 ranked Sure Start as an eight or more, with 12 participants giving the programme full marks.

All confirmed that, on the occasions that they had been in contact with Sure Start, staff members had been friendly, welcoming, non-judgmental, approachable and helpful, without being overpowering. Parents were aware of staff being there for them, but at the same time felt that they were not intrusive and were available to offer advice and information when required.

One participant felt that Sure Start should involve local people more in promoting the programme and encouraging local parents to get involved.

## **Focus Group**

In total 4 carers attended the focus group. The key issues that emerged are outlined below. A second focus group was arranged, but elicited one attendance and therefore did not proceed.

## **Parental aspirations**

As with the service user focus group, early questioning sought to gain an understanding of participant's daily lives and how families spent their time. Responses confirmed that much of participants' time was taken up caring for the family, looking after the home and working. As one parent expressed:

*'Chris is a handful. Much of the time is spent cleaning up after him'.*

One older participant, who was a great-grandmother, explained that she was now very active with her grandchildren and great grandchildren, more so than with her own children when they were young. She attributed this to understanding more about what was important in life. In contrast, other participants expressed that their lives were hectic and they were busy dealing with children, work, the household and other daily pressures. One mother stated that the only time they seemed to do things outside the house as a family, was at weekends and in the school holidays, primarily the summer holidays.

Family activities outside the home seemed to focus around having picnics, a trip to the park, the beach, the fair, the safari park and other local attractions. However money was a cause for concern. All stated that many of their

favourite family activities were expensive and they were not always able to afford them. One participant stated that she did not tend to go outside the house very often as she suffered from depression and other health-related issues.

The issue of transport to undertake these activities was also raised. Whilst the great grandmother could access free public transport with some of her younger grandchildren using her 'travel pass', the others found transport could be expensive and could act as a barrier. One participant had access to a car, however cost was still a deciding factor in planning activities.

The group was asked to think about how they would ideally like to spend their time. Responses included:

'Own my own business... maybe a little café',

'Be free of debt' and

'Make money and live abroad'.

One participant was content and felt that she had achieved her ambition of having children and being happy:

'Not in the best place in the world, but I'm happy. I love it here. I've bought the house, the kids are happy and so am I'.

Another's dream was focused around overcoming her health problems.

'To get out of the house, because I don't go out of the house at the minute. That's my aim'.

Regarding what they felt was important for the development of their children to give them a good start in life, the group concentrated more on what they did not want to happen, rather than expressing their hopes. There was concern about antisocial behaviour among young people and the effect this may have on the development of their own children. Some acknowledged that they were dreading their children becoming teenagers and were reluctant to allow them to socialise freely, for fear that they would be unduly influenced. Participants recognised that children are influenced by a number of factors, including their friends, family and home environment. One member of the group commented that:

'You have to teach children what is right and wrong. If they are taught this and they have been brought up right, then they know what is right and wrong. Some kids do go wrong, even if they have nice parents. You can't do anything about this'.

The general consensus was that the group wanted their children to grow up polite and well mannered, have a good education and go on to university and or get a good job. As one commented:

‘I don’t want the kids to get stuck in a rut’.

In terms of what carers felt was important for them, one felt that she had done what she wanted to do and was happy with her life. However, like the rest of the group, she felt that it was important for parents and carers to have a social life and make time for themselves. She explained that she tried to help her children out by looking after her grandchildren and great grandchildren, which she enjoyed. Unfortunately, it was the view that extended family support such as this is not widespread in the Huyton community. The group regarded the alternative of baby-sitters as too expensive, especially when added to the cost of an evening out.

Participants provided some examples of the breakdown of the extended family, based on personal experience. One participant did not speak to her mother, whilst another had parents who were in full-time employment and were not able to help. Another received help from her sister-in-law but other members of her family did not live locally. Infirmary and the inability of grandparents to cope with children who were ‘a handful’, were also given as reasons for the lack of support.

### **Engagement with Sure Start**

When questioned about reasons for attending Sure Start activities or not, one barrier to involvement was participants’ reluctance to attend activities on their own. The general feeling was that they would be more inclined to attend with a friend. At the same time, participants acknowledged that when they had attended Sure Start sessions they had been made to feel welcome by the staff and by other service users. Their use of Sure Start activities however was sporadic and limited. One participant had taken advantage of baby massage sessions and another stated that she was supposed to meet with Sure Start staff to talk about the baby and the problems she was having but did not find the time to attend this appointment. She added:

‘The baby goes to nursery now and is better behaved.’

Another stated that she did not get involved in Sure Start activities because she was concerned about the area surrounding the River Alt Resource Centre. The fact that gangs ‘hang out’ around the neighbourhood and ‘cause trouble’, put her off:

‘If it was more tidied up and the park was cleaned, I would start to use it’.

Participants confirmed that they did occasionally get information from Sure Start through the post, which gave them details of services. One said that she

took an interest in some of the literature, especially when it gave information about training courses. Courses of particular interest to her included computers, as she was interested in starting her own business. Others felt that courses

'like hairdressing, where you don't have to go to college and you can fit in around the kids at school or have crèche facilities'

would be beneficial and something that they would use. Whilst a number of the participants stated that they were interested in continued training, concern was raised about the costs associated with learning:

'I did go back to college, but putting the kid in a crèche was too expensive. I gave up after two days'.

In drawing the session to a close, the facilitator asked the group to consider what they would seek to provide for local families if they were responsible for Sure Start. Ideas included offering weight watchers (especially for women with babies as the majority want to lose weight), activities for families (including older and younger children), keep fit, more physical activities for children (e.g. outdoor games, exercise classes), affordable childcare for parents to leave the children and go to work or go shopping (at either no cost or low cost) and more child minders.

## **Discussion**

### **Constraints of the methodology**

#### *Interviews*

The intention had been to select a random sample, however, due to a low response rate, the final sample, in the case of the non users, was a convenience sample. This signifies that there is potential for selection bias, especially with non users, as those who agreed to participate may have been more confident, less stressed or have stronger views.

The primary difficulties encountered in securing completed interviews included candidates not answering the door, family pressures within the household which impacted on the interview, the length of the questionnaire, disinterest and short responses to questions. These issues were particularly prevalent during the interviews with non users. Some interviews with non users therefore had a low information density.

#### *Focus groups*

The success of the focus groups also needs to be questioned in terms of attracting a satisfactory number of participants. Based on previous experience with organising focus groups in the programme area, the researcher sought to encourage participation through a more personalised approach and increased support for potential participants. However, despite the involvement of a support worker, there were few attendances. Indeed, the focus group that was most heavily supported, elicited the lowest response of one parent and was cancelled.

#### *Implications for future research*

The problems faced during this fieldwork pose questions for future research, as obtaining a representative sample using this methodology appears difficult to achieve.

### **Inaccuracies in the database**

Sure Start maintains a database of service users and their attendance. This study highlighted inaccuracies, such as registered parents and carers not living at the address on the database (13 families) and unoccupied properties (5 instances). Sure Start will need to invest time and resources into reviewing and updating the information held on the database at regular intervals to address this.

## **SERVICE USERS**

### **In-depth interviews**

#### **Knowledge of Sure Start**

Service users were able to name several services provided by the Sure Start in North Huyton programme, although they did not show a detailed knowledge of services. However, as Sure Start provides a wide range of services for children aged 0 to 4 years and their families, covering health, education and learning, social and emotional development and capacity building, it is to be expected that parents may only be familiar with those aspects of the programme that they have accessed.

It is interesting that 'days out' were the most popular activity among service users, as the programme has not typically offered many days out until the formation of an activities planning group in March 2003 and the relaunch of the community involvement project in December 2003. However, it has been evident to the programme for some time that excursions are in high demand. The programme has tried to resist the temptation to offer many expensive, high profile outings, as they are costly to the programme, benefit a few and cannot be sustained. Instead, Sure Start in North Huyton has tried to offer educational trips that are local and inexpensive, in the hope that families can then take them up independently.

It is likely that the reason that the Funbus is popular is that it is one of the main outreach services and is highly visible. It has limited capacity, but has had a high take up. The safety advice and equipment scheme has also been well received and appears to meet a real need in the community. As for the playgroups, it is assumed that parents are referring to play activities for children in general, which is one of Sure Start's principal service areas, although they may have been referring to parent and toddler groups that are community-run, but supported by Sure Start.

It is interesting that Sure Start is seen by many as a service for lone parents only. This may be an issue for the programme to address. It is important to offer services that are universal and non-stigmatising, as this can have a positive effect on both service uptake and service satisfaction (Armstrong & Hill 2001). The low profile of fathers is obviously also still an issue for the programme and reflects the national picture, where concerns remain about the gendered pattern of service usage (Broadhurst 2003). Broadhurst points out that the issue of men's participation in family support services has long been neglected in both research and practice.

#### *Methods of communication*

Sure Start newsletters and leaflets featured highly as the principle means of communication from the programme to service users, despite the fact that the programme had been concerned that written information may not be effective

in an area where there was a higher-than-average incidence of literacy difficulties (Basic Skills Agency 2001). Word of mouth and personal contact with Sure Start staff were felt to be equally important methods of communication, however. Although service users expressed that Sure Start's written literature was comprehensive and well-presented, a number indicated that increased individual contact and home visits would help parents to overcome barriers to attendance such as lack of confidence. Home visits, door knocking and open days were also suggested as means to raise the programme's profile.

### **Use of other services**

The majority of service users were not aware of alternative services in or outside the Sure Start in North Huyton area, although some were using services for older children. This is unsurprising as there are not many other family support services for the 0 to 4 age group, other than community-led parent and toddler groups, Family Centre activities at Page Moss, nursery schools and private nurseries.

### **Accessing Sure Start services**

Most agreed that Sure Start services were easy to access as they were within walking distance, although transport was a barrier on occasions. The reasons for the latter were not given, however, it is possible that going to services on foot is difficult when a member of the family is unwell, the weather is poor and getting children ready on time as the principal carer is tiring. Public transport from the North to the South of the programme area is considered to be poor, although plans are underway to improve it (North Huyton NDC 2003; Merseyside Local Authorities and Merseytravel 2000). The suggestion of a shared care scheme may be difficult, as the number of car owners in Knowsley is well below the national average (Market Research UK 2001; Sure Start FHWH & North Huyton NDC 2002), however a shuttle bus may be a more feasible option. These findings support the Children's Centre model of providing services that are within 'pram-pushing distance' of the families they serve.

The timetabling of Sure Start services was considered to be good during term time, however the point that many parents with older children struggle during the school holidays is an important one. It is essential to families that services are 'joined up' and although the programme has attempted to co-ordinate its holiday activities with holiday schemes for older children, it has not achieved this comprehensively to date. Again, the proposed structure for Children's Centres where health, educational, childcare and family support services are co-located and linked to primary and secondary schools for continuity of care, will help to address this.

Lastly, increased personal contact with Sure Start staff was seen to be the predominant factor in supporting parents' greater involvement in the

programme. Research shows that informal support, such as community networking models or volunteer befriending schemes, can be more acceptable to parents, more flexible and more readily available, although less expert (Armstrong & Hill 2001). In addition, support where the boundaries between provider and helper are blurred can be preferable to parents. The authors acknowledge that it is disputed whether informal support produces the desired outcomes for children, in addition to having a positive effect on mothers' self-esteem and confidence. Others maintain that a combination of professional and para-professional support may be the most effective.

### **Barriers to access**

On a personal level, parents perceived 2 principal barriers to accessing Sure Start services, namely a lack of provision for older children and a lack of childcare to support adult activities. Despite Government efforts, it is well-known that there is still a national deficit of childcare places. Also, in North Huyton 50% of parents surveyed showed a preference for informal childcare (Sure Start FHWH & North Huyton NDC 2002), so there is perhaps a need to build parental trust of professional services and ensure and demonstrate their quality and, alongside this, address the local shortage of childminders.

Parents proposed that barriers for other parents may include a lack of awareness or understanding of Sure Start, difficulties in physical access to services and a lack of confidence or motivation. Proposed solutions were the provision of activities for all the family, especially during school holidays, more home visits and personal contact, increased advertising and a greater volume of activities.

It seems logical that in an area where there is a relatively high incidence of literacy difficulties and a proportion of the population has not traditionally accessed many mainstream services, providers should concentrate a substantial amount of resources on outreach and home visiting services and promotional activities. Sure Start may have suffered from government pressure to set up services and physical buildings within a short time frame, as it may have had a detrimental effect on the possibility for comprehensive local consultation processes, awareness raising and relationship building between providers and local families. Parents and carers have got to want to attend Sure Start services because they see the benefit for their family and this may mean that more time was needed to bring about a cultural shift. Parental perception of need (Broadhurst 2003) and of the benefits of intervention (Armstrong & Hill 2001) can differ from that of professionals. The programme could also question whether practitioners and managers are striving to engage all sections of the community, or whether some are content with serving a minority of attenders. At present the programme's outreach activity is limited; much of the focus is on centre-based work.

It would also be useful to reflect on the notion of 'lack of motivation', which was cited frequently. The interviewer reported high incidences of reports of depression, domestic violence and anxiety and isolation among

(predominantly) women interviewed. These could clearly affect women's capacity to participate. Or is lack of motivation about a lack of conviction of the benefits of Sure Start to children?

In terms of offering a greater volume of activities, it is unclear what is meant, as the problem currently is a low level of uptake. It is difficult to see what would be achieved by increasing the volume of activities, unless it is the breadth and variety of activities that is lacking.

Although Sure Start local programmes do not have the capacity to provide services to older children, they can endeavour to plan closely with other children's services providers, to ensure that families with children outside the Sure Start age range are not prevented from attending. In an area where there is a high proportion of single parents and a shortage of childcare (although improving), it is possible that providing services for different age groups in different venues, makes attending impracticable for some families.

### **Support and service satisfaction**

The prevailing view among service users was that Sure Start provided valuable advice and respite for the family and a wide range of support services. However, participants also pointed out the need for more home visits and individual counselling and support for carers. This links to the previous point that not all parents are comfortable with, or enjoy, a group environment, or alternatively they may not be ready to go out of the house or parent publicly. It is also reasonable that many issues are personal and require individual support. Again, research shows that vulnerable families are less likely to take up formal services or to seek help (Broadhurst 2003). One reason for this is that accessing services may disclose family difficulties that carry a stigma. In addition, the high incidence of domestic violence and tensions in adult relationships reported by the interviewer may prevent uptake.

Most parents recognised the benefits of Sure Start activities for their child's development and for their learning as parents. Parental satisfaction with individual services and with Sure Start in general was high and parents found that Sure Start staff had a positive, open attitude.

### **Range of services**

Participants did not identify any gaps in service provision initially. The absence of proposals for change or innovation was a common occurrence throughout the study. It is possible, and would be understandable, if participants found it difficult to imagine services that they had not experienced or been offered, therefore asking for suggestions for new activities is problematic. However, when prompted, participants did agree with a number of proposed changes. The provision of services at weekends, more childcare and more activities for fathers should all be considered seriously by the programme. Other suggestions included broadening the choice of courses for

adults and a more visible Sure Start presence in the community. The proposal for additional activities for fathers is interesting, as mothers have been known anecdotally to resist fathers' involvement in what they may see as their territory, or to encroach on 'their' time.

### **Focus group**

The breadth of the discussion was limited due to the low number of parents (4) attending, however the discussion did gain greater depth on 3 key issues: parental aspirations for their child, support to parents in their role and personal development.

### **Parental aspirations**

Parental time was spent principally on childcare, family and shopping, mainly around the immediate locality. Parents spoke of financial constraints, poor health and lack of confidence. Routine emerged as an important daily factor and there was little to distinguish term time from holiday time. All parents wanted a better start in life for their children and recognised their role in shaping their children's lives. Key factors in achieving this were seen to be time and love. There was no mention of education, socialisation, health or improved finances as factors that might affect children's upbringing.

Participants appeared to find it hard to express what they wanted for themselves and how they liked to spend quality time. Beyond shopping and cleaning, parents spoke of socialising, bingo, reading and doing puzzles. Isolation, poor health, lack of confidence and lack of money appeared to limit parental activity. It was unclear whether participants did not dare to hope that their situation could be different, although they did mention wanting something different for their children and so it seems the aspiration for change was there.

Participants had attended courses for their own personal development. None of the group was preparing to go back to work. Government policy is currently more understanding of the right of parents of pre-school children to choose to parent full-time, although the Government is keen for parents to get ready for work by acquiring the necessary skills (HM Treasury 2004).

It seems that parental aspirations are quite low. The process of raising them requires long-term, holistic support. It is possible that multiple difficulties are a barrier, as parents may feel that addressing one issue is futile or impossible. For example, the promotion of smoking cessation, where smoking may be a coping mechanism in a high stress environment.

## **Service usage and targeting non service users**

Parents stressed the importance they placed on Sure Start for their family. They had also attended other services at The Gate community centre and Page Moss family centre.

The group perceived gaps in Sure Start provision to be crèche facilities, family fun days, entertainment and parental support and advice. The latter appeared to be a particular issue for one participant. It is possible that if parents do not have the support of an extended family and are isolated, there may be few available role models to learn parenting skills from. The programme has run a Webster Stratton group in the past (which has now been continued by the Primary Care Trust) and a positive parenting group was on offer in the Page Moss Family Centre.<sup>11</sup> Traditional parenting education programmes have been found to be taken up by the middle-classes and relatively few vulnerable families are likely to be reached (Armstrong & Hill 2001). A more interactive model of learning is more likely to be successful.

Suggestions for engaging non users repeated previous ideas, however the group suggested using local parents (such as themselves) to promote services and knock on doors. The comparative success of volunteer and networking schemes mentioned previously would support this approach. The provision of needs-led services was seen to be key, as well as high quality services (although there was no suggestion that these were not being provided). The emphasis on quality reflects current priorities for Children's Centres, which advocate high quality services provided by highly trained staff (Pacey 2002). Key priorities in engaging non users were seen to be to consult regularly with parents, check their needs and ensure that they are being met. As previous research findings have showed a discrepancy between parental and professional perception of need (Broadhurst 2003), regular consultation is important to reconcile the two.

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<sup>11</sup> This facility was the target of an arson attack on the 13<sup>th</sup> July 2004 and has been demolished. At the time of writing this report, plans for delivering the centre's programme of activities in the future were yet to be confirmed.

## **NON SERVICE USERS**

### **In-depth Interviews**

#### **Knowledge of Sure Start**

Like the service users interviewed, non service users were aware of Sure Start and its remit of providing support for families with young children (with one exception), although they were unclear of the precise age bracket. Participants were able to name a range of Sure Start services, but, like service users did not give prominence to activities or support for fathers. The programme could perhaps review its literature and publicity and ensure that it is clear about which services it offers and to whom. The programme may need to be more proactive about promoting the involvement of fathers in its literature and ensure that a consistent message is given by all staff members.

Non service users echoed service users by saying that there was insufficient provision for older children, which was particularly problematic during the school holidays. Again, the programme needs to consider how to provide a seamless service with providers for older children.

#### **Involvement in the Sure Start programme**

A minority of participants had attended a Sure Start activity in the previous 3 months and were receiving regular written information from the programme. The discrepancy in the frequency of receipt of literature can be explained by the fact that registered families receive a newsletter quarterly and previously a mailshot every 6 weeks. Families also receive a birthday card for each child up to their 4<sup>th</sup> birthday, as well as literature from individual Sure Start services.

Interestingly, most non users recognised the benefits that Sure Start could bring to them and their families, despite their choice not to access services. Indeed, many expressed that they would like to increase their participation in the programme, but cited various obstacles that prevented this. These ranged from isolation to lack of motivation, fear of attending alone, difficulty in managing a child's behaviour and personal choice. Non users suggested accompanying parents on their first attendance to overcome shyness and lack of confidence. This is encouraging for the programme, as it suggests that parents do not need persuading of the benefits of childcare and family support, which would be more difficult to address, but need increased support to attend services.

#### **Communication and information**

Non users were also receiving regular written information from the programme and did not state that literacy difficulties were a barrier. On the other hand,

adults may be unlikely to disclose difficulties to someone they do not know. There was no consensus as to whether too much or too little information was received, whether it was received too far in advance or at insufficient notice, nor whether it was too frequent or not frequent enough. These differences may reflect the differing needs of families and/or their level of interest in the programme. Generally it was felt that information on individual activities was not sufficiently detailed.

Ideas for advertising and promoting Sure Start were similar to those of service users and included adopting a more personal and visible approach to advertising. As with service users, verbal communication of activities was considered to be very important in the area and there was a suggestion to capitalise on this by structuring regular home visits and door knocking. The idea of involving local people in the promotion of the programme was raised again.

### **Sure Start services**

It is surprising that parents perceived Sure Start activities to be restricted by a lack of funding. This is perhaps because activities have not generally been high profile or on a large scale. Apart from an initial launch event in a marquee, the programme has not hired out big venues or organised large trips. When compared with events organised by New Deal for Communities North Huyton, this may give the impression of being short of funds. In addition, parents are asked to make a small contribution for trips, which may reinforce this perception. As with service users, non users felt that the programme should organise more high profile public events, such as activity days and family days.

Non users were generally satisfied with Sure Start services, so dissatisfaction is obviously not a barrier to access. They were also able to identify the benefits of Sure Start to families, yet they did not regard Sure Start as a regular feature of their lives. It appears therefore that parents do not need persuading of the benefits of Sure Start to families, however, they may not see their involvement as essential or particularly important, but rather a matter of personal preference.

On the other hand, participants felt that there was insufficient crèche and nursery provision, in terms of the number of places and their duration and that Fun Bus provision was inadequate. Regarding childcare, this is a key point for the programme, as participants felt that current provision would not support them to attend training or take up employment, which is one of the principal Sure Start targets.

### **Access to and satisfaction with Sure Start services**

Transport and timetabling were not identified as barriers to access by non users, although a minority proposed the provision of activities at the

weekends. Participants did not appear to be using many alternative services to Sure Start, so this cannot be regarded as a factor affecting involvement in the programme.

Twenty non users were very satisfied with Sure Start and 12 were not. All were satisfied with the approach and attitude of Sure Start staff, which is known to be a key factor in the success of a service.

### **Focus group**

Again the discussion was limited by an attendance of only 4 carers. The researcher was concerned that the discussion was not conducted in a rigorous way and arranged a second focus group discussion. However despite increased personal contact and support from Sure Start support workers, only one attendance resulted.

### **Parental aspirations**

Participants described the way they spent their time much as the service user group, with childcare and housework. Paid work was also mentioned. Financial concerns, mental ill-health and the cost of transport restricted family activities, although participants went on picnics, went to the park, the beach and other fairly local attractions.

In terms of ambition, this group also found it difficult to express what they wanted for their family, although one strove to overcome health problems and leave the house more. Instead, participants talked a lot about their fears for their children. However, they did eventually express that they wanted their children to turn out well mannered, to receive a good education and go into further education or gain employment.

As for personal ambition, parents felt that it was important to have a social life and make time for themselves. They indicated that they found this difficult, as they did not have much extended family support. They did not express any wider ambitions.

### **Engagement with Sure Start**

The main barrier to attendance for non users was attending activities alone. In addition, one parent was reluctant to attend services at the River Alt Resource Centre, for security reasons. Participants were interested in Sure Start services, including continued training. Regarding the latter, parents felt that the cost of childcare was prohibitive.

Ideas for additional services included activities for all the family and physical activities for children and adults, as well as childcare.

In summary, the views of non users did not differ greatly from those of service users. Non users did not appear to oppose attending Sure Start services in principle, but were inhibited by a fear of attending alone.

## **Conclusions**

### **Summary of findings**

Both service users and non service users appear aware of the benefits of Sure Start for families and appear largely satisfied with Sure Start staff and services. Some gaps in service provision were identified, principally childcare to support parental activity such as training and employment, variety and choice of service, services for fathers and activities at the weekends. In terms of services for parents, many wanted more individual support such as emotional support and counselling and parenting support and advice. Few parents were using alternative services either locally or outside the North Huyton area.

The main barriers to access identified by parents were the failure to co-ordinate services with those provided for older children, which caused particular difficulties during school holidays, the shortage of childcare, lack of confidence and motivation, and shyness. The absence of organised transport to services was also considered to be a barrier at times.

Parents in both groups had difficulty in expressing their wants, needs and ambition for themselves, although they had clearer ideas for their children.

In terms of engaging more families, participants proposed the programme place more emphasis on verbal communication, have a more visible presence in the community and organise more promotional events, such as family days, open days and days out. Parents proposed utilising the skills of local people to approach families at home. Increased personal contact between the programme and eligible families was felt to be key to helping parents overcome barriers to attendance and the idea of structuring home visits, outreach work and 'door-knocking' by staff, volunteers and parents, was felt to be key. Non users in particular felt they needed increased support to attend, such as being accompanied to services by a staff member.

### **Recommendations**

Sure Start in North Huyton's difficulty in engaging with all families with children under 4 in the catchment area, is not unique. The difficulty for family support services of reaching vulnerable populations, using many different approaches, is well documented (Broadhurst 2003). Research into vulnerable populations is lacking, as research into family support activity has tended to concentrate on the experience of service users and referred populations. An informal, open access approach can encourage uptake of services (Armstrong & Hill 2001), although others argue that targeted services may increase parental motivation to attend (Broadhurst 2003). In addition, informal approaches may not produce the desired outcomes for parents or children, although they can provide a gateway into more formal services (Armstrong & Hill 2001). Although community, volunteer and networking schemes can have

more success in engaging vulnerable families (Armstrong & Hill 2001), some family-friendly organisations, such as Home Start have still had difficulty in engaging more than a core group – a minority (Broadhurst 2003).

In response to the study findings, the programme could consider employing parents, taking on volunteers, or developing a 'buddy scheme', to engage parents in the community and accompany them to Sure Start services. Another idea, developed by Sure Start in Hollinwood, is to appoint a 'welcomer' in each Sure Start group, to support new attenders. The programme could also consider whether to increase its outreach and home visiting activity, as a prerequisite for centre-based work. It seems that parents are asking for a more personal approach and increased individual support, especially with regards emotional support. The programme could also explore whether all staff members are seeking to engage 'hard to reach' families.

This more direct approach to reaching families could also be applied to updating the programme database. The programme could employ parents to knock on doors and check the validity of addresses. Accurate population statistics are vital to inform the programme's activity.

Research shows the benefits of early intervention programmes such as Headstart and High/Scope for children (Bynner 2001) and although participants seemed to be aware of the benefits, non users did not see engagement in Sure Start as essential. The programme could perhaps place more emphasis on promoting the benefits of its services for children and families for child development.

The lack of males participating in the study and in the programme is a continuing cause for concern, although it reflects the national picture. This is an essential issue for the programme and the researcher to address.

Joined-up, accessible, universal and non-stigmatising services are obviously a key priority, but it is hoped that this will be achieved through the forthcoming Children's Centre provision in Knowsley. Transport linking Children's Centres to secondary schools and residential areas, may also be a consideration.

The observations of the interviewer, suggest that the programme could explore the level of support it provides for parents experiencing mental ill-health and suffering from domestic violence. This could also be the subject of further research. Equally, from a research point of view, the programme needs to explore how to engage 'hard to reach' families for research purposes, as this is vital to inform practice and service delivery. This will also be important to inform the evaluation of Children's Centres.

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## Appendices

### Appendix one

#### Service user interview format

Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_. I'm working on behalf of the local Sure Start programme. I'd like to ask you some questions about the Sure Start programme. Your answers will help us to understand local families' needs so that we can improve our services.

Could you spare me some time to go through the questionnaire? If you participate in the interview Sure Start will give you a £10 Asda voucher in appreciation of the time you have spared us. Thank you...

All the information you give me will remain anonymous and all personal information strictly confidential.

As you can see I have a tape recorder which I would like to use to record this interview, this saves me scribbling down notes on paper and allows me to listen carefully to your answers. The recording of your interview will not be passed to any other person and will be erased once I have written my report to Sure Start.

So let's make a start.....

1. So could you tell me if you have heard about Sure Start?
2. Tell me briefly what do you think Sure Start does?
3. Sure Start used to be called Sure Start in Fincham, Hillside and Woolfall Heath. Do you know what it is called now?
4. Could you tell me in more detail about the range of services Sure Start offers? And tell me more about the services you and your family use?
5. And where do you access these services?
6. How do you get to find out about these services?

7. Do you receive information about Sure Start and the range of services it offers?
8. How do you get this information?
9. And what do you think about the information you get? Is it easy to understand? Does it give you the information you need
10. Apart from newsletters and leaflets have you heard about Sure Start in any other way?
11. Can you think of a better way of letting people know about Sure Start?
12. Do you visit Sure Start activities and events with other members of your family? Who? (partner, grandparents etc)
13. Are the Sure Start services easy for you to attend?  
E.g. issues around transport, childcare and care responsibilities
14. And are services provided at the times you want them?
15. What else would support and help you to attend Sure Start activities? E.g. Home visits, staff accompanying you to activities
16. How do you think Sure Start could improve their services? What else could they do or provide to improve things for you and your family?
17. What services do you think are missing?
18. Does Sure Start support you in your role as a parent? How or what else could Sure Start do to support you as a parent?
19. Does Sure Start provide you and your family with any other support? (E.g. 1-1 emotional support)

20. And could you tell me how do you think you and/or your family have benefited from being involved in Sure Start activities?  
(Ask about both them and their child/ren)
21. Would you say that you are a regular Sure Start service user? Say, in the last week or so how often have you and your family used Sure Start services?
22. What do you like about Sure Start and the services it offers?
23. And what do you dislike about Sure Start?
24. Do you know of any other organisation locally who provides services for families and young children?
25. Do you use any of these services?
26. Why do you use these services? What do they offer that Sure Start does not?
27. On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being poor and 10 being excellent, how would you rate the quality of services offered by Sure Start?
28. Are the Sure Start team members you come into contact with friendly and helpful? Could you suggest how improvements in this area?  
  
Probe around staff attitudes to parents and children and their relationships with them
29. Does the support and service you get from Sure Start staff and volunteers meet your needs as a parent? Could you suggest how these may be improved in any way?
30. Does the support and services offered to your children meet their needs? Are there any improvements you would like to see?
31. Are the services offered by Sure Start flexible? Are you able to make suggestions on how these may be improved? When you make these suggestions are you listened to and do things change?

32. What stops or puts you off getting involved in the Sure Start programme and the range of services it offers?

Probe around:            health            location  
   transport,    awareness  
   isolation    convenience    of    service  
   times,    confidence    having    older  
   kids  
   not for everybody  
   labelled/stigma

33. Put yourself in the shoes of other local mums/dads in the area. What do you think stops them from getting involved in the programme?

34. Do you think Sure Start provides the services and support you want and need?

35. If you were in charge of the Sure Start programme what 3 things would you do to get more local families involved in the programme?

36. Thank you for your time I've finished with my questions. Do you have any comments you would like to make?

Finally, Sure Start is holding 2 small group meetings for parents and carers to discuss in more detail services and share ideas. The meetings will last about 90 minutes and be held at the Gate on Princess Drive on 14<sup>th</sup> July.

If you attend you will receive a home smoke detector and a £10 voucher. Would you like to attend?            (Take/confirm individuals details)

Thanks again for your time..... (Hand over voucher and Sure Start leaflet)!!

**Service user focus group topic guide**

- ✓ Tell me a little bit about you and your family and tell me about something you enjoyed as a family recently? (round the room)
- ✓ Lets talk about you and your children - could you describe a typical day in the life of (name of family) - what does it consist of? (Question about week days and weekends)? **Need to include holiday times!**
- ✓ Lets dream a little - what would you want a typical day to consist of, for you, for your child/ren and for your family?
- ✓ What things do you think are important for children aged 0-4 years to get the best chances in life?
- ✓ What things do you think are important for parents and carers of children aged 0-4 years? **Probe around employment, training, personal development, health etc...**
- ✓ What stops you from having these days that you want? (**Refer this question back to the previous 2**)
- ✓ What do you need to do to change your typical day into one which you and your child/ren and family would want?
- ✓ What support and services are out there for you at the moment? Name of organisations? Tell me about your involvement in them? What do you/family/children do with these organisations?
- ✓ What services and support do you think are missing that you would like to see provided?
- ✓ Introduce Sure Start (if they haven't already been mentioned) - tell me why you choose/have chosen to get involved with Sure Start (round the room)
- ✓ What do you like about what they have to offer? (services/staff/support etc...)
- ✓ What don't you like about what they offer?

- ✓ Let's talk about services/products that you use each and every day - soap powders for example...
  - Which powder do you choose?
  - Why do you choose this powder? What make you buy?
  - How are you made aware of this powder?
  - What sets it apart form the others?
  - Do you try any other powders
  - Why/why not?
  
- ✓ Do you take the same things into consideration when choosing local services for you and your family? Discuss the elements of cost, value for money, convenience, availability, the Ronseal effect etc etc...
  
- ✓ Put yourself into the shoes<sup>12</sup> of other local mums and dads in the area. What is influencing their decision making about which services and support to take advantage of for them and their child/ren? What do you think stops them from getting involved in the programme?
  
- ✓ So what does Sure Start need to do to turn these non users/infrequent users into regular users?
  - Volunteer involvement/advocacy
  - House/telephone calls - staff calling if you don't attend for a week or so
  - Involvement incentives - like the Tesco Club Card - the more you use = points gained which you can trade in for child safety equipment, free training, free childcare sessions etc etc...
  - Buddy schemes
  - Taster sessions
  
- ✓ So if you were in charge of Sure Start what 3 things would you do to get more people involved?
  
- ✓ Do you have any comments you would like to make?

**Non service user interview format**

Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_. I'm working on behalf of the local Sure Start programme. I'd like to ask you some questions about the Sure Start programme. Your answers will help us to understand local families' needs so that we can improve our services.

Could you spare me some time to go through the questionnaire? If you participate in the interview Sure Start will give you a £10 Asda voucher in appreciation of the time you have spared us. Thank you...

All the information you give me will remain anonymous and all personal information strictly confidential.

As you can see I have a tape recorder which I would like to use to record this interview, this saves me scribbling down notes on paper and allows me to listen carefully to your answers. The recording of your interview will not be passed to any other person and will be erased once I have written my report to Sure Start.

So let's make a start.....

37. So could you tell me if you have heard about Sure Start?
38. Tell me briefly what do you think Sure Start does?
39. Sure Start used to be called Sure Start in Fincham, Hillside and Woolfall Heath. Do you know what it is called now?
40. Could you tell me in more detail about the range of services Sure Start offers?
41. And have you used any of the services (Probe for details)?
42. Just out of interest, how often would you say have you visited Sure Start activities over the last 3 months?
43. And where did you access these services?
44. How did you get to find out about these services?

45. Do you get information from Sure Start about the range of services it offers? And what do you think about the information you get? Is it easy to understand? Does it give you the information you need? And what do you do with it? (Probe around amount of information received about things going on in the area)
46. If not, have you ever received information from Sure Start about the range of services it offers?
47. How did you get this information? And what did you do with it?
48. Apart from newsletters and leaflets have you heard about Sure Start in any other way?
49. Can you think of a better way of letting people know about Sure Start?
50. Do you think that you and/or your family got something out of the Sure Start activities you attended? How? (ask about both them and their children)
51. What do/did you like about Sure Start and the services it offers?
52. And what do/did you dislike about Sure Start?
53. Do you think Sure Start provides the services and support local parents and carers want and need?
54. So what are the main reasons why you don't tend to use/don't use more Sure Start services now?
55. Are the Sure Start services easy for you to attend?  
E.g. issues around transport, childcare and care responsibilities
56. And are the services provided at the times you want them?

57. What support and help do you think Sure Start could offer to encourage you to attend their activities? **E.g. Home visits, staff accompanying you to activities**
58. How do you think Sure Start could improve their services? What else could they do or provide to improve things for you and your family?
59. What services do you think are missing?
60. How or what else could Sure Start do to support you as a parent?
61. Do you know of any other organisation locally that provides services for families and young children?
62. Do you use any of these services?
63. Why do you use these services? What do they offer that Sure Start does not?
64. On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being poor and 10 being excellent, how would you rate the quality of services offered by Sure Start that you took part in?
65. And were the Sure Start team members you come into contact with friendly and helpful? Could you suggest any improvements in this area?  
**Probe around staff attitudes to parents and children and their relationships with them**
66. What stops or puts you off getting involved in the Sure Start programme and the range of services it offers?

Probe around:            health            location  
    transport,    awareness  
    isolation    convenience    of    service  
    times,    confidence    having    older  
    kids  
    not for everybody

labelled/stigma

67. So what do Sure Start need to do to make you get involved in their activities more often/again?
68. Put yourself in the shoes of other local mums/dads in the area. What do you think stops them from getting involved in the programme?
69. If you were in charge of the Sure Start programme what 3 things would you do to get more local families involved in the programme?
70. Thank you for your time I've finished with my questions. Do you have any comments you would like to make?

Finally, Sure Start is holding 2 small group meetings for parents and carers to discuss in more detail services and share ideas. The meetings will last about 90 minutes and be held at the River Alt Resource Centre on Woolfall Heath Avenue on 16<sup>th</sup> July.

If you attend you will receive a home smoke detector and a £10 voucher. Would you like to attend? (Take/confirm individuals details)

(If yes to Focus group ask) Would it be O.K for a member of the Sure Start team to call you to tell you more about the meeting and see if you need any help to get there...

Thanks again for your time..... (Hand over voucher and Sure Start leaflet)!!

### Non service user focus group topic guide

- ✓ Tell me a little bit about you and your family and tell me about something you enjoyed as a family recently? (round the room)
- ✓ Lets talk about you and your children - could you describe a typical day in the life of (name of family) - what does it consist of? (Question about week days, weekends and holiday times)?
- ✓ Let's dream a little - what would you want a typical day to consist of, for you, for your child/ren and for your family?
- ✓ What things do you think are important for children aged 0-4 years to get the best chances in life?
- ✓ What things do you think are important for parents and carers of children aged 0-4 years? Probe around employment, training, personal development, health etc...
- ✓ So what stops you from having these days that you want? (Refer this question back to the previous 2)
- ✓ What needs to change to change your typical day into one which you and your child/ren and family would want?
- ✓ What services and support are out there for you at the moment? Can you name of organisations? Tell me about your involvement with these organisations? What do you/family/children do with these organisations?
- ✓ What services and support do you think are missing that you would like to see provided? (Probe around services and support targeted at children and parents/carers)
- ✓ **Introduce Sure Start** (if they haven't already been mentioned) - have you heard of the programme? What does Sure Start do? Have any of you used any Sure Start services over the last month? Why did you choose to use this service? What service did you use?(round the room)

Probe around who registered them and whether or not they used services after they registered?

- ✓ What did you like about what they have to offer? (services/staff/support etc...)
- ✓ What didn't you like about what they offer?
- ✓ So why don't you use the services and support Sure Start offers more often?
- ✓ What are the main reasons why you don't get involved in Sure Start activities at the moment? (go round the room and discuss)
- ✓ Lets change the subject and talk about services/products that you use each and every day - soap powders for example...
  - Which powder do you choose?
  - Why do you choose this powder? What make you buy?
  - How are you made aware of this powder?
  - What sets it apart from the others?
  - Do you try any other powders
  - Why/why not?
- ✓ Lets think about another situation you might find yourself facing - going to a party - what things will you take into consideration before you decide to go (probe around the confidence issues, friends being there etc)
- ✓ Do you take the same things into consideration when choosing local services for you and your family? (Discuss the elements of cost, value for money, convenience, availability, the Ronseal effect etc etc...)
- ✓ Put yourself into the shoes of other local mums and dads in the area. What is influencing their decision making about which services and support to take advantage of for them and their child/ren? What do you think stops them from getting involved in the programme?
- ✓ So what does Sure Start need to do to turn you as non users and infrequent users into regular users?

Potential ideas to raise once participants have had the opportunity to comment...

- Volunteer involvement/advocacy
- House/telephone calls - staff calling if you don't attend for a week or so

- Involvement incentives - like the Tesco Club Card - the more you use = points gained which you can trade in for child safety equipment, free training, free childcare sessions etc etc...
- Buddy schemes
- Taster sessions
- ✓ So if you were in charge of Sure Start what 3 things would you do to get more people involved?
- ✓ Do you have any comments you would like to make?

Thank you and close...

# SureStart

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